

 HARLEQUIN®
The background of the cover is a photograph of a man in a dark t-shirt and khaki pants holding a young girl in a red and white polka-dot dress. They are outdoors in a grassy area with trees in the background. The man has a dog tag around his neck. The girl is smiling and looking towards the camera.

American★Romance®

A SEAL's Secret Baby

LAURA MARIE ALTOM

OPERATION
Family

Laura Altom
A SEAL's Secret Baby

«HarperCollins»

Altom L. M.

A SEAL's Secret Baby / L. M. Altom — «HarperCollins»,

Boot Camp Didn't Prepare Him For This! Navy SEAL Deacon Murphy's tryst with Ellie Hilliard was white-hot, but quickly forgotten when she met her husband, his best friend Tom. That was fine by Deacon. As a rule, he avoided making commitments, at least to anything other than the Navy. But when Tom died, Deacon promised that he'd watch over Ellie and her daughter Pia. Not knowing that Pia was actually his, and never expecting that he'd fall for them both in the process. Ellie is terrified of getting too close to Deacon, and not just because of his high-risk career. Losing Tom was hard enough. If Tom's parents knew the truth about Pia, she could lose them too—and they're the only family she has left.

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Deacon made a beeline for Ellie, making her stomach somersault

"Hey, gorgeous." Hand casually about her waist, he bent to deliver a platonic kiss to her cheek. Why was she wishing for more?

"Hey, yourself. Glad you could make it."

"Looked dicey for a bit, but considering the fancy hair you're sporting, it was worth the effort."

Like a giddy teenager, Ellie's spirit soared at the compliment.

"Stop. My hair always looks like this."

He snorted. "I don't know what mirror you've been looking in, but I haven't seen you look this hot since...well..." He whispered in her ear, giving her shivers, "Since that time back when—" She reddened, and he had the good grace to look away and clear his throat. "But we probably shouldn't discuss that here."

Cheeks still flaming, she elbowed him before leading the way to their seats. When he squeezed her hand, she squeezed back. Her usual guilt was there, but so was something else she hadn't felt in a long time—anticipation for what might be next to come.

Dear Reader,

Never have I written a story more about family—not just blood ties, but the relationships we form with friends and coworkers and the entire network of people who comprise the colorful quilts of our lives.

If you've read any of my books, you know I adore kids of all ages. In real life I'm pretty much the same. I'm honored that my kids' friends are usually mine, too, and once I learn their struggles, I add those to my already full worry list.

Deacon Murphy spends a large portion of this book struggling to figure out if he's even capable of love. Love for his family and friends and most especially Ellie, his best friend's widow.

With the recent loss of my last surviving grandparent, my blood family has grown perilously small, yet the more friends I make, the more reassured I am that since they, too, count as family, I will never be truly alone.

My daughter's friend Louisa is having a baby and I find myself more and more excited to welcome this little boy or girl into the world. That, in turn, makes me excited for when my kids start having kids. Eeeek! (But not too soon! LOL!) By the time this story hits shelves, I will have held this new addition to our extended family and in doing so, will have found a whole new person to love.

Whomever you count as your family, give them a hug!! And cross your fingers for Deacon to figure out what love means to him, before it's too late....

Happy reading!

Laura Marie

A SEAL's Secret Baby

Laura Marie Altom



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After college (Go, Hogs!), bestselling, award-winning author Laura Marie Altom did a brief stint as an interior designer before becoming a stay-at-home mom to boy-girl twins and a bonus son. Always an avid romance reader, she knew it was time to try her hand at writing when she found herself replotting the afternoon soaps.

When not immersed in her next story, Laura teaches art at a local middle school. In her free time, she beats her kids at video games, tackles Mount Laundry and of course reads romance!

Laura loves hearing from readers at either P.O. Box 2074, Tulsa, OK 74101, or by email, BaliPalm@aol.com.

Love winning fun stuff? Check out www.lauramariealtom.com.

For one soul leaving this Earth and another entering...

My grandfather, Frederic William Alisch,

and

Louisa Margarita Hamilton and Ian Keserich's sweet baby.

Wherever they lead, I wish you both blessed journeys.

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Chapter One

Tell him.

Ellie Hilliard caught herself staring at Deacon, her dead husband's best friend. He stood at the surf's edge, glaring at the angry Atlantic. For August, it was a gloomy, miserable day. The rest of the crowd gathered at her in-laws' to commemorate Tom's life was inside, clustered about the big screen TV, which flashed home videos of happier times. Family clips had been merged with lighter moments shared with his Navy SEAL team. The worst to bear were intimate scenes caught with him and his daughter. Hard to believe a year had already passed since Tom had been gone.

The rain had stopped, but wind still whipped Ellie's hair. Holding it back, and kicking off her heels at the foot of the beach house stairs, she picked her way through saw grass on the dune and then across the beach. Seagulls shrieked over a find farther down the shoreline.

Reaching Deacon, she said, "We need to talk."

"Bout what?" At six-four, he towered over her by nearly a foot. His black hair was cut in a military buzz, and his square jaw was as hard as his muscled body. Tom used to say once you got to

know him, Deacon was a big softie. Ellie had known him in the most intimate way a woman could. He'd led her to a dangerous ledge, then had urged her to jump....

She wanted to spill everything, but found her pulse racing to an uncomfortable degree.

"Ellie! Deacon!" Tom's father, John, stood at the deck railing, hands cupped to his mouth. "Dinner's ready!"

Ellie's spirits both soared and deflated. It had taken her a while to work up the courage to tell Deacon her most closely guarded secret. This latest interruption had been hell on her emotions.

He sighed. "Guess we better head for the house."

"Deacon, wait." Instinctively reaching out, she clasped his forearm, only to just as quickly draw away. Considering their past, touching him was never a good idea. "We really do need to talk."

"Later." His back was already turned, and his size allowed him to take one step for three of hers. Swallowing her disappointment, Ellie doggedly followed.

Deacon wasn't even supposed to be here. Well, he'd been invited, but no one had expected his team to have returned from their latest mission.

Deacon had come to her after Tom's funeral, explaining that as his friend had lay dying, he'd asked Deacon to watch after Ellie and his one-year-old daughter, Pia. Each week, Deacon faithfully mowed the lawn and performed light maintenance on the Cape Cod house. When he was off on a mission, he arranged for a lawn company to tackle outside chores. He even insisted on regularly changing her car's oil. In the physical sense, Deacon worked hard to live up to the promise he'd made. But emotionally?

He barely spoke to her. Probably a good thing, but it still bothered her. Why, she couldn't have said. It just did.

Entering the house, she and Deacon joined the crowd of just over forty seated around the dining room table and folding tables, which had been draped in Tom's favorite color, royal blue. Tom's father stood, raising his champagne. "Helen and I didn't invite all of you here to mourn our son, but rather to celebrate his amazing life. We want you to rejoice, as we do, in the blessings of his daughter, Pia, and dear wife, Ellie. On this anniversary of his..."

When John's voice cracked, Helen put her hand on his shoulder. "I think what my husband is trying to say is thank you. Words can't express how much comfort it brings us, knowing our son was loved. So here's to Tom."

All assembled raised their glasses.

The dinner proceeded. Helen had hired a caterer for the occasion and the Italian food Tom loved soon had everyone in high spirits, swapping humorous stories about Ellie's late husband, and in general trying to make the best of the tragedy of a young life taken.

A few times during the meal Ellie felt Deacon's gaze on her. But when she looked at him, he'd glance away. The one time their eyes did meet, she flashed a faint smile, and he did the same.

Pia, who was almost two, sat in her high chair beside Helen. The toddler was adored by her grandparents, which made Ellie's secret all the harder to bear.

By the time they had eaten their fill, the clouds had broken, and the majority of Tom's SEAL family headed outside for beach volleyball. Unfortunately for Ellie, Deacon got caught up in the game.

Had she been wrong in thinking that having him with her today of all days was a sign? That she'd held on to her secret long enough?

Pia had hauled all her favorite beach toys from the box Helen kept on the deck. Her giggles rode on the wind when the seawater she poured into her sandcastle moat pooled for a moment, then vanished. "Gone, Mommy!"

"I know, sweetie. Funny, huh?"

"Yeah..." She was already engrossed in trying the trick again.

Ellie wished she could enjoy the simple pleasure of playing with her daughter, but for whatever reason, telling Deacon seemed to have taken on crushing importance. She'd heard through the SEAL

wife grapevine that this latest mission had been brutal. By the grace of God, the team had all returned home safely, but what if they hadn't been so lucky?

