



Blade (Spartan Watchmen MC #5)

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Category: Romance

Description: He's the club's enforcer.

Cold. Controlled. Dangerous.

But when a broken little girl with secrets in her eyes lands on his doorstep, everything changes.

Blade doesn't do feelings. He doesn't do soft.

But Lily?

She's all sunshine and trembles, pigtails and bruised trust.

And she just became his responsibility.

After being blackmailed by a rival MC and forced into silence, Lily's only goal is to survive. Trusting the Spartan Watchmen means risking everything—especially with Blade watching her every move, laying down rules, and delivering consequences with a firm hand and a growled “good girl.”

She should be terrified.

Instead, her heart whispers Daddy.

When the past she tried to escape comes hunting for her, Lily will have to decide if she's strong enough to stand... or finally ready to fall into the arms of the one man who swore to protect her at all costs.

Because Blade doesn't believe in halfway.

Once she's his—she's his for good.

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His jaw clenched as he spotted room eight.

Intel said that's where she was holed up.

Lily Hart. The little blonde who'd caused so much fucking trouble, whether she meant to or not.

He shut off the engine and sat for a moment, gathering himself.

The club had finally pieced it all together.

Lily had been blackmailed by Pedro's Rejects to infiltrate the Spartan Watchmen.

But she'd failed. She couldn't bring herself to betray them, even with her family at risk. When everything came to light, when Savage's girl, Savannah made a shocking confession to the club. It didn't take long to realize that Lily was also being manipulated.

Blade promised Savannah they would find and protect Lily.

She was no more at fault in any of this than Savannah was.

Instead, she'd disappeared.

For two fucking weeks.

And now he was here to collect her and bring her under club protection, whether she

liked it or not.

Blade stepped out of his truck, boots hitting the pavement with a heavy thud. He rolled his shoulders, feeling the familiar weight of his gun against his ribs. He doubted he'd need it, but in his line of work, you never took chances.

He approached room eight, listening for any sound. Nothing. He knocked firmly.

"Housekeeping," he growled, then smirked at his own dark humor.

No response.

He knocked again, harder. "Lily, open the fucking door. I know you're in there."

When silence answered him again, he muttered a string of curses. Fine. Hard way it was. He pulled out the keycard he'd persuaded the front desk clerk to provide. He could be pretty damn convincing.

The lock clicked, and he pushed the door open slowly, scanning the room before entering.

The stench hit him first. Mold, sweat and a hint of something sour.

The room was pitch black, the curtains pulled tight across the windows, the lights off.

The old split-level air conditioning and heater unit, apparently installed in the 80s, hummed loudly.

A small form huddled under a thin blanket on the bed.

"Lily," he said, his voice firm but quieter now.

The form didn't move.

He flipped on the light switch.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he muttered as he took in the state of the room. Fast food wrappers littered the floor. The trash can overflowed with empty ramen cups. A half-eaten sandwich sat on the nightstand, green fuzzy mold beginning to grow on it.

And then there was Lily herself. She pushed the blanket down just enough to reveal her face, squinting at the sudden light.

She looked like shit. Her usually bright eyes were dull and sunken, dark circles underneath them. Her blonde hair hung in greasy strands. She'd lost weight. She was already small, but now? He took in a sharp breath. He should have come sooner.

"Go away," she whispered, her voice raspy.

He moved closer, towering over the bed. "Not happening, little girl."

At the endearment, anger flashed in her eyes. Good. She wasn't completely broken. Not yet, anyway.

"I'm not your little girl," she hissed. "Who sent you? Lucky? Irish?"

"Does it matter?" he countered, looking around the room. "Where's your stuff? We're leaving."

"Not going anywhere with you." She pulled the blanket back over her head.

For fuck's sake.

Blade yanked the blanket off completely, ignoring her outraged squeal.

She was wearing an oversized t-shirt and cotton shorts.

Both looked like they hadn't been washed in days. He eyed the orange dust on the gray shorts, someone had eaten chips and used her shorts as a napkin. He'd seen her at The Citadel.

They'd talked and even played together a bit during playdates.

Blade knew, without any doubt, Lily was truly a little.

She wasn't pretending. She wasn't acting. She was little through and through.

"Yes, you are," he said with lethal calm. "You have two options. Either get up, pack your shit, and walk out of here with some dignity intact, or I throw you over my shoulder and carry you out. Your choice."

"You wouldn't dare," she challenged, sitting up.

He raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms over his chest. "Try me."

They stared at each other, locked in a battle of wills. He could see the moment her resolve crumbled. Her shoulders slumped, and she looked away first.

"Fine," she mumbled. "Turn around."

"Why?"

"So I can change clothes, you neanderthal!"

Despite everything, Blade felt his lips twitch. "No."

"What do you mean, no?" she spluttered.

"I mean, I'm not turning around. You've got five minutes to get ready before I make good on my threat. Four minutes, fifty seconds now."

Lily's face flushed red with anger or embarrassment, probably both. Good. Color looked better on her than that sickly pallor.

"You're an asshole," she muttered.

"Never claimed otherwise, little girl."

For a moment, he thought she might argue more, but then she slid off the bed on shaky legs. He frowned as he noticed how unsteady she was. When was the last time she'd eaten a proper meal? Or slept through the night?

She grabbed a pair of jeans from the floor and quickly stepped out of her shorts and into them, nearly losing her balance. Without thinking, Blade reached out to steady her, his large hand wrapping around her upper arm. She flinched at his touch.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, his voice unexpectedly gentle.

She looked up at him, eyes wide and wary. "That's what they all say."

Something twisted in his gut. Who had hurt this girl? Pedro's Rejects, obviously. But there was more to that statement. A nod towards a more intimate relationship. If she gave him a name, he'd take that piece of shit out.

"I'm not 'they,'" he told her, releasing her arm once she was stable. "I'm me. And I

keep my word."

She didn't respond, just turned away to pull a hoodie over her t-shirt.

"Where are we going?" she asked finally, stuffing a few items into a battered backpack.

"My place," he answered. "Club wants you somewhere secure. Somewhere no one will think to look."

"Why not the clubhouse? Isn't that secure enough?"

"We've got a mole," he said bluntly. "Someone's been feeding information to the Rejects. We've discovered it wasn't only you and Savannah who were connected to them.

There has to be at least one other person.

Only a few of us know where I'm taking you. The officers and their girls. A couple of veteran brothers on Valhalla. That's it. Our closest, inner circle."

Fear flashed across her face. "They're still looking for me?"

"They think you ratted them out. And they know you were going to testify against them."

She paled even further, if that was possible. "I wasn't—I didn't?—"

"Save it," he cut her off. "We'll have plenty of time to discuss all that later."

She zipped up her backpack with trembling hands, then straightened her spine. "I

need to use the bathroom first."

Blade gestured toward the bathroom door. "Two minutes."

Once she disappeared inside, he quickly searched the room, looking for anything she might be leaving behind. He found a small stuffed rabbit tucked between the mattress and headboard. It looked well-loved, one ear half-gone, the fur matted with age.

He stared at it for a long moment. She wasn't pretending to be a little. Not like Savage's girl had been doing. No, Lily was a little through and through. He'd already known that, but finding the rabbit confirmed it. He tucked the rabbit into his jacket pocket without a second thought.

When she emerged from the bathroom, her face was damp and slightly less grimy. She'd pulled her hair into a messy ponytail.

"Ready?" he asked.

She nodded, not meeting his eyes.

"Let's go then. My truck's right outside."

She followed him without argument, clutching her backpack like it contained everything precious in the world. Maybe it did.

As they stepped outside, the mountain air hit them. Blade watched as Lily took a deep breath, possibly the first fresh air she'd had in days. She swayed slightly.

"When's the last time you ate?" he demanded.

She shrugged. "Yesterday? Maybe the day before."

If he had to force-feed her, he would. He made a quick plan to get her to safety and get food inside of her. Real food. He opened the passenger door of his truck and waited for her to climb in. She hesitated, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked. "Taking me to your place. Protecting me. I almost got your club destroyed."

"Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades," he replied. "I don't leave people behind. Especially those forced into impossible situations."

Her eyes widened slightly. "You know it was forced?"

"We know enough," he said. "Get in. You can tell me the rest once we get home."

Home . The word hung between them, foreign and strange.

Lily climbed into the truck, her movements slow and careful. Blade shut the door and rounded to the driver's side. Before he got in, he pulled out his phone and sent a quick text to Savage.

Blade: Package secured. Heading to the cabin now.

He slid behind the wheel and started the engine. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lily shiver. Without a word, he cranked up the heat, then shrugged out of his leather jacket, dropping it in her lap. She stared at it like it might bite her.

"Put it on," he ordered. "You're freezing."

"I'm fine," she protested weakly.

"That wasn't a suggestion," he said, his voice low and firm.

Something shifted in her expression at his tone. She bit her lip, then reluctantly slipped her arms into his jacket. It swallowed her whole, the sleeves hanging well past her fingertips.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He nodded once, then pulled out of the parking lot, leaving the Lucky 8 Motel in the rearview mirror.

They drove in silence for several minutes. Blade kept his eyes on the road, but he was acutely aware of the woman beside him. She was fidgeting, her fingers picking at a loose thread on his jacket sleeve.

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"Stop that," he said without looking at her.

Her hand froze. "Stop what?"

"Picking at my jacket. You're going to unravel the sleeve."

"Sorry," she mumbled, tucking her hands under her thighs.

Another mile passed in silence.

"Are you going to tell me what's going to happen to me?" she finally asked, her voice small.

"You're going to eat a proper meal, take a shower, and get some sleep," he replied.
"Then tomorrow, we'll figure out the rest."

"That's it?"

"For now."

She turned to look out the window. "I don't understand why you're helping me."

Blade sighed. This woman had clearly been through hell. Trust wouldn't come easy.

"The club protects its own," he said simply.

"I'm not one of you."

"You were willing to risk your life rather than betray us," he countered. "Sounds like one of us to me."

She fell silent again, seemingly lost in thought. The road wound through the mountains, taking them further from town. The streetlights faded away, leaving only his headlights cutting through the darkness.

"They have photos," she said suddenly, her voice barely audible. "Of my dad."

Blade kept his eyes on the road. "What kind of photos?"

"He... he killed someone." Her voice cracked. "Years ago. He was protecting my mom, but he... he didn't call the police. Just buried the body on our property."

"And the Rejects found out?"

She nodded. "They said they'd send the photos to the police. Said they'd hurt my mom if I didn't help them."

"But you couldn't go through with it," he guessed.

"I tried," she admitted, shame coloring her voice. "But I couldn't... I couldn't do it. The girls were so nice to me. And then when I saw how the club treated them, how their Daddies protected them..."

She trailed off, her breathing becoming uneven.

"Take a deep breath," Blade instructed, reaching over to place a hand on her knee. "You're safe now."

She flinched at his touch but didn't pull away.

"They're going to kill them," she whispered. "My parents. When they find out I'm with you."

"No, they won't," Blade said with absolute certainty. "Because they won't find out. And even if they did, your parents are already under protection."

Her head snapped toward him. "What?"

"Irish sent some of our brothers to watch over them the minute we figured out what was happening. They're safe, Lily."

Tears welled in her eyes. "You're lying."

"I told you. I'm a man of my word. I don't lie."

A sob escaped her, and she covered her mouth with her hand. "Why would you do that? Why would you help them? Help me?"

"Because it's what we do," he replied simply. "And because you're mine to protect now."

Her eyes widened at that. "I'm not?—"

"For now, you are," he cut her off. They'd talk about it later. She was his a month ago when they'd spent two hours building with LEGO bricks and eating snacks. He knew it. He was sure she felt it, too. "You need a safe place. Food. Rest. And I'm providing it. That makes you my responsibility."

She opened her mouth as if to argue further, then closed it again. Good. She was learning.

He turned onto a narrow dirt road, barely visible among the trees.

The truck bumped along for another half mile before a cabin came into view.

It was larger than it appeared at first glance, built of solid logs with a wide porch wrapping around the front.

His property line backed onto Valhalla. They were grateful to have an ally living next door.

It also meant they were safe. The only way to his house was either through Valhalla or the road they just drove down.

A road with multiple cameras and motion sensors.

Blade pulled up to the cabin and cut the engine. "We're here."

Lily peered through the windshield. "This is your place?"

"Home sweet home," he drawled. "Isolated. Defensible. And no one outside the inner circle knows about it."

He got out and came around to her side, opening the door for her. She hesitated, then slid out, wincing as her feet hit the ground.

"What's wrong?" he asked, noticing her discomfort.

"Nothing," she said quickly. Too quickly.

He crouched down, tugging up her jean leg before she could protest. Her ankle was swollen, angry red lines crisscrossing the skin.

"What the fuck happened?" he demanded.

She tried to pull away. "It's nothing. I fell."

"Bullshit. Don't lie to me, little girl."

Their eyes locked, another battle of wills. This time, he wasn't backing down.

"Fine," she huffed. "I tried to run when they first caught me. One of them... one of them used a wire to tie me up. It got infected. It's healing now."

Rage, white-hot and blinding, surged through him. Someone had bound this woman with wire, tight enough to cut into her flesh, then left it to fester.

"Who?" he asked, his voice deadly quiet.

She shook her head. "Doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," he growled.

She shivered but she lifted her chin defiantly. "Why? So you can add it to your list of reasons to pity me? No thanks."

He stood slowly, towering over her once more. "I don't pity you, Lily. Respect, yes. Pity, no."

That seemed to throw her. She blinked up at him, confusion written across her features.

"Come on," he said, softening his tone slightly. "Let's get you inside. I need to look at that ankle."

Without warning, he bent and scooped her into his arms.

"Put me down!" she squeaked, wriggling in his hold.

"Be still," he commanded. "Or you'll find out exactly how I deal with disobedience."

She froze at that, her eyes growing wide. "You wouldn't."

"I would," he assured her, carrying her up the porch steps. "Push me, and you'll find yourself over my knee faster than you can blink."

A flush crept up her neck, spreading to her cheeks.

"You can't do that," she protested weakly. "You're not my... you're not..."

"Your Daddy?" he finished for her, watching her reaction carefully.

The blush deepened, and she looked away. "That's not what I was going to say."

"Sure it wasn't," he smirked, shifting her weight to one arm as he unlocked the door. "First of all, for the record, little girl, I'm whatever you need me to be while you're under my protection. Including that."

He pushed the door open and carried her inside, kicking it shut behind them.

"Second, I don't tolerate lying. I won't lie to you and you won't lie to me.

If I catch you lying, there will be swift consequences.

"The cabin was sparsely furnished, but clean.

A large leather couch faced a stone fireplace.

The kitchen was off to the right, separated from the living area by a breakfast bar. A hallway led to the bedrooms.

He set her down gently on the couch. "Stay put. I'm going to get the first aid kit."

She nodded, looking small and lost in his oversized jacket.

When he returned with the kit, she'd pulled her knees up to her chest, her eyes taking in every detail of the room. Assessing. Calculating. Looking for exits.

"Planning your escape already?" he asked dryly, kneeling in front of her.

Her gaze snapped to his. "Force of habit."

"Well, break it," he said firmly. "You're not going anywhere."

He lifted her injured ankle into his lap, carefully rolling up her jean leg again. The swelling was worse than he'd initially thought. The infection had spread, angry red streaks climbing up her calf.

"This needs antibiotics," he muttered, more to himself than to her. "When did this happen?"

"About a week ago," she admitted. "I put some Neosporin on it that I got from a gas station, but..."

"But you need actual medical care," he finished for her. "I'll have Doc come by tomorrow."

She tensed. "No doctors."

"Doc's one of ours," he explained. "He's discreet. And he won't report this."

She didn't look convinced.

"Let me be very clear about something," Blade said, meeting her eyes. "While you're here, you follow my rules. All of them. And rule number one is taking care of yourself. That means eating when I tell you to eat, sleeping when I tell you to sleep, and letting Doc look at this ankle. Got it?"

She glared at him. "And if I don't?"

A slow, dangerous smile spread across his face. "Then you'll be sitting on a very sore ass. Your choice, little girl."

Something about her brought out the Daddy in him. Maybe it was her size—she was tiny compared to him. Maybe it was the vulnerability she tried so hard to hide.

"Stop calling me that," she muttered.

"What? Little girl?" He raised an eyebrow. "Why? Does it bother you?"

"Yes," she said too quickly.

He began cleaning her ankle with antiseptic wipes, gentle despite his firm tone. "Your pulse jumps every time I say it. Your pupils dilate. You might not like that you like it, but you do."

She opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "I don't... that's not..."

