



# Wild River Daddy

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**Category:** Romance, Adult

**Description:** The one thing she desires is freedom. The one thing he demands is control.

Three years ago, Nico Midnight took everything from Boone Daniels with one shot. Now, Boone is back to even the score until the cries of a woman held captive by Nico force him to choose between rescue and revenge.-

The Little Tildi Lewis hides from her captors reaches out to the Daddy in Boone. If he can get them both home to his ranch, he might just have the thing he needs more than revenge.

Redemption.

**Total Pages (Source):** 53

## CHAPTER 1

Dread and relief crept closer as the sky around him blazed. They breathed down the back of his neck, pricking his anticipation. Boone Daniels settled a muscled arm on his saddle horn, leaning forward and rubbing his horse's neck. Boone Daniels leaned on his saddle horn and rubbed his horse's neck. He'd been up for hours, feeding the animals and making sure they had hay and water. Once he had finished, he'd headed for the eastern pasture so he could watch the sunrise.

Dollar whinnied and stomped the snow. "I know, boy. But this is worth braving the frozen ground. Just look." Settling back in his saddle, he watched as the rising sun painted the sky with deep purples and burnt oranges like fire.

Adjusting the collar of his jacket to keep out the wind, he thanked the good Lord, not for the first time, for the warmth of thick wool linings. As the brilliant colors faded, the deep blue skies wisped clouds across the neverending sky. Boone turned Dollar toward home.

Halfway there, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Grinning at the name displayed, he took the call, only surprised was it had taken this long. Chance had most likely been up as long as Boone.

Boone took the call and got in the first words. It was his right as the oldest. "Mornin' Chance. I'm headed back in. Tell me there's some of Ruby's biscuits left."

"Oh, no can do, buckaroo," Chance said, sharing a joke they'd kept going since childhood. He couldn't even remember how it had started, but it always made him

smile. “I tried to save you one, but you know how Tanner and Trace are. When I reached for the last one, they tried to jab me with their forks.”

“You tell Mr. Boone I saved him three biscuits in the kitchen. He can come get them whenever he gets back,” Ruby called from what sounded like the other side of the room.

That she’d saved him some biscuits didn’t surprise him. Ruby had been taking care of the house and the cooking for as long as he could remember. She had always been part of the family, and he’d always be grateful for the way she had stepped up as a mother to Kenzie when they lost their parents seven years ago.

“I saw you took care of the animals. Where’d you go after that?”

“Sightseeing,” he said. “I wanted to watch the sun come up.”

“It does that every day, brother. What made you want to watch this one?”

Boone wasn’t getting into that over the phone. “Nothing in particular. Like I said, I’m headed back to the house now.”

Disconnecting the call, his thoughts turned to the place he’d called home for thirty-six years. If only he were headed back to start helping everyone get ready for the holiday season. Thanksgiving was a huge deal on the Wild River Ranch. They got the homestead all decked with twinkling lights and sparkly decorations. Everyone looked forward to it.

As far as he was concerned, Thanksgiving Day was the best day of the year. His family all worked together to cook a feast for everyone who worked on the ranch. It took a lot of people to run a dude ranch, and the work was far from easy. The annual Thanksgiving celebration was one of the ways they showed their appreciation; just a

small way to show how thankful they were for their friends.

Lord knew Boone gave thanks for that and so much more. No one understood the blessings of their home more than him. It was a legacy he and his brothers and sister shared. As joint owners of the family ranch, they stepped in behind their forefathers as the fifth generation of Daniels to own Wild River Ranch.

As one of the oldest working dude ranches in the country, it did well enough to support them all. Especially now that they'd added Wilder Security.

The private security company was his domain. He hired mostly veterans, many of whom he knew and had served with personally.

"We've seen a lot, haven't we, Dollar?"

He and Dollar had been together for sixteen years. He was going to miss his horse almost as much as he'd miss his brothers. When he'd left the service, Dollar had kept him sane.

If everyone had a horse and the wide open range, the therapy business would take a hit. He knew his siblings loved him and would do anything they could to help him. All he had to do was ask. But he'd seen things he didn't want to share with them. But he could talk to Dollar. He didn't have to watch his words.

Closer to the ranch house, the Grand Tetons on the horizon arrested his gaze. He'd seen the same vista almost every day he'd spent on the ranch, yet it never failed to take his breath away. They were as majestic this morning as every other time he'd seen them. He'd have to make it to the west pasture this evening to watch the sunset behind the mountains. It was the only thing in nature that beat the sunrise.

"You're gonna have to keep up your climbing skills," he called to Dollar. "If I make

it back from this trip, we'll be headed that way as soon as I get my bag unpacked."

If was the important word in that sentence. Chances were better than not that he wouldn't be coming back. Of course, no one knew that but Dollar. No sense worrying everybody over things they couldn't change.

This was one mission that was worth the cost. Not that it was a mission in the strictest sense of the word. He'd been out of the Pararescue Jumpers for three years. As a leader in one of the elite teams who went in when US military personnel were trapped or held behind enemy lines, they did whatever it took to bring everyone home alive.

"But that's not always enough, is it, boy?" Dollar had nothing to say.

It hadn't been enough three years ago. But he'd be setting that right soon, even if it was the last thing he did. He gave Dollar his head, and, as usual, Dollar broke into a gallop and headed home.

"What the hell do you mean you're leaving?" Chance's voice shook with emotion. "I thought we were all sitting down next week and going over the ranch's books, then planning out next year. We have to start planning projects now if we want to have any hope of finishing them by tourist season."

Boone might be the oldest by three years, but Chance was the one who ran the ranch. They all pitched in, but his brother was in charge. Boone had his hands full running the security business.

"As much as I hate to miss that," Boone said, trying and failing to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, "I have to do something important. The timing wasn't my call."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:36 am*

“Does that mean you’ll miss Thanksgiving?” Kenzie asked. “You can’t miss Thanksgiving. You promised when you got home from the military, you wouldn’t miss another holiday. You promised.”

He hated disappointing his sister. She was the family’s touchstone. When their parents were killed, Kenzie stepped right into the role of woman of the house at the age of eighteen. Even with Ruby’s help, their mom had left big shoes to fill.

“I know I did, sweetie. I’m sorry, but this is something I have to do.” He had to steel his heart against her trembling lip. Damn, she was killing him.

“When are you leaving?” Chance asked.

Before he could answer, Tanner broke in to ask, “What the hell is so important that you have to leave now?”

That was Tanner, the older of his twin brothers. You never had to wonder what he was thinking because if it popped into his head, it came out of his mouth. Leave it to Tanner to ask the one question Boone didn’t want to answer.

But he’d never lied to his family before. His dad had taught all his children the value of honesty. In his dad’s book, that’s what a man did. If Boone did something, he owned it because his dad had been right. Honesty took courage. It’s what proved he was a man.

“I wouldn’t have laid it out like that,” Trace, the younger of the twins, said, “but I was wondering the same thing. What’s the emergency? I thought you were going to

help me with making sure we didn't have any unvaccinated newborn calves in the far pastures next week."

Yeah, this trip wasn't convenient for anyone, including him and the two men he was taking with him from Wilder Security. Grif and Dutch had served with him in the PJs. They'd served in the same unit and were together on the Midnight fiasco. They wanted, no, they needed to do this almost as much as he did. Boone had been the PJ leader on that retrieval. No one needed this more than Boone.

The chatter of questions and objections mushroomed. He couldn't get a word in.

Standing, he announced, "I got the call."

Instantly, the room went silent. Everyone knew what he meant. They'd all been there when he'd come home three years ago. He'd told them enough of what happened for them to understand some of what he was going through. They knew he'd been planning a trip like this for three years. And now it was here.

"Well, shit, Boone. How long will you be gone?" Chance asked. "What can we do to help?"

His muscles relaxed as warmth spread through his chest. That was his family. They knew who he was going after. They understood what it meant to him. "Probably around a month. I'll do my damndest to be back before Christmas."

Sniffing, Kenzie asked, "You might not be back for Christmas either? You can't be alone for Christmas. Is anyone going with you?" Her voice cracked, but she added, "You aren't doing this by yourself, are you?"

Her tears were more than he could take. He was supposed to make her life better, not make her cry. He held out his arms to her. "Come here, Tiger," he said, calling her

the nickname he and his brothers all used.

She flew across the room and jumped into his arms. He kissed the top of her head before setting her on her feet. Gently gripping the back of her neck with his hand, he said, “I’m going to be fine.” And blasted his no lying rule dead out of the water. “Grif and Dutch are going with me.”

“Wait, I thought they were going on vacation in Japan,” Chance said. He grimaced. “I knew that sounded weird. I can’t believe I didn’t ask more questions.”

“I never said vacation. I said they were headed to Japan.” Maybe it had been a lie of omission, but he’d had every intention of having this very conversation with them before he left. He just hadn’t wanted to upset everyone until the last minute.

“What’s the Cosa Nostra doing in Japan?” Tanner’s question was a good one.

“The Kuril Islands, actually.” Boone didn’t hesitate. It was time they knew. “We’re flying out tomorrow. It should take a few days to get where we’re going and about a week to carry out the mission. Then another three weeks to get home.”

“Wait. Why days to get there and weeks to get home?” Trace asked.

No one would ever accuse Trace of being slow on the draw. “We can’t fly back out. It’s likely there will be people looking for us. So, we’re coming home on a private boat. I’ll call you when it’s done, and I’ll do everything I can to be back home in time to hang my stocking on the mantle.”

Kenzie thumped his chest. “You’d better be home, but I wouldn’t hang a stocking if I were you. Santa’s most likely to fill it full of switches if you do.”

He grinned down at her then pulled her in for a hug. Over her head, he lost the grin as



he met Chance's gaze head on. Chance didn't buy his story. Boone hadn't expected he would. But they both stayed silent for Kenzie's sake.

After he'd had all the hugs and farewells he could stand from his family, Boone turned in for the night. He had a fifteen hour flight ahead of him, so he planned to leave for the airport around ten o'clock the next morning with Grif and Dutch. That way, he would be able to keep the promise he'd made to his family for one more round of goodbyes.

Upstairs, he packed up and got ready for bed, though he didn't expect to get much sleep. He hadn't slept worth a damn in three years. Not since his team had lost their Cara Bear.

He still pictured the events of that day every night as soon as he closed his eyes. Lifting the framed picture of Cara, he once again punished himself with the memory.

Three years earlier...

Boone and all the guys, plus Cara Bradshaw, crowded around the giant television in his postage stamp of a living room to watch the Arizona Cardinals game. They'd all come over to relax after returning from their latest rescue mission.

## Page 3

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The rescue hadn't gone according to plan. Nico Midnight, a leader in the American Cosa Nostra, tried to prevent them from rescuing the pilot his men had shot down in southeastern Asia. Tried being the operative word.

Boone and his elite team were trained to take out any and all obstacles. They'd eliminated the threat with no casualties, at least to his team, and rescued the pilot. Midnight had lost several men but had managed to escape.

At halftime, Boone headed out on a beer run. Before he even reached his car, Cara bopped onto the front porch. The way she stood, hands stuffed in the back pockets of her cutoff shorts and rocking back and forth, he knew she was in her Little headspace. She was adorable. Since all five men in his living room were also Daddies, it worked for all of them.

Showing off her bratty side, she wore a Seahawks jersey, knowing they were all pulling for the Cardinals. Where she'd gotten it, he had no idea. It practically swallowed her. She'd tied the extra length into a knot at the front, exposing plenty of skin. Even though it was an obvious ploy for attention, they'd all played along and given her a hard time.

"Where you goin'?" she sang out to him.

He had no hope of holding back a smile. "Just to the corner store for beer. What do you need? I have to hurry so I can get back before the second half starts."

A mischievous smile danced across her lips. "I need a pack of tampons, Booney. You think you could pick some up for me?" Reaching into her front pocket, she held up

some cash.

The open window made the guy's hoots of laughter easy to hear.

Boone pretended to be irritated, growling, "Get back inside, Cara Bear."

When on an op, she was as deadly as any of them. But once the retrieval was over, she was the Little sister to all the men in their group. She did so many things to let them know how special they were to her, always making cookies or crafting something for them. They all loved her.

At his order, she got serious. "Hold on a sec. If I give you some money, can you get me a couple of Dr. Peppers?" Nothing was more serious to their Cara Bear than her Dr. P, as she called it.

He didn't miss a beat. "I don't know. Have you been drinking your water today?"

Typical Little, she wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, but water sucks."

He wagged a disapproving finger at her, repeating the crede of all Daddies. "Water's good for you. And don't say sucks. Yes, I can get you a couple of drinks. But you have to drink a bottle of water between each soda. I'll be back in a few minutes." He headed for his truck.

She hopped off the porch. "Wait! You forgot my money."

"You try to hand me any money, little girl, and I'll tan your hide right out here in the front yard."

She poked out her bottom lip. "But you bought rounds last night at Dirty Pete's, and I need to pay you back."

He leveled her with the look. The one that made all Littles squirm and cover their bottoms with their hands. It worked like a charm.

Hands in the air in mock surrender, she laughed. “Okay, okay.”

Current Day...

He could remember everything like it was happening right in front of him.

That was his Cara Bear. She had always been smiling and laughing. She’d had more joy in her little finger than all the rest of them put together. A damn site more than they’d had for the past three years.

His phone alarm dinged, reminding him to take his sleeping pill. He needed them now for any semblance of rest. Shutting the memories down, he shook his head. As he continued to stare at the picture, his anger boiled.

Snapping the back off the photo frame, he took the picture out and put it in his duffle bag. She’d been there at the beginning. She deserved to be there at the end. He’d make sure she was the last person Midnight saw before he died.

He took his medication and crawled into bed. Usually, the meds took a while to kick in, if they worked at all. But at least he could be comfortable pretending to sleep. Tonight of all nights, he didn’t have much hope for the real thing.

A car engine revved down the street behind him. “Check it out!” a voice in his head screamed. “Look, for god’s sake!” He tried, but his body was frozen as he watched Cara come out of his front door.

The voice in his head screamed again, “Tell her to go back inside! Tell her now!” but his lips wouldn’t open. He tried to pull them apart with his hands, but they wouldn’t

budge.

The screeching of tires sounded behind him as the smile slid from Cara's face. Then, her eyes widened in shock.

"Run!" He attempted to warn her. "Get down!" Once again, his body failed him.

"Gun!" she screamed, reaching out to him. He reached for her, too, but the harder he tried to reach out, the farther away she got.

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He tried to jump in front of her, but his feet were rooted to the ground like a Ponderosa pine. Then the bullets started flying, and one struck him in the center of his chest. Thank god, this time they shot him instead. But rather than taking him down, the bullet bounced off his chest and fell to the grass at his feet. Still unable to move, he reached for the gun holstered at his hip but it was stuck. He fought to get it out, even knowing he wouldn't be in time.

The car maneuvered down the street in slow motion, a gun sticking out the window, and there was nothing he could do but watch.

Finally, his vocal cords relaxed, and he screamed for Cara to get down. But his words dragged out like a record playing at a speed much too slow to be understood.

Cara paid no attention to the car anyway. No, her stare was pinned on him. Eyes filled with betrayal, she kept repeating, "Why? Why didn't you help me, Boone?" over and over.

"Cara!" He bellowed out her name. "CARA!"

And then she jerked backward as a red stain spread over her chest. As she crumpled to the ground, his feet released, and he ran to her side. Her eyes were closed, her face drained of color, her chest not moving.

"Call an ambulance," he screamed. That is, he opened his mouth and formed words, but once again, he couldn't make a sound.

He reached for her, but as he did, she shot straight up, grabbing his wrist before he

could press his palm against the gunshot wound in her chest to slow the bleeding. Her eyes were open, the betrayal still there. “You didn’t save me,” she accused. “You let me die.”

“No,” he said. “No! I tried, Cara Bear, I tried. I TRIED!”

Boone jerked awake, still screaming, drenched with sweat. His chest squeezed his heart, and his stomach roiled. Throwing back the covers, he raced to the toilet and emptied his stomach.

When the heaving calmed, he shifted to sit on the floor and leaned against the side of the tub. His throat stung from the bile, and hot tears poured from his eyes. He ignored them.

He’d had one fucking job as a pararescuer. Protect his fellow brothers and sisters in arms. Failure was not an option. And yet when it mattered the most, that was exactly what he had done. Failed.

He’d made a vow to be prepared at all times to perform and place his duties before his personal desires and comforts so that others may live. Yet, he’d failed one of his own teammates, his Cara Bear. He’d been in charge. It was his responsibility. That’s why Grif and Dutch were going in as the retrieval part of this mission. Taking Midnight out was for Boone and Boone alone.

He reached for some toilet paper to clean up the mess of tears and snot and considered smashing his head against the porcelain tank of the toilet. But not yet. Not until he made Nico Midnight pay for what he’d stolen from them.

Maybe when he ended Midnight’s life, the nightmares plaguing him would end, and his life could regain some semblance of normal. Frankly, he didn’t hold out much hope. All he knew was killing Midnight was the only thing he’d lived for the past

three years. And now it was time.

Clawing his way off the floor, he found his phone and called Grif. “Yeah?” Grif answered on the first ring.

“Get Dutch and get ready. We’re rolling out in twenty.”

The sleepy tone vanished when Grif said, “Right now? It’s three o’clock in the morning.”

“Is that a problem?” Boone growled.

“Fuck no,” Grif said. “See you in twenty.”

Boone ended the call and checked his bag again. Scrawling a quick note to his family, he apologized for leaving without that last round of goodbyes. He checked his watch and headed out to pick up Grif and Dutch.

He made it in ten.

## CHAPTER 2

Tildi Lewis huddled in a corner of the tiny room she’d been forced to call home for the past week. It had been forever since she’d been kidnapped. She wasn’t sure exactly the length of time she had been missing. She’d lost track the tenth time they’d moved her.

At least the room she was in now had a small window. It gave her a glimpse of the latest compound grounds, not that the barren landscape was much to write home about. Unfortunately, as it had no window pane, it also let in a frigid sea breeze once sunset came. With her eyes squeezed shut, she tried to picture a sun-bathed, open



meadow with plenty of room to move and breathe. The distant crash of ocean waves made it tough.

The waves disappeared with her ability to breathe when thudding footsteps echoed off the hallway's stone walls. The louder they grew, the louder her heart thundered. When whoever it was stopped in front of her door, the meadow scene she'd been striving to picture evaporated.

It was futile, but she couldn't stop herself from scanning her room for the millionth time for a place to hide. Other than the paper-thin mattress on the floor, one threadbare blanket, and a bucket in the far corner for unmentionable things, the room sat bare.

She froze, straining for any new sound from the hallway that might warn her of unwelcome visitors. She couldn't take another breath until the heavy tread of footsteps clomped away from her door and faded.

Forcing air back into her lungs, Tildi worked at slowing the pace of her racing heart. Nothing could have prepared her for how much her life would change when she'd been stolen away from everything she knew.

"You worry too much," Tildi had assured her sister, Breezy, what must have been around a year earlier. "I've been taking care of myself for five years now. And my life is way better than it was living with you and mom at home under our father's, oh, sorry, I mean the General's thumb."

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Tildi shivered out a sigh. She'd been so cocky. So secure in her intellect and invincibility.

So stupid.

Breezy wouldn't be put off so easily. "Can't you at least tell me the alias you're using? What if something happens? I know you're not going by Sera anymore."

She certainly was not. When she'd run away, that name was the first thing she'd scraped off. It was too easy to track. Not that she would have kept it anyway. She hated that name and everything it represented.

It wasn't that Tildi didn't trust her sister. She did. But she didn't trust her parents at all. Her father, the General, as he'd insisted they call him, was a narcissistic asshole who wanted complete control of everyone's life and future. Including Tildi's.

"Nothing's going to happen," Tildi said. "I don't want you to keep even more secrets from Mom and the General. And frankly, you suck at lying."

Affronted, her sister huffed. "Do not."

But she so did.

"Anyway," Tildi continued, "I've got to go. I'm working a party tonight. It's super fancy. Some Italian highbrow's birthday bash."

"I guess if you won't even tell me your name, it's out of the question to find out who

you're working for."

The sad note in her sister's voice had almost convinced her to spill everything, but it would have only made Breezy worry even more. Tildi worked upscale parties, doling out drinks and hors d'oeuvres, while powerful men talked about things that now fueled Tildi's nightmares. She'd overheard things she thought only happened in books and movies.

Every second of being at those events dragged on like torture. But contrary to the romance novels she loved, hate didn't keep her warm, nor did it pay her bills. The tips she earned at the parties helped her scrape by in her studio apartment without having to find a roommate. Some of her friends weren't so lucky.

And, hopefully, with the amount she had slowly accumulated over the past months, she'd be able to go to a thrift shop and buy a warmer coat. Even growing up in the Tennessee mountains hadn't prepared her for these brutal northern winters.

Now she'd give anything to have shared more with Breezy that day. Then, the people back home would at least have a place to start looking when they realized she was missing. But the random calls she'd made happened so infrequently it had probably taken months for her sister to realize something was wrong. As it was, all she could do was pray someone from her new life had realized it.

The scraping and clanking of a key in the door's skeleton lock jerked her back to the present. Wedging into the corner, she ignored the rough stone wall scraping her back and pulled the blanket up to her chin. Holding her breath, she waited.

Please don't let him get in.

Even as she tossed the words out into the universe, she knew better. Her heart froze, and she lost the battle with her tears as the door banged open. Ottavio Moretti, the

underboss in charge of her latest hell, stumbled into the room, locking the door ominously behind him.

Numerous faded prison tattoos riddled his fingers, hands, and neck. They probably covered his entire body, but thankfully, she hadn't been forced to find out.

Yet.

He stared at her from the doorway without speaking. Her blood chilled at his predatory look. It was like he was hungry, and she was a filet mignon. Using her feet as leverage, she shoved herself further into the corner. The mattress skidded forward, causing her to slip lower on the pad.

His eyes flared. Did he think she was signaling she wanted what that look on his face telegraphed he was determined to do? Her stomach heaved.

She wanted to close her eyes, but there was no way she was taking her sight off him. In her mind, though, she pictured her life back in her hometown of Darling, Tennessee—the town she'd run from. Not because of the Daddies and Littles who seemed drawn to it but because of her own father.

At eighteen, she'd never had the chance to explore her feelings about the lifestyle most of the people living there practiced. The men were overprotective and possessive of their women yet treated them as the most precious treasures in their lives.

At eighteen, she couldn't fathom how the women didn't feel smothered or disrespected. But they didn't. No, the women of Darling adored it. No one could have convinced her she'd want a Daddy of her own one day. Not then. But now she was six years older, and those years had taught her a lot. Hurt her a lot.

She didn't feel that way anymore.

Right now, she'd give anything to have a strong protective Daddy to shield her from the beast standing in the doorway. But she'd missed her chance. There were no Daddies here, and even if there were, they wouldn't want a Little girl as damaged as she'd become.

Nico Midnight, the man who had kidnapped her, wasn't anywhere close to being a Daddy. Neither were the men who worked in his organization. These arrogant men were cruel and selfish and made her long for things she'd scorned before.

"There you are, *il mia topolina*, my little mouse. I think it's time for you to scurry out of the corner and play with me."

When he closed and locked the door, her heartbeat staggered. She could barely hear him over the roar of the blood rushing in her ears. He was huge, muscled, and mean. The bruise on her cheek bore proof of that.

As his staggered steps brought him closer, the whimper her frozen throat had held back escaped. The flare of triumph in his eyes told her he hadn't missed it.

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“I-I’m supposed to be left alone until Mr. Midnight, I mean the Boss, arrives.” She pulled the blanket up even higher.

Her heart raced so fiercely, she waited for it to explode. Maybe it would be a blessing. She hated being cornered, knowing she couldn’t prevent him from doing whatever he wanted.

He shrugged. “What the boss doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Or you. Because if you tell him I touched you, he will kill you as well as me. So, we won’t tell him. He sees you as a whore anyway.”

The insult bit, causing her to flinch. You’d think, after all this time, she’d have grown thicker skin, but no. Heart on her sleeve that was her.

She’d caught the eye of the head of the Midnight family, the birthday boy himself, that night at the party. A powerful man with cold, shark eyes—eyes she’d caught because of her stupid pink hair. He’d wanted her, and that was all it took for him to orchestrate her kidnapping.

She’d been shipped from place to place but always wound up in a small, locked room. Each new location was ruled by one of Mr. Midnight’s henchmen who thought he would be the first to get away with taking what the Boss, as they called him, considered his.

But she’d been lucky so far. Someone had always told Mr. Midnight. Then people died, and she would be moved to a new location where it started all over again.

Moretti stared down at her, derision in his voice when he said, “You’re just another girl for him to use before turning you over to his men. But this time, I am going to be first.”

He lurched forward and, before she realized he was too close, grabbed her wrist and lifted her to stand before him. She tried to run but her feet got tangled in the blanket, and she fell to her hands and knees on the edge of the mattress.

He laughed, and the sinister rumble sent shockwaves of fear over her. “How did you know where I wanted you, topolina? Such a good baby mouse to read my mind, or did you? You pretend to be afraid, but you want it, too, no?”

“No!” she screamed, trying to crawl away. But he had dropped to his knees behind her, his fingers gripping her hips hard enough to add even more bruises.

Terror forced bile into her throat, burning and tearing up her eyes. She screamed, knowing it would do no good. Even if anyone heard, no one here would stand up for her.

Reaching up her body, he grabbed at her breasts, using his hold to yank her backward into his hips. Even through his pants, she could feel his hard cock pressing against her. Unless some guardian angel from above appeared to help, she wasn’t going to be able to break free. There were certainly no Daddies here like the ones in Darling to rush to her rescue. She was on her own, like always.

This Italian gorilla was going to do what none of the others had been able to. Even knowing she would never be able to stop him, no way was she giving up without a fight. She kicked back as hard as she could, somehow nailing him in the thigh.

He roared in pain and anger, grabbing her shoulder and flipping her to her back. She watched him draw his hand back but had no way to dodge the slap. Fire blazed across

her face. She screamed and fought harder, praying the universe would send someone to save her even as she continued to fight for herself.

“He’s going to kill you for this!” she cried out, but her words earned nothing more than his laughter.

The universe must have something more important going on because, once again, she was left to fend for herself.

### CHAPTER 3

Boone could picture his brothers, all gathered in the main house, having a glass of Wyoming Whiskey Single Barrel Straight Bourbon, while talking over the day. Maybe even heading to the parlor, as his granny had insisted they call it, to shoot a game of pool.

And where was he? On some god-forsaken island in the Kurils off the coast of Japan, freezing his ass off in his night camouflage. Even with the thermal wear he wore while keeping the cattle fed and watered in negative twenty degree weather back home, the waterlogged air of the island soaked into his bones.

Only someone as crazy as Nico Midnight would put a compound on an island with four active volcanos. The least he could have done was build the thing on the windward side of the island where winds were chilled by the Bering Sea and Northern Pacific. Stupid fuck could care less that the visibility was higher over here. He considered himself untouchable, but the Cosa Nostra encroaching on either the Russian Bratva’s or the Japanese Yakuza’s, whichever was currently controlling the island, territory was one step away from suicide.

Maybe he should have tipped them off and let them go to the trouble of fighting over who would take Midnight out, but this was personal. Boone was taking care of this



himself. Midnight might believe he was untouchable, but he'd be finding out he was wrong when Boone put a bullet in his head.

Boone studied the night sky. The stars were in a different place than on the ranch, but he'd spent enough time on cattle drives to gauge by the moon it was somewhere close to ten o'clock. After crossing the island's rugged mountain terrain during the day, he'd fought his way past the layers of security. Now he stood just inside the entrance to the empty courtyard of Nico Midnight's medieval mansion.

Stealing through the shadows, he crossed the courtyard and entered the outer vestibule. Had the guards he'd shot on the beach had time to warn anyone he was coming before he took them out? He had to assume they did. Scanning the area and not seeing anything suspicious, he followed the main hallway deeper into the castle until it dead-ended into another. Which way now?

Being in the right place at the right time guaranteed his success in accomplishing his mission. Midnight had to pay for everything he'd done. An eye for an eye, that was the Cosa Nostra way. At least, it was the Midnight way. Boone believed in that, too, so he would be doling out retribution with the man staring down the barrel of his rifle.