How would she live with herself, knowing two men had died without learning a truth they'd both been entitled to hear?

* * *

DEACON MURPHY MADE A POINT OF avoiding Ellie and her daughter like the plague. He'd promised his best friend, Tom, that he'd watch over them, and to the very best of his abilities, he did just that.

The night Tom had died, they'd been in Afghanistan, taking care of business the way SEALs know how, when from out of nowhere enemy fire had started raining down as if hell had sprung a leak. The night had been so black, their faces and gear so well camouflaged, it'd taken precious seconds for Deacon to even see blood pulsing from his buddy's neck. He'd loved the man more than he loved his own brother. He and the rest of their team had finished the mission, then carried Tom's lifeless body eighteen miles across rugged terrain to their rubber combat craft, which they'd partially buried on the beach.

The whole way, Deacon had fought dark, drowning emotions he hadn't been equipped to handle.

Now, with Virginia Beach sunshine boring a hole through his head, he felt Ellie sitting on the sidelines, watching his every move, no matter how hard he tried distracting himself with the game. The two of them had their own special dance—the avoidance shuffle. Even though she'd married Tom, it had been Deacon who'd known her first. Known her in every way a man can know a woman, at least physically.

The ball came at him, but his reaction time was off.

“What the hell, Buns?” his pal Garrett complained. Lord, Deacon hated the name all of his buddies called him—especially when they were pissed. On weekend leave from BUD/S, it hadn't escaped their notice that base bunnies seemed to enjoy that particular portion of Deacon's anatomy. “That was for the win.”

“Sorry. Guess my head's not in it.”

While his team brokered a deal for the best out of three games to win bragging rights, Deacon headed into the house for fresh beer. He was careful to walk the long way around Ellie and her daughter. He couldn't imagine what she wanted to talk with him about, and he honestly didn't want to know.

Much the same way it'd been hammered into him to shut out physical pain, Deacon did the same with the emotional wounds of Tom's passing.

Tom Hilliard had been the best man he had ever known, a hero in every sense of the word. He would blast through bad guys, only to then save their starving dogs. Everyone had loved Tom, which was why Deacon had introduced him to Ellie. She might have been the best lay he'd ever had, but she was also deeply spiritual and intrinsically good. Soft-spoken, and tender enough to have kissed his battle scars. Deacon was a surface dweller who didn't believe in getting too far under anyone's emotional skin. Connecting with his SEAL team was one thing, but women? Not for him.

Truth was, he wasn't even sure why he'd come to this thing for Tom. Maybe out of respect for his friend's folks. Deacon hated swapping stories, or talking about how Tom was in a better place. Screw that. Tom's heaven had been with Ellie and little Pia.

When she approached this time, Deacon again tried to dodge her.

“Deacon, wait,” she said, grasping his arm.

Lips pressed tight, he stared into the blue sky, rather than look her in the eye.

“T-thank you for being here.”

“Sure.”

“Thank you, too, for the new trash bin. It's big enough that even the neighbor's Dalmatian can't tip it over.”

How could he politely tell her he had no interest in small talk? Even though the two of them had never so much as shared an inappropriate glance when she'd been with Tom, the fact still weighed on Deacon that she'd been with him first. He couldn't have explained why, but when Tom had been alive, the former hookup hadn't been a big deal. Now it was.

"I'm, uh, glad to finally get a chance to talk." She sipped her white wine.

"Lord, Ell..." Head tipped back, Deacon released a long sigh. He couldn't do this. He could go days without sleep, food or shelter, but facing his best friend's widow? Wasn't happening. "I really don't have anything to say."

"That's fine." She nodded toward a more secluded area of the deck. "I'll do all the talking."

"What about Pia?"

"Ada's with her. Please, Deacon..."

He made the mistake of meeting Ellie's tear-filled gaze. Her blue eyes mesmerized, while at the same time made him feel like the world's biggest jackass for even thinking of skipping out on her, regardless of what she had to say.

"Why is it so hard for you to talk to me?"

"You know why." He glanced over his shoulder to ensure they weren't being overheard. "Last thing I want any of these people knowing is that I slept with the widow. Sure, it might've been before you met Tom, but it bugs me."

"You think the fact doesn't bother me? I'd give anything if we could take back that night, but we have to—"

"For whatever you feel you must say, now's not the time or place," he interrupted. "If it's waited this long, as far as I'm concerned, it can wait indefinitely."

Ellie was so shocked by Deacon's rejection, she couldn't react quickly enough to stop him from walking away. This was the second time that day he'd refused to talk to her. What was wrong with him? Was he missing a vital sensitivity gene?

Why ask? She already knew the answer. After their one wild night together, he hadn't invited her to spend the morning with him, or even asked for her number. He'd merely thanked her, before explaining he had a long-standing date with the gym.

Determined to once and for all get her most closely guarded secret off her chest, Ellie tried chasing after Deacon, but was cut off by the base commander and his wife.

"This has been such a great day," the portly, white-haired man said. "Paula and I think of Tom often."

"Thank you." Ellie was momentarily too consumed with her anger at Deacon to think straight, resulting in her blabbering the first thing to pop into her mind. "Tom thought highly of you. Just before he died, he quoted your Independence Day speech."

"Oh?"

Dabbing at tears with a tissue, she said, "He was playing with Pia when he reminded her, 'True bravery stems not necessarily from those with the biggest muscles, but the biggest hearts.'" Flashing a misty smile, Ellie added, "Only to him would that quote seem apropos, while purposely losing a game of tug-of-war with a baby."

The older man chuckled, and tears filled his wife's eyes.

"Where's Deacon?" Commander Duncan asked. "This anniversary must be hard on him, too."

"He, um, was here just a minute ago."

From the driveway came the muted, yet unmistakable revving of Deacon's Harley.

"Don't you worry, dear." Paula gave her husband's arm a reassuring squeeze. "We'll find him."

Good luck, since the weasel is at this very moment fleeing the premises.

* * *

ELLIE WAS BEYOND GRATEFUL for the day to finally be over. Tom's parents meant well, but remembering happier times in the presence of so many people had been harder than Ellie would've

thought. Toss in her botched attempts to finally come clean with Deacon, and the afternoon had been an epic failure.

Out on the deck of her weathered, shingle-sided Cape Cod home, with a briny breeze drifting from the Atlantic, Ellie set the baby monitor on the side table, along with a freshly uncorked bottle of merlot. She'd long since lost the strappy heels that matched her floral sundress, and had freed her long, dark hair from the ponytail she'd resorted to while on the beach.

Tom had loved her hair down... Seated on his favorite lounge chair, the wine bottle resting between her breasts, she closed her eyes, imagining him there, leaning in close for a kiss, whispering how much he loved her and would always protect her and—

The pain balled in her chest was too much to bear.

Tears gushed, hot and stinging, until Ellie had difficulty breathing. This couldn't be happening. Even a year after the fact, she had a tough time believing her husband was really gone. The anniversary had dredged up too many painful memories. Of all their plans—not just for raising Pia, but projects for their home... Near the back picket fence, the one Tom had trained sweet pea vines to trail along, they'd talked about putting in a water garden. Ellie had wanted a trickling fountain. He'd wanted a train set that he could run with his angel, Pia.

Pia.

Such a huge burden her sweet baby unwittingly carried.

Tears started flowing again and Ellie upended the wine bottle, guzzling to find temporary relief where there was none. She dropped the bottle to the wood decking, and rolled onto her side, drawing her knees to her chest. She needed her husband so badly. With Tom gone, she didn't begin to know what to do. He'd completed her, and ever since his passing she'd felt empty and raw.

The French door opened and shut, startling Ellie. She glanced in that direction, only to have her heart sink. "What are you doing here?"

Deacon, still wearing the khakis and polo shirt he'd donned for the party, shrugged. "Wish I knew."

"Are you drunk?"

"Wishing for that, too, but..."

As much as she'd wanted to once and for all tell him everything, Ellie wasn't capable of dealing with him now. Not after the day she'd had.

"I was on the beach, thinking about all the shores I've been on with Tom, and somehow I ended up here." Hands in his pockets, Deacon shook his head. "I needed to be with someone who loved him like I do—did. Whatever. Tom was the greatest man I've ever known, and for the life of me, I can't figure why the big guy had him take that bullet instead of me. Literally six inches to the right and this would've all played out different. You'd be sitting here with him, shooting the breeze about me, and—"

"Stop," she begged, folding her arms tight. "You might've been with him when he died, but I was with him when he lived. I'd give anything if I could take back the night you and I shared. Most especially, I'd pray for Tom to be Pia's father instead of—" Clapping her hands to her mouth, she was thankful she'd stopped herself from confessing the secret she'd planned on delivering in a much saner way.