"Save your breath," he cut her off. "I can read you like a book, Lily. You're not as mysterious as you think."

He finished cleaning the wound and applied antibiotic ointment, then wrapped her ankle in a clean bandage. His hands were surprisingly gentle for their size.

"There," he said, rolling her jean leg back down. "That should help until Doc can take a look."

"Thank you," she said softly.

He nodded once, then stood. "Hungry?"

As if on cue, her stomach growled loudly. She pressed a hand against it, embarrassed.

"I'll take that as a yes," he said, the corner of his mouth twitching. "I'm not much of a cook, but I can manage soup and grilled cheese."

"You don't have to?—"

"Rule number one," he reminded her. "Taking care of yourself."

She sighed. "Fine."

He moved to the kitchen and began pulling items from the refrigerator. "You're going to eat, then shower, then sleep. Tomorrow we'll talk about the rest of the rules."

"There are more?" she asked incredulously.

"Oh, little girl," he chuckled darkly. "We're just getting started."

"Why you?" she asked.

He glanced over his shoulder. "What?"

"Why did they send you to get me? Why not Savage or Irish? Or Lucky himself?"

Blade turned back to the stove, where he was heating up soup. "Because I'm the enforcer."

"And?"

"And the enforcer handles problems," he said matter-of-factly.

She flinched at that. "So I'm a problem."

He sighed, setting down the spoon and turning to face her fully. "No, Lily. You're not a problem. You're a responsibility. My responsibility now."

"I didn't ask for this," she said, her voice small.

"I did. You are mine, Lily. I've known it since the first play date we had together.

I've bided my time. I've been patient. But, when I found out you were in danger...

the gloves came off. I wasn't going to let you run from me.

Hide. Put yourself in danger. I told the club I was coming to get you and I would keep you safe. And now, here we are."

Their eyes met across the room, an unspoken understanding passing between them.

"Here we are," she echoed softly.

He nodded once, then turned back to making their meal. That was one less thing he had to tell her. Oh, but he remembered, there was something else Lily didn't know.

Blade had her stuffed rabbit. And he planned to give it back to her tonight, once she was clean and fed and tucked safely into his bed.

Where she belonged.

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Then it all came rushing back. Blade. The Spartan Watchmen enforcer had found her. Had brought her to his cabin.

He'd been in here while I slept.

The thought should have terrified her. Instead, it sent a confusing mix of emotions swirling through her.

Relief. She didn't know why, but she trusted the large, overbearing motorcycle club officer.

He'd been kind to her at The Citadel. In fact, she'd decided he would have been her mark had she gone through with her end of the blackmail scheme.

She couldn't go through with it. Turns out, she didn't have the courage to infiltrate a motorcycle club.

Even if all of its members were military veterans.

She knew they would do anything, even break the law and commit murder, to protect theirs.

Although, they did live by a moral code.

They only hurt others when they had absolutely no other choice in the matter.

She'd spent four months in the area, working retail at a local boutique while attending

all the Little's Playdates at The Citadel.

When they'd told her that Savannah was coming and had the same job as her, Lily felt relief.

Maybe Savannah could do what Lily couldn't.

And, once Savannah succeeded, Lily would be free, too.

She'd do anything to help Savannah accomplish her mission.

She didn't have to do much. Savannah caught the eye of Savage pretty quickly.

Lily on the other hand... hadn't felt like any of the men were into her that way.

Sure, Blade had built LEGOS with her and made her a snack plate.

But she didn't get the feeling he'd wanted her.

Turns out, she was wrong. If their conversation last night had any merit to it.

Blade was moving slowly, giving her space and respect.

She didn't know what to think about him.

He was handsome, and not nearly as scary as some of the other men in the Spartan Watchmen.

He still kept himself clean cut, his military background obvious in his haircut.

Last night, he'd respected her when she fought back sleeping in his bed and allowed

her to sleep in his guest room next door instead.

After almost falling asleep at the dinner table, he'd spoken words that sent goosebumps up her spine.

Tonight you may shower alone, little girl. Get some sleep. Tomorrow everything changes.

She glanced around the room. It was sparsely furnished but comfortable. A queen-sized bed, a dresser, a nightstand. A door she assumed led to a bathroom. Nothing personal. No photos, no clutter. It could have been a hotel room.

Except for one thing.

Mr. Flopsy sat propped against the pillows beside her.

Her breath caught in her throat as she reached for the stuffed rabbit. She'd thought she'd left him behind at the motel, and the realization had brought tears to her eyes last night as Blade had ushered her into this room after her shower.

But here he was. One ear half-gone, fur matted with age. Her oldest friend.

Blade must have found him. Must have brought him along.

Why would he do that?

A gentle knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

"You awake in there, baby girl?" Blade's deep voice called.

Baby girl. The nickname that shouldn't have affected her the way it did. That

shouldn't have sent warmth spreading through her belly.

"Y-yes," she managed to reply, quickly shoving Mr. Flopsy under the covers. No way was she letting Blade see her clutching a stuffed animal like some actual child. Her gut said he wouldn't mind...

but her mind... logic and emotion warred with each other, as it always did, when she forced her little side deep down.

The door opened, and he filled the frame. He wore dark jeans and a black henley that stretched tight across his broad shoulders. His dark hair was slightly damp, as if he'd just showered.

"Morning," he said, his eyes scanning her face. "Sleep okay?"

She nodded, pulling the covers higher, suddenly aware that she was wearing only the oversized t-shirt he'd given her to sleep in. Her own clothes had been whisked away for washing before she could protest.

"Take the antibiotics," he said, nodding toward the nightstand. "Doc will be here in an hour to check your ankle." She wondered briefly where he'd randomly gotten a bottle of prescription antibiotics without seeing a doctor and then decided she didn't want to know.

"I told you I don't need?—"

"Not up for discussion." His tone was firm, brooking no argument. "Either Doc checks it, or I take you to the hospital. Your choice. I'd prefer not to take you anywhere where your name will be on record right now. We don't know who we can trust or how deep the connections are."

Lily glared at him, then snatched up the pills and the water. She swallowed them with an exaggerated gulp.

"Happy?" she asked, setting the glass down with more force than necessary.

A hint of a smile played at the corner of his mouth. "Thrilled."

God, he was infuriating. Acting like he had some right to dictate her life. Like he owned her or something.

But isn't that what you want? a traitorous voice whispered in the back of her mind. Someone to take control? Someone to take care of you?

She pushed the thought away. That was exactly why she couldn't let herself fall into that headspace here. Not with him. Not when she was trapped and vulnerable and desperate.

"Breakfast is ready when you are," he said, still watching her carefully. "Think you can make it to the kitchen, or do you need help?"

"I can walk," she said, jutting her chin out defiantly.

"Suit yourself." He turned to leave, then paused. "Oh, and Lily?"

"What?"

He met her eyes, his gaze intense. "I see you're keeping Mr. Flopsy hidden. No need for that. Not here."

Heat rushed to her cheeks. How did he know the rabbit's name? She hadn't told him.

As if reading her mind, he added, "It's stitched on his foot. Faded, but still readable."

Of course. Her mother had sewn the name tag when Lily was five, worried she might lose him at kindergarten.

"Also," Blade continued, "we need to talk about rules after breakfast. I meant what I said last night."

With that, he left, closing the door behind him.

Lily flopped back against the pillows with a groan. Rules. Great. Just what she needed. More restrictions. More control exerted over her life by people who thought they knew what was best for her.

First her parents with their suffocating expectations. Then Greg—her ex-fiancé—with his demands that she be someone she wasn't. Then Pedro's Rejects with their threats and violence.

And now Blade.

She should be furious. Should be plotting her escape.

Instead, a small part of her, the part she'd tried to bury for years, felt something dangerously close to relief.

With a sigh, she threw back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her ankle throbbed, but it was better than yesterday. The bandage Blade had applied was still secure.

She stood carefully, testing her weight. It hurt, but she could walk. She limped to the bathroom and found Blade had been in there, too. He'd laid out a brand-new

toothbrush, toothpaste, and hairbrush on the counter beside a clean towel.

He'd thought of everything.

After using the facilities and making herself as presentable as possible in a borrowed t-shirt, Lily steeled herself to face her captor. Protector. Whatever he was.

The smell of coffee and bacon guided her to the kitchen. Blade stood at the stove, his back to her, flipping something in a pan. Pancakes, by the smell of it.

"Sit," he said without turning around. He'd heard her approach despite her attempt to move quietly.

Lily slid onto a stool at the breakfast bar, watching him warily. His movements were precise and efficient, nothing wasted. Everything about him spoke of discipline and control.

He set a mug of coffee in front of her. "Cream and sugar's on the table if you want it."

"Thank you," she murmured, wrapping her hands around the warm mug.

A few minutes later, he slid a plate in front of her. Pancakes, bacon, and sliced fruit. Far more food than she'd eaten in one sitting for weeks. She'd managed a few bites of her spaghetti last night before exhaustion overtook and he took pity on her.

Her stomach growled loudly. Traitor.

Blade sat across from her with his own plate, watching as she tentatively picked up her fork.

"It's not poisoned," he said dryly.

"I know that," she snapped, then immediately regretted it. Antagonizing the man feeding her probably wasn't the smartest move.

But instead of anger, amusement flashed in his eyes. "Good to see you've still got some fight in you."

She didn't know how to respond to that, so she took a bite of pancake instead. It was delicious. Fluffy and perfectly cooked, with just the right amount of sweetness.

"You said you couldn't cook," she accused after swallowing.

He shrugged. "I said I wasn't much of a cook. Never claimed I couldn't manage pancakes."

"I could eat pancakes for every meal," she replied.

"I'm sure you could, baby girl. But, you need more nutrition than that."

They ate in silence for a while. Lily was hungrier than she'd realized, and before she knew it, her plate was empty. She'd devoured everything.

"Want more?" Blade asked.

She shook her head, suddenly embarrassed by her appetite. "No, thank you. It was good."

He nodded, then stood to clear their plates. "Now, about those rules."

Lily tensed. Here it came.

"While you're under my roof, you'll follow my rules," he began, leaning against the

counter. "They're non-negotiable, and disobedience has consequences. Understand?"

She wanted to argue. Wanted to tell him he had no right to impose rules on her. But what choice did she have? She was injured, hunted, with nowhere else to go.

"I understand," she said quietly.

"Rule one, as I mentioned last night: You take care of yourself. That means eating regularly, sleeping enough, and following medical advice."

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Okay, that one didn't sound too bad.

"Rule two: No leaving the property without me. Ever. For any reason. Until this is taken care of, you will be with me at all times. If for some reason, I can't be here, one of my brothers will be."

That one she'd expected. He couldn't exactly protect her if she didn't tell him where she was going.

"Rule three: Complete honesty. No lies, no half-truths, no omissions."

That might be more difficult.

"Rule four: respect. For yourself and for me. That means not deliberately putting yourself down, no self-destructive behavior, no yelling and no name calling."

She frowned. "Define disrespect."

His lips quirked. "Sass is fine, to a point. I don't expect you to be a doormat. I do expect basic courtesy and for you to follow the first three rules without constantly fighting me on them."

Lily nodded slowly. The rules themselves weren't unreasonable. It was the underlying dynamic that made her uncomfortable. The clear power imbalance. The way he was setting himself up as her... protector. Caretaker.

Daddy.

The word flitted through her mind before she could stop it.

"And the consequences?" she forced herself to ask, pushing the thought away.

Blade's expression turned serious. "Depends on the infraction. Minor stuff, you'll get a warning. After that, corner time. For serious disobedience or putting yourself in danger, you'll find yourself over my knee for a spanking. Just so we are perfectly clear, Lily, I only spank on the bare ass."

Heat rushed to her face, partly from embarrassment, partly from... something else she didn't want to examine too closely.

"You can't just... just spank me," she protested weakly. "I'm not a child."

"No, you're not," he agreed, his eyes darkening. "And we both know that's not why it would happen."

Her breath caught. He knew. He knew all about the kind of relationship she craved.

"You've been in the lifestyle before," he continued, watching her reaction closely.

"The club knows about your visits to Razor's Edge before you started hanging out at The Citadel.

We both know you are a little, and unlike Savannah who had no experience in the lifestyle when she was blackmailed, you had plenty of it. "

Razor's Edge. The BDSM club where she'd first explored her submissive side. Where she'd discovered that being a little—having a Daddy Dom who would care for her, protect her, discipline her when needed—was what she truly wanted. No, not wanted. Needed. Craved. Desired.

That was different," she whispered. "That was consensual."

"And this isn't?" His voice was low, steady, threaded with something possessive and raw. "You know you belong to me, Lily. You felt it at The Citadel the same way I did. Don't lie to yourself now."

She opened her mouth to argue, but no sound came. Because she had felt it. That connection. That pull. Like gravity had shifted and made him her center.

He stepped closer, closing the space between them. Not threatening, but absolute. Certain. "You are mine. And I protect what is mine. But I won't chain you, Lily. If you really want to leave, I won't stop you. Not physically, anyway."

Her eyes searched his, looking for a trap, but all she saw was conviction. Heat. A promise.

"I'd strongly advise against it," he added. "There are people out there who want you dead. And walking away from me means walking right into their crosshairs. You go, you're not just risking your life. You're risking your parents' lives too."

The truth hit her like a punch. She wasn't trapped by him. She was trapped by the world outside.

"So it's stay and follow your rules... or leave and probably die," she said bitterly.

"Pretty much," he said, one corner of his mouth tugging into something almost like a smile. "Though I'd like to think staying has some perks beyond basic survival."

She lifted an eyebrow, wary but curious. "Such as?"

He didn't blink. Didn't waver. Just said, "Such as being mine. Fully. Officially. If

you want that.” The air between them thickened, charged with something that had been building for too long.

So,” he said, voice dipping into something dark and tender all at once, “what’s it gonna be, baby girl? Do you want to be mine? I can promise you safety. Security. Not having to be alone and afraid anymore.” He paused, then added softly, "Having someone care for you the way you need."

Lily's heart hammered in her chest. This was dangerous territory. He was offering exactly what she'd always wanted but under duress, when she was at her most vulnerable. It wasn't right. It wasn't how this was supposed to happen.

"I don't need anyone," she lied.

Blade sighed. "Rule three, baby girl. Complete honesty, remember?"

Those words again. Baby girl. And the way he looked at her, like he could see right through her walls, right into the heart of her.

"Fine," she admitted, looking away. "Maybe I do want... that kind of relationship. Eventually. With someone I choose, when I'm not being hunted."

"Fair enough," he conceded. "But while you're here, under my protection, you'll follow my rules. You might not be ready to admit it yet, but you are mine Lily. My little girl. I've got all the time in the world, but my patience will wear out eventually."

Was he serious? Was he actually giving her space to decide if she wanted the Daddy/little dynamic with him? After making it clear he'd enforce his rules regardless?

It was confusing. And strangely considerate.

"Okay," she said finally.

"Okay, what?" he pressed.

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, I'll follow your rules while I'm here."

He nodded once, satisfied. "Good girl."

The praise sent a pleasant shiver down her spine that she desperately tried to ignore.

A knock at the door interrupted the moment. Blade immediately tensed, hand going to his waistband where she assumed he kept a gun.

"Stay here," he ordered, moving silently toward the door.

Lily held her breath, reminded of the danger lurking outside these walls. Blade checked the security camera feed on his phone, then relaxed slightly.

"It's Doc," he told her, tucking his gun away before opening the door.

A middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair stepped inside, carrying a medical bag. His eyes found Lily immediately, assessing her with a professional gaze.

"This the patient?" he asked Blade.

"Ankle infection," Blade confirmed. "Possible dehydration and malnutrition too."

"I'm right here," Lily reminded them irritably. "And I'm fine."

Doc chuckled, setting his bag on the coffee table. "Let me be the judge of that, young lady."

She bristled at his tone but allowed him to examine her ankle, unwrapping Blade's bandage carefully.

"Mmm," Doc murmured, probing gently. "Wire burns, infected. You start her on antibiotics?"

Blade nodded. "This morning. Z-Pak from my emergency kit, I'll need a replacement."

"Of course, I'll send one over tomorrow. She'll need a full course."

"Aren't antibiotics supposed to be specific to the weight of the patient? I mean, I'm at least fifty pounds less than Blade."

"Z-Pak doses are standard for adults. It's the antibiotic of choice for emergency kits because not only is the dose standard, it is a broad-spectrum antibiotic.

In an emergency where antibiotics need to be administered before medical professionals can get there, it's the antibiotic of choice.

"Doc reassured her. "Any pain elsewhere? Truthfully, now."

She hesitated, then admitted, "My wrists, a little. They used zip ties too, before the wire."