Midnight had taken Cara. Snuffed her out of existence and laughed as he drove away. Now it was time for him to pay. He wanted every emotion he'd been forced to witness in Cara's eyes playing out in Midnight's. Only he'd be able to see the life drain out of them, too. For Cara.

Swapping out his rifle for his Glock, he checked that the magazine was full and settled his stance, ready for whatever waited for him around the corner. Crouched low, his breathingsped up. He hated blind corners, especially in a den of Cosa Nostra vipers.

He spent most of his days on the ranch in wide open spaces. Running black ops in the special forces had forced him into too many tight places with precious few ways to dodge the bullets coming at him. He'd left damn near claustrophobic. It was one of the four hundred ninety-nine thousand reasons he loved his ranch. Wide open space extended in every direction. With the average population spread out to 6 people per square mile, he could breathe.

The fact that he was willing to spend the three weeks it would take to cross the ocean going home proved beyond a shadow of a doubt he wanted Midnight dead by his hand. Dreams of this moment, the day he would serve justice to the butcher who'd taken everything from him in the span of one stray bullet, had kept him going for the past three years.

Some people would call his dreams nightmares. But none of those people had the woman they loved stolen from them on the malicious whim of a mafia thug.

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Finger on the trigger, he edged close to the corner and peered up and down the hallway. Empty. The next hallway proved empty as well. Where the hell was the security that should be canvassing the halls?

After slowing his breathing to listen for footsteps, nothing caught his attention at first. The draft caught in the medieval stone hallways moaned like a distant, high-pitched wail. Wait, that was a wail.

Skimming the wall of the corridor with quick steps, he moved closer. As he turned another corner, the faint sounds of a woman crying became unmistakable. He scanned the hall for guards, then gave the sound his full concentration.

What the hell? Boone shook his head and listened again.

That was definitely a woman crying somewhere nearby. Every protective instinct in his body sprang to life. The last thing he'd expected was a woman inside the compound. Midnight had ironclad rules about women in a "man's domain."

That was another Cosa Nostra way. Unless they were brought in for his men's recreational purposes. God help whoever she was if that was the case. Very few made it out, and if they did, they'd be so severely abused they never recovered. From the cries of pain and fear now echoing down the passage, this woman wasn't there by choice.

"He's going to kill you for this!" the woman shouted, followed by continued sobbing and a man's deep laughter. Boone pushed back against the anger surging through him at the fear in the woman's voice.

Definitely not here by choice.

If there was one thing his dad made sure he and his brothers did, it was to treat the women in their lives with kindness and respect. He followed the sound until he came to the door standing between him and the crying woman. The thick wooden door couldn't block the crack of a hard slap, followed by a pained scream and more sobbing.

"I'm dead when he sees the bruise on your face anyway," a man said.

Boone recognized that voice. That gravelly tone and fake Italian accent belonged to one of Midnight's commanders, Ottavio Moretti.

"The way I figure, I might as well have some fun before I die. If you'd been nicer, we could have had a good time. Now, I'm going to have to be rough. Which suits me fine, little mouse, but you will enjoy it much less."

Boone squeezed the butt of his weapon. Squeezing the throat of the man inside that room would be much more satisfying. He'd love to see how good Moretti was at taking a small portion of the abuse he enjoyed dishing out to people who couldn't fight back.

"If you weren't such a big coward, you'd let me go," said the girl. "Are you scared of me or something?"

Boone couldn't hold back a grin. The woman was reckless, but he admired her grit. Of course, if she were his, he'd be tanning her bottom for putting herself in even more danger with her taunting. She was waving the proverbial red flag in front of the bull.

"Hardly. But why waste this opportunity to get to know you better?" The sneer in

Moretti's tone grated on Boone's already frazzled temper. "When the Boss arrives, you'll be glad someone has already had you. He's not nearly as gentle as I am."

Boone might be here to kill Midnight, but he was saving a round for this asshat. Still, he couldn't help but admire the woman's defiance when she shouted, "I don't like you. You're not supposed to touch me. And I'm telling that Boss guy everything you've done when he gets here."

Chuckling, Moretti said, "Be my guest, topolina. I won't be here when the Boss arrives. Now, I think it is time you use your mouth for something better than talking."

"Stop!" the girl screamed. "Don't do this! Please!"

That was followed by the ripping of cloth and another scream.

Pure rage plowed through Boone. The door at the far end of the passageway that probably led to the roof and landing pad for Midnight's helicopter mocked him. Everything inside him fought to keep to the mission. He should make his way to the roof and rid the world of Nico Midnight.

Cara deserved to be avenged. And he damn sure deserved to be the one to avenge her, to gain some semblance of resolution and peace. He'd failed her, failed to live up to the PJ creed to "be prepared at all times to perform my assigned duties so that others may live." He was the ranking member of the team, so the blame was his. Now, he finally had the chance to give his team a resolution.

But that wasn't who he was. What would he do to the man who walked away if his sister was the one unfortunate enough to be trapped on the other side of the door with Moretti? There was no way he could walk away from the woman behind that door and leave her to her fate.

Maybe he could still do both. He could take out Moretti first and tell the woman to wait inside, finish his mission to put a bullet in Midnight, then take her with him when he rendezvoused with his team and headed back to the States.

He ran his hands over the door, looking for a way to open it without drawing too much attention to himself. What he wanted to do was break it down and show Moretti what happened to thugs who tried to force themselves on women.

The solid wood door, easily twice as thick as a standard one, was designed to keep out unwanted interruptions. He'd have to use a C4 breaching charge to get in, but he needed both of the ones he'd brought with him for a different job. One that was vital for his mission to succeed.

The whirl of helicopter blades interrupted his inspection. Fuck. Boone shoved the knowledge that Midnight had arrived and could possibly make it off the roof before Boone could reach him to the back of his mind.

Moretti heard the whumps of the copter's rotor blades, too. With a bellow of primal rage, he snarled, "Do what I told you to do. I don't have any more time to waste."

Another scream rent the air, then the hitched breathing and sobs of a woman who had lost hope filled the space. "I w-w-won't t-tell anyone what h-happened. P-P-Please, I just w-want to g-go h-h-home."

"You are never going home, topolina. No matter what happens now."

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Boone was going to enjoy shooting this asshole right in the dick. He was going to make more noise than he'd like to take down a door this thick. Scanning the hallway again to make sure he was still alone, the steady blink of a small red light in the upper corner of the roof access caught his eye.

Shit. He'd missed a camera. How had he not noticed it? It was pointed right at him. If there were any guards paying attention, they knew he was there even if the guards on the beach hadn't alerted them.

His fury was a living monster inside him that fought to escape. The injustice of it was palpable. Midnight was within his grasp.

Even when it sucks, you have to do what you have to do.

It was a mantra he lived by. He'd taught it to all the men on his team. He couldn't walk away from the woman trapped inside that room. If he did, he'd be no better than Midnight.

But that man needed to be put down like the rabid dog he was. Not just for Cara but for all the other women he and his men had harmed. Women like the one behind that door.

The whirring blades above him slowed.

Taking out Midnight was the right call. So why could he hear Cara's voice calling him out in his head?

“You can’t leave her there, and you know it. You know what will happen if you do. She won’t last until you make it back.”

He tried telling himself ending Midnight was all for Cara, but was it? Or was it so he could finally get past the guilt he’d carried for three years? She’d died because of him. He’d been right there and hadn’t been able to do a damn thing.

Cara would never have walked away from someone in harm’s way for the sake of revenge. Never. And she would be furious if he used her as the excuse for doing it himself.

His men would understand. He had to put the woman he could still protect before the one he couldn’t. The woman’s sobs grew increasingly frantic.

“For you, Cara,” he said and went to work.

Fighting the urge to blow the door to splinters, he worked the problem. The door was expensive and made from sturdy mahogany. That ruled out throwing his weight against it and crashing through. It would be impossible. So, how would he get in?

Scuffling and thumping noises increased his urgency.

“No!” the girl inside screamed. “Stop! STOP!”

Out of time, he went for the simplest solution. He pounded on the door.

Now, only sobs came from the room. Boone waited. He had to get out of this hallway before someone found him standing there.

After scanning up and down the hallway again, he beat on the door once more, harder this time. He replaced his Glock with the largest of his knives and pressed it to the



door. With gritted teeth, he pounded again.

“I left clear instructions to wait in the dining room. I’m not to be disturbed.” Moretti snatched the door open, yelling in that damn fake accent. The man had been born in Chicago and never even visited Italy, as far as Boone knew. “I hope this was important because you are about to die.”

Moretti was still zipping his pants, so he didn’t realize who he was talking to until he finished and looked up. He stood there, speechless, staring at Boone.

Just as well. Boone buried his combat knife in the man’s throat before he could utter a sound.

The commander staggered backward, which was as much of an invitation to enter as the man was able to give. Boone stepped into the room, grabbed Moretti, and lowered the rasping manto the floor as he gagged and scratched at the knife. Boone watched, booted foot planted on Moretti’s chest.

“You okay?” he called to the shocked girl staring at him. He took a minute to look her over.

Cuts and bruises covered her body, along with scattered burn marks that had obviously come from the high powered cattle prod leaning against the wall. That son of a bitch had tortured her with a stun wand carrying enough voltage to knock an elephant on its ass. If Moretti used that, it was a miracle he hadn’t killed her.

Boone grabbed the cattle prod and pressed it to the metal blade of the knife lodged in Moretti’s throat. The man stiffened for the five seconds Boone held it there and then went limp forever.

Boone checked the hallway once more before closing and locking the door. Turning

back to the room, he scanned the area for possible escape options. He'd come through the only door, and the window was barely big enough for the girl to fit through. If he made it through that opening, it would be a miracle.

The girl huddled on a filthy mattress, staring at him in wonder. It took everything inside him not to return the stare. Her wavy hair barely reached her shoulders. And it was bubblegum pink. How she kept it that way in a place like this, he had no idea.

But it was her eyes that drew him in. Her eyes were huge and the most incredible blue, almost purple, like the mountain bluebonnets back home in Wyoming. He could lose himself forever in those eyes.

And he was pulling the brake cord on that train of thought right now. He had no business getting lost in anyone's eyes right now, much less a young woman who'd just been through what this girl had. He turned on his heel and retrieved his knife from Moretti's throat, wiping off the blood on the dead man's shirt as the girl stared at him.

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He sheathed the knife before crossing back to her. Slowly, so as not to startle her, he squatted down to her eye level. Using the voice he used with skittish colts on the ranch back home, he said, "It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you. Do you understand?" She hesitated for only a moment before nodding.

After one more assessing look, he held out his hand, waiting for her to take hold of him. After helping her to her feet, she shocked the shit out of him by pushing him aside and walking over to where Moretti lay on the stone floor.

Before he could guess her intent, she kicked the man right in the face. And not just once. No, over and over again until Boone put his hand on her shoulder. At Boone's touch, she twirled around to face him as if she had been stung. Fisting her hands, she beat on Boone's chest.

Instinctively, he wrapped her in his arms. She struggled to get away, but she wasn't going anywhere. "It's okay. You're going to be all right. I've got you, babygirl," he whispered, holding her close. He stroked her back with a gentle hand until she grew still, but her breathing was still rapid and shallow.

She startled him when she unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt and pressed her soft cheek against his chest. The skin-to-skin contact seemed to settle her like nothing else, which was good. All he knew was he liked her cheek there, and not just a little. He liked it a lot. He continued to hold her longer than necessary, but for some reason, he couldn't let her go.

"Thank you," she whispered.

“My pleasure,” he told her without thinking. “But if you’re feeling better, we need to get out of here. That copter landing on the roof was Nico Midnight.”

With a deep breath, she stepped back and looked up into his eyes with her beautiful blue ones. “Who are you?” she asked.

Before he could answer, someone banged on the door.

“Ottavio, my friend,” a voice called, “is there a reason you have the door locked? Eliatells me you have been taking liberties with my property. I can’t believe this is true. You, of all people, would know the consequences of that. Open the door so we can clear up this misunderstanding.”

Boone recognized that voice, too. Nico Midnight had no interest in fake accents. He didn’t need to play at being a bad guy. He was the real deal to his core. Boone fought the need to rip open the door and empty the magazine of his Glock into the man. The only thing holding him back was knowing what would happen to the girl beside him if he gave in to that need.

Ignoring Midnight, Boone stepped to the window and guesstimated the size. It was small, but he could make it work. Peering down from the second floor window, he reckoned the drop was long but survivable. Whether they could make the drop without injury was up for debate. It didn’t matter because there was no other choice.

Midnight still attempted to cajole his way into the room. “A key is on the way, Ottavio. It would be much better if you opened the door before it arrived.”

Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen. After everything the girl behind him had been through, he’d be damned if she was going to have to deal with the likes of a man like Midnight. Glancing behind him, he gave her a wink and a smile.

She didn't know it yet, but he always kept his promises. He'd told her she would be all right and refused to allow her to be anything else.

Boone crossed to his pack and took out his stiletto knife. Softening his steps, he slid the blade of the knife into the lock in order to keep Midnight from opening the door. Thankfully, the lock was old-fashioned and designed to use a skeleton key. He twisted the blade, making sure it wouldn't be easily dislodged, before turning back to the girl.

She wore a short skirt and a tight, cropped top that cut off just below her breasts. It had long sleeves, but he couldn't believe they were much help from the way she shivered.

While she could probably make a grain sack look good, the outfit she wore wouldn't suit her even if it wasn't messed up. He could picture her in a pair of cutoff jean shorts and one of his plaid shirts tied at the waist. Maybe a pair of cowgirl boots and some of those kitten-eared headthings girls wear these days.

Holy shit. What in the hell was he doing, picturing her in clothes that would fit on his ranch? Picturing her in his shirt? Picturing her at all?

Time and place, big guy. Time. And. Place.

He wasn't anything like the man on the other side of that door, but he sure was acting like it. Especially when she still wore clothes that bore rips and dirt that came from a struggle.

He needed to be focused on his new mission—getting her out of there unharmed. She was going to freeze in the early December night air when they made their escape. Not to mention the stacked strappy black heels she wore, which would be useless once they got outside and ran for cover.

Moretti had her dressed like a pretty doll, probably on Midnight's orders.

He made his way back to her side. After pulling off his jacket, he held it out to her. "Here. Put this on—" He stopped when he realized he didn't even know who she was. "What's your name, little girl?"

It took her a minute, but she finally said, "Tildi. Well, Matilda, but I go by Tildi."

His lips twitched. Cute. Why'd she have to be so damn cute? "Okay, Tildi not Matilda, put on my jacket. We have to move, and it's cold out there. Hand me your shoes."

She did as she was told without any questions. Was that her nature, or had those Cosa Nostra thugs conditioned her to act without asking? The Daddy in him was drawn to her, so he hoped it was the former. He flipped over the shoes she handed him, snapped off the spikes that most women thought were necessary and handed them back.

He halfway expected Tildi to react when he ruined the shoes, but she didn't make a sound. She didn't even blink. Lord knew his little sister would have thrown a fit. In the world of fashion, he'd been informed, black heels with red bottoms were expensive.

He scowled down at Tildi's feet. "Those still aren't going to be comfortable, but at least you can run in them without leaving tracks."

Footsteps thundered down the hallway as Midnight spoke again. "There's no escaping me, Ottavio. Why make this difficult, my friend? Open the door and—" Midnight broke off. A moment later, he bellowed out, "What!" and then snarled, "When? How many guards are down?" Pause. "Did the cameras catch who it is?" There was a longer pause for more muttering, and then Midnight roared, "Boone!"

BOONE! I'm going to slit you open from your throat to your dick and feed your entrails to the bears."

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:36 am*

Boone grinned but didn't answer. Even as the Boss of one of the most notorious Cosa Nostra families in the United States, Midnight could be a fucking drama queen.

Boone wanted to laugh but instead kept his gun trained on the door. He wasn't about to let this kingpin wannabe goad him into wasting bullets.

"I hope that bitch I shot three years ago suffered and died in agony. Her blood is on your hands, not mine. You should have kept your nose and your team out of Family business."

A soft hand gripped his arm. "What are we going to do?" Tildi whispered. He didn't know what shook more, her hand or her voice.

"Hold on, I need my phone," Boone said, reaching inside the jacket she now wore to retrieve the phone from the inside pocket. The back of his hand brushed her breast when he pulled out his phone, and she shivered. He refused to question why.

He thumbed the button for Dutch, one of the men who'd served with him on the black ops team and now worked on the ranch. Along with Grifter, another of his men turned cowboy, Dutch waited for Boone in an ocean-crossing yacht offshore. He picked up on the first ring.

"Status?" Dutch asked.

"Things didn't go as planned. I ran into an unexpected complication. I need extraction ASAP. We're heading to the rendezvous point now. Be ready because we might need cover."



“Wait, we?” Dutch asked. “Who the fuck is we?”

“You’ll find out when we get there.”

He was answered with a long pause and a heavy sigh. Finally, Dutch growled, “Roger that. Proceeding to the rendezvous. Will you need medical when you get here?”

“Maybe. Be ready, just in case. My passenger will need tending.”

“Come again?”

“You heard me. Just be there before I am and be ready for anything.”

“Roger that. On our way.”

He disconnected the call and shoved the phone back in the pocket of his jacket.

“Okay, we’re going to have to work together here,” he told Tildi. Pulling out his Glock, he asked, “Have you ever shot a gun before?”

Eyes huge, she stared at the weapon and shook her head. “No. Never.”

Perfect.

It would be his luck today to get the door rigged with the C4 charge without incident, only to be shot in the back by a cute, twitchy civilian who’d never held a gun.

He shifted to Plan B.

Grabbing the stun wand, he handed that to her instead. “Okay, I want you to stand there,” he said, pointing to the wall beside the door. “Hopefully, you won’t have to do

anything, but if someone comes through that door, you zap them with this wand. Got me?”

“O-okay,” she said, nodding.

When she didn’t stop nodding, his heart started to thaw. It had been frozen for the past three years, ever since he’d fucked up and caused one of his people to get shot.

Tildi stood there shivering with nothing but determination flashing in her eyes. She was trying to be strong, even after all she’d been through. He cupped his hand around her cheek and smiled. “We’re getting out of here safely. Both of us. I’m gonna take care of you, babygirl. You can trust me.”

Her eyes dilated at his words. That was interesting. He packed it away for later.

She squatted beside Moretti’s corpse as she crossed the room and whispered, “I still don’t like you.”

“Tildi, get where I told you,” Boone snapped.

Pausing only long enough to shock Moretti’s body with the weapon, she found her spot and assumed a ready stance, stun wand held high.

Boone’s lips twitched again. His little survivor had a streak of vengeance in her.

No, not his. Definitely not his.

Once she got away from this place, she wouldn't want anything to do with him. He would keep too many memories alive for her. Besides, he still had a score to settle with Midnight. He didn't need any distractions right now, either.

And, tiny as she was, she would still be a big one.

### CHAPTER 4

Tildi cringed as the man's voice penetrated the thickness of the door from the other side. He'd only spoken a few short sentences in her presence, but she would never forget that voice. After a year of waiting in terror for him to show up, he was finally here.

Fear curdled the very blood in her veins. Even the huge man standing beside her, with all his might and confidence, couldn't stem the wash of terror pebbling her skin. Her gaze fell to the pathetic mat shoved against the far corner. Why didn't her freaking prison mattress have a frame to lift it from the floor? Then she could at least pretend to have someplace to hide.

Mr. Midnight continued to shout through the door. "Open the door, Boone, or should I call you Bossman like the cowpokes on your farm do? We have that in common. Only I act like a boss, and you hide behind locked doors like a pussy. You might as well open it and face me like a man. If you go out the window, my soldiers will shoot you before you hit the ground. Be smart and open the door."

Even with terror burning her stomach like acid, Tildi couldn't keep herself from rolling her eyes at his words. The man was either crazy, or he thought they were. She'd just met Boone, but she already knew he was nothing like the monster who had held her prisoner for the past months.

At least now she knew her rescuer's name. She liked the name Boone. It suited him. Strong and bold.

Hopefully, he was also a magician. Only instead of pulling a rabbit from a hat, he'd need to pull a machine gun out of that pack he'd brought with him and shoot everyone outside the door. Ooh, or a rocket launcher. Yeah, that would work even better.

He motioned for her to stay quiet. Like she wanted to talk.

Mr. Midnight wasn't done. "If you hadn't been such a coward three years ago, you wouldn't have lost your woman. I warned you to stay out of Family business, but you wouldn't listen. You left me no choice but to kill her. Just like I'm going to kill you. It's only a matter of time until I get this door open. There's no escape for you."

"I knew this was a one-way trip from the start. I'd just planned on it being a little longer than this and us both being dead at the end of it," Boone called out in a deep, confident voice.

Um, what?

He didn't plan on making it out alive? She didn't want to be selfish or anything, but how the heck was he supposed to rescue her if he was dead? As if he heard her thoughts, he twisted to face her and winked. Winked!

Her confusion shifted to relief when he snatched open the bag he'd left on the floor.

He searched through a massive collection of weapons in his pack, hopefully for a bazooka or a cannon or some other form of mass destruction.

Visions of Boone, bandana tied around his forehead, muscles bulging in his sweaty, bare arms and chest, going all Rambo on the men outside the door popped into her thoughts. Of course, that was just stuff in movies. Those kinds of things didn't happen in real life. At least not in hers.

When all he pulled from the bag was two blocks of modeling clay with a walkie-talkie taped to each, her confusion returned. What the heck? She was as up for crafting cool things out of clay as the next girl, but not when their lives hung in the balance.

Maybe he'd been using his head to bang on the door earlier. Whatever the reason for his bizarre behavior, she needed to tell him it was not the time for craft night at the OK Corral.

He crooked a finger for her to come closer, muttering, "I'll keep Midnight talking until you can make it out the window."

The hair rose on the back of her neck. Had he just said she was going out the window? She opened her eyes so wide the skin in their corners strained. She shook her head. That wasn't going to happen. But other than that, it sounded like a good plan.

Boone nodded in return. "Yes, you are. My team will be here soon. When you're safe, I'm going to detonate these C4 charges and blow that door and everyone on the other side straight to hell."

Holy heck! Who was this guy? What else did he have in that freakin bag? She had no idea what a C4 charge could do, but she knew it must be powerful and effective.

From now on, Boone was going to be her go-to guy in a crisis. At least for now, she would. Once they got off this island, she'd probably never see him again.

He pointed one finger at her and then two fingers toward the window. Okay, he wanted her to head back that way. So, he didn't want her there to zap anyone who made it through the door? What if his plan didn't work and he needed her help? She opened her mouth to ask, but he held a finger to his lips and glared at her. Again, more forcefully, he pointed to her and then to the window.

Shaking her head, she glared back at him and stomped her foot. He couldn't tell her what to do. Yes, he'd rescued her from Moretti, but that didn't make him the boss of her.

And anyway, he acted as if his telling her to go out the window was completely sane. She held up a hand, palm toward him, in the internationally recognized sign for stop. Snatching the stun wand from her other hand, he grabbed the hand stretched out toward him, turned it palm up, and put one of his many handguns in her upturned hand. Evidence would suggest Boone didn't speak sign language.

What was she supposed to do with a gun? A real gun filled with real bullets if the weight of it was anything to go by. She'd told him she'd never shot one before. She'd never even touched one.

"Go stand by the window while I set the charges. If you see any movement out there, just point the gun at it and shoot," he whispered.

She clutched the handle of the gun so tight her knuckles whitened, and the cold metal bit into her hand. Her heart stuttered, but after notching up her chin, she shook her head once more. There was no way she was doing that. She was a party hostess, for crying out loud.

His eyes flared his displeasure at her defiance. Why did his stern expression make her tummy tingle? Staring straight at her, he held up one finger. She almost pretended she didn't know what he was doing but thought better of it. Anyone would know what that meant whether they'd had a course in sign language or not.

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No one had counted to three for her to obey them in, well, ever. That tingle in her tummy migrated south, settling in her lady bits. After one more fierce scowl of protest, she did as she was told.

He'd said to shoot at any movement. Maybe she could keep her eyes closed. If she didn't see anything, she wouldn't have to shoot. That seemed like a bad idea because, if someone was there, they might shoot her. What the heck was she going to do if she saw anyone move? She couldn't shoot a person.

She was no rich debutante worried about breaking a nail or anything. But kill someone? She couldn't do that. Didn't he know if you killed someone, they stayed dead like forever?

Anyway, she didn't have a good track record when it came to aiming. As a teenager, she'd hit a friend with a bowling ball at a birthday party. She'd meant to hit the pins, but she'd let go of the ball at the wrong time and almost prevented Phillip Ingram from ever fathering children. So, no, she wouldn't be shooting at anyone today.

Boone peeled adhesive covers she hadn't noticed off both clay blocks and stuck them on opposite sides of the doorframe. As he worked, he shouted, "How do I know you won't kill us both?"

"Because if I wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead. As for the girl, she's more valuable to me alive. She'll make me a fortune at the next auction."

Boone muttered some impolite words she wholeheartedly agreed with. There was no doubt Midnight meant what he said, but if he hoped to get a rise out of Boone, he had



wasted his breath. Boone's jaw tightened, but that was all. His attention was focused on his task. Mr. Midnight wouldn't be able to bait Boone into doing something stupid. Even she knew Boone was too smart for that. He was the whole package; brains, body, and brawn.

More importantly, he was also kind and protective—everything a girl could want, especially a Little girl. Not that he would care what she thought, but that didn't matter as long as he helped her escape.

Still, he was deliciously distracting. How was she supposed to focus on movement outside the window when the muscles in his arms and back were rippling like that?

"We both know that's not true," Boone called back to Midnight. "The whole reason I'm here is because you tried to kill me. Only, your men were such shit at marksmanship they missed me and hit a woman on my team instead."

"Just a woman on your team? I don't think so. All my men are excellent at their jobs, whether digging up the dirt on someone or taking some out. Cara Bradshaw was far from just any woman to you. You loved her. I think they have regulations against that kind of fraternization. She must have been special to risk both your careers. But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe she was just some slut you wanted to fuck."

Tildi gasped. The Boss of the Midnight family had tried to kill Boone and accidentally killed someone he cared about. The need to comfort him swept through her. It was all she could do to stay at the window instead of running to him and wrapping him in a warm hug.

But once again, Boone didn't take the bait. "That's your thing, Midnight, not mine. This isn't going to end as well for you as you seem to think. So why don't you cooperate? Drop your guns and wait in the hallway for me to come out and put a bullet in your brain."

Midnight laughed. “Another time, perhaps. I warned you to stay out of my business. You didn’t listen. Taking you out wouldn’t have been nearly as much fun as watching you howl like a wounded dog when we took out your woman. You should have listened to me.”

Boone knelt to get something else from his pack rather than focusing on what Midnight said. When the words sank in, Boone froze. “What the hell does that mean?” he shouted at the door.

Midnight laughed but it was so sinister Tildi shivered. “You cost me a lot of money, Boone. Not to mention wasting my time. But the thing I couldn’t forgive was your costing me my standing in the family. My reputation is everything, and you tried to ruin it. You know how this works. You took something from me. So, I took someone from you.”

Boone flinched as if he’d been shot. His gaze flew across the room, landing on Tildi. So many reactions played across his face she could barely catch them all. One thing was clear. Midnight’s words hit their mark.

The term ramrod straight hadn’t meant much to her until that moment. It was like an electric current had seized every muscle in his body, and the pain in his eyes was just that intense she could feel it all the way across the room. The haunting memories played out before her in his eyes. She didn’t know what had happened, but the pain he carried broke her heart.

But it didn’t stop with pain. So many emotions warred in his eyes. Rage, horror, vengeance, but still, the pain reigned supreme. He must have cared deeply for those under his command, especially the woman. Guilt painted her in broad strokes at the jealousy gripping her. But she’d give anything to have someone care about her the way Boone cared about this Cara person, whoever she was. They must have been really close.