Deacon's dark eyes narrowed, his expression dangerous in the flickering light of a citronella candle. Ellie knew that, with a man as sharp as he was, she had already revealed too much.

"What are you saying?" he asked. "Tom wasn't Pia's dad?"

"Let it go, okay? We'll talk about it later." After grabbing the tipped wine bottle from the deck, Ellie stood, intending to go inside. She'd wanted to have this conversation earlier. The coward in her that had waited a whole year thought there'd be safety in revealing the truth in a more controlled setting.

"Then what did you mean?" He took her by her arm, spinning her to face him.

“Let me go,” she said from between clenched teeth, struggling like a caged animal against the grip of a man who’d once given her the kind of hot, crazy, taboo sex she hadn’t known existed outside of fiction. On that night, she might’ve been dazed with need for Deacon, but not now. Now, she knew him for the bad-boy, full-on disaster he was.

“Not until you come clean with me. She’s mine, isn’t she?” Releasing Ellie to run his hands over his face, he leaned against the deck rail.

She nodded.

“Wow...” He took the two steps down from the deck to pace the yard. “And Tom never knew?” Hugging herself, tears falling in cold trails down her cheeks, Ellie shook her head.

“And that’s what you wanted to tell me today? In front of everyone we know?” The look he cast her was indecipherable.

“If you don’t mind,” she replied, adopting an all-business tone, “I’d like to keep this between us. Helen and John will always be Pia’s grandparents, but more and more, I’m seeing she needs a father. It’s not fair for me to keep this from either of you.”

Deacon sharply exhaled.

Arms crossed, he faced the sliver of glittering Atlantic visible from the yard. The view had been one of the things she and Tom loved most about the house.

What was Deacon thinking? Was he angry at her for not having told him sooner? She felt sick at how she’d handled everything.

“I owe you a massive apology,” Ellie said, her voice small in the chilly breeze. “But from the second Tom learned I was pregnant, he was so happy. I couldn’t take that from him—from myself. You know what kind of family I grew up in. I never wanted the same for my own child.”

A sharp laugh escaped Deacon. “You’re saying the right things, but all of a sudden, I don’t even know you.” Striding purposefully, he returned to the deck, only to open one of the French doors. Was he going to look in on his daughter?

“Please don’t wake her.” Ellie trailed behind him. “Pia’s exhausted from playing. She needs her rest.”

The dark look Deacon cast over his shoulder stoked the firestorm in Ellie’s stomach. “You drop this bomb on me, then not five minutes later have the nerve to dictate my every move?”

Chin raised, she said, “Forget everything you just heard. As far as I’m concerned, Pia’s true father is dead.”

Chapter Two

Deacon pushed his Harley to one-ten on his favorite lonely stretch of Shore Road before being forced to back down because of a tottering raccoon. Killing the engine, he climbed off, rolling his ride to the shoulder before dropping the kickstand to asphalt. At 3:00 A.M., he was pretty well guaranteed privacy until base commuters started pouring in.

After dropping his helmet to the seat, he ignored the burning behind his eyes and mounted the small dune standing between him and the angry Atlantic. What had been a soft breeze in town was now a wind whipping sand against his cheeks. Deacon liked it. Liked the pain.

One year ago today, it should’ve been him taking that bullet.

Aside from his SEAL team, he had no one in his life. His folks had long since written him off, and he couldn’t say he blamed them.

Not bothering to remove his clothes or even his shoes, Deacon trudged into the surf, fighting his way out to black water, where the swells held him as surely as a lover. He generally saved this sort of thing for missions or triathlon training, but after tonight’s chaos he needed the comfort found in the familiar. Out here, he knew where he stood. He’d been trained to handle any contingency with either sheer strength of will or ingenuity. What he wasn’t equipped to deal with were his emotions.

What the hell was he supposed to do with this ache in his chest, making it so tight he feared it would explode? How did he look past images of his best friend dying in his arms, asking him to

care for Ellie and his baby girl? Deacon had promised Tom he would, and he had, but he doubted his friend would have asked him if he'd known Deacon was the biological father of Tom's child.

With every stroke through black water, Deacon told himself it wasn't true, that Pia couldn't be his. But in his heart, he knew. Maybe he always had, but didn't want to admit it out of respect for the sanctity of his friendship with Tom. In certain areas, Deacon might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but he'd always done great at remedial math. As much as he'd tried forgetting the things he and Ellie had done, the way she'd unwittingly made him so crazy to have her he hadn't even used a condom, the memories were still there, colliding with the respect he'd had for her husband. His best friend.

When Deacon's body finally got around to telling his brain he was hungry, cold and tired, he sliced his way to shore. He had to be on base by 0800—preferably with his head in some semblance of a good place.

* * *

“YOU REALLY DIDN'T NEED to come in this early,” Ada declared, shortly after 9:00 A.M.

“Thanks,” Ellie said, hugging her friend and boss. “But yes, I did. You're not going to believe what happened after you left.”

“Not sure if I like the sound of this.” As usual, Ada looked runway ready, her makeup and hair flawlessly done. She'd retired from modeling to marry an NBA superstar, but when she caught him with a cheerleader, she'd been the last one laughing—at least from a financial perspective. The divorce settlement had afforded her the elegant boutique, where she designed several of the store's bestselling garments. “But you know me, always ready for a good story, especially if it's calorie free.”

Having stashed her purse behind the counter, after leaving Pia at the part-time nursery school she loved, Ellie took the white leather armchair opposite her friend. “Deacon knows.”

Ada covered her mouth with her hands. “Weren't you going to wait until the munchkin was a little bigger?”

“Yeah, well, I saw him yesterday and had a change of heart. Too many people told me his last mission was dicey. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to him and he never knew Pia was his. I tried telling him twice at the party, but both times got interrupted. Then what happens? He shows up at my house. One thing led to another, and instead of the calm, rational conversation I'd hoped for, I blurted it out.”

“Whoa. Good thing we don't open till ten.” Shifting in her chair, Ada asked, “What are you going to do?”

Ellie sighed. “I guess try to as smoothly as possible introduce Deacon into Pia's life. She already knows him, but not like a daughter should know her dad.”

“Where do Helen and John fit in?”

“If Deacon has any respect for Pia or myself, he'll keep all of this on the down-low for at least a little longer. There's no way I'm ready for my in-laws to know. The news would crush them. They live for Pia.”

“What about you? You're pretty attached to John and Helen, too.”

“Granted. Last thing I want is for anything to rock that boat. Tom might be gone, but they're still my family.”

“What about me?” Ada teased.

“Of course, you, too. But last I checked, I haven't given you just cause to disown me.”

* * *

THAT NIGHT, after an endless day of firing drills, the last person Deacon wanted to find at his apartment door was Ellie, holding Pia in her arms.

Without so much as a hello, she asked, “You alone?”

“At least until Woof and Grinder get back with pizza and beer.”

Behind her dark sunglasses, he imagined, she was rolling her eyes. More times than he could count, he remembered her voicing her dislike of grown men calling each other by nicknames. Woof happened to be Garrett Solomon, who had the uncanny knack of being able to puke like a dog one second, then be up on his feet, firing off rounds, the next. No physical discomfort fazed him. Grinder, aka Tristan Bartoni, had earned his name from downing six of the meaty Italian sandwiches in under ten minutes during their first leave from BUD/S training. The man ate more than any horse Deacon had ever met.

“We have to talk.” Brushing past him, Ellie sat on the brown leather sofa. Since the three men were hardly ever in residence, the place was sparse, but held all necessary conveniences for a well-equipped man cave. Three recliners. Supersize, wall-mounted flat screen. Xbox, PlayStation and a fridge stocked with beer and the homemade boiled peanuts Southern boy Tristan had his mama send him each and every month. He’d once been married, but his wife couldn’t handle his SEAL lifestyle and had bolted a few counties away with his son.

“If this is about last night,” Deacon said, closing the door behind her, but preferring to stand rather than join her on the sofa, “I’m still processing, and this isn’t a good time for hashing it all out.”