Blade growled like an angry bear, and Doc shot him a warning look.

"Let me see," Doc said gently.

Lily extended her arms, revealing the faded red marks around her wrists. They'd mostly healed on their own.

"I'll put some antibiotic ointment on these too, just to be safe," Doc decided. "Any dizziness? Nausea? Trouble keeping food down?"

"No," she said. "I'm really okay. Just tired and sore."

"Hmm." Doc didn't look entirely convinced. He took her vital signs, checked her eyes and throat, then finally sat back.

"Well, you're not on death's door, but you're not 'fine' either," he concluded. "You need rest, proper nutrition, and those antibiotics. The infection should clear up in a week or so if you take care of yourself."

He turned to Blade. "Make sure she eats regularly. Small, frequent meals might be best at first. Plenty of fluids. And keep her off that ankle as much as possible."

"I don't need a babysitter," Lily protested.

Both men ignored her.

"I've got it covered. Thanks, Doc," Blade said, walking him to the door.

They spoke in low voices for a moment, too quiet for Lily to hear. Then Doc was gone, and Blade was locking the door securely behind him.

"See? That wasn't so bad," Blade said, turning back to her.

Lily scowled. "I told you I was fine."

"And I told you that lying breaks rule three." He approached her. "Doc said you are not fine."

“Sorry,” she muttered.

"Good girl," he replied. Then crouched down in front of her. "Now, let me see those wrists."

Before she could protest, he took her hands in his, turning them to examine the marks.

His touch was gentle, at odds with his intimidating appearance.

He opened the tube of ointment and carefully applied it to each wrist, his fingers barely ghosting over her skin.

“I should have noticed these sooner. I’m sorry, baby girl. ”

Lily's breath hitched. She couldn't remember the last time someone had touched her with such care.

"Why are you doing this?" she whispered.

He looked up, his dark eyes meeting hers. "Doing what?"

"Taking care of me. Being... gentle."

Something flashed across his face—surprise, maybe, then anger and finally understanding.

"Because you need it," he said simply. "And because I can. You’re mine."

It wasn't the answer she'd expected. Not because it's my job or because the club ordered me to .

Because you need it. And because I can. You're mine.

Lily didn't know what to say to that. So, she said nothing, just watched as he finished treating her wrists, then moved to her ankle, applying fresh ointment and a new bandage with the same careful attention.

When he was done, he straightened up, towering over her once more. "There. Now, Doc said to stay off this ankle. That means you're on couch rest for the day."

She opened her mouth to argue, then thought better of it. She was exhausted, her body finally feeling the effects of weeks of stress and poor self-care.

"Fine," she conceded.

"Good girl," he said again, and this time, she couldn't suppress the little shiver that ran through her at the praise.

Blade noticed. Of course he did. His eyes darkened, but he didn't comment.

Instead, he scooped her up without warning, lifting her as if she weighed nothing.

"Hey!" she yelped, automatically wrapping her arms around his neck to steady herself.

"Couch," he said by way of explanation, carrying her to the living room. "Faster this way."

He deposited her gently on the couch, arranging a throw pillow under her injured ankle. Then he grabbed a blanket from a nearby chair and draped it over her.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

She nodded, suddenly feeling very small and very cared for. It was... nice. Dangerous, but nice.

"I need to make some calls," Blade told her. "Club business. TV remote's there if you want it. I won't be long."

With that, he stepped onto the porch, closing the door behind him.

Lily sank deeper into the couch, pulling the blanket up to her chin. Despite everything, despite the danger, the uncertainty, the confusing emotions swirling inside her, she felt safe for the first time in weeks.

Safe with a man who made her feel small and protected. A man who seemed to instinctively understand what she needed.

A man who could very well break her heart if she let him.

Because that was the thing about Daddies, wasn't it? They made you feel safe and cared for. Made you believe they'd always be there. Until they weren't.

Like Greg, who'd claimed to be the Daddy Dom she needed, only to bail when he discovered she couldn't have children.

Blade would be the same. Once she was no longer his responsibility, once the danger had passed, he'd move on. Back to his life as the club's enforcer. Back to whatever women usually warmed his bed.

Women who weren't broken. Who weren't hunted. Who weren't... her.

She couldn't let herself forget that. Couldn't let herself fall into that little space where everything felt safe and warm and right.

No matter how much her heart yearned for it.

Through the window, she could see Blade pacing on the porch, phone to his ear. His expression was grim, his posture tense. Whatever news he was receiving, it wasn't good.

Her stomach knotted with anxiety. What now? What fresh hell awaited them?

Blade glanced back at the house, his eyes finding hers through the window. For a moment, they just looked at each other. Then he nodded once, a silent reassurance.

I've got you. You're safe.

Despite her resolve, Lily felt herself begin to believe him.

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The cats moved between his legs, purring as Blade spoke with Savage.

He bent down to rub Macaroni between his ears.

Damn things had shown up during a storm one night, several years ago, and never left.

He'd taken them into Grand Ridge, to Mad Dog's girl's vet clinic.

After they were up to date on their vaccines and microchipped, he'd spoiled them rotten.

They were allowed in his house whenever they wanted, and they'd come in and out of the cat door he'd installed at will.

He never thought he'd be a cat owner. Kayla, Mad Dog's fiancé, laughed and told him that was how the Cat Distribution System worked.

These two orange knuckleheads had wormed their way into his heart.

Mac and Cheese. That's what he'd named them.

Macaroni was the thicker one, and he swore they didn't share a single brain cell between the two of them.

As he listened to the update with Savage, he was glad for the fur missiles rubbing on his legs.

Their purring had a weird effect on him, almost working as an anxiety medication.

Blade ended the call with Savage, his grip tightening on the phone until his knuckles turned white.

Just when he thought things couldn't get more fucked up. Zeb and most of his crew had made bail. They were out, free until trial. If they showed up. He knew they'd try to clean up their messes here and then leave the country.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, shoving the phone into his pocket.

He took a deep breath, trying to get his rage under control before going back inside.

Lily didn't need to see him like this, seething, murderous, ready to tear someone apart with his bare hands.

She was already skittish enough. Already afraid.

The last thing he needed was to give her another reason to fear him.

Through the window, he could see her on the couch where he'd left her, a blanket pulled up to her chin, watching him with those big, wary eyes. Their gazes connected, and he gave her a reassuring nod before turning away.

Get your shit together, man.

The new information from Savage was troubling, to say the least. Tim, the bartender at Razor's Edge and brother to the leader of Pedro's Rejects, had gone missing. His apartment had been ransacked; blood spattered on the walls. No body yet, but it didn't look good.

And the last person Tim was seen talking to? Lily Hart.

Blade didn't believe for a second that she had anything to do with Tim's disappearance. But the timing was suspicious enough that he knew he needed to get her side of the story.

He just hoped to hell she'd be honest with him.

Taking another deep breath, he schooled his features into something less murderous and went back inside.

Lily was exactly where he'd left her, but she'd sat up straighter, tension radiating from her small frame.

"Bad news?" she asked, her voice small.

He nodded, dropping into the armchair across from her. "You could say that."

"They found me," she guessed, her face paling. Just then, Macaroni and Cheese decided to jump up on the couch and introduce themselves.

"You have... cats?" She asked him.

"More like the fuckers have me," he said with a small smile.

"I love cats!" Thank God. He'd hate to hear she was allergic or some shit.

"They aren't exactly the pick them up and cuddle them type," he warned her.

"They'll come to you when they want attention. Otherwise, they do their own thing."

She looked at him like he had three heads as both Macaroni and Cheese curled up

against her. "Are you sure about that?"

"Definitely. Glad they like you, baby." He watched as the cats loved on her. "To answer your question, no. They haven't found you. You're safe here."

Some of the tension left her shoulders, but her eyes remained wary. Smart girl. She knew there was more.

"Lily," he began, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. "I need to ask you about Tim."

The change was immediate. Her entire body went rigid, her eyes widening with genuine fear.

"Tim?" she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper.

"The bartender at The Citadel," Blade clarified, watching her reaction carefully. "Brother to the leader of Pedro's Rejects."

She swallowed hard. "I know who he is."

"When's the last time you saw him?"

She looked down at her hands, which were twisting nervously in her lap. "The night I ran. Two weeks ago."

"Tell me what happened," Blade said, keeping his voice even despite his growing concern. Her reaction wasn't that of someone with nothing to hide.

"He..." She hesitated, then seemed to steel herself. "He helped me escape."

That wasn't what Blade had expected. "Escape? From his own brother's MC?"

She nodded, still not meeting his eyes. "Tim isn't like the rest of them. He never wanted to be part of the Rejects. He just tends bar at The Citadel because they make him. I don't think he is loyal to them. He... he has his own secrets."

Blade processed this. It fit with what they knew about Tim.

With help from Dax, a local police detective, and Jay the owner of The Citadel, they'd poured over a year's worth of video surveillance.

When Tim met with The Rejects, there was almost a reluctance, a hesitance.

His face and body language hadn't screamed, willing participant .

"So he helped you get away," Blade prompted. "How?"

"They locked me in a room at their compound after I... after I failed to get information from your club. Once Savage took Savannah under protection and they couldn't get to her, they snatched me.

They were worried I knew too much and would talk," she explained.

"Tim snuck me out through a back exit, gave me his car keys and some cash. "

"Why would he do that? Risk his life for someone he barely knew?"

At this, Lily finally looked up, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "Because I reminded him of his daughter."

Blade frowned. "Tim doesn't have a daughter."

"Yes, he does," Lily insisted. "Her name is Emma. She's six. Lives with her mom in Denver. He's not allowed to see her because of his ties to the Rejects. She's his brother's way of controlling him."

Christ. If that was true, it changed things. "Go on."

"Tim came to bring me food that night. Found me... hurt." She swallowed hard. "He looked at the wire burns on my ankles, and something in him just snapped. Said no one deserved to be treated that way, especially not someone's little girl."

Blade felt a surge of fury at the reminder of her injuries, but kept his expression neutral. "So he helped you escape. Then what?"

"I drove to that motel," she said. "It was the only place I could think of that might not require ID. I paid cash, kept to myself. But I was afraid to leave, afraid they'd find me if I tried to run further."

"And you haven't seen or heard from Tim since that night?"

She shook her head. "No. I assumed he'd covered for me somehow... said I escaped on my own, maybe."

Blade ran a hand over his face. "Tim's missing, Lily. His apartment was torn apart. There was blood, a lot of it. It doesn't look good."

All color drained from her face. "No," she whispered. "Oh God. They figured it out. They know he helped me."

"That's what it looks like," Blade agreed grimly.

"This is my fault," she said, her voice breaking. "He helped me, and now he's going

to die because of it."

"You don't know that," Blade said, though he didn't entirely believe his own words. Based on the amount of blood at the scene, and the level of betrayal, Tim was as good as dead. If he wasn't already.

Lily's eyes filled with tears. "Yes, I do.

You don't know Zeb. He's... he's sadistic.

He enjoys hurting people. Especially people who betray him.

Tim, he was a constant reminder that Zeb had eyes and ears everywhere, but...

he was kind. He never threatened me. He never hurt me.

Having him around was almost a relief. He... differed from Zeb and his men."

The first tear spilled over, trailing down her cheek.

Something in Blade's chest tightened at the sight.

Before he could think better of it, he moved to the couch, sitting beside her and pulling her against his chest. She stiffened for a moment, then melted into him, her small body shaking with silent sobs.

"Listen to me," he said firmly, one hand cradling the back of her head. "This is not your fault. Tim made his choice. He knew the risks."

"But if I hadn't?—"

"No," Blade cut her off. "You don't get to take that on. The only people responsible for Tim's situation are the ones who hurt him. Zeb and his crew of psychopaths."

She pressed her face into his shirt, her tears soaking through to his skin. He let her cry, his hand moving in slow, soothing circles on her back.

When her sobs finally subsided, she pulled back slightly, wiping at her eyes with the backs of her hands. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I got your shirt wet."

"I've got others," he said dryly.

A small, hiccupping laugh escaped her, though there was no real humor in it.

"What's going to happen now?" she asked, her voice small.

"Now, the club handles it," Blade told her. "We look for Tim, see if he's still alive. And we keep you safe."

"But—"

"No buts," he interrupted. "Rule four, remember? No putting yourself in danger. No self-destructive behavior. That includes blaming yourself for things beyond your control."

She looked up at him, those big eyes still shimmering with tears. "I can't just sit here while Tim might be dying because of me."

"Yes, you can," Blade said firmly. "And you will. The club has resources, connections. We'll do everything we can to find him."

"Promise?" she asked, so vulnerable in that moment that something in Blade's chest

ached.

"I promise," he said, meaning it. "If Tim can be found, we'll find him. Listen baby, how much do you know about The Watchmen?"

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“Not a lot,” she said. “I failed at my job to infiltrate you. I know you are all Daddies... or at least most of you, right?”

“Yes, baby girl. We are all Daddies. We are all also special forces operators. Every last one of us has gone through the fires of hell and come out on the other side. Being an operator comes with its own special set of skills and connections. Have you heard of Valhalla?”

“It’s a neighborhood right outside of Grand Ridge, right? I met Mia and a couple of the other littles at the playdates.”

“Yes. It’s a special type of gated community. It’s run a lot like a small military base. It’s heavily guarded and all the men on Valhalla are also former special forces operators.

I served with Phantom, the owner of the community.

He’s a good man and his wife, Samantha, is a charge nurse at the hospital downtown.

If anything happens and we have to relocate you, he’s already offered to keep you on Valhalla.

We have several brothers who live there.

If there is any evidence that The Rejects have found you, we will head over to Mad Dog’s house.

But, I'm not worried about that happening. You're safe here."

She nodded, seemingly satisfied. Then, to his surprise, she rested her head against his chest again, not pulling away as he expected.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He tightened his arm around her, resting his chin atop her head. She fit perfectly against him, like she was made to be there. The thought should have alarmed him, but instead, it felt right.

They sat like that for several minutes, her breathing eventually evening out. Blade found himself reluctant to break the moment.

Finally, she asked, "Do you think there's really a mole in your club?"

Blade tensed. It was the question he'd been turning over in his mind since they discovered the leak. "Maybe. Maybe not. Could be someone on the periphery. A hang-around, a sweet butt, someone with access but not a patch holder."

"But you're not sure," she guessed.

"No," he admitted. "I'm not."

"Is that why you brought me here instead of to the clubhouse? Because you don't know who to trust?"

Smart girl. "Partly. Also, because I live out here for a reason. I like my privacy."

She pulled back to look at him, studying his face with those perceptive eyes. "You don't seem like the MC type."

Blade raised an eyebrow. "No? What type do I seem like?"

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "Military, obviously. Structured. Disciplined. But the MCs I've seen are all about chaos and partying. You seem more... controlled."

"The Spartan Watchmen aren't your typical MC," he told her. "We operate differently."

"Still," she persisted. "You live out here, away from everyone. That says something."

"Yeah," he agreed. "It says I like my space."

She didn't look convinced but didn't push. Instead, she changed the subject. "So I'm just supposed to stay here until you find Tim? Or until you catch whoever's hunting me?"

"That's the idea," Blade confirmed.

"For how long?"

"As long as it takes."

She frowned. "What am I supposed to do all day? Just sit here and... what? Twiddle my thumbs?"

He hadn't thought that far ahead, truthfully. "There are books. TV. Internet, though I'd prefer if you stayed off social media."

"I don't have any of my things," she pointed out. "My clothes, my—" She cut herself off, a blush creeping into her cheeks.

"Your what?" he prompted.

She looked away. "Nothing. Never mind."

"Rule three, baby girl," he reminded her. "Honesty."

The blush deepened at the nickname. "My... little things," she admitted finally, voice barely audible. "Coloring books. Stuffed animals. Things that help me... you know."

"Regress," he supplied, understanding dawning. "You need your little space."

She nodded, still not looking at him, clearly embarrassed.

"I can get you those things," he said simply.

Her head snapped up, eyes wide with surprise. "You'd do that?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because it's weird," she said. "Adult women playing with stuffed animals and coloring books. Most people think it's strange."

"I'm not most people," Blade pointed out. "And there's nothing weird about needing a safe space to let go. Especially after what you've been through."

She bit her lip. "Most guys find it off-putting. Too much responsibility. Too many needs."

Blade snorted. "Most guys are weak. They don't understand what it means to take care of something precious." This protective instinct she brought out in him went beyond his duties to the club, beyond the job he'd been assigned. It was personal.

Primal.

Dangerous.

He needed to get his head on straight. Set some boundaries.

Remember that she was vulnerable, traumatized, and in his care.