That he was in this kind of pain hurt her soul. She had no idea what to do, but she just couldn't just stand there and watch his emotions bleed onto the floor. Leaving the gun at the window, she inched across the room and knelt beside him. That didn't seem enough, so she lifted a trembling hand to touch him. Before she reached him, he froze her in place with a glower.

“What are you doing, little girl? Get back to the window,” he said, his voice no more than a tormented growl.

She jerked away so hard she fell backward onto her butt. Scalding humiliation stole her breath. Of course, he wouldn't want her to touch him. She wasn't this woman he'd lost. What had she been thinking?

Besides, she'd been a prisoner of the Cosa Nostra for over a year. Everyone knew what that meant. She was dirty now, tainted. No decent person, and certainly not a man like Boone, would want her touching them. He closed his eyes, unable to even stand the sight of her.

“I'm sorry,” she managed to say before jumping to her feet and racing back to the window. Lifting the gun, she blinked furiously to beat back the tears threatening to escape. Scanning the area outside, she pretended she could see.

She sensed his rise and movement to stand behind her. She sensed because she darn sure wasn't going to look at him.

He'd told her to watch for movement, and that was what she was going to do. She would take out a blade of grass if it so much as ruffled. Hopefully, she wouldn't shoot a bird out of a tree when she tried.

A gentle hand gripped her arm as he tugged her around to face him. “Hey,” he said. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken like that. You haven't done anything wrong.”

She nodded her head but still didn't look at him. Why was he being nice to her? Did he pity her? Of course he did. Just look at her.

He could save his efforts. She didn't need his pity, just his help to get out of this place. And she darn sure didn't need him to pretend to care about her. He hadn't said or done anything she hadn't heard before.

Be good, be quiet, stay out of the way. That was what she'd heard all her life, so she could take it. What she couldn't take, couldn't understand, was him being nice to her. That was a surefire way to bring on the waterworks.

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Refusing to look at him or make a sound, she wiped her eyes. She'd been given a job to do. He was right. She should have minded her own business and stayed where he told her. For some unfathomable reason, she'd thought maybe she could help. She couldn't. No big deal.

"Little one, look at me," he ordered.

The tone of his voice, firm but kind, forced her to comply. Gah! Why did her defenses disappear with this guy?

He searched her eyes, and evidently, even being held by the Midnight family hadn't improved her poker face. He hid the rage and guilt she'd seen in his eyes seconds before and now looked at her with searching green eyes. No, not just green. His eyes were the dusty grayed blue-green of fresh sage.

He held her eyes for what seemed forever without speaking. Whatever he found there caused him to wrap his hand around the back of her neck and pull her into his chest.

Never, not in her entire life, had anything felt as wonderful as being held to his warm chest with the strongest arms in the world cradling her as if she might break. She loved it, but what the heck? Mixed signals much?

"I'm a dick, Tildi. I'd like to do better, but I know me. I promise to try, but I'm not an easygoing kind of guy. I won't be able to handle you with the gentleness you deserve. I am the one who can get you home, though. Deal?"

She had no idea why that warmed her heart, but it did. Honesty was something she

could appreciate. Although she suspected that while he was trying to be honest with her, he wasn't being honest with himself. He had plenty of gentleness in him, or she wouldn't be in his arms.

She attempted a smile. "Deal."

Her heart stuttered again when he smiled. It tilted higher on one side than the other in a way that caught her heart, and it went all the way to his eyes. When was the last time she'd seen a genuine smile other than when she was the butt of the joke?

Her smile blossomed into something, well, heartfelt.

"Good," he said. "Now, hand me my Glock and get behind me."

Her eyes dropped to his chest, and she gasped. "You've been bleeding," she said as if he didn't already know.

A shrug lifted and dropped his shoulders. "I ran into a few men earlier who forgot to bring their hospitality to work with them today. I'm fine."

Tugging the end of her shirt sleeve from underneath his jacket sleeve, she dabbed at the bloody cuts on his chest. Each time she finished with one, she blew on it gently as if she could soothe the sting.

Cupping her cheeks with his palms, he leaned down and kissed her forehead.

"How long did they have you?"

Tildi wished she knew. She'd tried to keep track at first, but it had gotten harder as the days turned into weeks, then months. "I don't know, exactly."

She hated admitting that. For some reason, it was humiliating. The blush coloring her cheeks at her admission angered her. She wasn't the one who'd done anything wrong, darn it. Well, other than being criminally stupid. "A year, I think. Maybe a little more."

"How are you so sweet after the year you've had? You're like a precious snowflake floating around in a firestorm."

He thought she was sweet and precious. Her insides warmed, and parts of her she hadn't felt in a long time tingled again. No one had ever called her anything like that before.

Then she remembered what the Boss had told Boone about his friend. Those words had taken him to a bad place. She'd give anything if she had a way to take his pain away.

Running her thumb along his cheek, she hid the jolt of surprise that hit her when her thumb came away wet. She stared at the tear, feeling his pain as if it were her own. Without thinking, she pressed the tear to her chest, right over her heart. "I'm sorry you feel responsible for someone you cared about being hurt. I know how that feels."

An expression she couldn't read crossed his face. "Can you find a way to trust me when I tell you I promise I won't let anything happen to you?"

"Of course," she said. For some reason, that made him smile. "What are you going to do?"

"Save our lives," he replied. He used his bag to break the sea-worn wooden bars lining the window and shoved them off the windowsill.

Tildi was glad he had a plan to get them out of there. Moretti's assault had given her

an adrenaline rush, but that was fading fast, along with her strength.

Mr. Midnight's voice called out again. "Regrettably, it has come to my attention that I must leave you before our business is concluded. Ah well, duty calls." After a pause, he added, "Kill the man, keep the girl. We can sell her."

For the first time in her life, Tildi stuck her tongue out. "You just took over the spot for biggest turd knocker I know!" she yelled out. Turning to Boone, she asked, "Should I still cover the window?"

"Not exactly," he said slowly.



“What do you mean, not exactly?”

“Bluebell, there are only two ways out of this room. And we can’t go out the door.”

“My name’s Tildi,” she corrected. “I understand we can’t go out the door, but, well, we can’t go out the window, either.” She paused when his brows rose, and he continued to stare at her. Waiting. “Wait... you... you want us to go out the window?”

Her question ended in a squeak.

His head tilted to the side when he shrugged that time. “I’m open to other suggestions, babygirl,” he said.

She paced to the window and back. “What about the guards outside?”

“Midnight only has a few men stationed here. I took out two on the beach and three others once I got to the compound and, of course, our friend Moretti here. Half the remaining soldiers will go with Midnight. That leaves half inside and the rest outside on the grounds. Probably only five or six.”

“Only five or six? Compared to our two?”

“Frankly, I’d count us as one and a half,” he said. “You’re pretty small, and you don’t know how to shoot.”

That snapped her spine stiff. Crossing her arms, she said, “We can’t all be Rambo,

you know.”

Unfortunately, he was right. Their odds of going out the window weren't great, but they were better than their odds if they stayed where they were.

She glanced out the window again. “We're really high off the ground.” She hated heights even more than she hated small, enclosed spaces.

Hugging her chest tighter, she snagged her bottom lip with her teeth. She could do this. He wouldn't ask her to do something that would kill her. Of course, he was used to dealing with super-human commando people.

Yeah, she was going to die.

Boone walked over to her, grabbed her shoulders, and gave them a squeeze. “You just said you trusted me. Were you lying to me, Bluebell? It's only a two-story drop to the ground. You'll be fine.”

“My name's Tildi,” she corrected again. “Two... oh, only two stories? Pfft. Is that all? And here I was getting all scared and stuff.”

He frowned at her sarcasm. “I know you're scared, little girl, but I'm gonna warn you this once to watch your tone.”

She stared up at him, eyes wide. Opening her mouth to speak, she had to snap it back shut because she had no words. Holy cow! Boone was a Daddy. He had to be. No one said things like that to a grown woman if they weren't a Daddy.

She'd wanted a Daddy for four years. She'd been tricked into believing the man who lived across the hall from her was a Daddy, but he wasn't. He'd turned out to be a giant jerkface. She'd kept searching until she'd been kidnapped.

She'd almost decided that kind of man only lived in Darling, Tennessee. And now, while being held prisoner by the Midnight family on the other side of the world, a real Daddy walked into her room. Things like that didn't happen. Not to her.

Her heart skittered at a sudden dreadful thought. Had she given off any signals that she was a Little? She didn't think so. She'd gotten good at hiding it. Most men took advantage of women like her when they realized what she was. Being Little could be dangerous.

Right now, she needed to forget about that and focus on Boone's plan to jump out a flipping second floor window.

"I mean no disrespect, but did they teach you about gravity in your commando school?"

His lips twitched before he spun her to face the window and smacked her on the butt.

"Ouch," she yelped, even though it didn't really hurt.

"There's plenty more where that came from if you don't march." He continued to propel her toward the window.

"Okay, okay! Talking time is over then. Aye-aye, Captain Commando." She did her best to salute.

He glared at her. Wow, somebody had a button that could be pushed. Not that she would dare push it. Probably.

"I was an air commando, but not anymore. I'm a rancher first who's occasionally called to act as a security specialist. For that part, I run Wilder Security."

“Is there a difference?”

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“I can see you are going to be a handful,” he answered, edging her forward until she could peek down to see for herself how far away the ground was.

Far.

Really, really far. Like to the moon and back far.

He must have depth perception issues. She was about to tell him as much when he said, “See? It’s a seventeen, maybe eighteen, foot drop, Tildi, twenty tops. I’m going to lower you down as far as I can. Between our two arm lengths, that’ll take at least fourteen feet off the distance. So, you’re only going to drop four or five feet, six feet maximum.”

She gave him the “you’re crazy” look he clearly deserved. She, however, was perfectly sane. “So, just to make sure we are on this reality’s page, I’m going to drop seven to eight feet, minimum.” There was no way that was only twenty feet. She spun around to move away from the window and ran into his solid, muscular chest.

“Look at me, babygirl,” he said in such a deep, stern tone her body obeyed automatically. “That’s two. I’ve already warned you about your tone of voice.”

There was nothing that could erase the shocked look from her face, and if her princess parts vibrated any harder she was going to bounce across the floor like one of those crazy Bumble Balls she’d seen toddlers chase around the room. She wasn’t going to ask what happened when he got to three. She was pretty sure she knew.

Instead, she sputtered, “You... but... I don’t think going out the window is a good

option.”

“You may be right, but it’s the only option we have. Didn’t I promise I’d keep you safe?”

Her mouth was so dry at the idea of going out that window she could do no more than nod.

“I always keep my promises. You’ll want to remember that,” he said, softening his words with another of his incredible, crooked smiles. “Now, keep your feet and thighs pressed together hard, and bend your knees. When you land, let your knees collapse and roll when you fall.”

“What if I don’t fall?” she demanded. He looked at her as if her words were ridiculous, which they were, but she was terrified. “Okay, so I’m gonna fall. I’m not the one who’s the super soldier air commando guy. Sorry, security specialist guy. Why don’t you jump first, and then you can catch me?”

“I’m going to answer that, then if you don’t jump out that window with no more lip, I’m going to tan your hide.”

Her bottom clenched, but she managed to keep from covering it with her hand. At least that cleared up what the countdown led to.

He continued his speech. “First, I have to detonate the explosives on the door and make sure it takes out the bad guys so they don’t come after us. Second, I don’t believe for one minute that if I go first, you’ll actually jump. Now get back to the window.”

Tildi then stomped her foot for the second time that day, adding a growl this time. Then she skittered back to the window before he could swat her bottom.

Boone helped her up onto the sill, grabbed her arms just above her wrists, and told her to do the same to him.

She grasped his arms just above his wrists as commanded. And then she made what Boone might call a grave tactical error. She looked back over her shoulder to the ground.

It was one thing to talk about a twenty-foot drop. It was another thing entirely to see the ground so far down she couldn't make out the details, at least not in the middle of the night.

Spinning back to face him, she blurted out, "I have to pee!"

He scowled. "You're going to have to hold it, little girl. We don't have any time left for potty breaks."

"I have to!" she cried. "If I don't, I'm gonna pee myself."

Boone seemed in a state of disbelief. Apparently, super soldier commando dudes didn't have bladders that overreacted when facing terror.

"You're going to that corner and pee in a bucket with me standing here?"

That was an excellent point. Darn it.

"How's this?" he said. "You hold tight, and you'll be able to pee in private soon."

She nodded and tried to calm her racing heart. She could do this. Not that she had a choice. She tried to take a deep breath but couldn't. It was as if her lungs already had too much air.

No matter how she tried to breathe out, it didn't help. Her lungs burned, and spots began to float in the air between Boone and her. Her lungs were too full of useless air to take in the good stuff. She was going to pass out. Time seemed to slow as she tried to decide how she felt about that.

Then Boone's deep voice broke through her mental gymnastics. "Tildi, breathe with me. You're going to pass out if you don't slow your breaths. Breathe in through your nose for a count of five. Slowly. Slower. Good, now out for a count of five. Good girl. Again."

She followed his breathing, never breaking eye contact. Her heart rate slowed, and she could breathe normally.



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“Okay now?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Good, I’m going to lower you down. I promise I won’t let go of you until it’s safe. Your job is to hold onto me. You ready?”

As I’m ever going to get!

She nodded again but couldn’t make herself speak. He slowly lowered her, bending out of the window until he was balancing on his hips.

“I’m going to let you go. It’s not far. I promise you, it’s going to be okay. Remember what I told you. Legs together, knees bent, roll. Got it? Okay, drop!”

He let go of her wrists. She didn’t let go of him, but it didn’t matter because even in the cold, her hands were wet and slippery with sweat. Yuck.

Before she could cry out, her feet hit the ground. He was right. It wasn’t all that far. She tucked and rolled, safe on the grass.

“You good?” he called down.

She nodded again, afraid to yell in case guards were near.

“I’m dropping you the gun. Do not try to catch it. When it lands, you can go pick it up, understood?” He tossed the pistol down, and she retrieved it.

“Should I still shoot whatever moves?”

“No. Wait right there, I’ll be back in a second,” he said before disappearing back into the room.

## CHAPTER 5

Holding the handgun like she’d seen in the movies, Tildi stared up at the window, waiting for Boone to reappear. Her adrenaline spiked even higher when he climbed out onto the windowsill, sitting bent practically in half. It was so small. She whispered yet another prayer to the universe that he didn’t slip and break his neck.

Looking down at her, Boone scowled and motioned for her to point the gun at the ground. “You need a keeper. We’re definitely doing some training when I get you home.”

Her stomach tightened and her lady bits clenched at his words. Not that he thought she needed a keeper. That was silly. She had functioned just fine on her own. Sort of.

No, it was the when he got her home part that tickled her nether regions. Did that mean he thought they would have time together when this was all over?

She really hoped that was what he meant. How crazy was that? She didn’t even know where the place he called home was. It was a ranch. That was all she knew.

“Focus, Bluebell,” he called down to her. How could the man shout and whisper at the same time?

The sternness in his tone warmed her tummy. That shouldn’t turn her on, right? Nothing should turn her on like that, not now, anyway.

She'd thought nothing would ever turn her on again after the past year. But then Boone came along, and there she was with her princess parts all a'tingling.

"Tildi! Are you listening to me?" he demanded from the window.

Yeah, she should probably think about her princess parts later.

"Do you see what looks like the rusty top part of a buried tank over to your left? You're going to want to start running toward it now."

What in the world? Turning to her left, she spied what he was talking about. Who would take the time to bury a tank? And why would she run toward it?

"What about the guards?" she asked. "Won't they spot me if I'm running out in the open?"

"Maybe, but I'm counting on the explosion distracting them," he yelled down to her.

Explosion? What explosion? He couldn't mean the C4 he'd attached to the door. She was no rocket scientist, but she had been good at physics. If he triggered an explosion while he was blocking the window like that, the force would shoot him across the yard like a bullet out of a gun.

"Um, Boone?"

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She was about to ask what the heck he was doing when, to her horror, he pulled out a box that seemed to be a remote control.

“What are you doing? Are you crazy?” she yelled.

“Oddly enough, you are not the first person to ask me that question. Now, run!”

Tildi ran. She covered her head with her arms to protect herself from flying debris. She was no athlete, but the only thing that really hurt was her ear when she smacked it with the handgun she’d forgotten she held.

A tremendous boom crashed through the air around her, and tiny particles of who knew what pelted her skin. She couldn’t hold back the scream that erupted from her. Luckily, the explosion probably covered it up.

Hoping against hope Boone had escaped the blast, she glanced back just in time to see him hurtling through the air. The force of the explosion rocketed him almost all the way across the yard, nearly to the buried tank.

Without breaking her stride, she angled toward him. He’d landed face down in the grass and wasn’t moving. Giving a very unladylike grunt, she managed to roll him over to his back. His head lolled to the side, and he didn’t open his eyes. With trembling hands, she pulled his now grass-stained and torn shirt open and placed her ear to his chest. She couldn’t hear anything at first, probably because of her proximity to the blast. But finally, the thumping of his heart told her he was alive. That had to count for something.

She collapsed by his side and rolled over onto her back, using his arm as a pillow. She forced her tears back, though she wanted to cry. On second thought, what she really wanted to do was smack him.

What had he been thinking? He could have been killed. That thought filled her with a way greater sense of loss than it should have, considering she'd only known him for an hour or so.

Sitting up, she scanned the area for guards. The last thing they needed right now was to get shot. His bag lay on the ground close to the stone wall of the house. Right where he'd dropped it before he blew up part of the freaking building.

Yeah, she was also glad he wasn't dead because that meant she could kill him herself for giving her a coronary.

Boone coughed and tried to sit up, an effort that did him no good. He settled for asking, "You all right, Bluebell?"

She wanted to yell at him, but his voice was funny. He must be in pain, which tended to happen when a person was catapulted half the length of a football field from the second story. Okay, so not that far, but pretty doggone far.

"I'm fine," she snapped. "But we are going to have a conversation about reckless regard for safety."

At that, he grabbed her arm and yanked her back down so her face was close to his. "You're damn straight we are," he growled. "The next time you run with a gun pointed at your own fucking head, you won't sit down for a month."

She struggled to get off him, but he wouldn't let her go. "You can't threaten to spank me," she said. "And I did not point a gun at my head."

His scowl did not improve. “Did you, or did you not, just run across the grass with your hands protecting your head?”

“Of course I did,” she answered immediately. “Because someone was about to set off a bomb!”

“I waited until you were clear of the blast zone,” he snapped right back. “Where was your gun while you were racing across uneven ground? In the dark, no less, where visibility was limited?”

Darn it. She’d hoped he hadn’t noticed that. Unconsciously rubbing her ear, she said, “It was in my hand.” Well, crap. “Okay, so maybe in my stark raving terror, I might have lost track of what I was holding.”

“Right. That’s three.”

Uh oh. “What do you mean three? Three what?”

Boone ignored her and grabbed the pistol from where she had dropped it on the ground beside him. After scanning the area, he turned his attention back to her, which she wasn’t sure was a good thing. “Okay, Bluebell. We are heading away from this compound before the guards show up. But when we get to a stopping point, you and I are going to have a chat.”

Hmm, she wasn’t sure that was a good idea. He didn’t wait for her to voice her opinion, however. He retrieved his bag, grabbed her hand, and proceeded to drag her toward the tree line.

After stumbling for three thousand years beside him through a dense forest of bamboo and scrub brush the perfect height to keep smacking her in the face, they broke through another tree line on the edge of a small meadow of tall grass. On the

other side lay a cliff that, by all appearances, was very, very high.

Turning to him, she asked, “Why did you lead us to a dead end?”

“I’ll get to that in a minute,” he said. “First, we have that chat.”

“Aren’t there people chasing us?”

“This won’t take long.”

“Oh, okay. Well, you certainly know more than me, Mr. Gummy-Security-Not-Commando guy, but I would have thought we were kind of in a time crunch.”

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“We’ve got time for this,” he said.

In hindsight, the tone of his voice should have given her a warning, but she wasn’t in a particularly discerning frame of mind.

They’d made it to a volcanic boulder. It wasn’t the first one she’d seen on their trek, and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

“As you so cleverly pointed out, little girl, we don’t have a lot of time. So, let’s do this in bullet points. We can talk it out in detail once our feet are on American soil. Deal?”

She automatically said, “Deal.” But what the devil had she just agreed to? He sat down on the boulder as if they had all the time in the world.

“Okay, point one. I’m a Daddy Dom, but I think you already know that.”

All the breath left her body, and her knees almost buckled. Holy cow! Had he just said that? He had. He’d just... said that right out in the open. Her mouth opened and closed like a catfish seeking water, finally landing on open.

He didn’t take his eyes off her. Reaching out, he put a finger under her chin and lifted, closing her mouth for her. She’d have to be embarrassed about that later because he kept talking.

“You aren’t asking me any questions about that, so I’m going to assume you know what it means. Bullet point two, I’m guessing you are a Little. Am I right?”



She was in such a state of shock at this turn in the conversation that she nodded before she knew what she was doing.

“Good girl,” he said. “Have you ever had a Daddy before?”

She had read words like that hundreds of times in her spicy romance books, but no one had ever said them to her before. They made her feel just as amazing as the girls in the stories felt.

“Um, no,” she answered honestly. “I thought I did, but he wasn’t a real Daddy. That was years ago, but I’ve always wanted to find my real Daddy.”

He nodded. “I haven’t had a Little girl in a long time, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t missed it. I feel drawn to you, and at the risk of sounding egotistical, I think you feel drawn to me, too. I don’t know whether that is something real or situational, but right now, it doesn’t matter. Bullet point three, I propose we agree to a short term DDlg relationship. I think it will make things easier for both of us.”

She tried to give him her answer, but he held up his hand. “Before you decide, you need to know I take being a Daddy very seriously. I’m not the marshmallow Daddy you might have read about in those books people write. And even though I can’t say how long our relationship will last, you need to know that while we are in that relationship, I will be your Daddy, and you will be my Little girl in every sense of the word. Any questions?”

None that she could think of, but then, she couldn’t even think of things she needed at the grocery store when someone asked out of the blue like he was springing on her. She shook her head.

“Think carefully, Tildi not Matilda,” he said. “Your answer lasts until we reach Washington state. That’s where we have to return a yacht that’s taking us back to the

US. That is what you are agreeing to. You will be my babygirl until we are safely back on land. You will have a safeword, of course, but we will be in a relationship with everything that entails. So, again, do you have any questions?”

She took a breath and tried to think. Did she have any questions? Surely there was something she needed to know. The anticipation of everything his proposal might mean had her nipples hardening. Oh yeah, she did have a question.

“Um, does this relationship include sex?” Her face flooded with heat as soon as the words left her mouth. He was going to think she was a horrible person to ask such a thing of a complete stranger. How could she have said that? Worried that, best case scenario, he would laugh at her, she covered her face with her hands. When no laughter came, she peeked at him through her fingers. He didn’t seem to be disgusted or amused. Actually, he looked pleased.

“That is a very good question, babygirl. I’m proud of you for having the courage to ask.”

Warmth at his praise heated her entire body. At that moment, if he had told her she could fly, she might have jumped off that cliff for him. Well, she’d have jumped off the rock he was sitting on.

She had lived twenty-four years, and that was the first time anyone had ever told her they were proud of her for something she did.

“To answer your question, that would be up to you, Bluebell,” he continued. “Not gonna lie, I would love to be with you in every way you can think of, and probably a few you can’t. But it’s your call. I would never put pressure on you for sex of any kind. Now I have a question. If we do this, I want to be your Daddy in every sense of the word, excluding sex. I will treat you as my Little because that is what you’ll be, with all the rewards and all the consequences that go with this type of relationship. Is

that what you want?”

Was that what she wanted? It was clear she'd never have to worry about what he was thinking or what he wanted. He was perfectly capable and willing to lay it out there in the open. After a lifetime of trying to guess what people really wanted from her and for what reason, that was more appealing to her than almost anything else he'd said.

She tried to think things through, but she really couldn't see a downside. To be able to turn over the reins to someone like Boone would be amazing. The stress and complications her life held were often too heavy to bear. To have the chance to experience what it was like to have a Daddy like the women in the books she loved? Sign her up.

She met his eyes and nodded. “I would like that,” she told him.

He nodded. “Since we don't know each other, we will use the traffic light system for safewords for now. Red for stop, yellow to pause and talk, and green to keep going. Are you good with that?”

“Yes,” she said immediately.

He studied her for a moment, then asked, “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

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He smiled, but his eyes were now filled with a stern purpose that hadn't been there before. "I'm glad, Bluebell. I'm looking forward to getting to know you and your Little better."

Standing and extending his hand, he waited. When she placed her hand in his, he said, "Now for the second part of our little chat."

### CHAPTER 6

Boone had never met anyone like Tildi. It was a wonder she hadn't gotten into the kind of trouble men like Midnight brought before now. She was the poster child for sweetness and vulnerability, all wrapped up in the sexiest body he'd ever seen. She was like a pitcher of cool water about to fall off a table in front of a man just leaving from a week in the desert. She should come with a warning tag.

When he'd seen her running across the grass with her handgun bouncing alongside her own head, finger on the trigger, he had almost lost his mind. Instead, he'd lost his balance and fallen from the window like a damn new recruit. If the blast hadn't increased his forward momentum, he probably would have broken his neck.

"We're going to start this relationship the way I intend for it to go." He sat back down on the boulder and, with a firm yank, pulled her face down over his knees.

"Wait!" She tried to push off his lap. "What are we doing?"

"You are lying over my lap like the naughty girl you are," he told her, stating what he thought was more than obvious. "I am about to show you what happens when a Little

girl of mine throws caution and common sense out the window and puts her safety at risk.”

Not for the first time since he’d met her, he appreciated her short skirt. She threw her hand back to try and prevent him from lifting said skirt, not that it would do her any good. When he had it shoved up to her waist, he smiled. Her lavender thong was very convenient. It meant he didn’t need to waste time pulling them down.

He took just a moment to appreciate the swells and curves of her bottom and her pale, unmarred skin. A moment was all he had, though, so he brought his hand down with a solid thwack to the dead center of her cheeks.

The yelp that escaped her was satisfying. She’d be making many of those yelps in the next few minutes and a lot of other noises, too. He didn’t have the time for a real lecture, so he made do with, “You never point a gun at anything you don’t intend to shoot. And you never, ever point it at your own head.”

Then he let his hand take over the conversation. He intended to be very thorough.

“Ow! OW!” she howled. “I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry! Please—ouch! Please stop! It was an accident.”

If that was supposed to be an excuse, it wasn’t anywhere close to being good enough. “Do you have any idea the number of people who wind up dead by accident?” he demanded.

“Oh! OH! OOOWWW! No! Stop! Please! I didn’t give consent.”

He didn’t even slow down. “You have a safe word, and you agreed to accept the consequences of naughty behavior. If you need to stop, the word is red. Are you using it?”

“Owie! Oh, OW!” She kicked her legs and bucked her hips, waving her bottom around to try and ease the heat in her cheeks as he rained down swat after swat. “Please stop! I’m sorry! I won’t ever touch a gun again as long as I live. I promise. I promise!”

Boone did not stop. He moved lower, spanking her sit spots and the tops of her thighs. He’d be able to see those even when her skirt was back in place. With one final crack to her bright red bottom, he hauled her up and set her on her feet in front of him.

She didn’t even bother to lower her skirt. Grabbing her scalded backside, she bounced up and down on her toes and stared at him with wide, tear-drenched eyes. “That hurt!” she cried.

“It was meant to,” he said. “You are going to prioritize your safety from now on, or you will find yourself right back over my knee, and next time, I’ll use my belt. Do you understand?”

Tildi whimpered and nodded. “I promise,” she said again.

He held her eyes to make sure she was serious, then held out his hand to her. She threw herself back on his lap, straddling his legs with hers and burying her face in his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her and held her while she cried out all the pent up emotions she’d been carrying. At least all she could get out in the few minutes they had.

She fit perfectly in his arms. He tried to pull his hips back in the hope she wouldn’t notice how hard his dick was.

Long before either of them was ready, he shifted her more toward his knees, though he couldn’t make himself move her from his lap. Her nose and eyes were red, but she

was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever known.