“That’s just it,” she said with a brittle laugh. “There’s nothing to hash out.” She set Pia on the cushion beside her, only the kid promptly scooted off the sofa, making a beeline for Woof’s brightly colored comic collection.

“Hey, whoa!” Deacon swooped to deter her. He hadn’t meant to end up holding her, but now that he was, he took a good look. He and Tom had both been dark-haired, but Pia was a cotton top, much like Deacon’s big brother, Peter, had been at that age. Her big brown eyes were like his, but Tom had also had the same shade. Ellie had hit the jackpot when it came to Baby Daddy Bingo. Had she not confessed that Pia belonged to Deacon, he’d never have been the wiser. He may have had questions, but considering he needed a kid about as much as he needed a hole in his head, he never would’ve asked. “Those comics aren’t toys. Captain America set Uncle Woof back eight hundred big ones.”

“Ridiculous,” Ellie said under her breath. “All of you are hulking man-children with permission to use guns.”

“And? You married one of our best.” Deacon set Pia on her feet, pointing her in the opposite direction from his buddy’s collection.

“Tom was different, and the jury’s still out on what I feel for you.” Ellie clenched her hands in her lap.

“Then why are you here? Because I’m not exactly feeling warm fuzzies for you.” He wore desert camo fatigues with beige combat boots, the laces of which Pia tugged, then giggled.

“Up!”

He glanced down to find the toddler trying to climb his leg. Something about the stern set of determination in her jaw struck a familiar chord deep within him. Did she have his drive to succeed in whatever she started? But Tom had had the same drive. How was Deacon supposed to tell where his traits began and the ones she’d learned from Tom left off?

“She likes being held,” Ellie said, leaving the couch to claim her daughter. “But you’ll figure that out soon enough.”

“Help me out here, Ell. You saying things like that lead me to believe you want me to have a relationship with Pia, yet I have to keep it a secret?”

“Exactly. You wouldn’t blurt to Tom’s parents that the two of us had a fling, would you?”

“No.” Just thinking of that scenario had his pulse taking off. Which made him understand her reasoning behind the hush-hush attitude, though he couldn’t say he liked it any better.

“More than anything, I think it’s important that Pia know you as her father. But Tom’s parents would be devastated to learn the truth, and I’ve still got enough of my own grief to deal with. I just can’t...well, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” Deacon got the gist of her every word. He might’ve inadvertently donated Pia’s DNA, but when it came down to raising her, Ellie would appreciate him being MIA.

* * *

THE WHOLE RIDE HOME, Ellie couldn’t stop trembling. Her relationship with Deacon—if it could even be called that—had always been tenuous at best. Since it had been Deacon who’d introduced her to Tom, she owed him an incalculable debt. But with Tom no longer with her, could that debt be considered paid in full? Technically, Deacon had also given her Pia, but with enough time, she’d have eventually been pregnant with Tom’s child, right?

She didn’t want to admit it, but Deacon scared her. With barely any effort, he’d released a side of her she hadn’t even known existed. While their time together had been exhilarating, the aftermath had been somewhat terrifying. She was a good girl. She’d never been the type who would consider a one-night stand, let alone to engage in one without protection. Countless times she’d replayed the night in her mind, seeking answers. What had she been missing that a bad boy like Deacon filled?

From her car seat, Pia cooed, reminding Ellie that no matter how much she might personally wish to steer clear of Deacon, she couldn’t deprive her daughter of knowing her father. Oddly enough, in having two fathers, Pia had been given a sort of do-over, in that if Ellie chose to let her, she could now begin a new life, with Deacon playing a starring role.

* * *

“WOOO!” cried the bosomy redhead Friday night when Deacon dipped her on the dance floor. “You’re wild!”

“I do my best, darlin’.” While the woman giggled as he twirled her to the honky-tonk song, he couldn’t help but think of the time he’d held Ellie on this very spot. The fact that he could even remember such a thing was a sign he hadn’t drunk nearly enough.

Four quick shots later and Deacon’s head swam pleasantly.

It wasn’t often a man commemorated the loss of his best friend, then learned he was the father of that friend’s child, only to have said child snatched from him, all in the same week.

Worse yet, each time he touched the redhead’s hips, in his mind’s eye he saw Ellie naked and sprawled out before him, her blue eyes hazy with pleasure, her long inky hair playing hide and seek with her full breasts.

“Mind giving someone else a turn?” From behind him, a beer-bellied local copped an attitude. Ordinarily, Deacon would have graciously stepped aside, allowing a fellow dude the pleasure of a trip around the dance floor with a pretty lady. But as Deacon had already noted, there was nothing ordinary about this night, which was why he swung around to give the guy his best right.

“Hey, whoa!” Before he could launch another punch, Garrett grabbed Deacon’s swinging arm, while Tristan took his left.

“Please forgive him,” Tristan said to Deacon’s victim, whose eye was already starting to bruise.

Garrett took the liberty of tugging Deacon’s wallet from his back pocket and fishing out a few twenties. “Here,” he said, handing them over as a peace offering. There was nothing Base Commander Duncan hated more than hearing one of his men had started trouble—especially SEALs. “Our friend would love to buy your drinks for the rest of the night.”

“The hell I would,” Deacon snapped.

Tristan smacked the back of his head. “Would you shut up already?”

By the time his so-called friends shoved him into the backseat of Garrett’s Mustang, Deacon needed another few shots. “I was all right back there. I hardly need you two finishing my fight.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Garrett made a sharp left that sent Deacon flying. “Put on your seat belt.”

“Did he eat any of that pizza back at the apartment?” Tristan asked.

“Don’t think so. Makes sense. He didn’t eat lunch, either. Explains why he was such a lightweight.”

"I'm right here," Deacon said to the two guys up front gossiping like old maids. "I hear everything you say."

Garrett asked Tristan, "He ever tell you why Ellie was driving away in tears as we showed up?" "Nope. I was too hungry to ask."

Garrett nodded, glancing into the rearview mirror. "How about it? What was she even doing at our place?"

"I'll tell you," Deacon said, "but then I'll have to kill you."

"Fair enough." Tristan angled to face him. "What'd you say that had her so upset and you drunker than I've seen you since finishing hell week?"

"You know Pia?" Deacon asked. "Tom and Ellie's baby girl?"

"Well, yeah." Stopped at a red light, Garrett glanced in the mirror. "She all right?"

"Oh—" Deacon had to laugh "—she's just hunky-dory. Especially since I'm supposed to be her dad, only not around Tom's folks."

"What?" Garrett had just accelerated from zero to sixty, only to slam on the brakes, fishtailing into an empty grocery store lot. "Please tell me you didn't just claim to be the father of your dead best friend's kid."

* * *

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, he's not here?" Ellie felt bad enough about her last conversation with Deacon that guilt had driven her to ask Helen to watch Pia so Ellie could find him on base. She'd failed to tell Helen the true nature of her urgent errand.

The base security officer checked a computer screen. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Hilliard, but Chief Petty Officer Murphy isn't available."

"He should be. Do you know where his team is?"

"Mrs. Hilliard, you know I'm not allowed to disclose that information."

It took every shred of Ellie's patience to thank the man and make an unhurried U-turn in the space so thoughtfully provided.

Damn the navy. Double damn all SEALs.

How many times had she needed Tom, only to be told he was unavailable? And then he'd show up days later, unable to tell her where or why he'd been gone. As much as she'd loved him, that portion of their relationship had been unnerving. All the pretty Virginia Beach barflies dreamed of snagging a SEAL. Little did they know that even after closing the deal, their lives would never be perfection. As much as she'd loved Tom, she'd equally missed him.

Where was Deacon?

Was he as upset as she was about the way they'd left things? Of course she wanted him to be Pia's father in every sense of the word; she just wasn't ready for Helen and John to know. Not yet. Deacon had to understand.

Why? a tiny voice prodded. Pia is his daughter. A flesh and blood part of him. Once Deacon got over the initial shock of learning he was a father, he would never back down. Not until the whole world knew Pia was his. Unfortunately for Ellie, he morally and legally had that right.

* * *

"I STILL CAN'T BELIEVE you just walked away."

"From what?" At 1930 hours, Deacon glanced across the belly of the C-130 transport hauling them south to the Congo, where a U.S. ambassador and his family were being held for ransom by representatives of the wannabe government du jour.

From on top of an equipment crate, Garrett popped a sunflower seed in his mouth, snapping the shell open with his teeth. "Your daughter."

"Stay out of it," Deacon warned, his head still throbbing from his earlier activities at the bar. He had to cut back. Last thing he felt like doing was shouting above engine noise.