Taking advantage of that would make him no better than the bastards who'd hurt her. He'd give her space and time to feel safe with him.

No doubt, she was his. His little girl. But, he wouldn't force himself on her.

"I have some more calls I need to make," he said, pulling away from her reluctantly.

She nodded, drawing the blanket back around herself. "Okay."

Blade stood, needing some space to clear his head. "You good here for a bit? Need anything before I make some calls?"

"I'm fine," she assured him. "Just... let me know if you hear anything?"

"I will," he promised with a small smile of reassurance.

He moved to the kitchen, giving himself some distance while still keeping her in his line of sight. As he pulled out his phone to call Lucky and ask him to get together a care package from the storage closet at the Clubhouse, a text came through from a number he didn't recognize.

Unknown: Tell the little bitch we're coming for her. No one betrays the Rejects and lives.

Ice slid down Blade's spine. He kept his expression neutral, not wanting to alarm Lily, but internally, he was on high alert. How the fuck had they gotten his number? Only his inner circle had this number.

Which meant the mole was higher up than they'd thought, well connected or good with technology.

Fuck.

He typed a quick response, hoping to draw out more information.

Blade: Who is this?

The reply came almost immediately.

Unknown: Someone who knows exactly where you are, enforcer. Might want to check your security.

Blade's blood ran cold. He moved casually to the window, as if just looking outside, but his eyes were scanning the tree line, the approach to the cabin.

Nothing seemed out of place, but that didn't mean they weren't being watched.

He popped open his phone and watched the camera footage coming up and down the road for the past twenty-four hours. No one but Doc.

His instincts screamed danger. He needed to get Lily somewhere else. Somewhere even more secure. But first, he needed to know who the mole was.

He dialed Savage's number, keeping his voice low. "We've been compromised," he said without preamble when Savage answered. "Someone has my number, knows

where I am."

"Shit," Savage cursed. "Who? We vet everyone who comes in and out of the clubhouse."

"That's what I need you to find out," Blade replied. "Check the club's prospects. Phone records, bank accounts, recent behavior. Someone's feeding information to the Rejects."

"On it," Savage promised. "What about Lily? You bringing her to the safe house?"

"Not yet," Blade decided. "Moving her might be exactly what they want. For now, we hunker down, beef up security. I need to know who we're dealing with before I make a move."

"I'll send Rampage with supplies," Savage said. "Extra ammo, some of that surveillance equipment you like."

"Have him go to the supply closet and put together a little package. All of it. Make sure he's not followed," Blade warned. "And Savage? Don't tell anyone else. Not until we know who we can trust."

There was a pause on the line. "You think it's one of our officers?"

"I don't know what to think, I don't think it's one of them, but they could be compromised in another way," Blade admitted. "But I'm not taking chances. Not with her life on the line."

"Understood," Savage said grimly. "Stay safe, brother."

Blade ended the call and turned back to Lily, who was watching him with concern.

"What's wrong?" she asked immediately.

He considered lying, keeping her in the dark to avoid frightening her. But that would break his own rule three. And if they were potentially in danger, she needed to know.

"We may have been compromised," he told her. "I just got a text from an unknown number. Someone who knows you're here."

Her face paled. "They found me."

"Maybe," he acknowledged. "Or maybe they're bluffing, trying to flush us out. Either way, we're not running. Not yet."

"What are we going to do?" she asked, fear evident in her voice.

"First, we're going to secure the premises," he said, moving to a cabinet near the fireplace. He unlocked it, revealing an arsenal of weapons. "Then we're going to wait for Rampage to bring additional supplies. And then we're going to set a trap."

"A trap?"

Blade nodded, selecting a Glock and checking the magazine. "Whoever's coming for you is going to regret it. I guarantee that."

Despite her fear, Lily managed a small smile. "You're pretty scary when you want to be, you know that?"

"Baby girl," he said, sliding the gun into his holster, "you haven't seen scary yet."

He moved to the windows, checking the locks, drawing the blinds. "Come on," he said, extending his hand to her. "I need to show you something."

She took his hand without hesitation, allowing him to help her up. Her trust warmed something in his chest, even as the rest of him remained on high alert.

"Where are we going?" she asked as he led her down the hallway.

"Safe room," he answered, stopping at what appeared to be a linen closet. He pressed a hidden panel, and the back wall slid aside, revealing a steel door with a keypad.

"Whoa," Lily breathed.

"Operator," he reminded her with a slight smirk. "Paranoia comes with the territory."

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He punched in a code, and the door swung open to reveal a small room lined with supplies. Weapons, ammunition, food, water, medical equipment. Everything needed to survive a siege.

"If anything happens," he instructed, guiding her inside, "anything at all, you come in here and lock the door. The code to get in from this side is 7-4-2-9. Can you remember that?"

She nodded. "7-4-2-9."

"Good girl," he said automatically. "Say it again."

"7-4-2-9"

"Good girl." This time, she didn't try to hide her reaction to the praise. Her eyes darkened slightly, and she swayed toward him almost imperceptibly.

Blade pretended not to notice, though his body sure as hell did. Not the time, not the place.

"The room is soundproof," he continued. "There's a satellite phone that will connect directly to the clubhouse if needed. Enough supplies for a week. Bathroom through that door. It's small, but it'll keep you alive."

"What about you?" she asked, concern in her voice. "Where will you be if I'm in here?"

"Dealing with the threat," he said simply.

She frowned. "You mean you'd be out there? Alone? Against, who knows how many of them?"

"It's what I do," he reminded her.

"No," she said firmly, surprising him. "I'm not hiding in here while you get yourself killed trying to protect me."

"Lily—"

"Don't 'Lily' me," she interrupted. "I'm not some helpless damsel. I can help. I can fight."

Blade raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Yes," she insisted. "My dad was in the military, too. Marine Corps. He taught me to shoot before I could drive."

That was new information. "Your dad, the one who killed someone to protect your mom?"

She nodded. "He made sure I could protect myself."

Blade considered this. Having her armed and ready might not be a bad idea, actually. Better than her being defenseless if someone got past him.

"Show me," he said, selecting a Beretta from a rack on the wall. He checked that it was unloaded, then handed it to her. "Field strip it."

Without hesitation, Lily released the magazine, checked the chamber, then began breaking down the handgun with practiced efficiency. Her small hands moved with confidence, disassembling the weapon in under thirty seconds.

Blade was impressed despite himself. "Not bad. Now put it back together."

She did so just as efficiently, her movements smooth and practiced. When she was done, she handed the reassembled weapon back to him.

"Satisfied?" she asked, a hint of smugness in her tone.

"For now," he conceded. "But handling a weapon is different from using it in combat. If it comes to that, you follow my lead. No heroics. No trying to save me. Your job is to stay alive. Understood?"

She hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. "Understood."

"Good," he said, leading her back out of the safe room. "Now, let's secure the rest of the cabin." His phone buzzed, and he looked down at the camera. Good. Rampage's truck was barreling down the road towards him.

As they moved through the house, checking windows, setting up defensive positions, Blade found himself continually surprised by Lily. She moved with purpose, asking intelligent questions, offering suggestions.

This wasn't the same frightened woman he'd found at the motel. This was someone who'd found her strength again. Someone determined to survive.

It was... attractive as hell, if he was being honest with himself.

Which was a problem, because the last thing either of them needed was for him to act

on the growing attraction he felt for her right now. She was vulnerable, traumatized, and under his protection.

Focus, man. There are people trying to kill her. This is not the time to get distracted.

A knock at the door jolted him from his thoughts. Three short raps, followed by two long ones. The club's signal.

"Stay back," he told Lily, drawing his weapon as he approached the door. He'd seen it was Rampage's truck, but the video wasn't clear enough to see who was behind the wheel.

Just in case, he checked the peephole, confirming it was indeed Rampage, then opened the door just enough to let the other man slip inside.

Rampage was massive, even by MC standards. Six-foot-six and built like a tank. Despite his size, he moved with surprising grace, a result of his years as a Delta Force operative.

"Brother," Rampage greeted Blade, then turned to Lily with a gentle smile that seemed out of place on his intimidating face. "Ma'am."

"This is Rampage," Blade introduced. "Road Captain for the Spartan Watchmen."

"Lily," she replied, offering her hand.

Rampage engulfed her small hand in his massive one, his touch careful. "Heard a lot about you, little one. Good to finally meet you."

"You too," she said, seeming only slightly intimidated by his size.

"Brought the supplies," Rampage said, turning back to Blade.

He hefted a duffel bag onto the kitchen counter.

"Extra ammo, comms, night vision, those motion sensors you like.

And the other things you asked for." He unzipped the bag, revealing the promised items. But Blade's attention was caught by a smaller bag tucked inside.

"Is that for her?" he asked, pointing to it.

Rampage grinned. "Savage said to grab a wide variety of items," He pulled out the smaller bag and handed it to Lily. "For you."

Lily took it hesitantly, peeking inside. Her eyes widened, and a genuine smile bloomed on her face, the first Blade had seen since bringing her here.

"Thank you," she said to Rampage, her voice thick with emotion.

Blade glanced at the bag's contents. Coloring books and pencils. Playdough, a building block set, a couple Barbie dolls with outfits. A small, plush unicorn. And a purple pacifier and matching sippy cup. And of course, a variety of snacks and candy.

Savannah must have helped pick the items. She would know what a little might need or want.

Rampage scratched his beard, looking slightly embarrassed by her gratitude. "Weren't my idea, but you're welcome all the same."

Lily clutched the bag to her chest, looking between the two men. "I'll just... put these in my room."

Blade nodded, and she limped down the hallway, her injured ankle clearly bothering her again.

Once she was out of earshot, Rampage's expression turned serious. "Savage sent me with a message too. Said to tell you there's been a development with Tim."

Blade tensed. "They found him?"

"Not exactly," Rampage said grimly. "They found a finger. Left on the clubhouse doorstep this morning with a note."

"What did it say?"

"She's next," Rampage quoted. "Pretty clear they mean her."

Blade's hands clenched into fists. "Do they know where she is?"

"That's the million-dollar question," Rampage agreed. "Savage is working on it. In the meantime, he said to tell you to be ready to move. Safe house is being prepared. Rewriting the plan, Valhalla is too obvious. We're concerned they'll set up a trap and you won't make it there."

"I'm not moving her until we know who the leak is," Blade insisted.

"For all we know, they could be waiting for us at the safe house, too. The only way to get to me here is through Valhalla, which isn't happening or down the road out front which is heavily monitored.

Going to take the ATV out and set up more motion sensors around the property and a few more trail cams."

Rampage nodded. "Figured you'd say that. That's why I brought a little insurance." He reached into the duffel bag and pulled out a small black case. "Latest gen tracking devices. Plant one on any visitor, and Savage can track them back to whoever's pulling the strings."

"Smart," Blade acknowledged. "What about the club officers? Any suspicions?"

"Nothing concrete," Rampage said, lowering his voice though Lily was still out of earshot. "But Hammer's been acting... off. Taking calls in private. Making excuses to leave club meetings early."

Blade frowned. Hammer was a transfer from another chapter. One they were close to and trusted. "I hope it's not him," Blade said. "But we can't rule out anything. Keep an eye on him."

"Understood," Rampage agreed. "What about her?" He nodded toward the hallway where Lily had disappeared. "Is she holding up okay?"

Blade considered the question. "Better than expected, all things considered. She's stronger than she looks."

"She'd have to be, to survive what she has," Rampage observed. "Just... be careful, brother."

"Meaning what?" Blade asked sharply.

Rampage held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Meaning she's been through hell. And you... well, you're you. Not exactly known for your gentle bedside manner."

"I can be gentle when the situation calls for it," Blade defended.

"I'm sure you can," Rampage said, though he didn't sound entirely convinced. "Just saying, she's likely to get attached. Trauma bonding and all that. Don't make it worse by playing Daddy if you're not planning to follow through."

Blade bristled at the implication. "I know what I'm doing."

"Do you?" Rampage challenged. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're getting attached too. And that could cloud your judgment when it matters most."

Before Blade could respond, Lily reappeared in the hallway, and both men immediately straightened, ending their conversation.

"Everything okay?" she asked, looking between them.

"Fine," Blade assured her. "Just discussing security measures."

She didn't look entirely convinced but didn't press the issue.

Rampage checked his watch. "I should head out. Need to report back to Savage." He turned to Lily. "You take care, little one. And don't let this grumpy bastard boss you around too much." He winked.

A small smile tugged at her lips. "I'll try."

Rampage clapped Blade on the shoulder. "Watch your six, brother. And call if you need backup. I can be here in twenty."

Blade nodded. "Appreciate it."

After a few more instructions about the equipment, Rampage left.

Blade locked the door behind him, double-checking the deadbolt. When he turned around, Lily was watching him, her expression unreadable.

"There's more, isn't there?" she asked quietly. "More than you told me earlier."

He considered lying, but what was the point? She deserved to know the full extent of the danger. "Yeah," he admitted. "There's more."

"Tell me," she said, her voice steady despite the fear in her eyes.

Blade sighed. "They found one of Tim's fingers at the clubhouse this morning. With a note. 'She's next.'"

He expected her to panic, to cry, to break down again. Instead, she straightened her spine, her expression hardening. "They won't stop, will they? Not until they find me."

"No," he confirmed. "They won't."

She nodded, as if coming to a decision. "Then we can't just hide. We need to fight back."

Blade studied her, impressed by her resolve despite the gravity of their situation. "That's the plan. But you need to be prepared for what that means."

"I am," she said firmly. Then, more softly, "I have to be."

He moved closer to her, drawn by something in her expression. The vulnerability beneath the determination, a need for reassurance.

"You're not alone in this," he reminded her. "I'm not going anywhere."

She looked up at him, searching his face as if trying to determine if he meant it. Whatever she saw there must have satisfied her, because she nodded once, decisively.

"Thank you," she said. In that moment, with her eyes blazing and her chin lifted in defiance, she was the most beautiful thing Blade had ever seen. And the most dangerous to his carefully constructed walls.

Rampage was right. He was getting attached. And that could get them both killed if he wasn't careful.

But as he looked down at Lily, this small, fierce woman who'd endured so much and still found the strength to stand tall, he knew it was already too late to guard his heart.

God help them both.

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Lily sat cross-legged on the bed, surrounded by her new treasures.

The coloring books, the colored pencils, the soft purple unicorn stuffie.

Flopsy and Uni sat together, having made fast friends already.

Her fingers traced the outline of the pacifier still in its packaging, a war of emotions raging within her.

Part of her, the adult part, the survivor part, recoiled at the idea of allowing herself this vulnerability.

Especially now, with danger lurking outside the cabin walls.

People were hunting her. Tim had lost a finger and who knew what else, because of her.

This was no time for her to regress into her little persona, for childish comforts.

But another part of her, the little girl inside who'd been bruised and battered by life's cruelties, yearned for the soothing escape these items promised. The chance to let go, even for a little while. To feel safe and protected and cared for. To stop thinking about adult things and simply relax.

But you're not safe, she reminded herself harshly. And you can't afford to be vulnerable right now. Not when it could get you both killed.

With a sigh, she gathered the items and moved to tuck them into the nightstand drawer, out of sight. But as she pushed the drawer closed, her eyes caught on the two stuffies, still sitting on the pillow where she'd left them.

She picked up the worn rabbit, running her thumb over his threadbare ear. The only constant in her life for the past twenty years. The only one who'd never left her, never hurt her, never asked for more than she could give.

"What should I do, Mr. Flopsy?" she whispered, feeling foolish even as the words left her mouth.

The stuffed rabbit stared back with his mismatched button eyes, offering no answers.

A soft knock on the door startled her. She quickly shoved Mr. Flopsy and Ms. Uni under the pillow before calling, "Come in."

Blade filled the doorway, his large frame blocking out the hallway light. He'd changed into a fresh t-shirt, this one tight enough to reveal the defined muscles of his chest and arms. God, he has fucking sexy. She definitely felt safer with him around.

"Just checking on you," he said, his dark eyes scanning her face. "It's been a long day."

Lily nodded, suddenly aware of her exhaustion. The adrenaline from earlier had faded, leaving her drained. "I'm okay."

"Liar," he said, but there was no heat in the accusation. "Your ankle's bothering you. You've been crying. And you're still processing everything that happened today."

Was she that transparent? Or was he just that perceptive?

"I'm tired," she admitted. "But I don't think I can sleep."

He studied her for a moment, then asked, "Would it help to have company? Or would you rather be alone?"

The question surprised her. Most men would have simply told her what they thought was best. But he was giving her a choice.

Respecting her boundaries even in this small way.