He needed to prepare her for the next step of their escape. After the way she reacted to their short trek through the narrow band of trees hiding Midnight's compound from the view of fishing vessels and tourists, he had no idea how to tell her about the thirty-five mile hike through real forests containing very real animals and an active volcano or two.

At least he'd parked the jeep Sev had arranged for him about five miles down. They'd be able to drive most of the way.

When he and his team had come up with the escape plan, he hadn't counted on having anyone with him. He had no problem with the jump as long as he had his base jumping equipment. But for Tildi? A drop from that height off a sheer cliff to a narrow strip of beach below was not going to go over well.

To be honest, he would never have subjected her to anything close to what she had coming in the next few days. He had planned his escape to the smallest detail. But he'd had no idea he would have a woman who'd been confined to tiny rooms for a year with him. Much less a Little. That could be the picture beside the term best-laid plans in the dictionary or whatever book held such things.

With no other option, he stood and put her down. "First things first." He loped to his pack and took out the spare thermals he always kept there. "Let's get these on you so you don't freeze to death."

Five minutes and a great deal of tucking and folding later, he had her in his spare set of thermals. The shirt hung down as far as her skirt, and he'd had to roll up the pants so many times they made a thick ring around her ankles. He'd also found a pair of wool socks in his bag, which was the best he could do to compensate for her shoes.

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She looked like she'd been swallowed whole, and he thought she was adorable. Now, time to fill her in on what came next. "Bluebell, I need to share what the next two days have in store for us. Fair warning, you're not going to be tickled pink by what I have to say."

"Are you kiddin' me?" he asked. She'd surprised him. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened. He thought she might sulk from having her britches busted, but she hadn't. When she shared some information about the town she'd grown up in, he understood why.

"Nope, it's a family friendly tourist town in the eastern Tennessee mountains," she said, attempting to keep up in her not-ready-for-mountain-range hiking shoes. "In Darling, almost all the men are Daddies. There all all kinds of things for Littles, hence for kids, to do. When I left, we were getting more and more Littles and Daddies visiting or moving there to try and find someone. Breezy says they have all sorts of things to do now."

Her pace slowed at the mention of her sister. Tildi had spoken of her sister before. Had she been in the same camp as this General who was supposedly Tildi's father?

He decided to wait to talk about her sister. There was something else he wanted to know. "You talk about home as if it is a wonderful place, and yet, you couldn't wait to leave. Why is that?"

She shrugged. "The town is great. My family, well, my parents, not so much."

Boone nodded. Talking kept her distracted. She hadn't mentioned the wind or the



ever-steepening trail, though it must be affecting her because her pace gradually grew slower and slower.

“Your parents but not your sister?” he asked.

“Breezy? No, Breezy was great. I couldn’t allow myself to show her how much I loved her back then. If the General thought anything was distracting me from my studies, he got rid of it. Even people. I had several friends whose parents miraculously got jobs somewhere else if I got too close to them. I came home one day and found a bunch of brochures about fine arts boarding schools all around the world. I knew it was the General’s way of warning me that he’d send Breezy away, too, if she got in the way of his plans for me. He was a shit father and a dick of a human being.”

He froze at her words and turned to face her. What kind of father would do that to his daughter? Either one of them?

“Language,” he drawled automatically. “Though I agree with the sentiment. Come here, Bluebell.”

She’d been lagging further and further behind the last mile or so, but she hadn’t complained. He was proud of her for that, but now that he watched her walk, it became evident she had a limp.

“You getting blisters from those shoes?” His years of military service had taught him the danger of open sores on the feet. It was one small reason to be thankful for the cold weather. Germs didn’t grow well in snow.

It hadn’t been a problem at first, but as they climbed higher, the drifts had grown deeper. His thermals and wool socks helped, but she could still get blisters or worse, frostbite.

When she got closer, he dropped to one knee and had her sit on the other. The breath she sucked in as he removed her shoe told him all he needed to know about the state of her feet, but he checked anyway.

As he suspected, she had several large blisters that had already popped on the bottoms of her feet and the backs of her heels. Even more concerning, her feet were a dark cherry red.

He should have stopped sooner, but she'd given no indication she was in pain. "Why didn't you tell me you could barely walk, little girl? I could have helped."

She sniffled, and he felt like an ass. Here she was, trying to be a trooper, and he was yelling at her.

"I didn't want to complain. You saved my life already. I shouldn't ask for more than that." Those periwinkle eyes flashed, and her adorable chin jutted out. "I can do my part. You said we needed to make it to the jeep, so that's what I'm going to do."

He did his best to gentle his tone. "I appreciate that, Bluebell. I know you've had to look out for yourself and not make waves for the last year, but those days are gone. It's my job as your Daddy to look after you. I know how strong you are. I'm proud of you, but being strong doesn't mean not asking for help when you need it."

"It always has before," she said, her voice small and filled with pain. He'd bet a steak dinner that pain wasn't because of her feet. Damn that man who donated sperm to her mother. He would never call the man a father again.

"Well, it isn't that way anymore. I want you to come to me when anything is bothering you, no matter how big or how small." He gave her a grin and a wink. "That's one of the perks of having a Daddy."

That earned him, if not a full blown smile, at least a tilt of her lips. With a nod, she said, “Okay.”

Schooling his face into an over-exaggerated scowl, he growled, “What are the words I want to hear, young lady?”

Her giggle was like bells jingling on a Christmas sleigh. “Yes, Daddy.”

“That’s my good girl,” he said. Without thinking, he leaned forward and kissed her. He’d intended to kiss her forehead, but at the last second, she looked up. His kiss landed on her lips. Her soft, plump, delicious lips.

It must have surprised her as well because her lips rounded into a gasp. It was all he could do not to take advantage of the opportunity to explore her mouth and taste her. With a self-control that had come from years of dealing with skittish colts on the ranch, he pulled back and brushed a kiss on her forehead as he had originally intended.

Was that disappointment in her eyes? He shut that thought down. There was no way he was going to make out with his girl when she was cold and in pain. It was more likely wishful thinking on his part, anyway.

“All right, Bluebell,” he said. “Let me look in my handy dandy backpack. I might have something to make your feet more comfortable.”

Before he could get it open, Tildi broke out in a rousing chorus of The Backpack Song, and his heart damn near burst.

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Then she shook her head at him. “Handy Dandy goes with a notebook from Blue’s Clues. The magic backpack is from Dora the Explorer. Everyone knows that, Daddy!”

He grinned. “I guess I need to brush up on my Nickelodeon.”

As he’d thought, he had a small first aid kit containing some antibiotic ointment and bandages. Once he doctored her feet, he shifted his pack to rest on his abs. Before she could step away, he hoisted her onto his back.

“Wrap your legs around my waist, Bluebell. Daddy’s going to give you a piggyback ride.” He bounced her higher on his hips and then held his pack out to make room for her to do as he’d told her.

Her legs secure, he reached behind and grabbed under her butt.

“Are you sure I’m not too heavy for you?”

He bounced her, deliberately harder than before. “I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that. It came awful close to you talking down about yourself. That will get your britches dusted every time. Do you hear me?”

Her shudder sent hot waves of need through him, but now was not the time for that. The miles they needed to cover before reaching the spot he’d hidden the tent on his way in stretched before them.

He took off at a brisk pace, thankful he’d stuck to his training regimen in the mountains near the ranch. Other than the lack of humidity, Wyoming had been the

perfect place to condition.

After about a mile, the trail became easier to follow. Not that the scrub wasn't still overgrown and smacking them both in the face, but at least he had a narrow path. He watched his feet much of the time. It wouldn't do to trip with his babygirl riding shotgun.

They rounded a sharp bend, and Tildi screamed.

Dropping her to her feet behind him, he pulled his Glock and searched for the enemy. Midnight's men shouldn't have been able to follow them, but it was possible he had men stationed closer to the western coast of the island.

When he spotted the problem, he holstered his gun and did his best not to laugh. To give his babygirl credit, it did present an intimidating picture. How it came to be on this island, he had no idea.

"We have to go back, Daddy," Tildi whispered, tugging at his arm to retreat. "It might attack us, but if we don't make sudden movements or noise, it might let us go."

"Tildi—"

"It's not time for brave hero macho Daddy," she cut him off to insist. "It is too big, even for you. Please, Boone. Please, let's go. We can find another way."

A better man would have explained the situation to his Little girl. Boone was more a man of action. He had no idea how a Wagyu bull had made it onto this island, but there it stood, two thousand plus pounds of the most expensive beef on the planet.

"Get behind me, Bluebell. I'm going to get us through this. You stay calm and don't move from this spot."

“Wh-what are you going to do?” Tildi whispered, wrapping her arms around her chest.

“I’m going to do what I always do in this situation. This is not my first stare-down with a bull, babygirl. It can be tricky, but I know what to do. You just be still and quiet. Everything will be fine.”

He lowered his pack to the ground. Tildi wasn’t wrong. The massive animal had the body of a wild ox.

Boone held his hands out wide and approached the bull with slow, steady steps. These bulls were gentle, but he didn’t want to startle it and have Tildi hurt.

Though the horns on the bull were intimidating, it watched Boone approach with no more than the occasional blink. Boone reached forward and placed his palm on its forehead. The beast nuzzled against his hand like Dollar had so many times.

“Tildi, come here, darlin’. This one’s as gentle as a baby lamb.”

“That’s all right,” she assured him, not moving. “I’m good back here.”

“I promise it won’t hurt you. This beauty is the perfect introduction to steers. Didn’t they have cows in Tennessee?”

“Not in their natural state,” she said.

He sliced a look over his shoulder. “Don’t you want to touch one and see what it feels like?”

“Yeah, no offense, but I think I’ll wait for a gecko-size cow instead of starting with a Godzilla-size one. But maybe if you put that one in the dryer or something.”

“You know, Little girls with smart mouths get butts busted,” he said but left it as a tease rather than a threat. These things took time, and she hadn’t grown up around cattle like he had.

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A thudding of hooves on the hard ground in front of them caught his attention. A dried bamboo pole appeared over the bull from the back and came down on its hind quarters with a resounding thwack. Someone had spliced the pole so it made a big noise without a lot of force.

The bull jumped and stepped forward. Boone stepped to the side and pulled Tildi back behind him. A young boy no older than ten whisked the pole again, prompting the bull to carry on down the trail.

The boy glanced at them as he passed but didn't seem surprised or alarmed. Still, Boone knew that was their signal to get a move on.

Putting Tildi back on his back, he told her story after story of growing up on the ranch. They'd swapped stories at first. But all her stories made him angry. How could someone so sweet come out of a home so dysfunctional? She was a miracle in motion.

"Okay, here we are," he said when he spotted the small clearing where he'd stored the tent. "Have you ever gone camping, little one?"

Her eyes were huge as she shook her head. "I was too busy with school."

That's what he figured she'd say. "Well, you are in for a treat, babygirl. Take this tarp and spread it out right over there. We'll get the tent up, and then, hear that water running?"

She nodded again. Cute. She was staring at him like he was a rocket engineer. He felt



ten feet tall.

“There’s a creek at the bottom of that ravine. We’ll walk down there and get water.”

She lit up like the sky last week at sunrise. He’d thought that was beautiful. The excitement and joy gleaming in her eyes outshone the sunrise, hands down.

“Let’s pick out our sleeping tree and go from there.”

She was adorable, inspecting each tree. Her tongue peeked out from the corner of her mouth as she concentrated on finding the perfect tree. Even in the freezing temperature, his dick was fighting to break through his zipper.

They worked to lay down dry branches and put down a mylar tarp. Then he took over. He set up camp the same way he’d been doing since he and his brother camped on the edge of the back pasture when they were kids.

Since he’d grown up camping in Wyoming, he’d known how to prepare for the cold night air. The trees broke up the wind, and the way he set the tent added more protection.

She’d ooh’d and ahh’d over the freeze-dried lasagna they had for supper. He loved her delight at everything they did, no matter how small. Seeing things fresh through her eyes took the bite out of not only the dropping temperatures but also the failure of his attempt to take out Midnight.

He’d rescued her with a resentment he kept buried deep, but her unfailing ability to see the good in everything after all she’d endured humbled him. It had only been hours, but he couldn’t imagine a world without Tildi-not-Matilda Lewis.

And now he was headed for the hardest thing he’d had to do on this mission so far.

He hadn't planned for company and only had one sleep sack.

Glancing at his watch, he said, "Time for bed, Bluebell."

She came back immediately with, "I don't want to go to bed yet." It would have been more effective if she hadn't yawned in the middle of her protest.

"Sure you do," he told her. "Once we're in bed, we get to see the star show."

He took one look at her and laughed. Suspicion didn't just cloud her eyes. It painted her whole face. Good to know his Little girl wouldn't be able to keep secrets from him.

She put both hands on her hips. "What are you laughing at?"

"You should never play poker, little girl. Your face is an open book. Now I'll rephrase my statement. You have until I count to three to get you hiney in this sleeping bag, or I'll put you there after I make sure it is very, very red."

Her eyes almost popped out of her head. "I was just thinking how tired I was, Daddy," she said, moving to the sleeping bag he already had in place.

"Good move," he told her as he helped her take off her shoes. "I'll get in first, then you crawl in next to me."

"It looks awfully tiny to hold two people," she said as he situated himself in the sleeping bag.

"That just makes it cozy. Now climb in, Bluebell."

He managed not to groan as she wiggled into place, settling with her firm, round

backside nestled against his crotch. There was no way to keep his cock from responding to her closeness.

He knew the second she realized that was his dick pressing against her bottom because she stiffened and stopped moving.

“Pay no attention to that, Bluebell. It doesn’t mean anything is going to happen. We are like this so we can stay warm.”

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He rolled onto his back with her on top of him. There was no denying her closeness affected his body, but he was more concerned about the way she was wiggling into his heart.

Her bubblegum pink hair tickled his neck, and she smelled of the spruce and fir trees they'd hiked through and something spicy and feminine he couldn't place.

He liked the way his mouth was pressed so close to her. He'd like nothing better than to run his tongue along the delicate shell of her ear. Instead, he said, "Are you ready to watch the star show?"

"Mm-hmm," she said, her voice already drowsy. His girl had been through a lot today.

"All right. You're going to have to pay attention to my words because I can't use my hands since they're inside the sleeping bag. But if you look straight up, you can see the Big Dipper."

"Wait, where?"

"Tilt your head back more. There you go. See it now?"

"Oh. Oh! I see it!"

"Good girl! Now, do you see that basically open space? That's where the star show will happen. We just have to be patient."

It took about five minutes before it happened. A falling star streaked across the sky. One thing about being at a high altitude on a remote island was the clear sky made the heavens easy to see. And this area of the world was known for its beautiful night sky.

She sucked in a breath, releasing it with an “oohh!”

“Just wait,” he said. “It gets better. Now, the magic of a shooting star is that you get to make a wish, but you have to do it before the star disappears.”

They watched as the sky put on a spectacular star show for his Little girl.

There he went again. It had only been about twenty-four hours since he’d first laid eyes on Tildi, and he already couldn’t stop thinking of her as his Little girl. She wasn’t, and chances were she never would be.

He wouldn’t be good for her anyway. She’d seen enough of the harsher things in life. She deserved a Daddy who would be patient, kind, and gentle. None of those words described him.

His job was to get her back to the States safely and help her start over, wherever that might be. It could be anywhere. Just not with him.

## CHAPTER 7

They got an early start then next morning. It was just as well. Tildi had slept well once the shooting star show slowed. She was able to make several wishes, most of which she wouldn’t tell him.

“Everyone knows wishes don’t come true if you share them, Daddy,” she’d told him with a tone so prim it would have made a schoolmarm proud.

They'd made it to the jeep Sev had arranged for him. He'd driven them the final thirty miles to the spot he'd picked for his escape. Once again, the plans he'd made didn't allow for an extra passenger.

No novice should make a base jump like the one he'd planned. Hell, no novice should base jump at all. He tried to tell himself he'd be with her, but the entire thing was reckless at best. The jump was tricky with all the icy winter winds blowing in off the northern Pacific Ocean. Keeping the parachute on target would require skill.

Add to that the narrowness of the strip of beach they had to land on. It didn't leave much room for error. Normally, landing in the water wouldn't be a problem, but coral covered the bottom of the ocean in the Kuril Islands. He hadn't counted it as a factor, either. It was only an issue if you didn't know what you were doing, which he did. But Tildi didn't know the first thing about base jumping.

None of this would be an issue if he were alone, but he wasn't. He'd calculated the jump limit counting only himself. Even with how small Tildi was, they were over the weight limit. That meant they would fall faster and hit the ground harder.

The blue-black waters of the Pacific churned in the wind, and the cold front that had moved inland sooner than expected blanketed the island with fog. At least that worked in their favor.

That was about the only thing that did. If he had any other option, he'd have gone with it. But this was all he had.

Returning his attention to the beauty beside him in the jeep, he got down to it. "All right, Bluebell, I need you to listen to me. When I tell you this, I want you to keep in mind that I have kept you safe so far. I've been doing missions like this for a long time, so you can trust I know what I'm talking about. Yeah?"

She nodded but didn't say anything. Best to just go ahead and get it out there. "If you didn't like going out the window, you're going to hate what happens next. But this time, we'll be together. You'll be in my arms almost every second. I promise you'll be safe."

"I'd feel safer if you didn't spend so much time trying to convince me how safe I'm going to be."

His girl was a bit of a straight shooter herself, wasn't she? "Fair enough. I have a boat hidden in the cove just north of that point," he said, indicating where the beach jutted out into the water not far away.

"I'm not afraid of the water or boats, so there's no need to worry about me." Scanning the grassy area in front of them, she asked, "Where are the steps down to the beach?"

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“It’s two hundred and fifty feet down to the beach, Tildi.”

“Wow, I’ve never even seen that many steps. We’d better get started. The guards who are left have to be tracking us by now. We have to hurry.”

“We will, but there are no steps.”

Confusion danced across her face. “No steps? Then how are we supposed to get down there?”

He slid her from his lap and knelt next to his pack, unzipping the bottom before pulling out what looked like a flat backpack. After rezipping the bag, he stood and held it up to her.

“We get down with this,” he said.

Her confusion vanished, replaced by fear. “It looks like an awfully small bag to hold two hundred and fifty steps.”

Ignoring her sarcasm, he asked, “Tildi, do you know what base jumping is?”

She shook her head. “I’ve heard of it, but I’m not exactly sure.”

That was probably a good thing. He explained while he took out his chute and harness. “It’s not a big deal,” he said. “I’ve done this hundreds of times. It will only last about ten seconds, and I’ll be holding you almost the entire time.”



She shook her head. “Wait, what will only last about ten seconds? No, strike that. What do you mean almost the entire time?”

How could he word this in a way that wouldn’t freak her out? Nothing came to mind. “I’m going to need you to take off my coat, Bluebell.”

“But it’s cold,” she replied.

“I know, babygirl, but the coat will get too heavy when we get into the water. It will weigh you down. You have to take it off so we can add it to the backpack. I have a blanket on the boat that will warm you up.”

“Okay, I guess.”

The petulance in her tone almost made him smile as he slipped his coat from her shoulders and stuffed it into the backpack. He was about to make her jump off a two hundred and fifty foot cliff, and she was whiny because she had to do it without his coat.

Kneeling in front of her, he snapped the leg straps together before holding them out. “Step,” he said. She didn’t move, but one pointed glance back at the boulder had her grabbing his shoulder to steady herself as she stepped into the leg straps.

Her legs were smooth and toned, and he had the sudden urge to run his tongue up her inner thigh as she stood before him with her legs slightly spread. His cock began to swell again, obviously on board with that plan.

Get a grip, for fucks sake. You’re not in junior high.

He hadn’t had this kind of reaction to a woman in three years. He stood, pulled the canvas loops up her gorgeous legs, and secured the chest straps in place.

“This is bringing back less than pleasant memories of my backpack in middle school,” she said as he pulled the shoulder straps in place. “At least this isn’t as heavy as my trig and chemistry books.”

He paused. “You took trig and chemistry in middle school?”

She blushed as if being smart was something to be ashamed of and shrugged. “It’s not hard when you have personal tutors every day.”

Why would she downplay her intelligence? “Sounds hard to me,” he said.

He was no slouch in the academic department, but it seemed his babygirl was on an entirely different level.

“Well, it wasn’t,” she said. “But it was something that made me different from everyone else. It’s hard to make friends when you’re twelve, taking classes with sixteen and seventeen-year-olds. I had to fail things on purpose so people would stop calling me a freak.”

He cracked his neck to each side to give himself time to calm down. He was all for allowing a child to live up to their full potential, but it sounded like Tildi’s parents hadn’t considered her overall well being. He could picture her sitting alone at lunch with no one to talk to. How isolated had she felt?

He let that drop for now but filed it away to bring up on the trip home. They would need many topics to make conversation on the nearly three week journey. That was one of the many things they could do to pass the time. Something to look forward to.

Now for the hard part. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he said, “This is how it’s going to go. We are jumping down into the water. You are wearing a parachute designed for jumping exactly this distance. You are strapped in, so there is no way for

you to fall. It will feel like you are floating for ten to fifteen seconds. I'll be holding on to you the whole way."

"How are you going to be holding onto me if I'm falling off a cliff?" she asked, and her voice sounded so small. It killed him that he had to put her through this, but there was no other way.

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“Not falling, jumping,” he said.

She yipped out a laugh. “I assure you, if I go over that cliff, I will be falling because you pushed me.”

He had to fight his grin. She wouldn’t appreciate it, but she was so darn cute when she got feisty. He liked it. Picturing life with her was not hard to do.

“I’ll be holding onto you with my legs around your hips. And I will be controlling the parachute. If anyone were to fall, it would be me, and I assure you that you won’t get rid of me that easily.”

“This is insane,” she said. “You-you are insane.”

“No, I am skilled at keeping people alive and getting out of tough situations. I promise you, Bluebell, I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

“So, if I close my eyes?”

“You can do that until we get to the bottom. You have to be looking in order to land properly.”

“On the sand? Is the sand down there soft?”

They were on a volcanic island. There was nothing soft about this place, including the beaches. “No,” he told her honestly. “But you don’t have to worry about the rocks because we are landing in the water.”

“Great! So all I need to worry about is drowning.”

Her hands had fisted on her hips. Her current tone of voice would normally make his palm itch, but right now, he was glad to see anything that wasn't fear.

“You're not going to drown,” he explained. “I am going to let go of you at the last second so I'll be able to help you as soon as you hit the water. You need to prepare, though, because it's going to be cold. Very cold. And if you gasp, you'll probably suck in water rather than air. I'll have us in my boat as quickly as possible, and then we'll head out to sea to rendezvous with my teammates on a much larger boat that will take us back to the United States.”

“So, if I agree to jump off a cliff, and if I don't drown or freeze to death in the water, and if we can actually make it onto this larger boat... how long will it take to get back home?”

“If everything goes according to plan, we should be able to make it home to Wyoming in about three weeks.”

Something he couldn't read crossed her face. “Is that where your ranch is? In Wyoming?”

Her question brought him up short. When he thought of home, he thought of Wyoming, but when did he start thinking of it as Tildi's home, too? She had a family and a life somewhere that had nothing to do with him she probably wanted to get back to. And yet, somehow, for him, home now included her.

Who would watch over her when they got back to the States? It didn't sound like her family was worth going back to. And on her own, she'd managed to get snatched by the Boss of the Midnight family, one of, if not the most powerful clans of the Cosa Nostra in America.

It would have to be her choice, but now that he thought about it, he wanted her to call Wyoming home, too.

She was still looking up at him, waiting for his answer. “Wyoming is where I grew up. My family owns a ranch there, and I work the ranch with my brothers and run a private security company from there as needed. I’d love to show you when we get back. It’s beautiful there.”

A pretty peach blush flooded her cheeks, and she dropped her eyes. “I’ve never seen the Rocky Mountains before. I’ve heard they’re beautiful.”

They were a beauty beyond compare. At least, that’s what he always used to say. But that was before he met a pixie of a girl with pink hair and lavender-blue eyes. He wouldn’t be able to say that anymore.

“Well, Bluebell,” he said as he led her to the cliff’s edge. “I’ll take you on a personal tour. But first, we have to get to the boat. I’m counting to three, then you jump out like you’re doing a belly buster off the diving board.”

“I’ve never done a belly buster. I’ve never been on a diving board, either, for that matter. I don’t suppose this is a good time to mention I don’t know how to swim,” she said.

“Wait, what? You don’t know how to swim?”

She shook her head.

“Did you or did you not tell me not five minutes ago, little girl, that you weren’t afraid of water or boats? Were you lying to me? Because if you were, you are going to be very glad you are jumping into the ice cold Pacific. That’s what it will take to cool your backside off.”

She shook her head harder. “I didn’t lie. I mean, not exactly. I don’t get scared in the water or boats because I never get near them. How was I supposed to know you were going to make me jump into the ocean?”

His hand itched so bad it was twitching. She wasn’t going to sit without wincing for a month. “You don’t swim.”

“No,” she cried. “Thus, the talk of drowning. I told you I can’t do this!”

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Holy hell. It hadn't occurred to him she might not be able to swim. Once again, he cursed her parents.

"Yes, you can. Okay, new plan. I'm not going to let go of you. We will hit the water together, and I will get us back to the surface."

When she didn't answer, he turned her to face him. "Listen to me, little one. A Daddy would never let his babygirl go. Do you hear me? I promised I would keep you safe. If you haven't figured it out yet, you'll soon learn my promises mean everything to me. We are going to see those mountains in Wyoming, you and me. Got me?"

She stared at him for what seemed like forever, then nodded. "I got you, Daddy," she said, trying her best to keep her voice steady.

His heart swelled with pride at her courage. She was something else.

"All right, babygirl. On three. One. Two... THREE!"

## CHAPTER 8

"One, two... THREE!" Boone said, and Tildi found herself flying through the air. She tried to summon her inner Supergirl, but as it turned out, she didn't have one. She tried not to scream, but that was a lost cause as well.

Only ten seconds, Boone had said. She knew ten seconds was ten seconds on a clock, regardless of what was happening, but perception was a funny thing.



She'd seen a whiz kid solve two Rubik's cubes in ten seconds. You could barely see his fingers move, and time seemed to fly. But then, she'd also seen a trick once where you could fold a T-shirt like a ninja in ten seconds. That might be true, but in the three day weekend she'd spent trying to master that skill, she'd come to the conclusion it was a highly overrated accomplishment.

The ten seconds Boone mentioned lasted an eternity. As long as it took for a bathroom stall to open up at the theatre when you were at the movie you'd been waiting all summer to see. Longer than it took for that person you just sent a really stupid text to reply while those freaking dots kept appearing and disappearing. Yeah, this was that kind of ten seconds.

She intended to keep her eyes closed, but once her feet left solid ground, she found it impossible not to watch the wall of water she hurtled toward grow closer. It consumed every thought in her brain. Was she going to splatter like a bug hitting a windshield? Or worse, was she going to be swallowed by the frigid waters of the ocean and have mermaids drag her all the way down to Davy Jones's locker?

She forgot to be Supergirl. She forgot to count down from ten. She forgot to breathe. She forgot everything, including the fact that Boone was holding onto her.

No, in her mind, it was just her careening through the air at Mach 10.

A few seconds in, the straps wrapped around her thighs and chest jerked, biting into her skin and snapping her back to reality. She was going to have bruises, but at least it slowed her speed a bit. Just as he'd promised, Boone used the parachute's grips to steer them further out over the water. The crests of the waves painted white streaks in the dark, slate-gray water.

"You've got this, babygirl," Boone shouted in her ear. At least, she thought he did. It was hard to hear over the rushing wind and the flapping of the parachute.

The only thing keeping her from losing it completely was his powerful thighs gripping her hips and the heat from his body against hers. That was nice. She should focus on that rather than plunging to certain death.

The cold wind still whipped her face and legs, even though their speed had slowed to a rapid glide. Boone shifted, still holding her hips with his thighs but now hooking his feet behind her knees. By leaning back, he tilted them to a slight reclining angle, and even with all the danger and adrenaline coursing through her, what his thighs might make her do in much more pleasant situations consumed her mind.

“Point your toes and breathe deep, Bluebell,” he yelled just before her feet touched the water. He released her a millisecond before she hit the biting frigid waters of the northern Pacific Ocean, pulling down on the release cord for the chute.