“No, seriously. You know what Tristan’s been through, missing his son. He tries hiding it with partying, but you don’t wanna end up hurting like him.” Garrett tucked the sunflower hull into his already bulging shirt pocket before grabbing another seed, then hopping down to join Deacon on one of the few rows of seats installed for their journey. “I never told you this, but I had a kid.”

One eye open, Deacon snorted. “You’re full of crap.”

“For real. Knocked up my high school sweetheart. Her dad shipped her off to some girls’ home, where she had my son, but he died.”

Deacon straightened. “Sorry, man. That’s awful.”

Shrugging, Garrett said, “It’s not anything I advertise.”

“Still...” Funny, how all of SEAL Team 12 had been through hell and back together, but there were still things Deacon didn’t know about his friends. With the remainder of their team either sleeping or off playing cards, he had the privacy to ask, “How did you work through something like that? Even a year later, losing Tom is damn near killing me. I can’t imagine losing a kid.”

“Compartmentalization, baby.” Tapping the side of his head, Garrett said, “Anything in me stings, I stick it in a box and shove it in the mental attic. Every so often—say, at Christmas—I take it out, toy with it a little—you know, wonder how different my life might be had our son lived. Would I have ended up with the girl? Ever joined the navy? Who knows?” He shrugged. “All I’m saying is that Pia is very much alive and cute as a bug. You should make getting to know her a priority.”

“Okay, whoa.” Deacon shook his head. “It’s hardly that simple. Ellie was Tom’s woman, not mine. The fact that she had my kid and not his is a crazy twist of fate. If guilt hadn’t been eating her alive over the fact that Pia needs a father and still has one, I don’t think she’d ever have told me I’m that guy. I know for a fact, now she did, that she wishes she hadn’t. She told me to my face she doesn’t want anyone—especially Tom’s folks—learning the truth.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Garrett popped another seed. “Way I see it, now that the cat’s out of the bag, you gotta feed it. Let’s say Tom was still alive when this came out. He knew you and Ellie had a fling.”

“He did?” Deacon sat up so abruptly he nearly choked on his spit.

“Everyone did. Thing is, he loved you like a brother, man. What happened with you and Ellie was in the past. He staked claim to her future. He never said anything, but given the short timing between their marriage and Pia’s birth, even he had to wonder. I know me and Tristan did.”

Deacon winced.

“Just think about it—becoming that little girl’s dad. She’s missing Tom, too. Maybe you could work through it together?”

* * *

AFTER TUMBLING FROM the plane’s belly in the dead of night, then floating silently to hostile ground, Deacon now stood, M-16 at the ready, just outside the U.S. ambassador’s home. The team stayed in the shadows—not easy, considering the obscene level of exterior lighting. They were used to trekking through desolate jungle or desert for miles to reach their targeted engagement arena, but this time had been different. Dropped on the outskirts of the capital city, they’d used lush tropical vegetation to their advantage.

The place was your typical British colonial, two-story mansion, complete with a glowing turquoise pool. The lower level featured plenty of open living space, which no doubt had contributed to the ease with which the bad guys had helped themselves to the ambassador and his family.

Aside from crickets, the only sound was tango music playing softly through hidden speakers. Above that rose an infant’s cries.

Once the team had surrounded the home, eliminating the remaining guards in the process, their leader gestured Deacon, Garrett and two other team members inside for a sweep. One by one, they searched the elegant rooms—now trashed—until on the second floor, they found a preteen male zip-tied to a desk chair, his mouth covered with duct tape. Given his wild eyes and dirty tearstained cheeks, Deacon wasn’t sure his immediate release was a great idea.

The spooked kid appeared capable of making a lot of noise.

On the other hand, he could also let them in on the secret of why the place felt voodoo deserted.

Deacon locked gazes with the kid, then put his finger to his mouth to urge him to silence.

Okay? Deacon hand-gestured to see if he understood.

The boy nodded.

The infant kept crying.

Deacon nodded to Garrett, who used his knife to eliminate the youth's restraints.

Arms free, the kid removed the tape from his mouth. He whispered, "I don't know where my parents are, but my baby sister's still in her nursery."

Deacon pointed to a closet, motioning for the kid to enter it. "We'll come back for you. Until then, don't move."

Garrett led them out of the room, back to the wide, wood-floored hall. Someone had targeted a vase filled with fresh flowers on a marble-topped table and shot it to hell. A sick confetti of tropical greenery and blooms littered the water-slick planks.

Room after room they found ransacked and void of life.

The infant's ever-increasing wails grew harder to bear, but for fear they were walking into a trap, they couldn't break the protocol of slowly securing the entire area.

Finally, Deacon and Garrett reached what must've once been a pretty nursery, only to now find "Die America" written in what appeared to be blood on yellow floral wallpaper.

Peering over the edge of a dark wood crib, Deacon found the source of the tears, only to recoil in horror. The infant wearing soiled pink pajamas couldn't have been much over six months old. She also happened to sport a belt comprised of neat white strips of C-4 explosives attached to a blasting cap and timer. The glowing red digital display read :32, then clicked to :31, :30...

"Damn!" Deacon took what knowledge he had of the explosive to rationalize that without the blasting cap, the C-4 was stable. The problem was figuring which plastic-coated line was attached to what.

Outside, gunfire erupted.

The automatic rounds could be heard pinging off the house's plaster exterior.

:20...

:19...

"Smile," Garrett said, nodding toward a cheap video cam someone had thoughtfully set on a dresser. "We're on Candid Camera."

"Damn." With twelve seconds to go, sweat literally dripped from Deacon's forehead onto the wires he needed to clip. Odds were, whoever had planned this show wasn't smart enough to have booby-trapped the explosives. Regardless, it was too late to do anything about it now.

At seven seconds, he said a prayer and eased his knife between rows of what looked like pale sticks of butter, to have his eye catch on what earlier had blended in. Velcro. The entire bloody thing was attached to the infant with simple strands of Velcro.

At four seconds, he ripped open the closure.

At three seconds, he kicked out the window.

Chapter Three

Ellie sipped green tea, staring out rain-streaked windows to the dark yard. How many times had she performed this vigil for Tom? Wondering where he was. What he was doing. Now that he was gone, she should've felt at peace, knowing he was safe in the arms of angels. But with Deacon now in danger, along with all Tom's other team members, apprehension was still Ellie's closest companion.

Wind shook the small house, pelting rain so hard against the glass it sounded like tacks hitting the panes. The night was miserable, blustery and colder than normal for the end of summer.

Though exhaustion clung to her like a heavy sheet, dulling her senses, sleep was out of the question. Ellie had tried reading, but her thoughts were too frenetic. TV held no appeal.

Wandering into the nursery, she peered at her child, at the long lashes sweeping those chubby cheeks. Even at rest, Pia's beauty never failed to thrill her. Ellie and Tom had had epic, laughing battles over what their little girl might grow to be. Tom had claimed Pia was destined to be the first female SEAL. Ellie had insisted she would for sure be a doctor or movie star—maybe both.

Was Tom looking down on them now? If so, what did he think of Ellie's deception? Would he have hated her for not telling the truth from the start? Or understood and appreciated her rationale, and invited Deacon to be an integral part of Pia's life?

Setting her tea on a nearby bookshelf, Ellie covered her stinging eyes with the heels of her hands. Given the chance to do it all over, would she wish her night with Deacon had never happened?

One look at her child confirmed what she already knew—that no matter who Pia's father was, Ellie loved her with every breath in her body. The night she and Deacon shared had given her life's ultimate gift. By introducing her to Tom, Deacon had given her yet another present of incalculable worth.

Were he here, she would thank him.

But only after begging him to maintain her small family's status quo.

* * *

WHEN THE TIMER HIT two seconds, Deacon tossed the C-4 explosive out the hole where there had once been a window.

At one second, he cradled the baby against him while the whole house rattled violently from concussive force.

Deacon held tight to the now-screaming baby girl. Even from outside, the fire's heat could be felt.

"Nicely done," Garrett shouted. "But we gotta get out of here." Rounds of gunfire could now be heard above the roaring flames.

"No kidding."

Garrett radioed that they'd accomplished their mission of scouting the house and securing remaining occupants.

With insurgents outside, apparently pissed to have had their big, televised show of force to the Western world ruined, Deacon led the way at a hurried, albeit cautious pace down the hall toward the boy.

They found him still in the closet, cowering in a corner with his hands over his head.