She'd noticed that about him. When it came to her safety, he didn't ask her opinion or give her a choice.

Doc was coming or she was going to the emergency room.

But, when it came to everything else, especially her feelings and her little side, he'd been more than respectful.

She wasn't sure if she wanted him to stand up and be more forceful or if she appreciated how kind and considerate he'd been.

"Company," she decided, the word slipping out before she could overthink it. "If you don't mind."

"I don't mind," he replied, stepping into the room. He gestured to the edge of the bed. "May I?"

She nodded, and he sat, the mattress dipping beneath his weight. For a moment, neither spoke, the silence stretching between them.

"I saw you put away the things Savannah sent," he said finally, nodding toward the

nightstand.

Lily flushed. "They're nice, but... not exactly practical given the circumstances."

"Sometimes comfort is practical," he countered. "Especially in stressful situations."

"Is that what they taught you in the SEALs?" she asked, a hint of sarcasm creeping into her voice. "The tactical importance of coloring books and stuffed animals?"

To her surprise, he chuckled. "Not in those words. But yeah, in a way. They taught us that mental well-being impacts performance. That finding ways to decompress is crucial to survival."

She hadn't expected that response. "And what did you do? To decompress, I mean."

Something flickered in his eyes, a memory, perhaps. "Whittling."

Did he just say whittling? "Whittling?" she repeated, unable to hide her surprise.

He nodded. "My grandfather taught me when I was a little boy. He made my brothers and I little toys. Toy horses, whistles, even wooden yo-yos. He'd sit quietly on the back porch with a glass of my grandma's sweet tea on the table and whittle.

No noise, no distractions, just him, nature and the piece of wood he was turning into a piece of art.

There's something about creating something with your hands. I didn't understand until my first tour in combat.

I'd returned from the field and I was... struggling.

There was a thick fallen log near us. I cut off a piece with my knife and whittled my first whistle.

I found that focusing on one simple task quiets the mind. "

Lily considered this. "I guess coloring is kind of like that."

"Exactly," he agreed. "So don't dismiss it as impractical. If it helps you stay centered, it's as important as any weapon."

She looked down at her hands, twisting nervously in her lap. "It's not just that," she admitted softly. "It's... when I'm in that headspace, I'm vulnerable. Defenseless. And right now, I can't afford to be either of those things."

Blade was quiet for a moment, considering her words. "You don't think I'd protect you?"

"It's not about you," she said quickly. "It's about me. About not being a burden."

"You're not a burden, Lily," he said, his voice firm. "You're my responsibility. My—" He cut himself off, as if catching whatever he'd been about to say.

Her heart skipped a beat. Had he been about to say my little girl? The thought sent a warm shiver through her that she tried desperately to ignore.

"Besides," he continued, "being in little space doesn't make you defenseless. It just changes how you process things. You'd still be you. Still capable."

She looked up at him, surprised by his understanding. "You know a lot about this."

"I'm a Daddy through and through," he admitted. "It is who I am. A part of my

identity, just like being a little is part of yours. I've researched and studied DDLG, attended classes at The Citadel for Doms. Exchanged ideas with other Mommies and Daddies. Learned a few things and have a pretty extensive tool belt. The first little I had... well, I rushed into things, I was a young hothead. I understood my needs and not hers. I've matured a lot over the years and have learned how to put a little's needs first. How to be a good Daddy. "

The thought of him researching DDLG dynamics, trying to understand her needs, touched something deep inside her. "Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For... not judging me."

He shrugged, as if it were nothing. "If I judged you for being a little, I'd have to judge myself for being a Daddy. There's no shame, Lily. No shame in knowing who you are."

A comfortable silence fell between them again. Outside, the wind had picked up, whistling through the trees surrounding the cabin. The sound made the space feel even more isolated, more intimate.

"Can I ask you something?" she ventured after a moment.

"Anything," he replied.

"Why do you live out here? So far from everyone else?"

His expression shifted, becoming more guarded. "I have my apartment at the Clubhouse; I stay there sometimes. I take my turn on guard duty. But, as I told you. I like my privacy."

"There's more to it than that," she pressed, sensing an evasion. "You are part of an MC. Brotherhood is everything to those clubs. But you choose to live miles from anyone else."

He was quiet for so long that she thought he might not answer. Finally, he sighed. "After I left the SEALs, I couldn't... adjust. Too many people. Too much noise. Too many potential threats to track."

"PTSD?" she guessed softly.

"Among other things," he acknowledged. "Out here, I can control my environment. See threats coming. Prepare."

"That sounds exhausting," she observed. "Always being on alert."

"It's what keeps me alive," he said simply. "Keeps others alive too, now."

Like me, she thought.

"Does it ever get easier?" she asked. "The hypervigilance?"

"Some days are better than others," he admitted. "Having a purpose helps. A mission, which we have a lot of with Spartan Watchmen. There's always someone who needs protected or bad men who need stopped."

"And what's your mission now? Besides keeping me safe?"

He met her eyes, his gaze intense. "Finding out who's betraying the club.

Putting an end to Pedro's Rejects. Making sure they can never hurt anyone else. We went the legal route before, and it ended up biting us in the ass. They made bail and

continue to torture people. No, this time, we are ending them. I won't let them threaten my woman. "

My woman. She wondered if he was even aware he'd spoken those words. The fierce protectiveness in his voice made her stomach flutter. This man, this warrior, was ready to wage war for her safety. It was both terrifying and exhilarating.

"I should let you get some rest," he said, standing from the bed.

"Wait," she blurted out, surprising herself. "Could you... would you stay? Just until I fall asleep?"

The request hung in the air between them, vulnerable and exposed. She half-expected him to refuse, to maintain the professional distance he seemed determined to keep.

Instead, he nodded. "If that's what you need."

"It is," she whispered. "I don't want to be alone. Please."

"Scoot over then," he instructed.

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Heart pounding, Lily moved to the side of the bed. Blade sat beside her, his back against the headboard, legs stretched out atop the covers. After a moment's hesitation, he lifted his arm in invitation.

She hesitated only briefly before curling against his side, her head resting on his chest. His arm came down around her, warm and secure. The steady beat of his heart beneath her ear was the most soothing sound she'd ever heard.

"Better?" he asked, his voice a low rumble she could feel through his chest.

"Mmm," she murmured in agreement, already feeling herself begin to relax.

"Who is this?" He reached behind the pillow and grabbed the stuffed animals and handed them to her.

She held them tightly in her arms. As she cuddled them, his large hand began to stroke her hair, gentle rhythmic motions that made her eyelids grow heavy.

It had been so long since anyone had touched her with such tenderness.

So long since she'd felt safe enough to let her guard down.

"Sleep, baby girl," he murmured. "I've got you."

The endearment washed over her like a warm wave, breaking down the last of her resistance. She let her eyes close, surrendering to the comfort of his presence.

Just before sleep claimed her, she felt him press a gentle kiss to the top of her head. So light she might have imagined it.

Lily woke slowly, awareness returning in gradual waves. The first thing she noticed was warmth. The second was a steady rhythm beneath her ear, a heartbeat. And the third was the unmistakable scent of man; soap, leather, and something distinctly male.

Blade.

She kept her eyes closed, savoring the moment. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so deeply, so peacefully. No nightmares. No jerking awake at every sound. Just... rest.

His chest rose and fell evenly beneath her cheek.

Still asleep, then. She risked opening her eyes to peer up at him.

In sleep, his face had lost some of its hardness.

The perpetual vigilance that tightened his features was temporarily eased, making him look younger.

More vulnerable. Long dark lashes rested against his cheeks, and his full lips were slightly parted.

He was handsome. Dangerously so.

As if sensing her scrutiny, his eyes fluttered open, immediately alert. His gaze locked with hers, and for a breathless moment, neither moved.

"Morning," he said, his voice rough with sleep.

"Morning," she replied, suddenly acutely aware of their position. Her body was draped half across his, her leg thrown over his thigh, his arm wrapped securely around her waist. "Sorry, I didn't mean to use you as a pillow all night."

His lips quirked. "You apologizing for sleeping well? Because I'm pretty sure that breaks rule one."

She couldn't help but smile at that. "I did sleep well. Thank you."

"You're welcome." He made no move to disentangle himself from her, and she found she wasn't in any hurry to move either.

A comfortable silence settled between them, the morning light filtering through the curtains and casting golden patterns on the bed. It felt... right, somehow. As if they'd woken up together countless times before.

Which was a dangerous thought. Because this wasn't real. This wasn't her life. It was a temporary arrangement born of necessity and danger.

As if on cue, Blade's phone buzzed on the nightstand. The real-world intruding.

With a sigh, he reached for it, checking the message. His expression darkened immediately.

"What is it?" she asked, pushing herself upright.

"Update from Savage," he replied, his voice returning to its usual clipped efficiency. "They found more of Tim. Another finger on the clubhouse steps."

Her stomach lurched. "With a message?"

He nodded grimly. "'Day by day, piece by piece.' They're drawing it out. Making a show of it."

Bile rose in her throat. The brief peace of the morning shattered like glass. "They're torturing him because of me."

"No," Blade said firmly, sitting up fully and taking her face in his hands.

"They're torturing him because they're sadistic bastards. Because he betrayed them. He's an adult with choices.

He could have walked away. Gone to the cops.

Got his family into protective custody. He had options.

None of this is on you, Lily. Remember that. "

She wanted to believe him. Desperately wanted to absolve herself of the guilt. But how could she, when Tim's suffering was so directly linked to his choice to help her?

"What else did Savage say?" she asked, trying to focus on details, on facts, rather than the horrific images her mind was conjuring.

Blade hesitated, clearly debating how much to share.

"All of it," she insisted. "I need to know."

He sighed. "They're closing in on the mole. Savage thinks it might be Hammer. He transferred from another chapter, they'd vetted him, and we trusted their intel.

He joined recently as one of our enforcers.

He's been making a lot of cash withdrawals lately, taking calls in private. Could be nothing, but..."

"But it's suspicious," she finished for him.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Savage is going to try to plant one of those trackers on him today. See where he goes."

"And what about us?" she asked. "What's our next move?"

"For now, we stay put," Blade decided. "The cabin is secure. Moving you might be exactly what they want." He paused, then added, "Savage also sent some... intelligence they've gathered about you."

Her breath caught. "What kind of intelligence?"

"The Rejects have been talking. Word is, Zeb wants you brought to him alive. He's got... specific plans for you."

The implication hung heavy in the air. Lily's skin crawled at the thought.

"He wants to make an example of me," she guessed, her voice surprisingly steady despite the terror churning in her gut.

Blade nodded, his expression grim. "Public punishment. He wants the club to know what happens to those who betray him."

"Like Tim," she whispered.

"Yeah," Blade confirmed softly. "Like Tim."

Lily took a deep breath, forcing down the panic threatening to overwhelm her. Fear wouldn't help her now. Only clear thinking and preparation would.

"Then we need to be ready," she said firmly. "For whatever comes."

Blade studied her face, something like pride flickering in his eyes. "We will be," he promised. "I won't let him get to you, Lily."

"I know," she said, and was surprised to realize she meant it. Despite everything, she trusted this man. Trusted him with her life. With more than that, if she was being honest with herself.

Which was terrifying in its own way.

He checked his watch. "I need to check the perimeter, make sure our security measures are still in place. You going to be okay for a bit?"

She nodded. "I'll make breakfast."

"Your ankle?—"

"Is much better today," she interrupted. "And I need to do something useful. Please. I can't just sit here and do nothing. I'm not good at being little all the time... I'm not like the other girls."

"You don't have to be like anyone but you, baby."

"I'm little when I need to be, when I can be... I don't think I could live a life like Mia or Savannah and be little all the time and let you just take care of me and do all the

things.”

He studied her for a minute. “Each couple’s dynamics are different, sweetheart.

We will find our own rhythm eventually. When the crisis vanishes.

Maybe, you haven’t been given the chance to fully submerge yourself in the lifestyle.

But, even if you can’t. That’s okay. We will find what works for us. ”

“I can’t sit here and do nothing, Blade. I need to... to... do. Do something.”

He seemed to understand her need to feel productive, to maintain some semblance of control. "Alright. But take it easy."

"Yes, sir," she said, offering a mock salute.

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Brat," he murmured, but there was affection in his tone.

As he left to secure the property, Lily made her way to the kitchen, determined to prepare something substantial for breakfast. Her mind, however, kept returning to the events of the previous night.

To the feeling of safety in Blade's arms. To the gentle kiss he'd pressed to her hair when he thought she was asleep.

This growing connection between them was dangerous. She knew that. Attachment in a crisis was a recipe for disaster. Trauma bonding, they called it. Not real feelings, just a survival mechanism.

But it felt real. It felt more real than anything had in a very long time.

She shook her head, trying to focus on the task at hand. Eggs. Bacon. Toast. Simple things she could control while the world outside spiraled into chaos.

By the time Blade returned, she had a decent breakfast laid out on the table. Nothing fancy, but hot and filling.

"Perimeter's clear," he reported, washing his hands at the sink. "Motion sensors are all active. No signs of disturbance overnight."

"Good," she said, placing a mug of coffee in front of him as he sat down. "Though I can't decide if that's reassuring or just makes the waiting worse."

"Both," he admitted, taking a sip of coffee. "But I'd rather wait on our terms than be caught off guard."

They ate in companionable silence for a while, the simple domesticity of sharing a meal creating an illusion of normalcy.

She allowed herself to think about what life with Blade would be like.

What it would look like. Would they act like a regular vanilla couple?

Sitting at the table and eating like this?

Or would he pull her onto his lap and feed her small cut up pieces of food, while she drank her milk out of the pretty purple Sippy cup hidden away in the drawer in the room she was staying in?

Would he let her cook, or would he tell her littles don't use sharp knives?

"Your ankle looks better," Blade interrupted her thoughts, nodding toward her foot.
"Less swelling."

"The antibiotics must be working," she agreed. "It hardly hurts at all today."

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"Good," he said. "Still, don't push it too hard."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Daddy," she retorted without thinking.

The word hung in the air between them, charged and significant. Lily froze, mortified at the slip.

Blade's eyes darkened, his fork pausing halfway to his mouth. For a moment, neither of them moved or spoke.

Then, carefully, he set his fork down. "Is that what you want?" he asked, his voice low and controlled. "For me to be your Daddy?"

Heat rushed to her face. "I didn't mean...I was just..." She stumbled over her words, unable to form a coherent response.

"Rule three, baby girl," he reminded her. "Honesty."

She looked down at her plate, unable to meet his intense gaze. "I don't know what I want," she admitted finally. "Everything's so... complicated right now."

"Look at me," he commanded.

Reluctantly, she raised her eyes to his.

"It's okay not to know," he assured her. "You're right. Things are complicated. And this... dynamic between us... it's not something to rush into under the best

circumstances, let alone in the middle of all this."

She nodded, relieved that he understood. "I just... I feel safe with you. In a way I haven't felt in a long time. And it's confusing."

"For me too," he admitted, surprising her.

"Feeling this way?" she asked, confused.

"Finding a woman, I wanted to Daddy again," he clarified. "I've dominated women before. I've had a little. But this is different. It feels different. More real."

The casual admission sent a jolt of heat through her core. The thought of Blade dominating someone, demanding submission, wielding his natural authority in the bedroom... it was a potent image.

"Different how?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

He considered the question. "It's more..

. More responsibility. More commitment. I want you to be mine forever.

Not for a scene. When you dominate someone for a scene, there's a beginning and an end.

Not a temporary thing, like my previous relationship.

But being your Daddy..." He took a breath.

"It's about more than just sex or play. It's about care. Structure. Protection. With you, it's forever. I don't know if you are ready for that. "

Forever.

"I don't know," she said pushing a piece of egg around her plate. "I know these are extraordinary circumstances. Real life is different."

Real life.

The phrase was a stark reminder that none of this was permanent.

Eventually, the danger would pass. The Rejects would be dealt with.

And then what? Would he still want her? Was this really real or did it feel that way because of the danger and circumstances?

Would she still want this dynamic outside the pressure cooker of their current situation?

"We should table this discussion," she said. "Focus on staying alive first. Figure out... whatever this is... later. If there is a later."

Blade nodded. "You're right. But there will be a later." They finished breakfast in silence, the easy camaraderie of earlier now strained by unspoken thoughts and desires.

As Lily cleared the dishes, trying to busy her hands to quiet her mind, Blade's phone buzzed again.

"Savage," he said, checking the message. His expression turned grim. "They've got movement. Hammer left the clubhouse an hour ago, headed toward Pedro's territory. He's got the tracker on him."

Lily's heart raced. "So, he is the mole."