The last thing she heard as the water swallowed her was Boone shouting, “Fuck!”

If her lungs hadn’t already been full of air, she wouldn’t have been able to stifle the gasp the cold water almost wrenched from her. It was a good thing, too, because she hit the water and kept going down.

It was so cold her muscles stiffened almost on impact. With straight legs and pointed toes, she sliced through the water like a bullet. The pressure built, and her ears hurt, but the real problem was the parachute. The push and pull of the current tossed her around like a ragdoll, causing the lines connecting the chute to her backpack to wrap themselves around her like a spiderweb. The more she struggled, the tighter the cords bound her.

How was she supposed to get to the surface when she wasn’t even sure which way the surface was? Kicking her feet helped slow her descent, but she continued to sink, and the already icy water grew colder the deeper she went. Her chest began burning, and the need to breathe overwhelmed her. Her rising panic wasn’t helping, either.

Where the heck was Boone? She hadn't read the manual, but letting your Little drown within hours of becoming her Daddy seemed to go against the whole Daddy Code thing.

Strong tentacles gripped her leg, and she let out precious bubbles of air when she yelped in surprise. She fought against whatever held her. Every B-rated sci-fi movie about giant squid drowning unwary swimmers played in her head. She might go down, but she was going down fighting.

Opening her eyes only made them burn, but she managed to squint long enough to recognize that Boone, not a giant squid, held fast to her calf. He tugged hard on her leg and held up one finger. She shook her head back at him but stilled so he could do whatever he was trying to do.

He pressed a knife against her thigh, slicing through the straps of the backpack imprisoning her. When they fell away from her legs, he repeated the action with the harness straps over her chest and shoulders. She could have cried with relief when the weight from the parachute that pulled her down slipped away and disappeared into the dark waters below.

With one arm wrapped around her waist, he swam them both to the surface. The wind whipped her face, the salty water burned in her eyes, and she had no idea how to stay up where she belonged. It was all she could do not to sing "Out of the Sea, Wish I Could Be" from The Little Mermaid.

Before she could do anything, Boone had flipped her onto her back. Shifting his arm from her waist to her chest, he started moving, but not toward the shore. No, he was heading out to sea. That was what she thought until he curved them around a pointed tip of land and said, "Hold on, Bluebell. You're doing great. We're almost to my Zodiac."

“Your what?” she managed to gasp out. He hadn’t struck her as the horoscope type.

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“My boat. It’s small, but it will take us to the yacht.”

Um, a yacht?

She’d never been on anything bigger than a rowboat before, much less a freaking yacht.

She opened her mouth to ask more questions, only to have it filled with nasty, briny water. It took all she had not to throw up everything she’d already swallowed, but she couldn’t hold back the coughs.

“Keep your mouth closed, little girl. You’re going to make yourself sick,” Boone shouted. “We’ll talk on the boat.”

She pressed her lips together and went back to trying not to think about all the creatures swimming in the water with them.

Once they got to his boat, Boone lifted her over the side of what amounted to an inflatable dinghy not much bigger than the innertubes they used at the local waterparks. Was this thing big enough not to flood or capsize? They were in a pretty big ocean.

If she hadn’t been freezing and completely exhausted, she would have flipped over the other side and taken her chances swimming to the yacht. As it was, she lay on the floor of the life raft and watched him push himself out of the water and climb aboard. She scratched at the floor, trying to grab hold of something, anything, as the Zodiac tipped and swayed from the new weight he added.

She hated boats. Hated. Them.

Once, as a young teenager, she'd gone out in a tiny boat on Sunset Lake with two guys. They thought it was hilarious how scared she became when they rocked the small boat so violently it almost tipped over. She was frantic by the time they agreed to take her back to shore. She'd never been in a boat since, until now.

Boone's boat had low sides and wasn't very wide. The shivers now wracking her body had nothing to do with the cold. She'd only thought she might throw up in the water. She tried taking shallow breaths and staring at the bottom of the boat—the itty bitsy, teeny tiny, lightweight boat that would carry her away from the shore and any hopes of survival.

What had she let him talk her into? She'd already jumped out a second-story window. Then she'd jumped off a freakin cliff, swam—well, been dragged through—God only knew what infested waters. But this? This just might be her breaking point.

She flinched when Boone stepped next to her and pulled her up to a seated position.

Wrapping a mylar blanket around her, he said, “Keep this pulled tight around you while I untether the boat and get us underway.” He tilted her face up to look at him and must have seen something was wrong. Dropping onto one knee beside her, he asked, “You okay, Bluebell? I know it's cold, but it's only about fifteen minutes to the rendezvous point. Once we get there, I'll get you in a hot shower and find you something warm to eat.”

She just stared at him, unsure of how she was supposed to react. How was one supposed to look when being ferried out to certain death? Whatever it was, she did it wrong because he dropped his other knee. Kneeling in front of her, he cupped her face in his hands.

She tried to be strong, doing her best to make her expression blank. After everything she'd been through the past year, this should be a piece of cake. Her fear was irrational. People rode in these kinds of boats all the time, and nothing bad happened to them.

But rational had nothing to do with feelings. Her panting breath began to hitch. It was as if an invisible hand was squeezing her throat, cutting off her air. She tried to breathe, but it wasn't working.

"Tildi, look at me," Boone said. Like a magnet, his deep calm voice drew her attention. "Tell me five things you see in the boat."

What? What good was that supposed to do? It was silly. But he was her Daddy, for now, so she scanned the area around her.

"Rope. Um, shiny tinfoil blanket. O-o-oar. Um, life jacket, and... and you."

He smiled and nodded. "Good girl, those were good answers. Now, four things you hear."

She focused for a moment, then said, "Waves, my heart beating, birds." She could only hear three things. Why could she only hear three? Then she remembered the sound that calmed her better than anything else in the world.

Leaning forward, she pressed her ear to his chest, right above his heart. His skin was chilled from the water. What if she couldn't hear over the wind? She stilled and listened.

There it was.

The thumping cadence of his heartbeat was the same as it had been before—strong

and steady, unaffected and unchanging. She pulled back, returning her gaze to his. Smiling, she said, “Your heart beating.”

She didn’t recognize the expression on his face until he named it. “That’s good, babygirl. I’m proud of you.”

Everything in her world slid back into place. He was proud of her. No one had ever said those words to her before, not once until him. He’d told her twice now in less than twenty-four hours.

She’d graduated from the local college with her associate degree a week before she started twelfth grade in high school, having started taking college courses when she was fourteen. No one had been proud of her then. The General had told her that her GPA could have been higher. She’d dual enrolled in all her academic courses throughout her senior year, overstacking her course load, and no one said a word.

She graduated valedictorian of her class and was offered full scholarships to several Ivy League universities. Nothing. President of all the right clubs. Nada. Captain of the softball and volleyball teams. Silence. They hadn’t even come to her games.

“Eyes to me, little one.” Boone recaptured her attention, but this time, she saw him with new eyes.



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This man could be trusted with her safety. He wouldn't let anything happen to her because he was proud of her and not afraid to tell her. Even though she sat in a minuscule rubber boat, practically in the middle of the ocean, she was safer than she ever had been in her life.

“You want to tell me what's going on inside that beautiful head of yours?” he asked.

If she told him, would he still be proud of her? Did he understand fear, even though he'd probably never been afraid of anything? Because even though she'd only known him a few hours, this man was stealing her heart.

Better to find out he wasn't who she thought he was now rather than after she'd invested months and left everything behind to be with him, only to find out he was a sleazy, jerk-faced jackweed.

Taking a deep breath, she admitted, “I lied. I am afraid of boats. Like, really, really terrified. I know I told you I was afraid of jumping out the window, and off the cliff, but I think that wasn't so much fear as common sense. But I've been afraid of boats for a long, long time.”

She held her breath again, but this time in anxious anticipation. Please let her not be wrong about him. Please let him be a real Daddy and not some creep who just wants a woman to serve him like a slave.

He reached for her, pulling her to him and curling his fingers around the back of her neck. “Thank you for telling me, Tildi. Thank you for your trust. I won't take it for granted. One day soon, when you're ready, you're going to tell me why that was hard

for you. But for now, here's what we're going to do. You are going to sit right here between Daddy's legs as I get us to the rendezvous point. I'm going to hold you the whole time. Does that sound better?"

She could barely speak past the lump in her throat, managing to warble out a whispered, "Okay."

He smiled that crooked smile. "Okay, let's get this life jacket on you. It was made for me. It is designed to keep a man weighing two hundred and eighty pounds afloat. I'm guessing you weigh, what, one hundred and twenty pounds sopping wet? What I'm trying to tell you is you are not going underwater with this on."

He lowered it over her head and cinched in the waist.

"You good?" he asked. At her nod, he added, "Good. Now, let's get you settled."

He sat on the floor of the raft right in front of the motor's steering stick. Then he pulled her into his lap, tucking the mylar blanket around her and pulling her back to press into his front. He wrapped his arm around her ribs and held her tight.

She relaxed against him, stretching her legs out in front of her, and closed her eyes. If she didn't see the endless horizon of water they were heading into, she would be much calmer. With her eyes closed, she could pretend they were riding a motorcycle or something, anything as long as it was on land.

With her eyes closed, the rhythm and vibration of the small craft were soothing. It was almost like getting a massage. She snuggled further back into Boone. He was like a furnace, and his warmth was just what she needed to relax even more.

Once he knew she was comfortable, Boone sped up. That meant the motor worked harder and faster. Which meant the vibrations of the boat's floor also grew in

intensity. It didn't take long before a need began to build inside her. A need you never would have convinced her she could have on a boat in a million years. If she'd ever imagined a situation like this, she might have gotten back in a boat years ago.

Boone must have noticed her squirming. Either that or the boat was affecting him as well. At least something was if his ever-hardening cock pressing against the crack of her bottom was anything to go by.

Soon her arousal took on a life of its own. The bottom of the boat was soft, which meant every bounce of the craft over the top of the water affected her. It was easy to imagine the pounding came from the stiff cock at her backside rather than the waves of the sea.

The thong of her panties put pressure in all the right places as well, and it was all she could do not to grind against the floor of the boat. The only thing stopping her was the huge wet spot that might be there when she stood up.

Despite her best efforts, a tiny moan escaped. Mortification forced open her eyes. Unable to control herself, she wiggled backward again to feel more of his hard cock, causing Boone to groan. "Bluebell, if you don't want your tour of the yacht to be delayed for an hour or two when we get aboard, I'm going to need you to sit still."

Here she was, freezing cold on a tiny boat in what felt like the middle of the Pacific, and she laughed—laughed! It bubbled up from her belly and escaped through her lips, shocking her.

"Oh, you think that's funny, do you?" he growled, hopefully only pretending to be upset. His fingers flexed at her ribs, and she froze. "Naughty girls who make their Daddies hard and then giggle get consequences."

Curiosity now warred with the desire burning inside. She wasn't curious enough to

overcome her fears and turn around to look at him, so keeping still, she asked, “What kind of consequences?”

He must have heard the fear in her voice. “Look at me, Bluebell,” he demanded. “I’ve got you.”

And he did. His broad hand was strong as he held her steady. She could do this. It wasn’t like her manic stare at the horizon was keeping them afloat. Probably. Sucking in a deep breath, she did as he asked.

Shifting slowly, she moved enough to look up at him and forgot about where they were. The heat and hunger in his eyes... no one had ever looked at her like that. Not with the same intensity and passion. She wasn’t just some girl who had ruined his plans to take out a target and was now around to scratch an itch. No, he wanted her as much as she wanted... she didn’t know exactly what she wanted, but whatever it was, she wanted to explore it with him. Just him.

He released the till long enough to turn her back around to face the front of the boat. Nestling her more securely between his thighs, he leaned forward to speak into her ear. His heated breath sent trills of desire down her body to settle between her thighs, where it turned into a steady, insistent quiver.

“All that squirming you’re doing makes Daddy think his babygirl has a problem that needs solving sooner rather than later.”

Even with the icy wind in her face, her cheeks felt like they might burst into flames. He knew. Of course, he seemed to be just as turned on as she was, so maybe it wasn’t so embarrassing. But he wasn’t done.

“If I touched that pretty pussy of yours, would I find it soaking wet?”

Oh god! She was going to come just from his words. No one had ever spoken to her like that. It caused the quivers tormenting her kitty to grow into a throbbing pulse.

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His deep laughter at her rumbling told her he knew exactly what he was doing to her.

“Now, close your eyes.”

Um, if she didn’t see where they were going and what might be coming at them, how could she—how could she what? Do something to keep them safe? Not likely. But closing her eyes, that was hard.

“You can do it, sweet girl. I promise I’ll make it worth the effort.” If coaxing would work, he’d coax.

The timbre of his growly voice brushed her ears and dropped straight to her already weeping pussy. Steeling her nerves, she complied.

Without her view of the world around her intruding, everything else was magnified. The sounds of the motor and the boat crashing against the ocean waves. The scent of the salty water.

But what captured all her attention was the feelings rushing over her. The spray of the ocean water on her skin. The size of Boone’s erection pressed between her shoulder blades as she leaned back into him. The vibrations of the boat against her bottom and pussy.

“I want you to let yourself relax. Good girl. Now, rock your hips forward and press that hot as fuck pussy against the boat.”

She obeyed.

Her eyes flew open, and a surprised “Oh!” flew from her. Holy, holy crickets! The sensations she’d been feeling were nothing compared to what she experienced following his instructions.

Her heart raced, and her breathing grew ragged. The pulse in her pussy grew to spasms as her inner muscle fought for something to squeeze. Without being told, she rocked back and then forward again.

“That’s my dirty girl. That tiny skirt is finally going to come in handy. Pull it up, Tildi.”

“Daddy,” she gasped.

“Pull it up, babygirl. Let me see those sexy panties. Unless you want to use your safeword, do it now.”

The command was back in his voice. What he was asking was so naughty. She had a feeling it was just the start of what he had in store.

Did she dare? The boat hit a wave, causing her to rock forward so hard her clit touched the boat’s vibrations. Tendrils of electric shocks spiraled through her body.

When she regained her breath, without another thought, she tugged her skirt up above her hips.

“That’s my needy girl. Now bend your knees and slide your feet up to your ass.”

She obeyed without question.

“Let your knees fall open. Yeah, babygirl, just like that. You are being such a good girl for Daddy.”

She was going to die. Not from embarrassment as she'd thought. No, she was going to go insane with need. She had never been this aroused in her life. She grabbed his ankle, holding on for dear life.

"You are doing so good, babygirl. Have you ever used your fingers to make yourself come?"

Disappointment crashed over her. Tears stung her eyes.

"Answer me, Tildi," he said. "Have you ever made yourself come?"

"Yes," she said. "I have, but not very often. It takes me a long time, and the results aren't really worth the effort."

She attempted to sit up, but he held her in place.

"I want you to try again, babygirl. Let's see if we can improve your experience. Can you do that for Daddy?"

He'd saved her life. She would do anything for him. Hopefully, he wouldn't be too disappointed.

"I'll try, Daddy," she said. Even she heard the reluctance in her voice.

"That's my good girl. Close your eyes again, and slip your hand inside your panties."



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Oh god! She couldn't do something like that with him watching. What had she been thinking? He must have felt her stiffen. Before she knew it, his hand was on hers.

“Here, babygirl. Let Daddy help.”

He slid both their hands lower, lifting her skirt and slipping underneath her panties. His control over her was the most erotic thing she'd ever experienced in her life. He didn't stop until her finger rested over her clit. It was already slick with her arousal.

That would have embarrassed her, but before she could register any emotion except pleasure, he muttered, “Fuck, you're so wet, Bluebell. It's damn sexy.”

When he pressed her finger down, rolling it over and around her clit, she didn't bother trying to hold back her whimpers and groans. This was nothing like the times she'd tried before.

Her hips fell into a natural rhythm, matching the swirls and strokes of her finger. She arched away from him, unable to hold herself down. “Daddy,” she groaned.

“Daddy's got you, babygirl,” he said. “You are so damn hot. I want my mouth on you as soon as possible.”

His words ramped up her excitement to an almost fevered pitch. She pictured his tongue replacing her finger and pressed harder, circling faster.

“Are you close, babygirl?”

She had to be. If something didn't happen soon, she was going to combust into flames. "I think so, Daddy. I need... I don't know... I need."

"Let's take it higher, babygirl. Slide your hand down and put your finger inside," he said.

"What? Noooo! I like this." This was great. This was incredible. Nothing could be better than what she was feeling. Anything more might kill her.

"Do as Daddy says, naughty girl. Slide your finger into that wet pussy."

His stern command had her sliding her finger lower, curving one slender digit and slipping it inside her soaking wet kitty.

The tight muscles of her sex clutched at her finger as she thrust it in and out. Each time, she deepened her movements until she found a spot that had her scream.

"Fuck, I need my cock inside that pussy of yours. That's it. Faster, babygirl. Harder."

She followed his directions, dancing on the edge of a cliff.

Then his fingers were back on her clit. He circled once, then pinched the bundle of nerves between his fingers, wet with her slick.

She exploded as she came. He held her as wave after wave of bliss crashed over her. It was the most intense experience of her life. As she drifted back to reality, he stroked her hair and told her how proud he was of her.

Sliding his hand back under her panties, he pulled her hand away from her sex and brought it to his lips. She stared at him as he sucked her glistening finger into his mouth and licked it clean. He was the perfect Daddy, and he was all hers.

Temporary Daddy, she reminded herself.

Her temporary Daddy. She had to remember he hadn't been talking about forever, just until they got back to land. But he'd talked about Wyoming and his ranch. So, maybe there could be more.

She didn't want to giggle anymore.

Luckily, Boone broke the silence. "I'm not sure where you just went in your head, Bluebell, but I'd like to find out. For now, do you see that dot on the horizon to the right? That's our ride home, Midnight's Mistress."

It took a minute, but she found it. "I see it. Thank goodness," she said. "It must be huge. The bigger, the better, as far as I'm concerned."

As soon as she said the words, she froze. Froze practically sitting on his rock hard cock. His "dear god, please don't get any bigger" rock hard cock.

She wanted to look at him over her shoulder, but she didn't dare. Not until she felt his body start to shake with silent laughter. At least she assumed it was silent laughter, which he confirmed seconds later as he burst out laughing. She had never heard anything so wonderful in her life. She was so caught up in the warm, resonating tone she almost missed the last of her tension evaporating.

It must have been contagious because before she knew it, she was laughing, too. She hadn't laughed in years, not like that. Her stomach hurt, but she kept laughing. Tears coursed down her face, and she still couldn't contain her laughter.

"I can be funny," Boone said, "but I've never been that funny. You okay, Bluebell?"

"Yes, Daddy, I'm better than okay. You can be very, very funny."

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Within minutes, they were pulling up behind the enormous yacht. If there was such a thing as a sleek, sexy, sinful boat, Midnight's Mistress was it.

She twisted around to ask Boone about it when a movement just to the right of the boat caught her eye. She could have sworn something moved just under the surface of the water.

Her heart kicked the center of her chest when it happened again. Was that a fin?

It couldn't be a fin in water this cold, right? At least she didn't have to worry about it being a shark. Sharks didn't bob in and out of the water. She'd watched all the Jaws movies. Shark fins stayed up once they broke through the water until just before they attacked.

"Um, Boone, I mean, Daddy?" she called out.

"Yes?" He kept his attention on the horizon.

There it went again. The fin popped up, this time attached to a curved black back, only now there were two of them. They were multiplying.

"Daddy?"

"What is it, Bluebell? What are you looking at?" His gaze followed her line of sight.

"I don't know," she said. "I think it's a dolphin, and there's more than one."

The closer they got, and the lighter the early morning sky grew, the less they looked like Flipper. They actually looked like Orca, only smaller.

Her breathing sped up, drying out her mouth. She wasn't going to drown. She was going to be breakfast for two killer whales. Pushing off her place cradled between Boone's thighs, she rose to her knees.

"Tildi, sit back down," Boone yelled.

She ignored him. She needed to be on her knees to scan the water for more fins. "There!" she screamed, pointing to the water only thirty yards away from the Zodiac. Or what Tildi liked to call way, way too close. "See, Daddy? They're over there!"

"I see them, Bluebell. They aren't going to hurt us. Now, sit your ass down in the boat before I cut the motor and make the rest of this trip much more uncomfortable for you."

She knew what that meant. The last thing she wanted was for him to spank her again. If she did as he said, though, she wouldn't be able to keep track of the fins. She compromised by sitting on her heels. "What are they? Are they killer whales, Daddy? Are they sharks?"

"No, babygirl. Those are called Dall's porpoises. They won't hurt us, and if you watch, you might see that they are swimming alongside a?—"

He didn't get to finish that statement.

Without warning, the most gigantic creature she had ever seen shot out of the water. It was as big as a cruise ship, maybe bigger. Spreading its fins out like wings, it bellyflopped backdown, shooting water in every direction and making huge waves that rolled out in every direction.

Tildi couldn't help it. All she could think to do was run. Screaming, she shot to her feet, but the first wave hit the side of the boat, tipping it up high. With nothing to hold on to, she stumbled backward, flailing her arms to find anything to grab hold of, but there was nothing but cold air.

She lost her footing and tumbled back. The small of her back hit the low side of the boat. Fingers of freezing water pulled at her hair and slashed across her scalp and neck. She was going to land in the water right beside the giant sea monster.

Clawing uselessly at the rubbery side of the boat, she prepared herself to meet her fate. At the last second, a band of iron clamped around her ankle and reeled her back inside the safety of the boat. It turned out to be more of a hand of iron, she decided, when her Daddy flipped her over his knee and delivered ten stinging swats to her bottom before planting her on the floor of the boat.

She'd seen him angry before, but this was the first time his fury was directed at her. "If you lift your butt off the bottom of this boat again before I tell you to, I will bust your tail so hard you'll wince when other people sit down. Do you hear me, young lady?"

"Yes, Daddy. I'm sorry."

"Thank you, darlin'. Now we can put it behind us unless you move again. Being sorry won't keep you from drowning. So, when I say do not move, I mean it. Do. Not. Move."

She didn't think it wise to move, so she settled for nodding.

Once they got back on their way and the fins had disappeared, she braved his wrath to ask, "I was running from the sea monster earlier. What kind was it, Daddy?"

He stared at her, and she wished she'd stayed quiet. He'd probably changed his mind about wanting her to go to his ranch with him. Her breath hitched at the thought. She'd been looking forward to seeing it and meeting his family.

Not that she blamed him. She was a lot of trouble. Maybe if she could just stay out of his way until they made it to Seattle, she could find a waitressing job and scrape together enough to start over.

“Whatever you’ve got going on in that brain of yours, Bluebell, just shut it down. I can tell it’s not anything good. Look at me, baby. Did you mind Daddy?”

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She shook her head. “No, Daddy,” she said. Try as she might, she couldn’t keep the wobble out of her voice.

“Slide over here, little one. I want you back between Daddy’s legs.”

He probably didn’t trust her to stay seated. She did as he asked, well, told her to do, and slid back to the place she’d been when the whole monster mess had started.

“That’s my good girl. I like you close. Now, did Daddy smack your bottom for not minding him?”

She squirmed on her bottom. It was still tender. “Yes, Daddy,” she said.

“Well, then it’s over. I’m not angry anymore, and you don’t have to feel guilty. That’s how consequences work. So, whatever you were thinking about what I was thinking, let me spell it out. When I said to slide over here because I wanted you between my legs, did you know what I meant?”

“Yes, Daddy. You meant what you said.”

“That’s right, I did. And I always will. I don’t play mind games with my words, babygirl. I say what I mean. You can always trust what I say to be what I mean. So, when I say that we can put something behind us, what do I mean?”

“That I don’t have to worry about it anymore?”

“There’s that fantastic mind at work. You’re right. So, whatever was going on in your



head a minute ago, you should forget it. Why is that?"

The bad feelings clawing at her lost their grip and blew away in the stiff ocean breeze. Smiling, she said, "Because I can trust you to say what you mean, so I don't have to guess."

He wrapped her up in his arms and kissed the top of her head. "That's my Bluebell."

She held his arms tight, soaking up all the warm fuzzies having them there gave her. Then it occurred to her he'd never answered her question. "Daddy, what kind of sea monster was that thing?"

The vibrations of his chuckle moved through her, sparking those tingles she seemed to get when in his arms. "That wasn't a sea monster, Bluebell. That was a rare treat. You got a glimpse of something most people will never get to see."

Now he had her curiosity stoked. "What was it?"

"It was a fin whale. It is the second largest mammal on the planet and very rare to see. And it was so happy to see you it jumped for joy. Not that I blame it, of course."

That made her giggle. "That's silly. No one would jump for joy over me."

He stilled behind her. "And why is that?"

Uh oh. She'd said something wrong again. She wasn't sure what, but he was unhappy with her. "Why is what, Daddy?"

"Why wouldn't anyone jump for joy over you?"

Yep. He was definitely unhappy with her. She shrugged. Something told her there

was no right answer to that question. She settled for explaining, “They never have before.”

“Well, that was on them, not you. I read about a woman who bought a fake diamond ring for thirteen dollars at a hospital pawn shop and found out a few years later that it was real. She sold it for almost eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Someone had that ring before her and gave it away for practically nothing. But that didn’t make the ring worth nothing. It made the person who had it before a fool. Anyone who can see the real value of a person would jump for joy over you.” He tipped her chin so her gaze was on him. “And, Bluebell, I am jumping for joy.”

## CHAPTER 9

They made it to Midnight’s Mistress without any further incidents, but by the time they pulled alongside the yacht, Tildi was shaking like a leaf. Whether from cold or shock, he didn’t know. Probably both.

Tying up the Zodiac to the last cleat, Boone called to his friend, “Grif, get down here and help me get Tildi aboard. Take her below so she can get warm. Bluebell, you go with Grifter. He’ll get you a blanket and some dry clothes. I’ll be down in a few minutes. I need to bring the guys up to speed and touch base with the ranch.”

And bring Sev up to date about what went down with his father, or rather, what didn’t go down. He wasn’t going to tell Tildi about that. She’d find a way to make it her fault and he wasn’t having that. He was a big boy, and he’d made that decision all by himself. Even though it cost him his shot at taking out Midnight, he had no regrets.

“On it,” Grif said. Slings his rifle onto his back, he jumped down from the flybridge and knelt on the back deck of the yacht. Extending his hand to Tildi, he said, “Grab my hand, Bluebell.”

“Her name is Tildi,” Boone growled. He’d be having words with his friend later about proper names. If Grif was smart, he’d stick to calling her Tildi.

Grif’s gaze shot to Boone. It took only seconds for his confusion to shift into a knowing grin. Bastard. Still grinning, Grif lifted Tildi from the Zodiac onto the open deck and rushed her below, hopefully to the center of the ship where she’d be safest.

Boone fought back a growl at having his Little girl out of his sight. He’d always been overprotective of those in his care, but somehow, in a matter of hours, 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.

Dutch jogged out to the swim deck and helped Grif get Tildi to the companionway before returning to help Boone stow the Zodiac. By the time they had attached the crane and hoisted the tender up to the boat deck, gotten it wiped down and covered, Boone had worked up a sweat.

"So, now can we talk about this newweyou picked up from Midnight's compound instead of taking that sonofabitch out?"

"I'm not telling this story but once," Boone said. "You can wait long enough for me to get the ranch on the radio and Grif to get back up here."

Dutch's eyes narrowed, but he kept silent. That was one thing he appreciated about Dutch. He knew how to bide his time and wait for the right moment to strike. It was probably why he was so great at breaking in the new horses. He was calm and patient.

Once Grif got back, Boone put in a call to the ranch. Of course, his little sister, Kenzie, answered the phone.

"Wide Ribber... Wide Rib, Ribber Rach. Dabbit!" she rasped out, obviously unable to breathe through her nose.

"Why aren't you in bed if you're sick?" Boone demanded. "Have you seen a doctor?"

Where's Chance? If he isn't taking good care of you, I'm going to kill him."