"Come on," Deacon shouted, "your sister's safe. Let's get you out of here."

"B-but they're shooting."

"I know," Deacon said above the noise, "but would you rather die from fire or a bullet?"

"I don't wanna die!" the kid wailed.

"Me neither," Deacon cried. "Which is why we've gotta haul ass to somewhere safe. Come on! Pretend we're in a video game!"

Garrett helped the kid to his feet, and a minute later, keeping to back staircases, they slipped into a basement and crawled out a window that led to a formal garden. The visual serenity of dimly lit, winding gravel paths among fragrant flowers felt incongruous given the gunfire surrounding them. The baby let them all share her discomfort with continued screams.

A minute later, the firing stopped.

Through his earpiece, Deacon's commander said, "Cease fire. Rendezvous like ghosts at staging area five."

Garrett snorted. "Easy for him to say. He doesn't have a screaming baby in tow."

"How do I get her quiet?" Deacon asked the girl's brother.

"She's probably scared and hungry, and needs her diaper changed."

Right. None of those bases had been adequately covered in training.

By now, local officials were arriving, sirens blaring, red and blue lights adding to the already chaotic scene. It would be simple enough to run around front and ask for medical assistance. Trouble was, not knowing which government was currently in charge, or their opinion of the good old U.S.A., put them in a bind.

As Deacon's commander had said, they needed to be ghosts, leaving as stealthily as they'd arrived.

With the staging area a good mile east, Deacon cradled the infant as close to his chest as he could while still hugging shadows and staying alert for additional danger. Most of all, he prayed his own daughter never found herself in this much danger.

* * *

FIVE DAYS AFTER Ellie had last spoken to Deacon, she opened the front door to him, the scent of honeysuckle heavy in the twilight's warmth. Knees rubbery, she had to keep a strong hold on the door frame so as not to crumple.

"Hey." He was dressed in cargo shorts and a navy T-shirt. Even with his eyes hidden by gold-rimmed Ray-Bans, Deacon looked exhausted, but still steal-your-breath handsome. Tall, with broad shoulders and a square jaw sporting stubble. His dark hair had grown out of its usual buzz and now was a rummaged-through mess. When he smiled—oh, when he smiled—that was when she'd always had to work to keep her pulse from racing. White teeth and a lopsided dimple drew in the ladies more effectively than a 75% off sale at Jimmy Choo.

"I'd ask where you've been," she quipped, striving for a lighthearted tone, beyond relieved that he was okay, "but Tom taught me better."

"Yeah, uh..." With a bottle of Patrón in hand, he brushed past her. When their shoulders touched, her throat knotted from the unexpected pleasure of sharing his warmth. Impossible to explain, but she felt an irrational connection to him. "Sorry for the abrupt exit. You know how it is," he murmured.

She did. And in many ways, being a SEAL's wife had sucked.

Nodding to ward off tears ready to spill, she said, "I'm having iced tea. Want a glass?"

"Thanks, but—" he waved his unopened bottle "—I brought my own refreshment."

While Ellie bustled into the kitchen to refill her glass, Deacon stood on the threshold, hands crammed in his pockets. Did he, too, feel awkward about the way their last conversation had ended?

From over the baby monitor, Pia let loose a few fitful whines. She'd crashed earlier than usual tonight. Striving for some semblance of normalcy, Ellie had taken her to their weekly play group comprised of base moms and toddlers. Ellie had hoped it'd be fun, but with her naval husband gone, more and more she felt she no longer belonged. Everyone was still kind, but Ellie found they had less and less in common.

"Be right back." She nodded toward the nursery.

Deacon blocked her path. "Let me."

"No. You're holding booze."

"Holding. Not drinking."

She wanted to deny him, but the hard set of his jaw told her he wasn't backing down.

For a good five minutes, she watched him from the edge of the sofa that allowed her a view into her daughter's room. Pia had long since quieted and now Deacon just sat there, elbows on his knees, chin on his fists, staring. As if in a trance, he was stone still. The bottle of Patrón never left the floor.

Was his behavior a result of the mission he'd just completed, or more? Had he only just now absorbed the gravity of becoming a father? If so, what did that mean for her? For Pia?

Unable to bear the current scene, Ellie brewed coffee. Not for her, but for Deacon. He took it black.

Strange how she knew dozens of mundane facts about him, ranging from his coffee preferences to his aversion to broccoli. She'd known him intimately, yet for all practical purposes, they were strangers. Strangers who shared a child.

An hour passed.

Ellie folded laundry, dusted the contents of her curio cabinet, unloaded the dishwasher, stared at the paperwork necessary for volunteering at a local alcoholic outreach program. Ada thought helping others might get Ellie's mind off her own worries, but Ellie wasn't so sure.

Finally, without a sound other than leather flip-flops hitting his heels, Deacon went out onto the deck, tequila in hand. He didn't bother to shut the door. Temperaturewise, it was pleasant outside, but the breeze came from just the right direction to ease under the seascape hanging behind the sofa, making it clap against the wall.

After pouring Deacon a mug of his favorite Kona blend, she joined him outside. Baby monitor in hand, she shut the door behind her.

Deacon stood at the rail, staring into the night.

"Thanks," he said when she handed him the mug.

"You're welcome. Want to sit down?"

Though he shrugged, as if on autopilot, he crossed the short distance to the table with its comfy, red-cushioned chairs. He hadn't removed his sunglasses. Meaning she still had no clue as to what he was thinking.

"Nice night, huh?" Ellie's stab at conversation seemed to fall on deaf ears.

Deacon had zeroed in on his bottle. He drank his coffee down to half-full, then eyed the tequila. "She's really something," he said, more to himself than to Ellie. "Pia, I mean. Before...well, I never really noticed."

"You were over here all the time, Deacon. It wasn't like Tom and I put her in the cupboard when you barged in for a free meal."

He half laughed. "It was different then. Pia belonged to Tom."

And now she's yours.

The elephant in the room between them. Only they weren't in a room, and she wasn't in any position to give parental advice.

Deacon cleared his throat. "I saw some crazy shit the past few days."

"Language," she scolded.

"Right." He downed more coffee. "Sorry."

"It's okay. Even though Pia isn't out here now, it's good to get in the habit of not cursing. I was constantly reminding Tom we had a little sponge just waiting to one day arrive in kindergarten not knowing her ABCs, but fluent in every SEAL curse."

"Kindergarten. Wow." Deacon shook his head. "Yeah, that wouldn't be good."

Fat, endless minutes of silence passed, with nothing between them but the rush of wind in the trees.

Finally, Deacon said, "We both know why I'm here, so let's stop pussyfooting around."

Ellie wasn't sure what he meant. Did she even want to know? she wondered, her mouth dry.

"Without letting you in on any state secrets, I just witnessed some shi—stuff—that blew my mind. In my years of service, I've seen a lot, but this..." He shook his head. "Before he died, Tom, uh—" Deacon glanced away. "He, um, asked me to look after you and Pia." Turning back to Ellie, he slipped off his sunglasses and set them on the table. Even in the shadowy light leaking from the house, his eyes looked horrible. Bloodshot. His right cheek sported a bruise. It took everything in her not to gasp.

What happened to you? "Wh-what else did Tom say?" And why was this the first time Deacon had brought it up?

“That’s pretty much it, aside from asking me to tell you and his folks how much he loved them. I—I guess with this anniversary, I’ve been so caught up in how I’m feeling, I forgot I’m not the only one missing him. Tom was a good guy. The best.”

“I know.” Ellie didn’t even try holding back her silent tears.

“He deserved to be Pia’s dad.”

Ellie nodded, relief streaming through her.

Obviously, whatever Deacon had gone through had showed him how important it was for Pia to have continuity in her life. Yes, Ellie was all for Deacon playing an important role in her daughter’s upbringing—like that of a favorite uncle. No one would have to know he was actually the girl’s biological father.

“That said—” Deacon clasped his hands on the table, locking their gazes “—with Tom out of the picture, Garrett helped me see that she’s going to need her real father more than ever.”

Straightening in her chair, Ellie shook her head. “You told Garrett what was supposed to have been our secret?”

“Tristan, too. But he’s cool. They’re both like family.”

Pressing her hands to her superheated face, Ellie wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. “Those two blunderheads you call Woof and Grinder are hardly my family. Sure, you all might’ve worked together, but that doesn’t mean beans.”