"Looks that way," Blade confirmed, already moving to check his weapons. "Savage is tailing him at a distance. Wants to see who he meets with."

"And then what?" she asked, following him into the living room.

"And then we deal with the traitor," Blade said, his voice cold in a way she hadn't heard before. It sent a shiver down her spine, a reminder that beneath his protective demeanor lay a trained killer.

"How?" she pressed.

He glanced at her, as if debating how much to say. "Club justice," he said finally. "It won't be pretty."

She swallowed hard. "Will you... are you going to..."

"Execute him?" Blade supplied bluntly. "If it comes to that, yes. It really depends on him and how he responds when confronted. We always hope it doesn't come to violence."

She should have been horrified. Should have been appalled at how casually he discussed taking a life. But all she felt was a grim sort of acceptance. This was the world she'd entered, a world of harsh justice and brutal consequences.

"You're not shocked," Blade observed, studying her reaction.

"Should I be?" she countered. "He betrayed your brotherhood. Put lives at risk. Put me at risk. Where I come from, there are consequences for that kind of betrayal."

Something flickered in his eyes—surprise, maybe, or respect. "Where you come from," he repeated. "You mean the military family?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "My dad was... strict about loyalty."

"Your dad," Blade echoed. "The one who killed a man to protect your mother. The Marine who taught you to field strip a weapon before you could drive." He studied her. "There's more to that story than you've told me."

It wasn't a question, but she answered anyway. "Yes."

"Rule three," he reminded her. "Honesty."

She sighed, knowing he was right. If they were going to trust each other, if he was going to put his life on the line for her then he deserved the full truth.

"My dad wasn't just a Marine," she admitted. "He was Force Recon. Special operations."

Blade's eyebrows rose slightly. "Go on."

"After he left the Corps, he... consulted. Private security, mostly. But sometimes other things. Things he didn't talk about, but that kept him away for weeks or months at a time."

"Contractor," Blade surmised. "Black ops."

She nodded. "I think so. He never said, but... there were signs. The training he gave me, and my mom was intense. Survival skills, weapons handling, threat assessment. He was preparing us for something."

"For the day someone might come after you to get to him," Blade guessed.

"Exactly," she confirmed. "And then one day, someone did."

"The man he killed," Blade said.

"Yes," she whispered. "I was sixteen. Home alone with mom when they broke in. Three men, armed. Professional. They... they hurt her. Were going to hurt me too. Dad came home in the middle of it."

Blade's expression hardened. "What happened?"

"What you'd expect," she said simply. "He killed them. All three. One of them was important. The son of some bigwig. That's how Zeb was able to blackmail me. If it comes out it would cost my father everything. His reputation, his name, his life."

"I'm sorry," Blade said, his voice gentle.

She shrugged, trying to appear less affected than she was. "It was a long time ago."

"Not that long," he observed. "And trauma doesn't fade just because time passes."

"No," she agreed. "It doesn't."

"Is that why you seek out the little headspace?" he asked perceptively. "To escape those memories?"

She considered his question. "Partly, I think. When I'm little, I don't have to be strong all the time. I don't have to be vigilant. I can just... be."

"And your Daddy keeps the monsters away," he said softly.

Her eyes met his. "That's the idea. But Daddies can leave too."

"Like Greg," he recalled. "The fiancé who couldn't handle that you couldn't have children."

She nodded, the old hurt still stinging. "He said he wanted a Daddy/little dynamic. Said he loved taking care of me. Until he found out I couldn't give him biological children. Then suddenly, the only 'little girl' he wanted was one he could actually father."

"He's an idiot," Blade said flatly. "And he didn't deserve you."

The vehemence in his voice surprised her. "You don't even know me," she pointed out.

"I know enough," he replied. "I know the little you, I learned her when we played together at The Citadel. I truly believe you were being the real you, not an act. Am I right?" He waited for her to nod.

"I know you've survived things that would break most people.

I know you protected your parents even when it put you in danger.

I know you'd rather suffer yourself than see others hurt because of you.

" His eyes held hers. "I know you're strong and brave and loyal.

And any man who couldn't see your worth because of something you can't control is a fool. "

Her throat tightened with emotion. No one had ever seen her so clearly or spoken of

her with such conviction.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He nodded once, then checked his phone again as it buzzed with an incoming message. "Hammer is on the move again. Heading toward the mountains."

"Toward us?" she asked, alarm spiking.

"No," Blade reassured her. "Different direction. But Savage thinks he might be headed to a secondary Rejects property. A hunting cabin they use."

"To meet with Zeb," she guessed.

"Possibly," Blade agreed. "Savage is staying on him. We'll know more soon."

As if on cue, his phone rang. He answered immediately.

"Go," he said by way of greeting. He listened for a moment, his expression growing more intense. "You're sure? ... How many? ... Any sign of Zeb? ... Alright. Keep your distance. Wait for backup. I'm on my way."

He ended the call, already moving toward his weapons cache.

"What is it?" Lily asked, fear clutching at her heart.

"Hammer just arrived at the hunting cabin," Blade explained, checking a handgun before holstering it. "There are at least five Rejects there, heavily armed. And they've got someone inside. Savage thinks it's Tim."

"He's alive?" she gasped.

"For now," Blade confirmed grimly. "But from what Savage could see through his scope, not in good shape."

"You're going," she realized, watching him gather equipment.

"I have to," he said. "This might be our only chance to get Tim out alive. And to eliminate the immediate threat."

"But you'll be outnumbered," she protested. "At least five of them, maybe more inside that Savage couldn't see."

"Savage and Rampage will be with me," he told her. "And Lucky's sending Irish as backup. We've handled worse odds."

She wanted to argue, to beg him not to go, to remind him that he'd promised to stay with her. But she knew it would be selfish. Tim was suffering because he'd helped her. She couldn't stand in the way of his rescue.

"What about me?" she asked instead. "If you're going, what am I supposed to do?"

Blade approached her, taking her face in his hands. "You're going to stay in the safe room. Lock the door. Don't open it for anyone but me. The security system is active—if anyone approaches within a half-mile radius, you'll get an alert on the tablet inside."

"How long will you be gone?" she asked, her heart hammering.

"A few hours at most," he assured her. "The cabin is only about twenty miles from here."

She nodded, trying to be brave. "Okay. But you'd better come back in one piece."

A small smile curved his lips. "Is that concern I hear, baby girl?"

"Obviously," she retorted. "If you get yourself killed, who's going to protect me?"

His expression softened. "I'm coming back," he promised. "Count on it."

Before she could respond, he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers in a brief, fierce kiss. It was over almost before she realized it had begun. It was a flash of heat, a promise of more.

"For luck," he murmured, pulling back.

She stared up at him, speechless, her lips tingling from the contact.

"Now," he said, his voice returning to its commanding tone, "get what you need. You're going in the safe room until I return."

Still dazed from the unexpected kiss, she nodded and moved to gather a few items. The first things she grabbed was Mr. Flopsy & Ms. Uni, the snacks from the box Savannah sent, the coloring book and pencils.

Comfort items, yes, but also distractions.

Anything to keep her mind occupied while Blade put himself in danger.

For her. For Tim. For his club.

As he led her to the safe room, explaining the security measures one last time, she found herself studying his face, memorizing every line and angle. The scar through his left eyebrow. The slight crook in his nose, broken at least once. The fullness of his lips that had so briefly claimed hers.

"You have everything you need?" he asked, doing a final check of the safe room.

Not everything, she thought. Not you, safe here with me.

But she nodded. "I'll be fine."

"I know you will," he said. "You're stronger than you give yourself credit for, Lily."

"So are you," she replied. "But be careful anyway. Please."

He nodded once, then stepped back. "Remember, don't open the door for anyone but me. And if... if something goes wrong, if I don't come back by nightfall, call the Clubhouse on the satellite phone. Ask for Rampage or Savage, I trust them with my life."

The thought of him not returning made her chest ache. "You'll come back," she insisted. "You promised."

A shadow of something—regret? fear? determination?—crossed his face. "I'll do my best," he amended. "That's all any of us can do."

A loud meow at his feet caught their attention. Both Macaroni and Cheese came into the room with her. "You won't be alone after all," he said. "Take care of my girl."

With that, he closed the safe room door, leaving her alone with her thoughts and fears.

Through the small security monitor inside, she watched him move through the cabin, performing final checks before he left. His movements were precise, economical, almost like a predator preparing for the hunt.

And then he was gone, the cabin empty and silent.

Lily sank onto the small cot, the cats quickly joining her. She rubbed their heads as the ache of anticipation settled into her bones.

"Please come back," she whispered to the empty room. "Please come back to me."

Because somehow, in the span of less than three days, Blade had become essential to her in a way no one else had ever been. And the thought of losing him was more terrifying than any threat from Pedro's Rejects.

She just hoped she'd get the chance to tell him that.

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A familiar calm settled over Blade as he drove toward the Rejects' hunting cabin. The pre-mission focus, honed through years of SEAL operations and club business. His mind went cold and clear, emotions compartmentalized into neat boxes to be dealt with later.

If there was a later.

He pushed that thought away. Failure wasn't an option. Not with Lily waiting for him to return. Not with Tim's life hanging in the balance. He hadn't completely forgiven Tim for his part in all this, but after the conversation with Lily, he respected the man for saving her.

His comm unit crackled. "Blade, you copy?" Savage's voice came through, tight with tension.

"Copy," he replied, one hand on the steering wheel, the other checking his sidearm. "What's your position?"

"Ridge overlooking the cabin, northeast side. I've got eyes on the front entrance and most of the perimeter. Rampage is circling to the west, getting into position."

"Irish?"

"Ten minutes out," Savage confirmed. "Lucky's staying back at the clubhouse, keeping an eye on things there."

Smart. If Hammer wasn't the only traitor, they needed someone watching their backs

at home base. The girls were there. Precious cargo.

"Any movement?" Blade asked, taking a sharp turn onto a dirt road that would lead him to their rendezvous point.

"Minimal," Savage replied. "Two guys outside, smoking. Rest are inside. I can see movement through the windows, but can't make out how many."

"Tim?"

A pause. "Confirmed visual about twenty minutes ago. They brought him to the front room. He's... it's not good, brother."

Blade's jaw clenched. "Still alive?"

"Yeah. But they've worked him over pretty good. Missing at least three fingers that I could see. Face barely recognizable."

"Hammer?"

"Inside. He arrived with a duffel bag. My guess is he's delivering something. Information, maybe."

Or weapons. Or drugs. The Rejects dealt in all three. The Watchmen didn't touch drugs. If it were drugs, he'd be curious where he was getting them from.

"Zeb?" Blade asked, referring to the Rejects' president and the man ultimately responsible for hunting Lily.

"No visual," Savage replied. "But there's a black SUV with tinted windows parked around the back. Could be his."

Blade processed this information, tactical options cycling through his mind. "We need to confirm Tim's exact position before we move in. If Zeb is inside, we need to take him alive if possible."

"Understood," Savage acknowledged. "But Tim's our priority. He's fading fast from what I can see."

"Agreed," Blade said grimly. "I'm five minutes out. Hold position until I arrive."

He ended the transmission, his mind already mapping out angles of approach, potential threats, extraction routes.

The familiar ritual helped push away thoughts that had no place in combat.

Thoughts of soft blonde hair between his fingers, of wide, trusting eyes, of lips that had yielded so sweetly to his brief kiss.

Focus, asshole. You can think about Lily after, when everyone's safe.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? She wasn't just a mission parameter anymore. She was becoming something more, something dangerously close to essential. And that kind of attachment was lethal in his line of work.

He turned onto a narrow path barely visible among the pines, driving another quarter mile before killing the engine. From here, he'd go on foot. Less chance of being detected that way.

Grabbing his tactical vest and rifle from the passenger seat, Blade quickly geared up. Earpiece in, weapons checked, extra magazines secured. The routine was as familiar as breathing, muscle memory taking over while his mind stayed focused on the task ahead.

As he moved through the woods toward the rendezvous point, Blade allowed himself one moment—just one—to think about what would happen if he didn't make it back. Lily, waiting in the safe room, hoping for his return. The fear and disappointment in her eyes when she realized he wasn't coming.

The thought hardened his resolve. He'd make it back. Not just because the mission demanded it, but because she was waiting for him. Because he'd promised. Because she was his and he had to make sure she knew it.

Savage materialized from the trees like a ghost, acknowledging Blade with a nod. Despite the gravity of the situation, Blade felt a surge of confidence. Savage was one of the best operators he'd served with. Cold as ice in a crisis, lethal in execution.

"Status update?" Blade asked quietly.

"Rampage is in position to the west," Savage reported. "Irish just arrived, moving to the south. Two tangos still outside, four visible inside, including Hammer and Tim."

"And the SUV?"

"Still no visual on the driver or any other passengers. Could be Zeb, could be someone else."

Blade considered their options. "We need to take out the two outside silently, then breach simultaneously from multiple entry points. Minimize the risk to Tim."

Savage nodded. "Rampage can handle the two outside with that fancy crossbow of his. Then you and I take the front, Irish the back. Be advised, they've got Tim tied to a chair in the main room. Possible Dead Man's Switch scenario."

Shit. That complicated things. If Tim was rigged to explosives or had a gun to his

head, a direct assault could get him killed instantly.

"We need eyes inside," Blade decided. "Confirmation of exactly what we're dealing with."

"Already on it," Savage said, handing him a small tablet. "Drone feed. Launched it five minutes ago."

Blade studied the thermal imaging on the screen. Six heat signatures inside the cabin. One, presumably Tim, seated and stationary in the center of the main room. Four others moving around, and a sixth, cooler signature in what appeared to be a back bedroom.

"Who's in the back?" Blade asked.

"Unknown," Savage replied. "Could be Zeb. Could be someone else. They've been in there since I arrived."

"Are they guarding the back exit?"

"Doesn't look like it. No consistent pattern of movement."

Blade made a decision. "Change of plan. You and Rampage take out the two outside. Irish covers the back exit in case anyone tries to flee. I'll go in through the bedroom window, neutralize whoever's inside, then work my way to the main room while you breach from the front on my signal."

Savage frowned. "Risky. You'll be outnumbered if the bedroom occupant raises the alarm."

"Better than a full frontal assault with Tim in the line of fire," Blade countered.

"Besides, I work better alone."

That wasn't strictly true, not anymore. But it was easier than admitting he wasn't willing to risk Savage's life unnecessarily. Not when Savage had a wife and kid at home. Not when Blade himself only had?—

Don't go there. Focus on the mission.

Savage studied him for a moment, then nodded. "Your call, brother. But if I don't hear from you in ten minutes after you go in, we're breaching regardless."

"Fair enough," Blade agreed.

They synchronized watches, then Blade contacted Rampage and Irish, relaying the plan. Both acknowledged without question. Another advantage of working with former special forces—they understood chain of command and the importance of following orders in combat situations.

"Move out," Blade ordered, checking his silenced sidearm one last time.

Savage clasped his shoulder briefly. "Watch your six."

"Always do," Blade replied with a grim smile.

He moved through the trees like a shadow, keeping low, using natural cover to approach the cabin from the east side. The bedroom window was partially open, either a stroke of luck, or possibly carelessness on the part of the occupant.

Through his earpiece, he heard Rampage's whispered confirmation: "Targets acquired. Ready on your go."

"Execute," Blade commanded softly.

Seconds later: "Tangos down. Perimeter clear."

That was his cue. Blade approached the window, staying below the sill, listening. Inside, he could hear movement. Someone was in there pacing and muttering to themselves.

He risked a quick peek. A man stood with his back to the window, cell phone to his ear. Even from behind, Blade recognized him immediately.

Zeb. President of Pedro's Rejects. The man responsible for the hunt for Lily.

"...don't care what it takes," Zeb was saying, his voice low and angry. "Find the bitch. She's with one of the Spartans, name's Blade. Some cabin in the mountains..." He paused, listening. "No, I don't have an exact location. That's why I'm paying you, isn't it?"

Blade's blood ran cold. Zeb was putting out feelers, trying to locate Lily. Which meant the text Blade had received wasn't a bluff. The Rejects knew she was with him, even if they didn't know precisely where.

"Just find her," Zeb continued. "I want her brought to me alive. Relatively undamaged. She needs to be coherent for what I have planned."

The implications of that statement made Blade's hands tighten on his weapon. This man was not walking out of here alive. Not if Blade had anything to say about it.

Zeb ended the call, muttering curses under his breath. He moved toward the door, his hand reaching for the knob.

It was now or never.