"Ugh, relax," Kenzie sniffled. "Id's juss a code. I'b fide. Dabbit to h?—"

"Do not think I won't dust your britches and wash your mouth out with soap when you're feeling better. Get Chance to the phone and go to bed. Do not get out until he tells you that you can. And drink plenty of fluids. Orange juice. Drink plenty of orange juice."

"I'b too tired to argue with you. But I'b going to bed because I wad to, dot because you're the boss of me," she tried to say.

"You keep telling yourself that, Tiger," he said. He scowled. At least she was full of energy.

"MacKenzie Jane Daniels, what are you doing out of bed?" Chance demanded. Even over the phone, Boone could tell Chance wasn't happy with their younger sister. "I'm going to tan your backside if I catch you anywhere but under your covers again. Do you understand me?"

Boone grinned when Kenzie answered with a whine. "But is boring! I don't like laying id bed."

"You'll be laying in bed on your stomach if you get out of it again. Now go." A scuffle, a smack, and a yelp came through the speaker, and then Chance spoke. "Boone? Is that you? Damn, but it's good to hear from you, brother. We've all been worried. This radio silence shit is for the birds. Are you all right?"

He ignored the pleasantries and demanded, "What the hell is wrong with Kenzie?"

"Nothing too serious. Doc says she has the crud, but I insisted he do an X-ray to

make sure it wasn't pneumonia. She's supposed to be staying in bed and getting rest, drinking plenty of fluids, the normal stuff. I think she's fine."

"Stay on top of it," he said, knowing he didn't have to. They were all protective of their baby sister.

"I'm on top of it," Chance said. "How'd the mission go? Did you acquire your target?"

Boone didn't keep anything from his brothers. They were family. They had each other's backs. They knew how much it meant to him and the men who had been on his team and now worked with them on the Wild River Ranch.

"Not yet," Boone answered. "There were complications. That's why I'm calling. Once I got inside Midnight's compound, I discovered they were holding a woman captive. She was on the verge of being assaulted when I got to her. I kept that from happening, but I lost the opportunity to attain the objective of the mission."

"Fuck, man," Chance said. "Sounds like you didn't have a choice, but I'm sorry your mission wasn't a success."

Boone wouldn't go that far. True, he hadn't killed Midnight, but Tildi was far from a burden. He'd get Midnight soon enough, and the feelings he already had for Tildi were strong.

"Right, about that. The woman I rescued might be coming back to the ranch with me. She doesn't have anywhere else to go, and we have the room. It will give her time to get her head together after everything she's been through."

And give you time to convince her she never wants to leave.

Ignoring the voice in his head, he asked about the ranch. He wanted to know the number of foals they ended up with and how the fields were doing.

Trace and Tanner hopped on to say hello and report on the progress of repairing the fencing and all the other tasks they put off until winter.

As good as it was to talk with his brothers, he cut their conversation short. He wanted to get below to his babygirl. And he still had another call to make.

“So, how long before you’re home?” Trace asked.

“It will take a solid three weeks to make it to Seattle, so probably three and a half.”

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Tanner, the older twin by nine minutes, asked, “Does that allow you time to drop the woman you rescued off somewhere?”

If Boone had anything to say about it, Tildi’s home would be with him at Wild River Ranch. Either way, he wanted to give her a chance to see it. “No,” he told his brothers. “Both Tildi and I will be back at the ranch in three and a half weeks.”

His statement was met with silence. He got it. He hadn’t shown any interest in the opposite sex since he’d gotten home. Three years was a long time. But as soon as they met Tildi, they’d understand.

“Okay then,” Chance said. “See you for Thanksgiving.”

Thanksgiving on the ranch with Tildi. That sounded perfect.

After Boone cut the call, Grif and Dutch exchanged a glance. Grif was the first to speak. “So, Tildi’s home is on the way to Wild River?”

“No, but we wouldn’t be stopping by there even if it was.”

Grif grinned like a Cheshire cat.

Dutch nodded and asked, “So, it’s like that, is it?”

“Yeah, Dutch,” Boone deadpanned back. “It’s like that.”

The call to his friend Sevin was short and to the point. Boone just needed him to know



that Nico was aware it was Boone who'd tried to take him out. There was no connection between Boone and Sev that Nico would know about.

"I'm headed down to check on Tildi and get on some dry clothes," he called out to Grif and Dutch. "Grif, you've got first watch to make sure that fucker Midnight doesn't show up. Dutch, bring us around and head for Seattle. Let me know if there's a problem. I'll be up to relieve one of you after I get some shuteye and make sure Tildi's situated."

Both men gave him a chin lift, though Dutch added, "Roger that."

Boone moved silently down the spiral ladder to the lower deck where the staterooms were found. The two twin staterooms where Dutch and Grif slept lay to the aft of the ship. Boone turned forward where the master suite lay.

The master stateroom suite sported a high ceiling with three large skylights over a king-sized bed. Forcing the things he could do to Tildi in that bed out of his head – for now – he sat down beside her on the couch in the seating area opposite the bed and drew her onto his lap. Trembling in his arms, she searched his face. Those gorgeous lavender eyes sucked him in.

He'd found her curled up on the couch, her knees curled into her chest, staring around the luxurious stateroom. The clothes Grif had found in Sev's closet still lay stretched out on the bed.

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

It shouldn't have. There was no love loss 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.

Boone was all for it. His friend wanted to take the Midnight family in a different direction. Not that Sev was a boy scout, far from it. But even he realized his father was a threat to everyone, especially the Cosa Nostra.

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.

She continued to gaze at him without speaking, looking for what, he wasn't sure. If he had to guess, he'd bet on assurance, so he gave it to her.

After wrapping her in his arms, he said, "It's all right now, brave girl. You're safe now. You'll always be safe with Daddy. I promise. I won't let anything happen to you."

"How many women have you had on your boat?" she asked. "There must be a lot for you to have a whole closet full of women's clothes."

"First, it's a ship, not a boat, and I've never had a woman here," he told her.

"Then why do you have a closet full of women's clothes? They're not your size," she said.

Her confusion was acceptable. Her snarky comments were not. "Are you wanting a second spanking in one day, babygirl? If not, I suggest you change your tone, stop accusing, and ask me what you want to know in a respectful manner."

She squirmed and quickly uttered, "Sorry, Daddy. I don't want another spanking."

Why have you got a closet full of women's clothes on your boat, I mean ship?"

"Thank you, sweet girl. That was exactly the way to ask. I don't know why there is a closet full of women's clothes, darlin', because this isn't my ship. It belongs to my friend, Sev Midnight. He let me borrow it for my mission. I asked Grif to pick you out an outfit because I knew he wouldn't mind."

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and blushed. "Oh."

He tapped the tip of her nose and repeated, "Yes, oh."

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“I’m sorry, Daddy,” she said. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Even if it was your boat, it’s none of my business how many women you’ve had here.”

Um, no. He lowered his finger to her chin and tilted her face up until she was forced to look at him. “I want you to ask me anything you want to know. As long as you ask respectfully, I will never get upset with you for asking. I may not be able to answer your question, but I will tell you why I can’t. And I promise I will answer it as soon as I’m free to do so. There are no secrets between a Daddy and his Little girl. Understand?”

She smiled. “Yes, Daddy,” she said, then shivered in his arms.

She was ice cold. What was wrong with him? A Daddy didn’t let his Little girl sit there and freeze to death.

“Let’s get you out of these wet clothes,” he said. “A warm shower will make you feel better.”

She gave a startled cry when he lifted her from the seat they shared and carried her into the bathroom on the left. The marble counters were surrounded by dark, wooden paneled walls. The room took up the entire bow of the yacht, but to Boone, it was small. Then again, for a ship, it was huge.

Entering the master stateroom en suite, he couldn’t hold back a grin at the shower. It would easily hold two people, which fit in with his plans perfectly. But what caught his eye was the built-in seating area at one end and the almost shoulder-high ledge shelf under the dual shower head.

There were any number of advantages to explore, but he needed to talk to her first. She might prefer a soak in the free-standing marble tub. That would only be disappointing if she wanted to do it alone.

“Tildi, you have a choice to make about how you want this to go. I want you to know I won’t be upset with whatever you decide. Your comfort is the most important thing to me. We can handle this shower one of two ways. I can get the water set at the right temperature for you then leave you to shower alone. Or I can stay, and we can shower together. If I stay, you need to know we will be getting dirtier before we get clean. I will do whatever you want. There is no wrong decision. This is about you, what you are ready for, what you need, and what you want. What can Daddy do to make you feel better?”

She stared up at him for a long time, still shivering. He was about to make the choice for her when she said, “I’ve been alone for over a year. I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

Thank God.

“You aren’t alone anymore, babygirl. Now you have a Daddy. I feel a connection to you that I’ve never experienced before. I think you feel it, too.” At least, he hoped she did.

Without breaking eye contact, she nodded.

“I’m going to need your words this time, Bluebell.”

He could have predicted the adorable pink that washed over her cheeks. “Yes, Daddy. I feel it, too.”

A tension he hadn’t realized he had relaxed its hold. But he wasn’t done. “If we do

this, I won't be able to pull back. You've already made a decision that lasts until we get to Seattle. But I'll be honest. The way I feel right now, I don't know if I'll be able to let you go by then."

"I don't know if I will, either," she said. "But I'm willing to risk it if you are. If I've learned anything the past year, it's that you can't waste today waiting for what might come tomorrow."

Truer words had never been spoken, though it gutted him that she knew them already. She was way too young to have learned those lessons. Especially since he knew she'd learned them in such a hard way.

Grabbing the bottom of her shirt, he said, "Reach for the sky, Bluebell."

With a laugh, she raised her arms, allowing him to pull off her wet top. It landed with a splat where he dropped it. When he turned back to face her, his mouth went dry, and he lost the ability to speak. Hell, he lost the ability to think. Even knowing from the spanking he'd given her earlier, he was unprepared for the sight before him.

She stood, eyes to the floor, back stiff as a board, like a prisoner before a judge waiting to be sentenced for a crime. The warm air of the hot shower had smoothed the pebbling from her skin, but her nipples pressed against the sheer fabric of her bra, barely hidden by the tiny lace flowers scattered across the cups.

Without lifting her face, she peeked up at him through her hair. Rage threatened to engulf him at the fear in her eyes, but he fought it back. It wasn't her he was upset with. She'd been through enough, and not just that day. She'd been living under the threat of the Cosa Nostra for a long time. No woman should endure what she had.

Before that moment, killing Midnight had been justice enough. Now... now that man would suffer. He would beg for death before Boone put him down like the vicious

animal he was.

He schooled his features to only show the desire consuming him at having her here with him now. As he removed her bra, he traced each of her numerous bruises, pressing his lips on each mark on her her arms. They didn't shock him, nor did they dampen the desire keeping his cock at attention.

He shifted closer, crowding into her personal space. Her face shot up to stare at him, and he let every ounce of hunger and passion he'd held back show in his eyes. He wasn't always great with words. Actions were his language.

He slipped his fingers into the waistband of her skirt and slid it and her panties to the floor. After she stood naked before him, he stepped back for a moment and rid himself of his clothes. The rigid state of his dick could speak for him. Cupping her jaw in his hands, he guided her back toward the shower.

He allowed his eyes to skim her tempting curves. When she lifted her hands to cover her breasts and the vee between her legs, he blocked her efforts and placed her palms on her outer thighs.

"Every inch of you is perfection, babygirl. You have no need to be ashamed of your body, and you have nothing to fear. Nothing happens between us, now or ever, without your consent. Nothing. Do you remember that safeword from earlier?"

He waited for her answer. She nodded, but that wasn't good enough.

"Words, Matilda..." He paused, realizing he had missed gathering important intel. "Tildi, what is your middle name?"

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She gave a small start of surprise before stammering, “Um, it-it’s Matilda. Um, Matilda Faith Lewis. Why?”

“If you’ve ever read one of those Daddy romance books, you know there are times when only a Little girl’s full name will do.” The adorable blush stole across her cheeks again, making him grin. Oh yeah, she’d read those books. He made a mental note to buy her an eReader and fill it with every DDLg book she wanted.

With slow, measured steps, he backed her into the flowing water of the shower, making sure her footing was sound. Once her shivering slowed, he turned her so the water sprayed her front. Adjusting the height of the shower nozzle so it focused on her chest, he altered the spray to a pulsing massage setting. As the pressure of the steaming water pelted her nipples, the rosy buds tightened, eliciting a moan from her that went straight to his already rigid cock. Stepping closer, he maneuvered them so they could both stand underneath the hot water.

Taking her hand in his, he pressed even closer, turning her so she faced him again, rubbing her hands to ensure they were getting proper circulation. He barely held back a groan of pure pleasure as his cock pressed against her stomach. No worry about blood flow there. Quickly taking care of bathing himself, he then moved on to his girl.

His hands moved up her arms and shoulders, around to her back, and finally lower, cupping her bottom. He couldn’t resist giving the firm globes a squeeze.

“Let me help you, little one,” he said. He pumped a generous amount of soap into his hands and began washing her. He was very thorough. Wouldn’t want any part of her



to be irritated later by salty ocean water.

He allowed his attention to drift down, soaping her breasts and playing with her tightly puckered nipples. Taking encouragement from her gasps and moans of pleasure, he moved lower, running his hands over her stomach and lower still, slipping his fingers along the space between her thighs.

“How are you doing? You okay?” he asked as he leaned forward to run the tip of his tongue along the shell of her ear. Her delicious shiver answered him.

“More than okay,” she moaned.

“Should I stop?”

“No! I don’t want you to stop, Daddy.”

“That’s good because I’m not sure how I’d have managed if you’d said yes.” Holding his hands underneath the steaming hot water to warm them even more, he once again slid one finger along her slit before plunging it deep into her heat.

His cock throbbed with the need to come. If he didn’t stop soon, he was going to come all over her stomach. The idea washot as fuck, but he had more than that planned for his Little girl. He’d save that for a later time.

“Oh, God,” she cried. “That’s good because if you stopped, I just might die.”

That was all he needed. He took the mobile shower head and rinsed her off. The water pressure was fantastic to play with. If her cries of pleasure were anything to go by, it was just right for some parts of her body, and over the top fantastic for others.

Once she was thoroughly rinsed and aroused, he returned the showerhead to its place.

With a hand under each arm, he lifted her to sit on the higher ledge underneath the showerhead. She clutched his shoulders, squealing when he lifted her thighs to rest on his shoulders.

“Boone,” she called out as she struggled to remove her legs.

“No, naughty girl,” he said and gave her bare mound a sharp smack.

“Ouch,” she said, but the breathiness in her voice said it was the best kind of pain. Good to know.

He gripped her outer thighs, holding her in place, and took the mesh sponge hanging from the side of the shower. Adding more soap, he said, “I don’t think we got your pretty pussy clean enough.”

As he passed the sponge over her mons, her head fell back against the shower wall. “Oh, don’t,” she cried out. But when he pulled back, she whined her disappointment and looked back at him. “What are you doing? Why did you stop?”

He painted an innocent expression on his face. “I wouldn’t want to hurt my precious babygirl.”

“Please, hurt me like that some more.”

And wasn’t that the prettiest begging he’d ever heard? He couldn’t hold back a wicked chuckle. “Your wish is my pleasure, sweet girl.”

He returned the sponge to her pussy and dragged the net loofah over her clit, circling it gently with his finger. He traveled lower, putting just the right amount of pressure to drive her need higher. And when he pressed the heel of his palm to the sensitive area between the opening to her core and her bottom hole, she screamed out his

name.

Lifting the showerhead again, he sprayed the soap away. After returning it to its place, he pushed her thighs further apart.

She stiffened. “Wait, what are you doing?”

He wiggled his brows. “Let’s see if you can figure it out.” Then he eased himself between her thighs.

“But you can’t... I’m not... Oh, God!”

Her head bumped the shower wall again as he drew his tongue all the way up her slit, flicking her clit before returning to the start and repeating. Her thighs tightened around his head with each pass he made.

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He played with her without mercy, darting his tongue into her depths and teasing her sensitive bud. She grabbed his head as if she could control him. Her nails dug into his scalp and shot pulses of need straight to his cock.

It had been a long time since he'd been with anyone and even longer since he'd had a babygirl. His need was a driving, visceral force.

Lifting his head, this time, he sank two fingers deep inside her and circled her swollen nub with his thumb. Then he lowered his mouth to her sex and sucked her clit into his mouth as he continued to thrust two fingers inside her, curling them to stroke her in just the right spot to send her tumbling over the edge.

Angling her hips upward, he dropped his mouth lower and replaced his fingers with his tongue. A gush of her sweet honey coated his tongue as she spasmed again and again.

Thank fuck. He was seconds away from losing his load like a randy teenager.

“Oh my God,” she gasped out as she came down from her orgasm. “That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever, ever experienced. I’ve never... I mean, not like that anyway.”

He would want to explore those words with her later, but right now, he had more urgent needs. “I’m glad you liked it as much as I did, Bluebell. But we aren’t anywhere close to done.”

Turning off the water and helping her from the shower, he wrapped her in a warm

towel. Sev knew no bounds to the luxurious special touches his ship had, including a towel warming rack.

Drying himself off, he took her by the hand and led her to the bed. “I think this is a much better spot for what I have planned next,” he said.

“You want to lay down with me?”

Her surprise didn’t sit well with him. “Of course, babygirl. I want to be close to you. Is that a surprise?”

He lost her eyes when she shrugged and wrapped her arms around her waist. “Sort of. Most of the men I’ve been around for the past year didn’t want that kind of closeness, that’s all,” she whispered.

The shame in her words gutted him. As soon as he got her settled on his ranch, he’d schedule an appointment with a counselor who specialized in trafficking trauma. She still wouldn’t look at him.

He needed to make sure she was in the right head space to continue. “Will it make you uncomfortable if we cuddle, Bluebell?” She still didn’t look at him, but she nodded.

Sitting on the side of the bed, he pulled her into his lap. “Listen to Daddy, babygirl. You bear no blame or responsibility for what happened to you over the past year. You did nothing wrong. It was important for you to do whatever you had to do to survive.”

The look she gave him was filled with sorrow and humiliation. “I shouldn’t have worked the party. I just never thought anything like that could happen. It was a ritzy hotel. I thought I was safe.”

“Don’t go there, Bluebell. You were earning a living. There was no reason for you to think something like that would happen. It sucks that your employers did business with a group of cowardly, scum-sucking monsters.” He would be finding out the name of that company and dealing out some justice when he got home. “You were a victim in this. I’m so fucking proud of you. It makes you like me.”

She laughed, but it held no humor. “You were fighting for justice, Daddy. Defending America from people like the guys at that party. I was serving them drinks. We are not the same.”

He forced her to look at him. “You are exactly the same. We are warriors and survivors. We did what we had to to stay alive long enough to escape so we could take them down another day. I’m honored to be your Daddy, to be in your life in any way. We fit because you’ve been through the fire, too. You know who I am on a level most people never will. Not even my own family. I wish to God you didn’t, and I’d change that for you if I could. But you will never hear me condemn you for the choices you made. Not ever.”

Tears traced down her face, and he wiped them away with his thumb. She grabbed his hand and pressed a kiss into the center of his palm. And in that moment, his heart became hers.

She smiled, and damn if it wasn’t the most beautiful gift he’d ever received. To be able to smile like that after everything she’d endured... this woman was perfect.

“Yes, Daddy,” she said.

After placing her on the bed, he said, “Hold on a minute. I have something for you.”

He crossed to a set of narrow French doors that opened to one of the closets in the room. The last time he’d been on Sev’s yacht, there’d been a special shelf – ah, there

it was. He scanned the items placed there, knowing immediately which one he wanted.

Lifting it from its place, he carried it to Tildi. Her eyes widened, and she breathed out a soft, “Oh.”

“I remembered this from when I got the whirlwind tour Sev gave me before he lent me his ship. I’ve been picturing it in your arms ever since we met.”

He held out a pastel tie-dyed plush baby dragon stuffie, complete with tiny silver lamé wings and horns. It was adorable, just like his babygirl. A cute, fierce little dragon that needed some special Little. Someone just like Tildi.

For a second, she stared at the stuffie. Then she reached out slowly, as if afraid it would disappear if she moved too fast, and petted the toy's head. Glancing at him, she whispered, “Is she for me?”

So the dragon hatchling was a girl.

“Just for you,” he told her. “Do you like it?” He’d never met a Little who didn’t like stuffies, but if she were the first, he’d find what she did like and get that. Anything for his girl.

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“She’s beautiful,” Tildi whispered, not taking her eyes off the little dragon. “Can I hold her?”

“Of course, Bluebell. She’s yours.”

She lifted the toy from his hand like a priceless treasure, and the care she took almost broke his heart. He’d expected her to jump up and snatch it from him, maybe squeeze it tight against her chest.

“I’ve never had a stuffie for a friend before,” she said. “My sister did. She took it everywhere, even after she was too old, according to our parents. I was always so jealous.”

The emotion in her voice made him want to cradle her to his chest the same way she held her new friend.

“Why didn’t you have one?” He braced for her answer, knowing it would gut him. He was not wrong.

“I wasn’t allowed. I was expected to be an adult from a very early age. The General had my life all planned, and those plans didn’t include dolls and toys. Anything soft, really.”

“Wait, you said that before. Why was a general planning out your life for you?”

Shock and fear entered her eyes, and she shook her head. “Believe me, he’s no one important. That’s just what my father insisted everyone in the family call him.



General. Forget about him. Lord knows I try to.”

What the hell? “I’m confused. Your father was a general? I didn’t know you were raised military.”

“I wasn’t raised military, just raised by a narcissist. But seriously, it doesn’t matter.”

Yeah, that was a lie. Because it obviously did matter. A lot.

After laying next to her on the bed and gathering her close in his arms, he stroked her hair as she continued to stare at her dragon.

He scratched behind her stuffie’s ear. “What’s her name?” he asked. “Have you thought of one, or do you need more time?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Her name is Puff.” She rolled into him and flung her arm around his chest. “Thank you, Daddy,” she said. “She’s the bestest present I have ever, ever gotten. I love her.”

The lilting tone of her words told him she was sinking deeper into Little space. His heart swelled. If he wasn’t careful, this woman would own his heart. Or maybe she already did. “I’m glad you love her, Bluebell. I expect you two will be the best of friends.”

“Uh huh,” she agreed. “I’m going to take good care of her. If I treat her right, maybe she’ll love me as much as I love her.”

“That’s not how it works, babygirl. You don’t have to earn her love by doing things. Her love is like a Daddy’s love. She loves you because of who you are, not what you do.”

She pulled back and stared at him for half a second, then his little bluebell launched herself at him.

The sparkle that flared in her eyes should have been a clue, but before he could process what it meant, she was kissing him. To say her kiss was unexpected would be an understatement. To say it was unwelcome would be a lie. Her lips were warm and sweet.

He enjoyed letting her have her moment, but soon his dick told him it was time for him to take control and show her what having a Daddy meant.

He pulled back. Slowly pulling her towel away, he took in her body, from the cotton candy hair to freezing at the tattoo above her ankle. It had to be more than a coincidence she'd chosen a dragon tattoo. He'd known exactly which stuffed animal he'd wanted for her.

He hooked her leg under the knee and lifted it so he could get a better look. With a smile, he realized it suited her perfectly. The tattoo wasn't an actual mythical beast. Instead, she had chosen aHello, Kittywearing a green and purple dragon costume.

"I have to ask, what is the story behind your ink? It doesn't seem that someone who insisted on being called the General would approve."

Giving him a smirk worthy of any brat, she leaned across him to look at her ankle. Rolling onto her stomach, she explained. "It was the first thing I did after I ran away. Well, after paying for a new identi—" She cut her words off and stared at him, eyes wide and alarmed. "I mean, paying for a new ability to?—"

This time, it was his finger pressed to her lips that cut off her words. "Since you've already had your butt busted once today, I'm going to stop you before you earn another. But mark this down. You never lie to Daddy. I will always find out, and then

you'll have two punishments to deal with; one for whatever you're trying to hide and one for lying. Do you understand?"

She nodded, adding a quick "Yes, Daddy" when he raised one brow in warning. "Now, would you like to try that again?"

She nibbled on her bottom lip before nodding. He got the feeling she would be more eager to swing a skunk around by the tail. Tempted as he was to let her off the hook, he wanted the truth.

She flopped back on her pillow with a huff. He gave her time before prompting, "Well?"

Without looking at him, she explained. "My father is a powerful man, and he doesn't like anyone to derail his plans. So, when I left home, first I changed my hair and the style of clothes I wore. Then I paid some people a lot of money to create a new identity for me. My birth name is easily recognized because it's unusual. And stupid."

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He had a hard time believing any name could be as bad as she was making out. She quieted, but he gave her time to collect her resolve. Just when he thought he'd have to prompt her again, she spoke.

“My name was Serephena Michelle. You see? Have you ever heard of a more hideous name in your life?” With typical Little drama, she covered her face with her hands. “It stands out like a neon sign. I had to change it, or he would have found me in days.”

The name wasn't hideous, but he much preferred Tildi. It suited her. “So after you secured your new identity, you got the tattoo?”

Lowering her hands, she nodded. “It was something he would have hated.”

That was probably an understatement if her father had been even half as bad as she said. He let it go with a nod. “So, back to my original question. Why aHello, Kittywearing a dragon costume?”

No doubt she wanted to bolster her courage by having a dragon since they were fierce and powerful, though hers was adorable. But yet again, his babygirl surprised him.

“Dragons have good instincts, and they're lucky. I knew I was going to need both of those things to stay hidden from the General.”

“I see,” he said.

He had started making plans to deal with Tildi's father as soon as she had begun

talking about him. But now he boosted it up the list to number three, right behind finishing off Nico Midnight and taking out the catering company that sent defenseless employees into such dangerous situations as working a party for a known leader of the Cosa Nostra.

“And what about theHello, Kitty?” he asked.

She looked at him like he’d just asked her if rain was wet. “It’sHello, Kitty, Daddy. Who doesn’t loveHello, Kitty?”

Who indeed. Glancing again at the tattoo adorning her shapely leg, he decided question and answer time was over. He propped up on his elbow and took in the shape of her calf and the curve of her gorgeous ass. Soon, looking wasn’t enough, so he ran his fingers along her arms before turning her back onto her back.

This time he slowed down enough to explore all her delicious dips and curves. He paused on more than one occasion, tracing especially enticing spots like the hollow of her neck and running his fingers along the curve of her breast. The tension in the room swelled almost as much as his cock.

She echoed his movements, tracing his cheekbones and jawline. Her fingers were soft and gentle as if she might break him. Had anyone ever thought him fragile? He should probably be insulted, but he wasn’t. Her care warmed his heart even more. She touched with a grace and sensuality he’d never known, yet her hand trembled.

“Here, babygirl,” he said, removing his towel and pulling up a blanket from the foot of the bed. “You’re still cold. Time for Daddy to warm you up.”

## CHAPTER 10

Tildi blinked up at him. Her pussy clenched at the thought of what he might have in

mind. She was all in for whatever he wanted. After what he'd just said to her about them both being warriors and survivors, he could ask her for anything.

She didn't believe him, of course. But the fact he believed it gave her hope that one day she might.

"It's my turn to, well... warm you up," she said, her cheeks burning. How did people do this sexy pillow talk stuff? "I don't think I could possibly, um, warm up again."

A lazy, sexy smile lit his face. "Challenge accepted, little girl."

Oh dear. She had never been able to come more than once, and she didn't want to disappoint him.

"But that's not fair. I want you to, you know, warm up, too."

"Oh, I will. But first, I'm going to make you come so hard you forget your own name. Then we'll take care of me. After that, we're probably going to sleep for the rest of the day. Among other things."

Oh, the wicked gleam in his eyes did twitchy things to her girlie bits.

"But, I can't—"

He cut her off. "Seems like we need to review a few things, naughty girl. Who's in charge?"

"You are, Daddy, but—"

Again, he didn't let her finish. "That means every part of you is under my control."

She got that, but he didn't know her or her body. She tried again. "Yes, but—"

Once again, he broke in. Her hackles were starting to rise.

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“That means I am in charge of your pleasure, little one. You need to lay back, enjoy, and trust Daddy.”

That was easy for him to say. He wouldn't be the one who ended up disappointed. Well, he would, but it wouldn't be her fault.