“You need to hush before I get angry. Lucky for you, your husband was a SEAL. We take care of our own. You don’t have a clue what it takes to become a SEAL, which means you don’t know jack about how hard we’ll fight for what we love. I loved Tom more than I cared for my own brother. Because of that, you and Pia are under my protection. Admittedly, I’m off to a rocky start, but during the heat of what I just went through—unwrapping C-4 from a baby’s belly—I vowed to never let anything near that kind of horror befall my baby girl.”

Mouth dry, Ellie stammered, “Wh-what does that mean?”

“It means I need to try being a father. We both know I’m going to make mistakes, but at least I’ll be there for her, right?”

“I don’t understand.”

“We live in a scary freaking world. What kind of man would I be, letting my own kid grow up without protection?”

“Um, right...” Deacon didn’t know the first thing about being a father. His speech was all “rah, rah, I’m a SEAL, hear me roar” B.S. “But you plan on doing all of this without the rest of the world knowing, right? You’ll essentially be a private parenting partner?”

Palms flat against the table, he laughed. “Seriously? Are we back to your worries over Tom’s parents finding out you’re an adult woman who dared have an adult dalliance before you even met their son?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Ellie said in a whispered hiss. “My husband’s barely been a year in his grave. His family and Pia are the only things keeping me sane. How dare you step foot in my home and make demands?”

“That’s you putting your own spin on my words. I’ve been trained to handle situations, and we certainly have a doozy here. Bottom line, I’m Pia’s father, and as such, I’m more than ready to step up to the parenting plate. If you need more time to adjust to my taking on this role in a formal capacity —” he shrugged “—I guess I can live with that. But not for long.”

When relief over the fact that Deacon wasn’t dead set on rushing to John and Helen first thing in the morning flowed through her, Ellie sharply exhaled. She also released the iron grip she’d held on her emotions. All at once, fear and grief and anger for even getting herself in this position poured from her in ugly tears.

“Hey, whoa...” In true Deacon style, he stood up and backed away.

“Please, just go,” Ellie said, swiping at her cheeks.

Instead of doing as she asked, he shocked her by pausing, then taking a few awkward steps forward and drawing her into a loose, equally awkward hug. She wanted to push him away, convinced she didn't need his pity. But it turned out she did. With grief rising in her belly, threatening to cut off all air, she clung to him, fisting his shirt, resting her head against his warm, solid chest.

He tightened his hold, burying his face in her hair. "It's okay. Let it out."

"I—I can't. I—I have to stay strong for Pia. And Tom's parents."

"I'm here. Lean on me."

She did, crying until the only tears remaining were the ones deep inside she feared would haunt her for years to come.

When she finally felt strong enough to stand on her own, she drew back, intending to thank Deacon for being there. Only his eyes were misty, too.

"Of all the people in the world," she said hoarsely, "you and I were the only ones who really, truly knew him. His parents loved him, but they didn't know him. Not like we did."

Deacon nodded.

"I've wanted to tell you about Pia for a long time now, but the timing never felt right."

"It's okay..." He shook his head. "Well, it's not okay that you kept this from me, but now that I know, I deserve the chance to prove I can be a good man. Never in Tom's league, but for Pia's sake, at least close."

"But you're not pushing the whole official daddy title, right?"

Tipping his head back, Deacon groaned. "You're like a dog with a bone. Leave it alone, Ell. Like it or not, as Garrett says, I am Pia's father. I'm trying to be sensitive here. Really, I am. But there's only so much a guy can stand." He gave her a glare before turning to look out to sea. "I'm good enough for you to cry on, but not for anyone to know I fathered your kid?"

As if wanting to say more, but holding back, he laughed before reaching for his Patrón. He walked down the steps off the deck and stood at the back fence. Ellie watched as he tipped up the bottle repeatedly.

She should've gone to him, but couldn't.

The most she could manage was taking and hiding his motorcycle key.

And just when she'd thought all her tears had been spent, they returned with a vengeance. Were it not for her fears of Tom's parents learning she wasn't the perfect wife they'd imagined her to be, Deacon would still be sober beside her, making her world a less lonely place.

Why couldn't he understand how much was at stake if she admitted Tom hadn't been Pia's dad?

Why can't you understand Deacon has every right in the world to share the truth whenever and with whomever he pleases?

Chapter Four

The morning sun was like a laser in his eyes when Deacon woke on Ellie's sofa, feeling as if he'd been kicked by the mule he'd encountered in a rural area on his last mission. Worse yet, from the nursery, Pia wailed. Where was Ellie?

The restroom needed to be first on his priority list, but his mission to the Congo had left zero tolerance for baby tears, so he headed straight for the nursery.

He scooped Pia from her crib. "Hey."

Huffing, red-eyed and offended, she stared at him, harder than any woman he'd ever wronged.

"Ouch." Leave it to a female to make him feel even worse, when for once he was trying to do the right thing.

Ellie's bedroom door was closed.

He found the baby monitor off and sitting on the kitchen counter. Assuming Ellie needed the rest if she had been tired enough to forget it, he set Pia in an armchair. "Stay. I've really got to take care of business."

Back from the bathroom, Deacon found his daughter off the chair and making a beeline for a giant potted fern.

“Whoa...” Snatching her around her waist, he held her gaze with his. “Since when are you such a rebel?”

She blew a raspberry.

“And you stink.”

Her giggle didn't do much to alleviate the smell.

In his role as Uncle Deacon, he hadn't done much in the way of Pia's care. Meaning when it came to changing a diaper, he didn't know squat. How hard could it be?

In the nursery, he started the mission much as any other, by gathering supplies. Clean diaper—check. Wipes. Powder. Lotion. Fresh snappy pajama-thingee.

He figured the table sporting a raised edge and floral pad on top was for changing, and he set Pia there. Only all the supplies were on the counter section of the built-in cabinets and bookshelf.

Eyeing his daughter, he asked, “If I leave you here, are you going to stay?”

The gleam in her eyes told him he'd asked a stupid question. The monkey would be gone faster than he could call her name.

It took a couple trips, but he finally had the equipment and the child in the same place. Unsnapping her PJs was simple enough, but they were damp, so he wrestled them off, being careful with her arms, as they struck him as somewhat floppy. Normal? He didn't have a clue.

The dirty diaper was problematic.

Sticky tabs had been made with a super polymer resin apparently tough enough to withstand Pia and others of her kind, yet not especially user friendly for those in a caretaking position. Wishing for his Bowie knife, he settled for ripping, which made for a whole new problem. The fluffy stuff inside the diaper that held the pee? Not cool.

Deacon had wiped, lotioned and powdered when Pia decided to pee again. “Seriously?”

Lucky for her, she already had a killer smile.

Repeating the whole process, adding the diaper, then gently cramming her gangly limbs into ridiculously small clothing holes finally netted him a pleasant-smelling kid. The snaps were out of order, but those were way over his head in level of difficulty.

“Good Lord,” Deacon mumbled on his way back to the kitchen, holding Pia on his right hip. “That was too intense for this early in the day. Know where Mommy keeps her aspirin?”

“Mommy!” Pia's smile faded and she was back to making the huffy noises she'd produced when he'd first wrangled her from her crib.

Deacon found headache relief in the cabinet alongside the fridge, then poured himself OJ. “Want some?”

He held the juice glass to Pia's mouth, but she made a sour face.

Checking the fridge, he found bacon and eggs. Nothing took care of a hangover like a big breakfast. “You're gonna like my bacon, Miss Pia. Back when me and your dad shared a place, he said I didn't cook it long enough—actually told me the pig was still oinking. But I told him to—well, never mind what I said. Probably not anything fit for your tender ears.”

Deacon found a frying pan and started enough bacon cooking for Ellie to have some, too. He wasn't sure what the munchkin ate. Only knew that as long as he kept talking, she didn't cry. Using goofball accents even earned him the occasional giggle.

“What are you doing?” As she marched toward him, wearing black booty shorts and a pink tank top, Ellie's scowl matched her daughter's. “You can't hold her next to the stove. What if the bacon splatters?”

“Good point,” Deacon said, while Ellie snatched Pia from his arms. “Rookie mistake I hadn't considered.”

“A mistake that could land her in the emergency room.”

“Whoa!” He held up his hands. “Lesson learned. Just trying to help out.”

“Well, when she woke up, I wish you had come get me.”

Clenching his jaw, Deacon summoned every ounce of what bit of gentleman remained in him to not let Ellie have it. What was her problem? If she hadn't left Pia's monitor in the kitchen, he might still be sleeping. Granted, he shouldn't have had Pia near the stove. It'd been a mistake, but nothing worthy of this attack.