In one fluid motion, Blade vaulted through the window, his body impacting Zeb's before the other man could react. They went down in a tangle of limbs, Zeb's surprised grunt cut short as Blade clamped a hand over his mouth and pressed the barrel of his silenced pistol to his temple.

"Make a sound," Blade whispered, "and I'll paint the walls with your brains. Nod if you understand."

Zeb's eyes bulged with fury and fear, but he nodded.

"Good," Blade continued, his voice deadly calm. "Now, here's what's going to happen. You're going to tell me exactly how many men are out there, and what they've done to Tim. Then you're going to call them in here, one by one, so I can deal with them quietly. Blink twice if you understand."

Zeb blinked twice, hatred radiating from him in waves.

Slowly, Blade removed his hand from Zeb's mouth, keeping the gun firmly in place.

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"Four men," Zeb whispered, his voice shaking with suppressed rage. "Five, counting your traitor, Hammer."

"And Tim?"

A cruel smile twisted Zeb's lips. "What's left of him, you mean? He's alive. For now. Though after what we've done to him, he might wish he wasn't."

Blade fought the urge to pull the trigger right then. "Is he rigged?"

"Rigged?" Zeb looked genuinely confused.

"Explosives. Dead Man's Switch. Anything that would kill him if you or your men were taken out."

Understanding dawned in Zeb's eyes, followed by something like respect. "Not a bad idea. But no. We wanted him alive for the grand finale. When we finally tracked down his little blonde friend."

Lily. They'd been planning to torture Tim in front of her before doing the same to her.

"Call your men," Blade ordered, pressing the gun harder against Zeb's temple. "One at a time. Tell them you need to speak to them privately."

Zeb's eyes narrowed. "And why would I do that?"

"Because if you don't," Blade said silkily, "I'll start by shooting off pieces of you."

Kneecaps first. Then elbows. Then shoulders. You'll live, but you'll never ride again. Never hold a woman again. Never wipe your own ass again."

Fear flickered across Zeb's face. A coward at heart, then, despite his sadistic tendencies. "Alright," he agreed. "But you won't get away with this. There are more of us than there are of you."

"I like those odds," Blade said coldly. "Now make the call."

Zeb complied, calling for one of his men.

Moments later, the bedroom door opened, and a burly man with a shaved head stepped inside.

Blade recognized him and would recognize each of the men who followed.

They were the worst of humanity. The fact they were out on bail showed a total failure in the American justice system.

Or, perhaps, a corrupt judge. These men were child sex traffickers and rapists.

Drug dealers. This one? Had a part in kidnapping and torturing one of Valhalla's men's girls.

"Boss, what's—" His question was cut short as Blade's silenced pistol coughed once, putting a neat hole between his eyes. He dropped like a stone.

"Jesus!" Zeb hissed, eyes wide with shock at the speed and efficiency of the kill.

"Next," Blade instructed, as if they were calling numbers at a deli counter.

One by one, Zeb summoned his men. One by one, they entered the room. And one by one, they died, quick and silent. Blade had no regrets taking out the trash. The predators who hurt children and innocent women deserved worse deaths than the quick and easy one he gave.

Finally, only Hammer remained in the main room with Tim.

"Last one," Blade said. "Call him."

Zeb shook his head. "He's not one of mine. He's your problem."

"Call. Him." Blade enunciated each word, pressing the gun into the soft flesh under Zeb's jaw.

With a resigned sigh, Zeb called out, "Hammer! Got something to show you."

Footsteps approached the bedroom door. Blade positioned himself behind it, gun ready.

The door swung open. "What now?" Hammer asked irritably, stepping into the room. "I already delivered the?—"

Blade slammed the butt of his pistol into the back of Hammer's head, dropping him unconscious to the floor before he could register what was happening.

"Breach now," Blade said into his comm, signaling the others to enter.

Zeb stared up at him, a mixture of fear and defiance in his eyes. "What now? You going to kill me too?"

"Eventually," Blade promised. "But first, you're going to tell me everything you know

about who's been feeding you information from our club."

"And why would I do that?" Zeb sneered.

Blade smiled, cold and merciless. "Because if you don't, I'll hand you over to the man whose wife and daughter you threatened. Let him get creative."

Fear flickered in Zeb's eyes. Savage's reputation preceded him. "Alright, alright. No need for that. Hammer came to us, offered to sell information. Said he'd fallen on hard times, needed cash."

"And you just happened to ask about Lily?" Blade pressed skeptically.

"No," Zeb admitted. "He brought her up. Said one of your guys was hiding a witness against us. A blonde little who was ready to talk to the cops, tell them everything. She knows too much about our operation. She'd been spying on us the entire time, and informant."

That was a lie. Lily hadn't been an informant. He'd blackmailed her into approaching the club, then she couldn't go through with it.

"Why the fixation on her?" Blade demanded. "Why not just let it go?"

Zeb's eyes hardened. "No one betrays the Rejects. No one. Especially not some bitch who thinks she can play games with us, then run to your club for protection."

"She didn't betray you," Blade said. "She refused to betray us. There's a difference."

"Same result," Zeb spat. "She failed to deliver what she promised. And then my idiot brother helped her escape before we could make an example of her. Blood or not, he had to be made an example of to keep the rest of my men from following suit."

"Tim," Blade remembered. "Where is he?"

"Main room," Zeb said. "Though there might not be much left to save."

Blade hauled Zeb to his feet, keeping the gun pressed to his back. "Move. And if you try anything, anything at all, I'll put a bullet in your spine and leave you to bleed out slowly."

He pushed Zeb ahead of him into the main room, where Savage and Rampage had already secured the area. Irish stood guard at the front door, weapon ready.

And in the center of the room, tied to a chair, was what remained of Tim.

Blade had seen torture victims before. Had seen the aftermath of brutality in war zones around the world. But what the Rejects had done to Tim was on another level.

His face was barely recognizable, swollen and discolored. Three fingers were missing from his left hand, two from his right. Burns covered his exposed torso, some fresh, some beginning to fester. One eye was swollen shut, the other barely open, dull with pain and resignation.

But somehow, impossibly, he was still alive.

"Jesus Christ," Irish muttered, crossing himself.

Savage was already moving to Tim's side, checking his vitals. "He's alive, but barely. We need to get him medical attention, fast."

"Doc's on standby," Rampage reported. "Called him as soon as we confirmed Tim's condition."

Blade shoved Zeb into a chair, letting Rampage secure him while he approached Tim. The injured man's one functioning eye tracked his movement, a flicker of recognition visible through the haze of pain.

"We've got you, Tim," Blade said, his voice gentler than anyone in the room had likely ever heard it. "You're safe now. We're getting you out of here."

Tim's cracked, bloody lips moved, trying to form words.

Blade leaned closer. "What is it?"

"L-Lily?" Tim rasped, the single word obviously costing him immense effort.

"She's safe," Blade assured him. "You did good. She's safe because of you."

Relief washed over Tim's battered features. His eye closed, a tear tracking through the blood and grime on his cheek.

"Let's move him," Blade ordered. "Carefully. Rampage, you and Irish take him directly to Doc. Savage with me. We've got unfinished business here."

Rampage and Irish gently cut Tim free from the chair, then lifted him as carefully as possible, mindful of his numerous injuries. The broken man made no sound as they carried him out, either too weak or too resigned to pain to protest.

Once they were gone, Blade turned his attention to their two prisoners: Zeb, tightly bound to a chair, and Hammer, still unconscious on the floor.

"Wake him up," Blade instructed Savage, nodding toward Hammer.

Savage complied, dumping a bottle of water over Hammer's face. The traitor

spluttered awake, disoriented and panicked.

"W-what? What's happening?" he stammered, eyes darting around the room until they landed on Blade and Savage. His face drained of color. "I can explain?—"

"Save it," Blade cut him off coldly. "We know what you did. Selling out the club. Selling out Lily. For what? Money?"

Hammer swallowed hard. "I was in deep, man. Gambling debts. They were going to break my legs, maybe worse."

"So instead you broke your oath," Savage said, his voice deadly quiet. "Betrayed your brothers. Put an innocent woman's life at risk."

"She's not innocent!" Hammer protested. "She was spying on us for The Rejects!"

"No, she wasn't," Blade said. "She was blackmailed. Forced. And she refused to go through with it, even knowing what it would cost her."

Confusion crossed Hammer's face. "But Zeb said?—"

"He lied," Blade interrupted. "To manipulate you. And you were too stupid or too greedy to question it."

Zeb laughed from his chair. "Wasn't hard. He practically begged to sell you out. Just needed a little cash and the promise of a patch with the Rejects."

Savage raised an eyebrow. "You were going to prospect for the Rejects?"

Shame crossed Hammer's features. "I had nothing left. I moved to Colorado when I heard Grand Ridge was different from my former chapter. My club changed, since I

joined years ago. The brothers there have been bringing in all these... littles. It became domesticated and different than when I joined. We were all single and had each other's backs. Now.. It's not the brotherhood I signed up for.

Then I come here and find this chapter is the exact same fucking way.

What is the chances there were two chapters like this? Nah. Fuck that noise."

Blade understood then. It wasn't just about money. It was about resentment. The Spartan Watchmen had evolved over the years, becoming less about chaos and destruction and more about building something lasting. Relationships. Families. And some members, like Hammer, hadn't appreciated the direction.

"So you sold us out," Blade summarized. "Betrayed everything we stand for. And for what? To join up with these sadistic pieces of shit?" He gestured toward Zeb.

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"You don't understand," Hammer muttered. "You've got your little cabin in the woods, your independence. Some of us needed the club to be more than it was becoming."

Blade exchanged a look with Savage. The judgment had already been made. The only question was how to carry it out.

"Club rules are clear," Savage said quietly. "Betrayal means death."

Hammer's face crumpled. "Please, brothers. I made a mistake. I'll make it right. I'll do anything."

"You already did everything," Blade replied coldly. "You gave them information that nearly got Lily killed. That did get Tim tortured within an inch of his life."

"I didn't know they'd do that to him!" Hammer protested. "I swear!"

Zeb laughed again. "Of course you did. I told you exactly what would happen to anyone who helped that bitch escape. You just didn't care as long as you got paid."

Hammer's panicked gaze darted between Blade and Savage, finding no mercy in either man's eyes.

"Please," he begged. "I have information. Things Zeb told me. Plans. I can help you protect her."

Blade paused. As much as he wanted to end Hammer's miserable existence

immediately, intelligence was valuable. "What plans?"

"Zeb's got men looking for your cabin," Hammer said quickly. "He hired some ex-military tracker. Guy's supposed to be the best. They'll find her, even if you kill us both."

Blade's blood ran cold. Lily, alone in the safe room, waiting for his return. If a tracker found the cabin while he was still here...

"Who?" he demanded. "Name. Description. Everything you know."

"Guy named Reynolds," Hammer supplied eagerly. "Former Army Ranger. Specialized in manhunts in Afghanistan. Zeb hired him this morning."

Savage pulled out his phone. "I'll alert Kylie at the clubhouse. Get her to run a background, see what we're dealing with."

Blade nodded, his mind racing. If Reynolds was as good as Hammer claimed, they had limited time.

"What else?" he pressed.

"Zeb's got a second property," Hammer continued. "A compound up north. Heavily fortified. That's where he was planning to take Lily once they found her."

"Why?" Savage asked. "Why not just kill her and be done with it?"

A sick smile twisted Zeb's lips. "Because death would be too quick. Too merciful. I wanted her to suffer first. To beg. To break. No one has defied me the way that little girl has. That can't go unpunished."

The calm Blade had maintained throughout the mission began to fracture, rage seeping through the cracks. This man had planned to torture Lily, to break her spirit before killing her. Had already done the same to Tim as a warm-up.

"You're a dead man," Blade told Zeb, his voice terrifyingly soft. "The only question is how long it takes."

Zeb's smile widened. "Big talk. But while you're here playing interrogator, Reynolds is closing in on your little blonde toy. Tick-tock, enforcer."

Blade glanced at Savage, a silent communication passing between them. Savage nodded once, understanding.

"Finish this," Blade said. "I need to get back to Lily."

"And leave all the fun to me?" Savage asked, a cold smile playing at his lips.

"Save some for Lucky and Irish," Blade replied. "They'll want their pound of flesh too."

Hammer's eyes widened with terror as he realized what was happening. "No, wait! I told you what you wanted to know! I helped you!"

"Too little, too late," Blade said, already moving toward the door. "For what it's worth, I'll make it quick. For old times' sake. Savage here... he might not be so merciful."

Savage's smile promised pain, long and excruciating.

"Blade, please!" Hammer called desperately. "Brotherhood! We swore an oath!"

"You broke it first," Blade reminded him, pausing at the door. "Remember that while you're paying the price."

He left without looking back, Hammer's pleas echoing behind him. In the yard, he broke into a run toward his truck, pulling out his phone as he went.

No signal. Of course. They were in the mountains, a cellular dead zone.

Fuck.

He'd have to wait until he got closer to civilization to warn Lily. Or use the satellite phone in his truck. Either way, precious minutes would be lost.

As he reached his vehicle, a single silenced gunshot echoed from the cabin. Hammer, then. True to his word, Blade had ensured Savage gave the traitor a quick death. Zeb would not be so fortunate.

Blade started the engine and roared down the dirt road, pushing the truck to its limits. The twenty miles back to his cabin stretched before him like an eternity, each minute another opportunity for Reynolds to find Lily.

The thought of her alone, trapped in the safe room while armed men surrounded the cabin, sent a spike of fear through his chest. Fear was an unfamiliar emotion for Blade. He'd faced death countless times, both in the SEALs and with the club. Had never flinched, never hesitated.

But the thought of failing Lily, of returning to find her gone, or worse, awakened a terror unlike anything he'd ever known.

He pushed the truck faster, tires skidding on the loose gravel of mountain roads. If Reynolds was as good as Hammer claimed, every second counted.

"Hold on, baby girl," he muttered, as if she could somehow hear him across the miles separating them. "I'm coming."

He just hoped he wouldn't be too late.

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Lily checked the tablet screen for the hundredth time. Still no alerts from the perimeter sensors. Still no message from Blade.

The safe room felt smaller with each passing hour. The walls closer. The air thicker. She'd tried coloring to distract herself, but the cheerful images in the book seemed absurd given the circumstances. Tim was being tortured. Blade was in danger. And she was trapped in a metal box, waiting.

Useless. Helpless. Again.

She paced the small space, five steps one way, five steps back. Mr. Flopsy watched from the cot, his button eyes offering no comfort now.

Three hours had passed since Blade left. Three hours of silence broken only by her own breathing, the cats purring and the occasional hum of the ventilation system.

He's fine, she told herself. He knows what he's doing. He'll be back soon.

But another voice, darker and more persistent, whispered other possibilities. What if he's hurt? What if he's dead? What if he never comes back?

The thought made her stomach clench painfully. She'd known him only from a few playdates at The Citadel and being together the last three days, yet the idea of never seeing him again was unbearable. How had that happened? How had he become so important so quickly?

Trauma bonding, she reminded herself. Not real feelings. Just a survival mechanism.

Like a person trapped in a fire falling for the firefighter who rescued her or a patient falling for his nurse.

But it didn't feel like survival. It felt like... something else. Something that terrified her more than any physical threat.

She checked the tablet again. Still nothing.

With a frustrated sigh, she sat on the cot and buried her face in her hands. She hated this. Hated being the one left behind. Hated being the cause of so much pain and danger.

Tim's broken body flashed in her mind, an imagined horror based on Blade's grim description. Three fingers missing. Tortured for helping her escape. And for what? So she could hide in a safe room while others fought her battles?

No.

That wasn't fair. She hadn't asked for any of this. Hadn't asked to be blackmailed, to be hunted, to be protected. But here she was all the same.

A sudden beep from the tablet jolted her upright. An alert from the perimeter sensors. Someone was approaching the cabin.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she grabbed the tablet, fingers trembling as she accessed the security feed. The camera showed a dark SUV moving slowly up the dirt road leading to the cabin. Not Blade's truck. Someone else.

Please be Rampage, she thought desperately. Or Irish. Or anyone from the club.

But as the vehicle drew closer, she could see it wasn't a club member. The driver was

a stranger. A lean, weathered man with military-short hair and sunglasses despite the fading daylight. He drove with purpose, scanning the surroundings methodically. Could he be another member of The Watchmen? His military bearing suggested he could be. A chill ran up her spine as she watched him. He was sinister. Cold. No, she knew in her gut he wasn't in the MC.

He was a hunter. Looking for her.

Lily's blood ran cold. How had they found the cabin? Blade had been so certain it was secure, that no one outside the inner circle knew its location.

Unless the mole had revealed it before Blade and Savage got to him.