Wait. It wouldn't be her fault. All she had to do was give control over to him and the results were in what he had proven to be his very capable hands. Fine by her. He couldn't say she hadn't tried to warn him.

“Oh yeah? What makes you think you can?” she demanded, but this time she did it with a smile. She threw her leg over his hip and traced the skull tattoo over his heart. She made a mental note to ask him what it meant. Later.

His eyes darkened to a deep forest green. “That's what you're about to find out, babygirl.”

“Mm,” she hummed. “And what if I resist?”

“Other than another red ass, you mean? Well, I do have some restraints around here somewhere. If all other methods of persuasion fail, I'll just handcuff you to the bed.”

She laughed. How long had it been since she had joked like this with someone? Had she ever joked like this? Using nothing but his words, he already had her pussy throbbing, which she hadn't known was even possible.

“No need for extreme measures, Daddy. I hereby relinquish control.”



“Good plan,” he said, his voice now dropping to a guttural tone that sent tingles down her spine all the way to her wet sex.

“Now, second thing to discuss. I want to be inside you, babygirl, buried balls deep in that sweet pussy. I don’t have any condoms, though. How are you for birth control?”

Heat suffused her face. Geeze, she was old enough not to blush like a schoolgirl when talking about this.

“I’m covered,” she said. “I had an implant put in my arm not long before I... not too long ago. It should still be active. And they retested me for everything every time they moved me, so I’m clean.”

“I haven’t been with anyone in a long time, and I’ve been tested, so I’m clean, too. Are you comfortable with us having unprotected sex?”

She didn’t have to give it much thought. She wanted him and didn’t want to miss the chance to make love to someone she cared about who seemed to care about her. She had the feeling being with Boone might ruin her for most other men. Then again, she might never meet another man like him again anyway.

She nodded. “I’m more than comfortable with that, Daddy.”

He didn’t give her a chance to change her mind. Lowering his head to hers, he took her mouth in a deep, possessive kiss. His need for her spiraled her own desire even higher.

He didn’t just kiss her. No, he plundered every part of her mouth. He was not playing around. He laced his fingers through her hair and angled her head to take the kiss even deeper.

The fire his dominance lit in her belly was only surpassed by the slickness it caused between her legs. He wasn't fooling around. There was no doubt who was in charge here. None.

His cock pressed hard against her thigh, making her want to wrap her hand around it and stroke him. He smelled of musk and salt and male. God, she needed him.

As if he could read her mind, he rolled on top of her, grabbing her hands and pinning them beside her head. Why had he talked about restraints earlier? Clearly, he didn't need them.

He parted her legs with his knee and said, "Eyes to me, babygirl."

Her eyes immediately found his, and she sucked in a breath at the desire she found burning there. For her.

"Who controls your pleasure, Tildi?" he demanded.

"You," she said, her voice husky with need.

He pushed his cock inside her slowly, rocking his hips so he went deeper each time. The pleasure was euphoric, but she wanted him buried deep inside her. He needed to hurry.

With a growl, he seated himself deep within her. She cried out, wishing she had the use of her arms to grasp his shoulders. Ripples of pleasure were just out of her reach. If he would just move, she could be there. Once again, she rocked to try and spur him on.

He pulled back slightly and stilled.

No. No! She was almost there. He needed to move. When he didn't, she cried out, "Please," and attempted to lift her hips higher to take what she needed.

His hand landed sharply on the side of her bottom. "Who is in charge of your pleasure, greedy girl?" he growled. When she shook her head, he demanded, "Tell me. Who controls your orgasms, Tildi?"

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Oh God. His erection pulsed inside her. She clamped down hard on his cock and took satisfaction in the groan he let escape.

He lowered himself so his chest pressed into her breasts, the hair tickling her tight nipples. Shifting both her hands into one of his, he rolled her over and smacked her bottom twice. The fire his hand created there slipped somehow to her already weeping pussy. His hand was as hard as an oak paddle as he smacked her again on the other side.

His lips caressed her ear. “Tell me who is in charge, Tildi, before I pull out of your needy pussy and stroke myself until I come all over these gorgeous breasts without letting you come.”

He wouldn’t dare. But taking in the primitive desire in his eyes told her he would. She would die if he did.

“You do, Daddy. You control everything.” She gave him the words he wanted to hear because they were true.

Rolling her back over, he balanced on his elbows, never looking away from her, and slowly began to move again. He slid in and out of her slick channel, stoking all the flames back to a feverish pitch and bringing her to the edge. Then he stopped. Again.

She held tight to his shoulders, just in case he planned to make good on his threat. If he tried to stand, he was taking her with him.

“One more time, babygirl. Who is in charge of your orgasms?”

She was tired of fighting. They both knew the answer. It was the one they both wanted. So, she gave it to him.

“You are, Daddy. You are always in charge,” she said.

“Damn straight,” he growled again, then buried himself in her to the hilt.

“Yes, Boone, oh god, yes!”

He dug his fingers into her hips, setting up a fast, hard rhythm that had her seeing stars. Finally, with one powerful thrust, he rocked against her in a way that hit the magical spot again inside her and commanded, “Come now, babygirl.”

She obeyed, coming so hard her back arched off the bed as she screamed his name over and over. Just as she was coming down, he grabbed her bottom and lifted her. Without thinking, she wrapped her legs around his waist, opening herself up for him to go even deeper.

He held her easily, pounding into her until she was shuddering once again, and still, he kept grinding into her. With a primal bellow, he came inside her so powerfully she could feel each pulse as he filled her with his seed.

When he finished, he rolled to the side and cradled her against his chest. He must have found a remote control that darkened the windows because the room grew dark.

Not that she would be able to sleep anyway. Her body was like a wet noodle, but her mind was racing one hundred miles an hour. There was no way she’d ever be able to sleep.

The next thing she knew, Boone was sitting on the edge of the bed, brushing her hair from her eyes. He was dressed in different clothes, clean and dry, and the room now

glowed with morning sun. At least, she assumed it was morning. So much for not being able to sleep.

“Time to rise and shine, sleepyhead. I know Puff slept well, but how about you, babygirl?”

She stretched and wished she hadn’t. Her muscles told her in no uncertain terms she needed to exercise more. She had muscles that ached in places she didn’t even know had muscles.

Not all her aches were bad though. She was deliciously sore from her time with her Daddy last night. It had been the best experience of her entire life. She must have winced. Of course, he noticed.

“What’s the matter, babygirl? Are you sick? Do we need to take your temperature? I should never have made you jump into the freezing water.”

She placed a hand on his arm. “I’m not sick. I’m just sore because I have the physical fitness level of a baby sloth.”

Boone’s eyes narrowed. “That wouldn’t be you talking bad about yourself, would it, Bluebell? Because there aren’t many things that will get your butt roasted faster than making negative comments like that.”

Yikes. Time to backtrack.

“Sorry, Daddy,” she said. “I just meant I’m really sore, and no one else is. I’m not in good shape.”

“I’ll bet you aren’t. You’ve spent the past year being moved from one small room to the next. You spent all your energy staying sane and keeping yourself alive. Most

people wouldn't do that. You need to get in better shape? I'm all for it. You need to learn how to defend yourself? We're headed to a working ranch, little one. I'll remind you of how you're longing to get in shape in a few weeks. Ranching is a physical life. Not to mention, you'll be doing training with the rest of Wilder Security in my downtime, learning how to shoot and fight. Believe me when I tell you that you are going to have more opportunities than you'll want soon enough."

He said that like she didn't want to go with him. Or that she wouldn't pull her weight if she did. Didn't he know he was waving her dreams in front of her? There was nothing she wanted to do more than jump on that plan with both feet. She wanted to go to his ranch with him so badly it hurt.

She should have known better than to complain. That was one reason she was so good at working the parties at her catering job. Growing up with the General had given her plenty of practice in smiling on the outside and giving people what they wanted. No one wanted to hear her complain. It was her job to be grateful.

She was smart. She was wealthy, or her family was anyway. She only got the things her father thought would help her meet his expectations. She was pretty, athletic, and talented in music. She had it all. What could she possibly have to complain about?

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She'd scraped and fought for everything she'd gotten since the day she was born. She hadn't been allowed to even think about what she wanted. Not that it mattered. No one wanted to hear about her desires.

It was normal, expected. So, why did it hurt so badly when it came from Boone? She'd let herself believe it would be different with him. She should have known better.

"You're totally right," she said, staring down at her knees so he wouldn't see her lip tremble. She knew all the tricks to hide what she really thought or felt. "I shouldn't have talked like that. I'm being ungrateful, and... and you don't deserve that. You saved my life, and I'll be grateful to you forever. So... so yes, you say jump, and from now on, all you'll hear from me is how h-high."

There, she did it. Hopefully, he didn't catch the hitch in her voice. But at least she'd made everything okay. She'd given him what he wanted. It sucked, but she wanted him to be happy with her. Now at least the rest of their trip back home would go smoothly.

Or so she'd thought, right up until he growled, "What the hell was that?"

### CHAPTER 11

Her gaze shot up, only to come face to face with a very unhappy Daddy. As a matter of fact, he was the exact opposite of happy. He was furious.

Now just a minute. What right did he have to be furious?



She'd told him what he wanted to hear. She wasn't sure what else he expected. She didn't like not meeting people's expectations. Meeting expectations meant she was safe. It meant there could be peace.

She'd done her part. What was wrong with him?

"Answer me, little girl. What was that shit you just spewed at me?"

"You... you said I was ungrateful."

"I sure as hell did not." If his scowl got any deeper, his eyebrows would merge in the center of his face.

How could she give him what he wanted when he didn't even remember what he'd asked for? Something in her snapped. Too much was too much. She punched her hips with her fists and yelled right back.

"You did so say that. You said I should be grateful I was rescued and do whatever it takes not to be taken again. I'm not a complete idiot, you know. I may be slow to grasp some things, but if the General taught me anything, he taught me that."

Boy, did he ever.

Unbidden, the memory assailed her, taking her down. Her father's voice echoed in her head. "Sera, an A+ in British literature is trash if you only get a ninety-seven on your advanced calculus test when you could have gotten a one hundred. With all I'm doing for you, the least you could do is put forth a modicum of effort. Your lack of gratitude is a slap in the face. It makes me sick."

Wait. Had she said that last part out loud?

Boone studied her like she was some kind of science experiment that failed, and he couldn't figure out why. Several times, he opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Great. She finally found the Daddy of her dreams and promptly broke him. This was why she couldn't have anything nice.

After waiting a few minutes for him to say something, her tummy started to get tight, and her eyes started to burn. What was he thinking? Did he wish he hadn't rescued her? Was he thinking about chucking her into the sea?

He was getting harder and harder to focus on because all the spots floating around kept getting in her way.

He took her hand in his. "Bluebell, are you breathing? I'm gonna need you to calm down and take a breath, darlin'."

What was he talking about? Of course, she was breathing. And as soon as her lungs stopped burning, she'd tell him so. Not breathing. Ha!

But she'd have to tell him how silly he was being later. Right now, she needed to figure out who was stabbing her chest with knives of fire.

"Shit. Tildi, breathe for me, babygirl." He grabbed her arms and forced her to her feet.

He said something else, but the ringing in her ears and the pounding of her heart in her chest were all she could focus on. And whoever was crying in that muffled way really needed to stop. It was annoying.

Boone shook her. Hard. His lips were moving, but no sound was coming out. But she

couldn't worry about that, either. She was floating. It was almost like she was watching a video of what was going on in the room but not really experiencing it.

And he really needed to stop shaking her because her head was killing her, and that wasn't helping. But he was right about one thing. She needed to breathe.

She tried. She really did, but it was like something was lodged in her throat, and she couldn't get past it.

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He said something she couldn't hear over the noise in her head, then lifted her arms straight up in the air, tossed her over his shoulder, and ran up the stairs and out into the cold ocean air on the deck. All she was wearing was one of his t-shirts, so the air was a shock to her system after spending all that time in a heated room.

Maybe it was the bouncing on his shoulder as he'd run. Maybe it was now standing in the icy wind. But whatever the reason, air rushed back into her lungs. She coughed and sputtered, but at least she could breathe.

He cupped her cheeks in his hands. "Baby, are you all right? Never mind, I want you to focus on breathing with me. Slow, deep breaths. That's my good girl. Good. Slowly breathing the good air in and slowly pushing the bad air out. Good. Daddy's got you, darlin'. I'm right here. It's all okay. You're okay. Yeah?"

She nodded, not yet trusting herself to speak.

"Good girl," he said. "That's my good girl. All okay now?"

She nodded again, but he insisted she use her words. "I'm okay," she said. She sounded like a frog with laryngitis.

Lifting one of the seat cushions on a nearby bench, he grabbed a thick blanket and wrapped her up tight. After swaddling her, he sat down with her cradled in his lap. He ran his fingers through her hair as he talked to her in that deep, comforting voice. Soon, exhaustion pulled her back under.

When she woke again, she couldn't figure out where she was or what was going on.

Then the memories crashed back in on her. She must have had a panic attack. It would only be a guess because it had never happened before.

“Good morning again, little bluebell. We’re going to have a do-over and start this day again. Is that good with you?”

It took her a minute to remember what had happened. She tried to cover her face, but the blanket still held her arms by her sides. She settled for burying her face in his chest. How could she have acted like that in front of him? He must think she was so weak. Who has a panic attack because they don’t measure up?

Her. She did, that’s who. And a panic attack did nothing but prove it was true. She was weak. He didn’t deserve someone like her. He was brave and strong. Even as he held her like the baby she was, he was probably trying to figure out how to let her down easily. No way would he think she was strong enough to live on a ranch now.

She’d ruined everything with her stupid overreactions. Just like her stupidity had landed her in trouble in the first place. Giving up on getting out of his lap, she curled up in a ball so she could put her palm on her dragon tattoo. It always made her feel better.

Where was Puff? Now she had a dragon she could hold. She looked around the seat they were on, but didn’t see her stuffie.

“What do you need, little one?” Boone asked.

Stiffening, she shook her head. It would be too much trouble for him to go get Puff for her. He’d done enough. “Nothing, Daddy. I’m good.”

The narrowing of his eyes was not a good sign. “I’ll agree that you are good, but I asked you a question, and you didn’t give me an honest answer. I’m going to ask

again. This time I want the truth, young lady. I will always expect honest answers from you. The next time you lie to Daddy, there will be consequences. Are we clear?"

The knot binding her heart loosened a bit. That didn't sound like he had given up on her. She nodded her head and said, "I need Puff, Daddy."

"That's my good girl. Let's go back downstairs and get her. You need to get dressed, and we need to talk about what just happened."

The knot in her chest pulled tighter than ever. No conversation that started with we have to talk ever went well. She nodded her head again and focused all her energy on not crying as he led her back down to the master stateroom.

It didn't take her nearly enough time to get dressed.

Boone once again sat on the side of the bed and pulled her onto his lap. Her muscles locked, and she perched on his knees, unable to force them to relax. To be honest, it was taking all she could do not to panic again. Or burst into tears. Tears never made anything better. Tears gained nothing but disappointment and disgust.

If she saw those in her Daddy's eyes, she'd never survive it. He'd grown to be that important to her.

With gentle fingers under her chin, he forced her to look at him. She wasn't ready for what she saw in his face. It stole her breath, but this time in such a good way. His eyes were filled with tenderness and concern.

"Can you tell me what I said that triggered you, sweet girl? I don't ever want my words to hurt or frighten you, and it guts me that I did both of those earlier."

Her chest tightened, and tears stung the backs of her eyes. No one had ever cared

about her enough to ask her such things. She shook her head. He needed to know that it wasn't him. She was the broken one. "No, Daddy. It was my fault."

"I'm going to have to disagree. To be your fault, it would have to have been a deliberate attempt to manipulate. I don't believe for a second that's what happened. Am I wrong about that?"

Wait, what? He was right. She hadn't made a choice to react that way. It was almost like her own memories and emotions attacked her. And boy, were they good at it. They flooded her, drowning her in waves of failure.

"No, Daddy. I wouldn't do that on purpose. Never."

He rewarded her by pressing his lips to her forehead. She loved it when he did that. Her heart glowed.

"So, what was going on in that incredible brain? I don't think it was being very nice."

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“No.” This was hard. What if he didn’t understand? She wasn’t sure she understood. How could he? “Daddy, can I hold Puff?”

“Of course, Bluebell.” He reached across the bed and grabbed her friend. “Here you go. Can you tell me the words that upset you?”

Puff was soft against her cheek. With her Daddy and her dragon, she could be brave.

“It wasn’t your words, Daddy. It was my ears. I don’t like disappointing people. In the house I grew up in, disappointing people got you yelled at and punished. So now I am constantly listening to people’s words and the tone of their voice. If I pick up on the fact they are unhappy with me, I can do something about it before they get upset. People aren’t nice when they get upset.”

She waited for him to scold her. He had every right to tell her how silly she’d been and how much she’d scared him.

But then he wrapped his arms around her and held her close. The steady thump of his heart was comforting. The warmth and acceptance washed over her, cleansing her spirit.

“I’m sorry you had to live in that house. And I’m glad you called it your house and not your home because a home isn’t like that. Now, look at me, Tildi.”

She obeyed, no longer worried about what she would see in his eyes.

“I will never be disappointed in you. You are a beautiful soul, and you are valuable



because of who you are, not what you achieve or accomplish. I may be disappointed in your actions from time to time, but never, ever in you. I don't expect you to be perfect. And I'm warning you right now that I'm not even close to perfect myself. So, Bluebell, you're going to be disappointed in me sometimes, too. But I promise if you'll talk to me when that happens, I'll do everything in my power to make it right. Deal?"

It took her a second to process all that he'd said. Things like that weren't ever said around her, much less to her. Until now. Until Boone. Beaming up at him, she nodded. "Deal, Daddy. And I call no takebacks."

He grinned before kissing her forehead again. "No takebacks from you, either."

She owed the universe an apology. All those times she'd thought no one was listening, she'd been wrong. The universe just needed to get her in the right place at the right time so she could have a Daddy like Boone. At least for now.

He scanned her face and must have been reassured by whatever he saw. "Dutch made breakfast, and he gets his tighty whities in a wad when people don't eat what he cooks while it's hot. What do you say we save him that discomfort and fix ourselves a plate?"

Her stomach growled, answering for her. With a bark of laughter, Boone stood and carried her from the bedroom into what he called the helm station. There was a large square table to the left, surrounded by a U-shaped sectional. On their way, they passed through the galley, where she saw a man wearing camo pants and suspenders without a shirt cooking something on the glass-top stove.

Boone sat down on the sectional, keeping her on his lap. No sooner had they taken a seat than the man from the kitchen showed up with two plates. One had pancakes stacked a mile high, two eggs, bacon, and sausage, while the other had three pancakes

shaped like Mickey Mouse, complete with blueberry eyes, a strawberry nose, and an oversized smile of piped whipped cream.

He placed the huge plate of food in front of her and the Disney pancakes in front of Boone. She stared at them for a second, then back up at the man.

He pretended to jump and said, “Oh, my bad,” before swapping the plates around. With a grin and a wink, he said, “Hey there. My name’s Dutch.”

“You got something in your eye, Hallowell?” Boone grumbled out, frowning.

Dutch continued to grin. “Nope.”

“Thanks for the food. Now get gone,” Boone ordered.

Dutch’s grin grew to a smile. “Gotcha,” he said. With one more wink, he headed back toward the galley.

“That man’s gonna lose an eye if he keeps that up,” Boone said.

Leaning over to kiss his cheek, Tildi told him, “Don’t be a grouchy pants, Daddy. He was just being nice.”

Boone gave a non-committal grunt and began eating. Tildi wolfed down her pancakes in no time, only breaking when Boone fed her a bit of his eggs or a slice of his bacon. She’d never tasted anything better in her life.

They spent the morning exploring the ship. It was incredible. When it was Boone’s turn to take the helm, he sat in the chair with her in his lap. He even let her steer.

She was so excited, she couldn’t hold back her, “I’m doing it, Daddy. I’m doing it!

See me?”

“I see you, Bluebell. You make a great co-pilot.”

“Uh-huh, we make a good team.”

“That we do, little one. That we do.”

By early afternoon, her eyelids began to droop. That she was able to hide from her Daddy, but when she was attacked by a yawn so big she couldn't cover it, he swung his eyes her way. “Sounds like someone needs a nap.”

“Not anyone I know,” she sassed.

No one could have convinced her she would like being on a boat, but she now thought boats were the shiitake mushroom. Well, she had been rudely instructed by Grif that it was a ship, not a boat. Then she was the one who had to write lines when she justifiably stuck her tongue out at him. Lines seemed way more fun in the Little books than they were in real life.

Grif grinned when she got in trouble—smirked was more like it—but she had plans. She would be getting even before they made it to land. Then he’d learn not to mess with Big Bad Tildi. She knew he was worried because he frowned every time she gave him the “I’m watching you” gesture. It was definitely an “I’m worried” frown and not an “I’m annoyed” frown.

Then her Daddy looked at her and did that one raised eyebrow thing she couldn’t do no matter how hard she tried.

It seemed like a good moment to concede. “Well, maybe I’m a little tired.”

“Good call,” he said. Once he got her tucked in and made sure she had Puff, he lay down beside her, and once again, she drifted to sleep in her Daddy’s arms.

## CHAPTER 12

In the following two weeks, Tildi grew to be quite the sailor if she did say so herself. She’d never known how relaxing it could be to sleep on a ship. The rocking motion lulled her to sleep every night, not to mention the naps Daddy insisted she take after

lunch.

The time she'd been able to spend with Boone was something she would cherish for the rest of her life. They had spent almost all their time together. Even when he put calls in to the ranch. She'd met all of his brothers, and she loved them all. They treated her like a younger sister already, and they hadn't even met her yet.

It had taken some getting used to, especially the teasing. Trace and Tanner were hilarious. They had her laughing so hard her sides ached.

"I can't wait until you're here," Kenzie, Boone's only sister, said. "There is way too much testosterone around here. You've got to get here and help me find a girl posse to even the odds."

"I can't wait to meet you, either," Tildi told her.

She wasn't too sure about helping Kenzie build a girl posse. She'd never had time to worry about friends in school. She'd had teammates in the various sports she'd played, but she wouldn't have called any of them friends. The only person she'd have called her friend was her sister, Breezy.

Listening to the Daniels family tease and argue with each other made her miss her sister more than ever. When Boone finished talking to his family, she'd ask him if she could call Breezy.

"I hope you're workin' out on that tugboat Boone found. We've got a date with a pretty young mare named Starlight. You can't be with a rancher and not ride," Chance, another of Boone's brothers, said.

A growl rumbled from Boone. "The only one teaching my Little girl to ride is me."

Cold shock washed over her. She stared at her Daddy, unable to believe what he'd just said. When Boone caught her expression, he lifted one brow. "What?" he asked.

Tildi shot to her feet and raced from the salon on the upper deck straight to the stairs.

"Matilda Faith," Boone bellowed from behind her. "Stop running!"

She ignored him and raced down the stairs. How could he have just blurted out to his entire family that she was a Little? She would never be able to face them now. She'd have to ride as far as the Rocky Mountains and then find a cave to live in for the rest of her life. Being a hermit couldn't be any worse than being around people who had learned her deepest, darkest secret because her big mouth Daddy had blurted it out as if it were an everyday occurrence.

Thundering footsteps on the stairs behind her spurred her on. She almost lost her footing once, okay twice, but she kept going. Why did they put the freaking bedrooms at the bottom of this darned ship?

The steps got louder as Boone gained on her. She squealed when an arm of steel wrapped around her waist. The next thing she knew, she was over his shoulder, and he was stomping the rest of the way to their stateroom.

After kicking the door open, he put her down, facing him. The day had grown cloudy while they were talking to his family, but it didn't hold a candle to the thundercloud of his expression.

He towered over her, his scowl growing deeper and darker by the second. "Would you like to tell me what the hell you thought you were doing running on the deck like that?"

Hmm. Her tummy started a slow, insistent roll downward. Her insides began to

quiver in the face of his anger, but she straightened her shoulders and reminded herself that she was the wronged party.

“I thought I was getting away from the person who just humiliated me in front of his entire family.” Her defensiveness made her tone a bit sharper than she’d intended, but who could blame her? From the look of him, you’d think she was the one in the wrong.

If his expression looked like a thundercloud before, now it bordered on typhoon level. “What are you talking about?” he demanded.

“You told everyone I was a Little!” she said, trying not to scream. “How could you do that? What are they going to think?”

“That’s what your reckless disregard for your safety is about? If you had slipped on the deck and gone overboard, it would have taken too long to even turn around. Did I specifically tell you not to run on the deck? I guess I need to add stairs because it didn’t occur to me you’d try to run down those. Especially when the sea is growing choppy by the minute.”

“Nothing happened,” she insisted. “And even if it had, I can take care of myself!”

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“You could have drowned!” he yelled.

He was right, of course. She shouldn’t have run. She might have been at sea for two weeks, but the middle of the ocean wasn’t the best place for swimming lessons. Pride wouldn’t let her admit that to him. Instead, she shrugged a shoulder and said, “It’s not that big of a deal,” going so far as to even roll her eyes.

What was she doing? Was this really the time to push her limits and test him? She knew the answer to that the second she chanced a look at his face.

What are you standing there like a dummy for? RUN!

For once, that voice in her head had a good idea, but before she could act on it, his hand wrapped around her hand like a vice. He stalked straight to the bed and shoved his left foot between the mattress and the wooden platform it covered. Then in one smooth motion, he lifted her and flipped her over his knee. She clawed for the mattress, but it was just out of her reach.

There was no need for her to worry, though. Boone thoughtfully tilted her forward, putting her hands close enough to grab the covers. Unfortunately, that put her butt pointing straight to the ceiling.

In one swift motion, he stripped her bikini bottoms down to her ankles and brought his hand down smack in the middle of her bottom. He continued the rhythm of hard, fast swats, covering every square inch of her bottom.

How was it that every time he spanked her, the pain of each smack shocked her?



You'd think a girl would remember something like that and learn some self-control. The pain was something she should never, ever forget.

She'd sworn the last time he spanked her that his hand was made of solid wood. She'd been wrong. Wood was soft compared to this. His hand must be made of iron. Hot, sizzling, scalding iron from which there was no escape.

She tried.

She clamped her lips between her teeth, determined not to make a sound. Yeah, that lasted about thirty seconds. In record time, she was howling like a banshee. The fire he lit in her bottom had to be on the verge of melting the skin clean away.

All too soon, she added motion to her cries of distress. She couldn't have stopped her hand from reaching back to prevent his palm from smacking her poor, aching rear.

Fortunately, she succeeded in hindering his efforts to further raise the temperature of her bottom. Unfortunately, her success was short-lived when he merely shifted his target from her backside to her heretofore untouched thighs.

She only thought she'd caterwauled before. The backs of her thighs were soon burning as hotly as her bottom. She kicked her legs in a futile attempt to slow his hand. If she'd been in the ocean, she'd have moved faster than the ship.

Releasing screeches that would make an owl jealous, she did the only thing she could and brought her feet up to protect her thighs.

"Hand by your side, toes on the mattress," he commanded.

"Are you crazy?" That was probably not the wisest response.

Without so much as a pause, he grabbed her wrist and, wrapping his arm around her to make sure she didn't fall, held it captive at her waist. But that wasn't the worst part.

His other hand slid between them and the distinctive jangle of a belt buckle being unfastened had her struggling to free herself. How he managed to double his belt over and wrap it around his hand until it was the length he wanted, she had no idea.

"No!" she wailed. At least she did until he brought the leather down on her already burning rear end.

Not wood. Not iron. Leather. Leather was the worst pain she'd ever felt when it bit into her hind quarters. Her wails lost the coherence of words, and he brought it down over and again on her poor bottom.

And the sounds, the whoosh of the strap coming down and the thwump of it smacking against her butt. The fire was everywhere. It lit her skin and then sank deep into her muscles.

Giving up, she collapsed over his knee and sobbed. "Please! I'm so sorry! You're right. I shouldn't have run. I'm sorry!"

As soon as the words left her mouth, he threw the belt to the floor. She lay draped across his knee, sobbing. Her tears fell, making dark, staining circles on the silk comforter.