After turning off the burner, he dumped the bacon on a plate then tossed the pan in the sink. “Where are my keys?”

She took them from a teacup in her curio cabinet. “Here.”

“Not sure what your issue is—” he bounced the keys in his palm “—but you need to get over it. I was only trying to help.”

Deacon left.

When the sound of his motorcycle's powerful engine faded, and the only proof he'd been there was the acrid smell of exhaust drifting through the open kitchen window, Ellie finally allowed herself to exhale.

“What just happened?” she asked her child, wishing she was old enough to hold an intelligent conversation. But then that would open an entirely new box of issues. When Pia was five or ten or eighteen, what would she think about her mother wanting to hide the fact that Deacon was her real father?

Setting Pia in her high chair, fixing her oatmeal with raisins, and filling her sippy cup with apple juice sidetracked Ellie's racing mind for a few minutes. But that was only a temporary fix.

She feared what had upset her most about finding Deacon holding her daughter—their daughter—had little to do with lethal bacon grease and more to do with the fact that her baby girl had been happy. Grinning in her father's arms. Though Ellie had known it was past time for Deacon to learn the truth, she'd been naive to assume he'd have no problem hiding the fact that he was a parent. Her carefully balanced pile of secrets was poised to topple, and as much as the thought terrified her, she realized that for Pia's sake—and Deacon's—full disclosure was for the best. A girl needed her father.

Even if, in the process, the fallout destroyed her mother.

* * *

“I WAS SO NOT IN THE MOOD for this.” Deacon set his rebreather unit on the aft end of the Mark V Special Operations Craft. Breathing pure oxygen for hours at a time when he'd started his morning with a killer headache had only made his day worse.

“Come on,” Garrett teased, with an elbow to Deacon's ribs. “How can you not love practicing for disarming nukes at three hundred feet?” Unzipping his dry suit, he tilted his head back to take in the sun. “It's the dark that gets me. The black swallows you whole.”

“Yeah.” Deacon began the long process of disassembling and stowing his gear. They would rinse off the seawater back on base.

Garrett joined in the mundane task, asking, “What's up with you? You've been off all day—I mean, beyond your hangover.”

“Remember our last conversation about Pia?” Deacon checked to make sure none of the rest of their team were within eavesdropping distance.

“Sure. You take my advice and see her?”

Deacon winced. “Yes and no.”

Groaning, Garrett said, “Man, you've got to lay off the sauce—especially around your kid.”

“It wasn't like that.” Deacon bristled. “I wasn't going to drink at all, but then Ellie made me crazy. One thing led to another and somehow I downed the better half of a bottle. Ellie took my keys and I passed out on her sofa.”

“This just keeps getting better . . .” Garrett shook salt water from his fins.

“So this morning, I hear Pia crying. Wanting to try my hand at the whole responsible dad thing, I handled it. Got the kid scrubbed down, and I would’ve fed her, too, but Ellie flipped. I’m cooking bacon, with Pia in my arms, and she practically accuses me of child abuse. Says I’m gonna burn her with grease. The whole scene was nuts.”

Garrett didn’t answer, just kept messing with his gear.

“What? You think I was in the wrong?”

“No. Just put yourself in Ellie’s shoes. Not only did she lose her husband, but now she’s got this deep dark secret threatening to spill. Tom’s folks think the world of her and Pia. They’re her support system. What happens if she loses them, too?”

“Hadn’t considered that.” Sitting back on his heels, Deacon strove to balance himself against the Mark V’s 45-knots-per-hour bounce. “But you told me I should take an active role in raising my kid. Now you’re saying, for Ellie’s sake, I shouldn’t?”

“Not at all. For Pia’s sake, for sure you should. Just maybe take it a little slower. No more passing out on the couch, for one. And two, put the baby in her high chair before handling popping grease.”

* * *

“EVERYTHING’S PERFECT.” Tom’s mother, Helen, used a pushpin to add a pink balloon to the last pink streamer. “I doubt Pia will remember any of this, but I’m in desperate need of cheer. My granddaughter’s second birthday couldn’t be a more perfect excuse.”

“Agreed.” Ellie dropped raspberry sherbet into a bowl of pink lemonade punch. It had been a month since she’d seen Deacon, who’d been off on another mission. It’d been over a year since Tom’s passing. Every day she hoped missing him would get easier, but if anything, the fact that he really wasn’t coming back was sinking in. The heartbreaking finality of his absence, in everything from deciding whether or not to repair the broken washer or buy a new one, to what to have for Sunday supper, was taking an emotional toll.

Ellie’s only bright spot was Pia. She talked more every day and now had a working vocabulary of about thirty words—mostly commands for what she wanted Ellie to do. Play, hot, cold, food, ouch. How badly Ellie wanted to share these milestones with Tom. How guilt-ridden she was for not sharing them with Deacon.

She’d invited him to Pia’s big day, but in the same breath prayed he’d stay away.

“These are delicious.” Tom’s father helped himself to a cherry cupcake with cream cheese icing. “Ellie, you sure know how to cook.”

“Thanks.” She glowed at the man’s kind words. Her home life had been far from idyllic, growing up, which made her cherish her relationship with Helen and John all the more. “It’s a new recipe, so I’m relieved they turned out.”

Guests started arriving.

Ada. Neighbors. Friends from her old Mommy and Me crowd, as well as her widow support group and new alcoholic outreach program. She’d recently begun working with Pandora, a young alcoholic mother who’d lost her child to foster care. Though Ellie hadn’t admitted it to Ada, the work was extremely satisfying, going a long way toward making Ellie finally recognize she wasn’t a helpless little girl anymore. Bad things might occasionally happen in her life, but she was ultimately in control of how she reacted to those events. The more friends who arrived, the more relieved Ellie felt that Deacon wasn’t among them.

Helen turned on a kid-friendly CD and soon the normally serene backyard was transformed into a riot of frosting-smudged kids running wild on sugar and fun.

Ellie was at the kitchen counter making a fresh batch of punch when the back door swung open.

“Where’s the birthday girl?” In walked Deacon, brandishing a huge beribboned box. “Sorry I’m late. Pia’s gift was a special-order thing, and it just came in this morning.”

Ellie’s hands were trembling so badly she dropped the last scoop of sherbet down the garbage disposal. She tried finding words, but none made it past her dry mouth. He wore jeans and an untucked

cobalt button-down that, when he removed his sunglasses, did the most amazing thing to his brown eyes. The man wasn't just handsome, he was breathtaking—and he knew it.

Wielding his smile as if they'd seen each other just the other day, he asked, "Anyplace special you have assigned for presents?"

"I, um..." She wiped her sticky fingers on a dishrag. "Just put it anywhere. I didn't think you were coming."

"Why wouldn't I?" he asked with an extra helping of charm. "I'm Pia's father."

"Who hasn't seen her in a month."

"Through no fault of my own." There he went again with his smile. "You can thank Afghan rebels for my absence, but I'm here now and psyched."

"You could've let me know you've been on a mission. I had to find out through friends."

"Sorry," he said, still smiling. "You know how it is. After our last talk, I assumed you'd understand that would be the only reason I wouldn't show up. Regardless, forgive me?"

What a loaded question. On one hand, there was nothing to forgive him for. On the other, she wanted to blame him for being Pia's father. But how could she when she'd played an equal role in the utterly careless abandon that fatal night? Moreover, her daughter was her world—more than ever since Ellie had lost Tom. If anything, in some twisted way, she owed Deacon great thanks for wanting to tackle this most important job with his usual SEAL drive to excel.

"Of course I forgive you. But you have to do the same for me. I didn't mean to come down so hard on you about the bacon. I just..." Hands to her forehead, she searched for an explanation for the chaos in her heart that had stemmed from seeing Pia in his arms. "Well, not that it's an excuse, but with the anniversary of Tom's death, and telling you about Pia, I was having a rough time."

"Ellie, are there more—" Helen saved her by arriving in the kitchen with an empty cupcake platter. "Deacon!"

When she drew him into a hug, Ellie fought an irrational jealous twinge. She'd forgotten the simple luxury of human touch, and missed it. Sure, she held Pia all the time, but that wasn't the same as losing herself to the warmth of being held.

"John and I have wondered how you've been." Her hand to his cheek, Helen added, "The anniversary had to have been hard on you, too."

Eyes welling, he nodded. "Sorry I haven't called or anything."

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