He rubbed the small of her back and let her cry. Eventually, her tears slowed, and her sobs devolved into hitched breaths. He lifted her from his knee and carried her to the sofa. Sitting, he helped her straddle his lap.

She leaned into his chest, relaxing into the soothing motion of his hand rubbing

circles on her back. Once she had calmed, he said, “Look at Daddy, Bluebell.”

She forced herself to comply.

“Do you have any idea how close you came to going over the side of the railing when you took off like that?”

She shook her head. She’d been focused on escape. Her proximity to the guardrail was the last thing on her mind.

“The surface temperature of the water here is around thirty-five degrees. Add to that the cross pattern of the waves, and you would have been unable to stay above water for more than ten to fifteen minutes. When you almost went overboard, I lost ten years off my life. I know it’s fast. I know we’ve only known each other for weeks. But I can’t lose you, Bluebell. It would kill me.”

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The ring of truth in his words pierced her soul. The truth was, she couldn't imagine her life without him, either.

But she couldn't get rid of the shame filling her at the knowledge that Boone's brothers now knew her most private secret.

"I feel the same way, Daddy," she said. "But I don't know how I can go to your ranch now. How can I face your brothers and Kenzie when they know I'm a Little? They probably think I'm a freak."

"I would never share our private life with anyone who would hurt you. I thought I had told you at some point. Bluebell, I'm not the only Daddy in my family. All my brothers are Daddies, too. They all think you're adorable. I promise you, the only other emotion they are feeling is envy that I have found someone so precious."

She gaped at him. All his brothers were Doms. And not just Doms, Daddy Doms. Did that mean Kenzie was a Little like her? How cool would that be?

"Tildi," Boone said, reclaiming her attention. "I'm sorry I upset you. I should have made sure you were okay with me sharing that information. The fact that I knew they'd accept you is no excuse. That was wrong of me, and I promise to be more careful in the future. Do you forgive me?"

Wait. He was asking for her forgiveness? No one had ever cared if they offended her or not before. She nodded. "You don't even have to ask, Daddy. I'll always forgive you, just like you always forgive me."

Relief swept his face. Then his lips were on hers, and she lost herself in his kiss. At least she did until the ship pitched so sharply it almost sent them both to the floor. Boone's phone lit up. Dutch was calling.

Boone took the call, and Dutch yelled, "I'm going to need some help up here. I think we're in trouble."

## CHAPTER 13

Boone smiled at Tildi as he helped her get dressed as quickly as possible. It wasn't easy. She'd heard the tension in Dutch's voice as clearly as he had.

"What did he mean, problem? What kind of problem?" She was doing her best to stay calm, but her pulse had sped up.

"I'm not sure, Bluebell," he said. "But I'm sure it's nothing we can't handle. You are in some of the best hands in the world. And if you roll your eyes again, you'll be sitting on a wooden seat writing lines for the next three days."

The shade of pink filling her cheeks had become one of his favorite colors.

"Sorry, Daddy. But you have to admit that was a bit of an exaggeration. I mean, the best hands in the whole world?"

He didn't say anything at first, just held her gaze with confidence. He'd told her the capabilities of the three men she had on board with her. Now he would show her.

"We need to get up top," he said. Handing Puff to her, he took her hand and led her back up to the helm.

As soon as they made it out of the companionway, Boone realized Dutch had played

down the situation. The sky around them was filled with dark thunderclouds, and the wind almost stripped the hat from his head. He turned the brim of his baseball cap to the back.

Never letting go of Tildi's hand, he pulled her toward the helm, placing his body on the outside to shield her from the rain that was now coming down harder.

"Report," he barked at Grif as they entered the helm.

"This thing came up out of nowhere," Grif answered. "I've been watching it on the radar, but there must be a short somewhere because it went out right after y'all tore out of here. The last image I had showed us not coming in contact with it, but it obviously shifted course."

Obviously was right. The wind was growing stronger by the second, kicking up the height of the waves.

"Are we going to be okay?" Tildi asked. She clutched Puff to her chest as she stared past him at the waves. "Why are the waves making that diamond pattern instead of all going in the same direction?"

He met Grif's gaze as Dutch made it to the helm. "It means two storms met and are going for a dance. Don't you worry about a thing."

Dutch threw a small life jacket to Boone and cocked his head to Tildi before pulling three larger ones from the storage underneath a bench cushion.

"If there's nothing to worry about, why do I have to wear one of these?" she asked in a tight voice.

"Because you are precious cargo, and I'm not willing to take even the slightest

chance on you getting hurt,” he told her. She quieted, but didn’t look convinced. “Let’s get you situated at the table.”

He put her in the corner of the sectional seating at the table. That way, if it got worse, she’d have something to hold on to.

“I tried to locate the short so we could get radar back, but the wiring on this bucket isn’t like anything I’ve seen. I did find a weather radio, but no batteries.”

“So, what you’re sayin’ is we’re shit out of luck,” Grif said.

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They dropped their voices to a level Tildi couldn't hear, then Boone said, "We need to make a plan because it looks like it's gonna get worse before it gets better."

"Agreed," Dutch said. "Plus side, these things usually blow themselves out quickly."

"Which way did it come in from?" Boone asked Grif.

"It came up behind us," Grif said. "If it isn't too large, we should be able to outrun it without too much trouble. We have to watch our speed, but as long as it doesn't get any worse, we should be okay."

His words evidently challenged Neptune. Golfball sized hail fell from the skies, pummeling the deck and hull of the yacht.

"Shit!" Dutch yelled, forgetting about not making Tildi more worried. "The ship isn't going to stand up to that very long. Going slow just left the table."

Grif's jaw tightened, and his grip on the wheel, already firm, tightened to a death grip.

"Right. I'm going to get us out of here, but the trip may be rough for the time being. Bossman, you're gonna want to get Tildi face down on the floor so she doesn't get tossed around like a ragdoll."

"On it," Boone said, leaving Grif to focus on the waves and stumbling to his Little girl.



Her face was the color of paste, either from fear or seasickness. He didn't have time to find out which.

"Tildi, I need you to lay on the floor on your tummy." At her immediate protest, he held up his hand. "Daddy's going to be with you, Bluebell. I don't want you to get hurt in the rough seas."

He didn't like how the lightning now popped all over the place, either. But he kept that to himself. As soon as they were down, Grif sped up.

The man had not been kidding about it getting rougher. How a boat the size of Midnight's Mistress could bounce from wave to wave like a rubber ball was beyond him. He held them in place but couldn't stop them from bouncing on the hard deck floor.

"Da-daddy," Tilde said. "I can't breathe!"

He barely heard the words she uttered over the pouring rain and the pounding hail. He realized the problem as she flew completely off the floor at the next wave and crashed back down on her diaphragm and ribs.

He flipped to his back and pulled her face down on top of him. Locking his legs around the support pole for the table they were under, he held her pressed against him so the force of each bounce would be absorbed by his body.

"I want to go back downstairs," she cried out.

He'd give anything if he could. She thought she'd be safer there, but if something happened, the lower levels might fill with water before he could get to her.

"I can't let you do that, babygirl. I need you here with me so I can keep you safe."

“Take this,” Dutch yelled and tossed a blanket their way.

Boone nodded his thanks and wrapped it around his shivering Little girl. “We’re going to be fine, Bluebell. We’ll be out of this storm in just a few more minutes. I’m so proud of you. You’re such a brave girl.”

“Oh, fuck!” Grif yelled. “Hold on!”

Boone knifed up high enough to look through the doorway leading to the seating area at the front of the deck. For a second, he couldn’t make sense of what he saw. Where was the horizon and sky? Then it hit him. A wall of water barreled toward them.

Fuck!

He wrapped his arms around Tildi and attempted to move them further under the table. Before he could maneuver around, the yacht shot off the crest of the wave under them and crashed into the next one head on.

Tildi screamed as the force jerked them forward. Freezing water flooded the helm as the wave tried to swallow them whole. The blanket made holding onto her difficult, but Boone managed.

But then the yacht pitched upward again, and all that water came rushing back through, this time toward the end. The pull of the wave rushing back to the sea ripped his babygirl from his arms and carried her out the open doorway and down the back of the deck toward the sea.

She screamed until the water cut her off, washing over her head and tumbling her away from him.

It was happening again. He was losing someone under his care and protection. He’d

thought the loss of Cara was the most devastating thing that would ever happen to him. And until Tildi came into his life, it had been.

He'd been wrong. Losing Tildi would destroy him. He might as well follow her over the side and let the sea have him. Just the thought shot an indescribable pain through his chest.

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Worse than losing people from his PJ cell. Worse than losing a brother or sister in arms they'd been sent in to rescue. Worse than when he'd lost both his parents.

He wasn't about to let that happen. Not to his Tildi. Not ever.

With a roar of defiance at whatever force in this universe was fucking with them, he used the pole he'd held to reach his bluebell. Using the table pole like an Olympic swimmer used the pool wall, he pushed himself through the rushing water carrying away his babygirl.

She was rolling under the water like a barrel. She should be fighting against the water, but she was limp. His heart almost stopped at the realization she was unconscious.

She hit the side of the deck but the rushing water was lifting her from the floor. With three hard strokes of his legs, he grabbed her wrist right before she flipped over the rail and into the sea.

With her limp body draped across his arms, he pushed up far enough to get their faces out of the water until the force of the flow lessened. Standing, he struggled against the remaining water and carried her back to the helm. He laid her on the table and screamed, "Dutch! Little help!"

His friend was immediately at his side. Boone gave her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation while Dutch performed chest compressions. In the few seconds—seconds lasting an eternity—Tildi lay unresponsive, Boone died a thousand times. He would never pretend to himself or anyone else that he could live a day, an hour, or even a second

without her again.

She was his life, and he'd make sure he did whatever it took every day to make sure she knew it.

## CHAPTER 14

Boone once thought of Wild River Ranch as heaven on earth, but he'd been wrong. He knew now that lying beside his Little bluebell and watching her sleep was the closest to heaven he'd probably ever get. The closest he ever needed to be.

He'd do anything to keep her safe and by his side. Almost losing her in the storm crystallized his feelings for her in a way he could no longer deny. He longed to be home, but nowhere would ever be home again without Tildi by his side. She was someone he could no longer live without. Was it fair to her, though, to take her with him when the danger they'd escaped weeks before would follow him?

They'd be docking in Seattle tomorrow. Once he'd brought Sev up to speed about everything that had happened, they'd be on their way back to Wyoming. If he were a better man, he'd let her go for now.

Revenge no longer drove him. He'd let those feelings go with Tildi's help. And how had he repaid her? By putting a target on her back the minute he'd rescued her. She would never be safe as long as Midnight was alive.

She snuggled closer to him and breathed out a sexy sigh. He loved waking up early in the mornings and watching her sleep. She was the most gorgeous woman he'd ever known. She was perfect, and he was going to do everything he could to convince her to make Wild River Ranch her home.

Shifting in his arms, a flash of pain crossed her face, and she whimpered. The storm

had left bruises all over her body. She no longer had to fear boats. He was never letting her set foot on one again. He would be seeing the water snatching her from his arms forever. Right now, he couldn't stand the thought of her so much as stepping in a puddle.

Fate, or God, or the universe... whatever name you wanted to give it... gave this precious woman to him. She was his, and he was hers. Her days of believing she had to earn love were over.

She was a gift he would treasure until his time on this earth was gone. He would make it his mission to make sure she knew he believed in her. And that he loved her exactly as she was.

It wouldn't matter if she were Little, Big, or anything in between. He accepted every part of her. She'd find her safe place in him. Always. He was ready to spend a lifetime showing her how special she really was.

A soft knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

"Yep," he called out.

Grif cracked open the door and looked in. "She doin' okay?" he asked.

That was the million-dollar question now, wasn't it?

"She's doing okay," he answered. "She'll be better once we finish Midnight."

Grif lost his grin, and when he spoke, Boone knew why. "Midnight's going to be a problem."

Boone rubbed his chest, soothing the ache Grif's words caused. He refused to accept

them. “Midnight is a dead man walking.”

Grif didn’t look convinced. “It’s one thing to take out the head of the Midnight family halfway across the world on an island where we can control the situation. It’s completely different to go to war with the Cosa Nostra in the States. Not to mention the position it puts Sevin in.”

The man was not wrong. Boone would have words with Sev. Nico hadn’t remained Boss of the Midnight family by being stupid. Even though he didn’t know the extent Sev was involved, he had to suspect his son was the one who’d provided intel and access to the island.

But more importantly, Sev had to know that if Nico Midnight came after Boone’s Little girl or his family, he would put him down like the feral wolf the man was.

“Sev will deal,” Boone said. “Call the ranch and tell them we’ll be heading straight there once we turn Sev’s ship back over to him. We should be there by the end of the week.”

Grif’s grin returned. “I’ll let them know.”

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After Grif closed the door, Tildi shifted to look at him. The pain in her eyes was a punch to the gut. “So, no extra time to take me anywhere? What, are you just going to drop me off at the first bus stop you see?”

Her assumption she was that unimportant pissed him off, not at his bluebell, but at her miserable excuse for a family. If he ever had the misfortune to stumble across that father of hers, they were going to have a discussion about child abuse.

A very physical discussion.

“No, babygirl. I have other plans. But even if I didn’t, I wouldn’t put you on a bus. Those buses aren’t safe for Little girls.”

She eyed him with suspicion and maybe a little guarded hope. That might be wishful thinking on his part.

“But you said you were going straight to your ranch.”

“No, Bluebell. I said we will be going straight there. I meant all of us, including you. That’s what I want, but you have to decide if it’s what you want.”

The fear and hope that warred in her eyes almost broke him. He held her gaze, letting her see the truth and desire in his own.

Hope won. She threw her arms around his neck and cried, “Yes, Daddy! Yes, yes, yes, yes. YES!!” She leaned back and asked, “Can I ride a real horse?”



He grinned. “Don’t have many fake ones there, Bluebell.”

He reached for her but stopped himself. She’d had a traumatic morning. She didn’t have to tell him to be careful because her bruises spoke for her.

Evidently, his babygirl had other plans. She grabbed his hand and placed it on her cheek. “Don’t pull back from me, Daddy. I want you to touch me.”

His brows furrowed. Did she understand what she was starting? There was no way he’d be able to stop at caressing her cheek.

“Please, Daddy,” she begged. The rise and fall of her chest sped up. “I said the magic word. Don’t you want to touch me?”

She was killing him. He tucked her hair behind her ear. “Of course, I want to touch you, Bluebell. But I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t, Daddy. It looks way worse than it feels. I don’t hurt at all. And I’ll feel even better if you touch me.”

Little minx. How was he supposed to stand up to that? He cupped her cheek and leaned forward, brushing his lips lightly across hers. “All right, babygirl. I promise I’ll be gentle.”

“I don’t want gentle, Daddy. I want real. I want to celebrate. We can’t celebrate if you’re being a big ole fraidy cat.”

The pout she gave him was cute. He’d warm her bottom later. Right now, his girl had made it clear she had other, more important needs.

He let the predator in him out in his smile. “Are you saying you want Daddy to fuck

you, babygirl?”

A pretty pink blossomed across her cheeks, and she squirmed at his crass words. She sucked in a deep breath, nipples already pebbling to tight points.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“I want to hear the words, Bluebell. Tell Daddy exactly what you want.”

A shiver raced over her. She notched up her chin. “Fuck me, Daddy. Please.”

“What a good girl, always doing what Daddy says.”

A spark of mischief lit her eyes as he reached for her. She pulled her arm away and rolled to the other side of the bed.

Seemed his Little girl wanted to play. Well, he wasn’t one to deny her what she wanted. He put plenty of gravel in his voice when he demanded, “What are you doing, naughty girl?”

She grinned, excitement pinkening her cheeks even more. Rolling the rest of the way off the bed, she bounced on her toes and said, “Catch me if you can!” Quick as a wink, she ran to the other side of the room.

He’d seen frightened Tildi, caring Tilde, tearful Tildi, and now she was showing him playful Tildi. He looked forward to a lifetime of exploring every one of her facets and moods.

“Last chance to come peacefully, naughty girl,” he growled. Never let it be said he was a Daddy who didn’t know how to play his part.

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But there were a few things his Little girl didn't know about him yet, too.

He could see the refusal in her eyes before it ever left her mouth, so her "No!" didn't surprise him.

Reaching into his pack on the floor next to their bed, he pulled out a long line of soft rope. That would work nicely.

"You know, Bluebell..." Boone worked the rope as he spoke. "There's still so much we don't know about each other. For example, I don't know what your favorite song is, or your funniest joke, or even whether you eat your grits with milk and sugar or butter and salt. And as for me, you don't know if I pull for the Grizzlies or the Spuds, or the name of my favorite pet growin' up, or if I ever won an award at the county fair. Now, the answer to that last one would be yes. I've won several, and do you know what for?"

He waited for her to shake her head, which took a while because she seemed hypnotized by the loops he was tying in the rope. When she looked up to meet his eyes again, he finished his tale. "I was the blue ribbon winner five years in a row for calf ropin', darlin'. You know what that means?"

Her eyes widened as she shook her head again. He let her see the predator inside him again and growled out, "Run."

She gave the cutest squeak he'd ever heard and took off for the door. He had her lassoed before she took three steps.

She resisted as he slowly pulled her back toward him, making sure the rope didn't tighten too much. He made quick work of shifting the lasso to her wrists and then tying them together over her head.

"Boone!" she yelled as he tossed her back on the bed.

After tying the rope to a bar that ran along the headboard, he pressed a finger to her lips. "Quiet now, Bluebell. I believe you said something about wanting to be fucked. I've decided to give you exactly what you asked for."

She laughed and struggled to get away as he flipped her over onto her stomach. He'd put her in one of his t-shirts after the storm and, lucky for him, didn't want to take the time or trouble to look for another pair of panties. This made yanking the shirt up over her head and puddling around her wrists an easy task.

"Now, let's get this out of the way," he said and commenced smacking her bottom with his hand.

She tried to evade his spanks, but he was quick, and she was laughing too hard to give it her best effort. This wasn't really a punishment anyway. As far as he was concerned, she could wiggle that fine ass all she wanted.

When he'd warmed her bottom to the perfect shade of pink, he pulled her up so she was face to the bed, ass in the air, and admired his work.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, and the sinful smile on her face made his dick pulse. Pushing her knees further apart, he squeezed one perfect globe of her bottom with each hand before pulling her cheeks even further apart and spearing her pussy with his tongue.

She screamed in shock and pleasure. He loved the taste of her and took his time

working his babygirl into quite a frenzy.

“Oh, god. Boone,” she said, her voice breathy and filled with need. “I... I... oh, please, Daddy. Please!”

He fucked her relentlessly with his tongue until she was almost to the point of tears. She was so hot and wet that her juices painted his face. He pulled out one last time, licking higher to flick his tongue across her sensitive pucker hole.

He had her strung so tight her thighs quivered. She arched her back and pressed her bottom high. Flipping her to her back, he shoved inside her all the way to the hilt, burying himself in her slick heat and pressing against her.

“What did you want me to do to you, dirty girl?” he demanded.

She whimpered, then said, “Fuck me, Daddy. I need you to fuck me.”

She did not have to ask him again.

He pulled almost all the way out, then drove back into her. Starting slow, he gradually built the rhythm.

She was so damn tight. And her internal muscles gripped his cock like a vice with each thrust. He kissed her, mimicking the movement of his hips with his tongue.

She sucked his bottom lip into her mouth and nipped it with her teeth. It was just enough pain mixed with overwhelming pleasure to make his cock stiffen that much more. The sound he made was somewhere between a moan and a growl, and he wasn't sure which he'd intended to make.

Pulling back his head, he gazed down at her. Her lavender-blue eyes had darkened to

almost violet, and passion had warmed her cheeks. Her eyes were filled with lust and challenge as she gazed back at him.

“My babygirl is feeling brave, isn’t she?” he rasped, his voice deep and husky.

“Uh-huh.” She tried for sassy, but the gasp that escaped her when he shoved his cock in extra deep ruined the effect.

She wanted to play the bad girl though, now, didn’t she? He could work with that.

“It’s not nice to tease Daddy.” He pushed deep inside her again and stilled.

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Balancing on one arm, he pinched her nipple—not worrying about being gentle—then dragged the tips of his fingers slowly down her abdomen, not scratching, but making sure she could feel his nails.

She arched up with a scream when he reached her clit and pinched that swollen pearl as well.

“Daddy!” His name sounded as if it had been ripped from her as she bucked her hips against his groin. The sight of her straining against the rope binding her hands to the headboard was so fucking hot he almost came right then.

She shook her head back and forth as if that might calm the sensations that had hardened her nipples to diamond points. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she pressed her heels to his ass and tried to make him move, but he kept himself completely still inside her.

Was it possible for her to make herself come without him moving at all? That might be an interesting experiment for a different time, but the fire consuming him right now wouldn’t allow for that. She was the most glorious creature he’d ever known.

When she finally whimpered and relaxed back onto the bed, he leaned down over her again and breathed words into her ear. “That’s a good girl. Now tell Daddy who’s in charge of your pleasure.”

With a sob of need, she said, “You are, Daddy.”

“Damn straight,” he growled.

Then he nipped the lobe of her ear the way she had done his lip and thrust into her again, just as hard and deep, but this time fast. It took only seconds before her inner muscles quivered, then clamped down on his cock as her orgasm rolled through her.

His chest swelled with primal need as she screamed out his name again and again. That was all he could take. His balls tightened, and fire ran from his cock to his abs, then surged throughout his body. His muscles locked, and the noises escaping him were nothing more than primal growls and grunts.

It was the most incredible experience of his life.

He rolled to the side and collapsed on the bed. Untying her wrists, he tucked her close, her back pressed to his front. He needed to take care of the condom and clean them up, but first, he needed to check on his babygirl.

Curling her in tighter, he asked, “You okay, sweet girl?”

She didn’t answer with words. She purred and wiggled her butt in for a tighter fit. Yeah, his girl was okay. Tucking the covers around her, he walked to the bathroom, took care of business, and came back with a warm cloth to clean up his Little girl.

When he rolled her to her back and pulled apart her legs, she smiled... until she saw the rag in his hand.

Twin flames kissed her cheeks when she realized what he intended to do. Clamping her thighs together, she tried to push away from him. “I can do that,” she said as she stretched out her hand for the rag.

“Of course, you can,” he said. “But you aren’t going to. This is part of the way Daddy takes care of you. Now relax your legs and let Daddy get you clean.”



She started to protest again, but he sent a stern, determined look her way, and she changed her mind. She was a smart girl.

“So, you said you want to learn to ride a horse when we get to the ranch. What else would you like to do?”

She wouldn’t look at him as he cleaned her up. They’d work on that. But at least she answered his question. “I’ve never been to a dude ranch before. What kind of things are there?”

“So many things. Do you like to fish?”

She scrunched her nose. “I used to eat fish until I tried fishing with some of my friends once. I told the General I was going to the library for some tutoring, and I met them at the creek. I lasted right up until they handed me a worm and told me I had to eviscerate it with a hook and then plop it in the water to either drown or be eaten alive by the fish.” She shuddered at the memory.

“Well, you’ll be happy to know that we have fly fishing on the ranch. No worms or any other living critters required.”

“I can’t wait to meet everyone in person. They’re all so nice on the phone.”

“Yeah, they’ll do in a pinch,” he teased. “You know, when you get settled, you could call your sister and invite her out for a visit.”

She froze at the suggestion, staring at him with her mouth shaped in a perfect O. Then she burst into tears.

His heart dropped. Tossing the rag aside, he gathered her onto his lap. “Bluebell, sweetie, you don’t have to ask her to visit. I just thought you might like to.”

“I-I-I d-do!” she sobbed. “I w-want to s-see h-her more than a-anything. I j-just n-never thought I’d s-see her again.”

This girl was going to smash his heart into tiny pieces. “Darlin, she’s welcome at the ranch anytime. If there’s anything we value at the ranch, it’s family. You’re part of our family now. You are going to have all the love and support you can stand and then some. If everything goes according to my plans, we’ll be home in about five days.”

She leaned back to look at him. “Plans? What kind of plans?”

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Okay, so here they were. He'd hoped to talk about this after they'd spent a few more days together. Not that he'd change his mind, but she would have a bit more time to feel comfortable with where she was moving. And she was moving to his ranch. Her not being with him every day from now on wasn't an option. She was meant to be his Little girl. He'd been born to be her Daddy.

Sure, it had only been a couple of weeks. But she was his. He knew it as well as he knew his own name. And even more important, she knew it, too. The question was whether she'd thought through how this was going to work once they left the yacht.

"Well?" Tildi demanded.

"Do you trust me, Bluebell?"

That seemed to startle her. "Yes?" she answered.

"Was that an answer or a question?"

"Um, both? Cause I still don't know what we're talking about."

"I've told you all about the Wild River Ranch, and you've talked with my brothers and sister. I can't wait to show you the beauty that we have in Wyoming. Like I said, the fishing is great. You're going to love it."

Fishing? Really? He was having the most important conversation of his life, and he led with fishing?

Damn, was it him, or was it suddenly really hot in here? She was looking at him like he had three horns growing out of his head. He was blowing it.

She placed a hand on his cheek. “Do you need to breathe with me, Daddy? You don’t have to be scared. I’m right here to keep you safe, too.”

Now it was his turn to stare at her. Outside of his siblings, when had anyone worried about taking care of him? That was his role, and he loved it, but for her to realize caring went both ways was one of the eight million, four hundred and sixty-two thousand reasons he was in love with her.

He placed his hand over hers, pressing her soft palm into his cheek. “I want you to come to the ranch with me with the plan to stay there forever, Bluebell. I don’t want to let you out of my sight. I’m damn sure not putting you on a bus. You’re gonna love it. My family already loves you. What do you think? Would you like to at least give Wyoming a try?”

She studied him for a long time. An eternity. He was dying here.

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

His heart cracked open, bleeding out from the wound that one word delivered. But she wasn’t finished speaking. “I’m sure it’s great, and your family is wonderful. I don’t need to give Wyoming a try. But giving us a try is everything I’ve ever wanted. Is that part of the deal?”

His girl. In that moment, Boone made a plan. He was gonna kiss her. Hard. And then spank her even harder. And then make love to her again, this time sweet and slow.

“Yes, babygirl. That is definitely part of the deal. As a matter of fact, it is most of the deal. I just threw the mountains in for free.”

She smiled, and the light was more beautiful than any sunrise he'd ever seen. He took in all she was and decided the most important part was she was his. And then Boone followed his plan.

Tildi stared down at Boone. If her love for him filled her any more she was going to burst wide open. It was settled. She was going to a ranch in Wyoming. With Boone. And not just for a visit. No, she was going to stay.

She was thrilled. Ecstatic. Overflowing.

Terrified.

She ran her hand over his thick hair. There was so much she wanted him to know that she'd never be able to say with him looking at her. So she whispered it to him as he slept. "You're everything I've ever wanted. Everything I never thought I'd have. I probably don't deserve your love, but I'm so, so glad you think I do."

He'd taught her that. And not because of the things she did or didn't do. He loved her for who she was.

He'd seen every side of her and loved her anyway.

And she loved him. Deeply. Completely.

"I never knew what love was before you came into my life. You rescued me from so much more than that compound. I have no clue what will happen tomorrow or the day after that." No one could predict what life would throw their way. But they'd be okay as long as they faced it together.

"You're the first man I've ever loved, and you'll be the last. And when this life is over, our love will draw us together, whatever comes next. One lifetime will never be enough." Their bond was that strong.

They'd never actually said the words to each other. She wanted to practice first, so she could get it just right. The first time you told someone you loved them was important. She should practice, and now, while he was sound asleep, was as good a time as any.

She concentrated on each word as she whispered, "I love you, Daddy."

Sleeping Boone smiled and muttered, "I love you, too, Bluebell. Top of my heart to the bottom of my soul." He opened his eyes and rolled to face her. "And nothing will ever separate you from my love. Not time. Not space. Not eternity."

She should be irritated that he'd been playing possum. But who could be upset after a declaration of love like that?

He was right. The future might hold anything, but they would face it together. And that was all that mattered.