The SUV stopped a hundred yards from the cabin. The man got out, surveying the area with practiced precision. He didn't approach immediately, instead reaching back into the vehicle for what appeared to be a rifle with a scope.

Oh God. He's going to set up a position. Wait for Blade to return.

She fumbled for the satellite phone, hands shaking as she dialed Blade's number. It rang once, twice, three times. No answer.

Damn it!

She tried Savage next. Same result.

Think, Lily. Think.

She set down the phone and moved to the weapons rack built into the safe room wall. Blade had shown her where everything was, how to access it. Had made sure she knew how to use every weapon in the room.

"Just in case," he'd said. "Though I hope to hell it never comes to that."

Well, it had come to that. She was on her own, with an unknown assailant preparing to ambush Blade when he returned.

She selected a rifle similar to the one her father had taught her to use a Remington 700 with a scope. Checked that it was loaded. Grabbed extra ammunition. Then moved to the small gun safe and punched in the code Blade had shown her.

Inside was his backup handgun and a tactical vest. She strapped on the vest, which hung loose on her smaller frame, and secured the Glock in a holster.

What now?

She couldn't just sit here and wait. Not when Blade was heading into an ambush. Not when she had the means to warn him, to maybe even help.

But leaving the safe room meant exposing herself to danger. Meant going against Blade's explicit instructions.

"Don't open the door for anyone but me."

She was still debating when the tablet beeped again, another alert from the perimeter sensors. A second vehicle approached. Her heart leapt with hope. Blade?

But no. Another SUV, this one larger, with darkened windows. It pulled up behind the first, and four men got out. All armed. All scanning the cabin with predatory intent.

Five against one when Blade returned. Those weren't odds she liked.

Decision made, Lily moved to the safe room door. If she could get to a vantage point with the rifle before they surrounded the cabin, she might be able to even the odds a bit. At the very least, she could try to warn Blade somehow.

She took a deep breath, steadying her nerves. Her father's voice echoed in her memory. "Fear is natural, baby girl. But you can't let it paralyze you. Feel it, acknowledge it, then set it aside and do what needs to be done."

"Okay, Dad," she whispered. "Here goes nothing."

She unlocked the safe room door and eased it open, listening intently. The cabin was silent. She slipped out, rifle in hand, and moved carefully toward the front of the house, staying low and out of sight of the windows.

Through a gap in the curtains, she could see the men spreading out around the property. The first man—the one she'd mentally labeled as the leader—was directing the others with hand signals. Military. Or former military. Their movements were too coordinated, too practiced to be ordinary thugs.

Which made them all the more dangerous.

She needed a better vantage point. The cabin's second floor had a small loft with windows facing the approach road. If she could get up there without being seen, she'd have a decent firing position.

Moving silently, she made her way to the stairs, wincing at every creak of the wooden floor. The loft ladder was pulled up, a security measure Blade had implemented before leaving. She reached for it, then froze as voices drifted through an open window.

"...sure this is the place?" one was saying.

"Positive," replied another. "GPS coordinates match exactly. This is Blade's cabin."

"Doesn't look like anyone's home," a third voice observed.

"They're here," the leader insisted. "Or they will be soon. Zeb said Blade went to rescue his buddy at the hunting cabin. He'll be coming back here for the girl."

"And what's so special about this chick anyway?" the first voice asked. "Why not just put a bullet in her and be done with it?"

"Because Zeb wants her alive," the leader replied sharply. "Our job is to deliver, not ask questions. Now get into position. I want eyes on every approach. When Blade returns, we take him out fast, then secure the girl."

They're going to kill him, Lily realized with horror. They're going to ambush him the moment he returns, then take me to Zeb.

She couldn't let that happen. Wouldn't let that happen.

With renewed determination, she pulled down the loft ladder as quietly as possible and climbed up.

The small space was dusty and cramped, but offered an excellent view of the front yard and the road beyond.

She set up the rifle, nestling the stock against her shoulder just as her father had taught her.

Through the scope, she counted five men total. All armed with handguns, at least two with rifles. The leader, the weathered man she'd seen first, was clearly giving the orders, positioning the others strategically around the cabin.

Too many to take on directly, she thought grimly. But maybe enough to scare off if I can create some confusion.

Her mind raced, considering options. She could try to pick them off one by one, but she wasn't confident enough in her marksmanship for headshots. And if she missed, they'd know exactly where she was.

She needed a distraction. Something to scatter them, to give her a chance to escape or at least to warn Blade somehow.

Her eyes fell on the propane tank at the side of the cabin. A risky move, but potentially effective. If she could rupture it with a shot, the escaping gas might create enough of a diversion for her to slip away and try to intercept Blade before he drove into the trap.

It was dangerous. Reckless, even. But staying put meant certain death for Blade and a fate potentially worse than death for herself.

She took a deep breath, steadying her aim on the propane tank's valve assembly. One good shot should do it. Then she'd need to move fast down the ladder, out the back door, into the woods before they could regroup.

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

Then she paused, a new thought surfacing. The satellite phone. She might still be able to reach Blade or Savage. Warn them of the ambush without putting herself at risk.

But the phone was back in the safe room. She'd need to retreat, abandoning her vantage point and potentially losing track of the men's positions.

Damn it.

A sudden movement outside caught her attention. Through the scope, she saw the leader checking his watch, then speaking into a radio. Receiving a message, perhaps?

Then he smiled a cold, predatory smile that sent chills down her spine.

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"Heads up," he called to the others. "Target is five minutes out. Get ready."

No. No, no, no.

Blade was almost here. Five minutes. Not enough time to get back to the safe room, call him, and hope he answered. Not enough time for anything but direct action.

Decision made, Lily adjusted her aim. Not the propane tank. It was too risky with Blade so close. Instead, she focused on the leader's position. If she could take him out, the others might be disorganized enough for Blade to recognize the danger when he arrived.

She steadied her breathing, finger poised on the trigger. The leader was partially concealed behind a tree, only his shoulder and part of his head visible. A difficult shot, but possible.

Just like the shooting range with Dad, she told herself. Breathe in. Hold. Squeeze gently.

She fired.

The rifle's report echoed through the cabin, impossibly loud. Through the scope, she saw the leader jerk backward, blood spraying from his shoulder. It was not a kill shot, but enough to incapacitate him temporarily.

Immediately, chaos erupted. The other men dove for cover, shouting to each other, trying to determine where the shot had come from. Two returned fire blindly, bullets

splintering the cabin's exterior.

Lily didn't wait to see more. She scrambled down the ladder, rifle clutched tightly, and sprinted for the back door. If she could make it to the tree line before they surrounded the cabin completely...

She burst onto the back porch, heart pounding, adrenaline surging through her veins. Twenty yards to the trees. Fifteen. Ten.

"There!" a voice shouted behind her. "The girl!"

A bullet whizzed past her ear, so close she felt the displaced air. Another struck the ground at her feet, throwing up dirt and pine needles.

She didn't look back. Couldn't afford to. Every ounce of her focus was on reaching the relative safety of the forest.

Five yards. Two. One.

She plunged into the trees, the dense foliage providing immediate cover. But she didn't stop. Couldn't stop. They would be right behind her.

Keep moving. Away from the cabin. Away from the road where Blade will arrive.

She crashed through underbrush, branches whipping her face, roots threatening to trip her with every step. Behind her, she could hear pursuit, men crashing through the forest with less care for stealth than speed.

Her lungs burned. Her injured ankle, so recently healed, throbbed with renewed pain. But fear and determination pushed her forward, deeper into the wilderness.

Just need to lose them, she thought desperately. Just need to circle around, try to intercept Blade before he reaches the cabin.

A shout from behind her was much closer than expected. They were gaining on her position.

She veered sharply left, hoping to throw them off. The ground sloped downward, becoming steeper. Her foot caught on a root and she pitched forward, tumbling down the incline in a tangle of limbs and rifle.

She landed hard in a shallow ravine, the breath knocked from her lungs. Pain lanced through her side. Her ribs were either broken or bruised. For a moment, she lay there, gasping, fighting to regain her breath.

Get up. Get up NOW.

Footsteps crashed through the forest above her. Voices called to each other, coordinating the search.

With a groan, Lily dragged herself to her feet. The rifle was gone, lost somewhere in her fall. But she still had the Glock.

She drew the handgun, checking that a round was chambered, then looked around desperately for some kind of shelter or hiding place.

The ravine extended in both directions, carved by what was now just a trickle of water but had once been a more substantial stream. She chose a direction at random and began to move, staying low, using the ravine's walls for cover.

The voices behind her faded slightly. Not gone, but not immediately on top of her either. She'd bought herself a little time.

Think, Lily. Think.

She needed to get back to the road somehow. Needed to warn Blade. But she didn't know these woods, and had no idea which direction would lead her back to civilization.

As if in answer to her unspoken dilemma, the distant rumble of an engine reached her ears. A vehicle on the road, and close.

Blade.

She scrambled up the ravine's wall, using roots and rocks as handholds. At the top, she paused, listening intently. The engine sound was louder now, definitely approaching along the main road to the cabin.

But which direction was the road?

She closed her eyes, trying to orient herself. The cabin had been to the north. The ravine had taken her... east? Maybe southeast? Which would put the road...

A branch snapped nearby. Too close.

Lily froze, pressing herself against a large pine tree. Through the foliage, she could make out a figure moving cautiously through the forest. It was one of the men, hunting her. He hadn't seen her yet, but he was heading in her direction.

She had two choices: engage or evade. Fighting would reveal her position to the others. Fleeing might lead her further from the road, further from Blade.

The engine sound grew louder. Closer. Almost to the cabin now.

No choice then.

She took a deep breath, steadied her grip on the Glock, and stepped out from behind the tree.

"Stop right there," she commanded, aiming at the hunter's chest.

The man froze, his own weapon half-raised. For a heartbeat, they stared at each other, a silent calculation passing between them.

Then he smiled, a slow, confident smile that made her blood run cold.

"Well, well," he drawled. "Quite the little wildcat, aren't you? Zeb said you'd be a handful."

"Drop your weapon," Lily ordered, trying to keep her voice steady despite the fear coursing through her.

"I don't think so, sweetheart," he replied, his gun now leveled at her. "How about you drop yours instead? Make this easy on yourself."

"So you can take me to Zeb?" she spat. "I know what he has planned for me."

The man shrugged. "Not my concern. I'm just the delivery boy."

"And if I refuse to be delivered?"

His smile widened. "Then I bring you in with a few more bruises than strictly necessary. Zeb wants you alive. He didn't specify what condition."

Lily's finger tightened on the trigger. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

Something shifted in the man's expression, A hardening, a loss of patience, terrifying her. "Have it your way."

He lunged forward with surprising speed, batting her gun hand aside before she could fire. The Glock discharged harmlessly into the forest floor as they grappled.

He was stronger, more experienced in hand-to-hand combat. But Lily was fighting for her life, for Blade's life, and desperation lent her strength.

She drove her knee upward, connecting solidly with the man's groin. He grunted in pain, his grip loosening just enough for her to wrench free. She scrambled backward, bringing the Glock up again.

Too slow. He recovered quickly, closing the distance between them with two swift strides. His fist connected with her jaw, snapping her head back and sending her stumbling. The Glock flew from her grasp, disappearing into the underbrush.

Stars exploded behind her eyes. Copper flooded her mouth, blood from where her teeth had cut into her inner cheek. She shook her head, trying to clear her vision as the man advanced on her again.

"That was stupid," he growled, all pretense of casual confidence gone. "Now I'm going to hurt you."

Lily backed away, searching desperately for a weapon, an escape route, anything. Her heel caught on a root and she nearly fell.

The man's hand shot out, grabbing her by the throat. "Zeb's going to love breaking you," he hissed, his face inches from hers. "And I'm going to enjoy watching."

Spots danced at the edges of her vision as his grip tightened, cutting off her air. She

clawed at his hand, his arm, fighting for breath.

No. Not like this. Not after everything.

With the last of her strength, she reached for the only weapon left to her, the tactical knife strapped to the vest Blade had given her. Her fingers closed around the handle, withdrew it from its sheath.

The man saw the movement too late. His eyes widened in surprise as she plunged the blade into his side, between his ribs, angling upward just as her father had taught her.

His grip on her throat loosened. A wet, gurgling sound escaped his lips. He staggered backward, looking down in disbelief at the knife protruding from his torso.

Lily gasped for air, rubbing her bruised throat as she watched him sink to his knees. Blood bubbled from his mouth, his eyes already glazing over. The knife had found his lung, possibly his heart.

She had killed a man.

The reality of it hit her like a physical blow. She had taken a life. Ended someone's existence. The fact that it was self-defense, that he had been trying to hurt her, didn't change the fundamental horror of what she'd done. Bile rose in her throat.

For a moment, she stood frozen, staring at the dead man at her feet. Then the distant sound of gunfire jolted her back to reality.

Blade.

He must have arrived at the cabin, run straight into the ambush. The remaining men had engaged him.

Ignoring the trembling in her limbs, the nausea churning in her stomach, Lily bent to retrieve the dead man's weapon. It was a Beretta, similar to the one she'd field-stripped for Blade. She checked the magazine. Nearly full.

Then, using the ringing gunfire as a guide, she began to run toward the cabin. Toward Blade. Toward danger, rather than away from it.

Because that's what you did when you cared about someone. You ran toward the fire, not away from it.

The gunfire grew louder as she neared the cabin. Through the trees, she could see muzzle flashes, could hear men shouting to each other. She slowed her approach, moving more cautiously now, trying to assess the situation before rushing in.

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From her position at the edge of the clearing, she could see Blade's truck parked haphazardly in the driveway, driver's door open. Blade himself was nowhere in sight, but the sporadic gunfire suggested he was pinned down somewhere, exchanging shots with the remaining attackers.

She counted three men still active. The leader, clutching his bloodied shoulder, barking orders from behind an SUV, and two others using trees for cover as they fired toward the side of the cabin.

Blade must be around the corner, using the cabin's structure for protection. Three against one. Not good odds, especially since they had him pinned.

Lily took a deep breath, steadying herself. She could help even those odds.

Moving silently along the tree line, she circled to get a better angle on the men. The leader was her primary target. If she could take him out, the others might lose coordination, might make mistakes.

She raised the Beretta, sighting down the barrel at the leader's head. He was partially protected by the SUV, but his injured shoulder and part of his head were exposed.

Her hands trembled. Taking a life in the heat of desperate struggle was one thing. This felt different. This was colder, more calculated.

But necessary, she reminded herself. To save Blade. To save yourself.

She squeezed the trigger.

The shot went wide, striking the SUV's window instead of the leader. Glass shattered. The leader ducked completely behind the vehicle, now alert to her presence.

"The girl!" he shouted. "East side! Take her alive!"

One of the other men immediately changed direction, moving toward her position with his weapon raised.

Damn it.

She fired again, forcing the approaching man to take cover behind a tree. But she'd given away her position now. Her advantage of surprise was gone.

"Lily?" Blade's voice called from somewhere near the cabin. "Lily, is that you?"

"Blade!" she shouted back. "Three men! The leader is injured!"

A burst of automatic fire answered her, forcing her to duck behind a thick tree trunk as bullets splintered bark inches from her head.

"Stay down!" Blade called. "I'm coming to you!"

"No!" she yelled. "They'll cut you down in the open!"

But it was too late. She heard him moving, the sound of his boots on gravel as he sprinted toward her position. Gunfire erupted from the men, trying to stop him.

Then a grunt of pain. A thud.

"Blade!" she screamed, terror clawing at her throat.

No answer.

No, no, no.

She peered around the tree, desperate for a visual. What she saw made her heart stop.

Blade was down, sprawled on the ground halfway between the cabin and the tree line. Blood stained his shirt. He'd been hit either in the shoulder or upper chest, she couldn't tell from this distance. He was moving, trying to crawl toward cover, but vulnerable in the open.

The leader emerged from behind the SUV, pistol raised, limping toward Blade's prone form. Victory was written all over his battered face.

"End of the line, enforcer," he called. "Zeb sends his regards."

Time seemed to slow. Lily saw the leader's finger tightening on the trigger. Saw Blade struggling to raise his own weapon, too slow, too late.

Without conscious thought, she stepped out from behind the tree, Beretta raised. This time, her hands were steady. This time, when she pulled the trigger, there was no hesitation, no trembling.

The leader's head snapped back, a red mist spraying into the air behind him. He crumpled to the ground, lifeless before he hit the dirt.

The remaining two men froze in shock at their leader's sudden death. It was all the opening Blade needed. From his position on the ground, he fired twice in rapid succession. Both men fell.

Then silence descended, broken only by the ringing in Lily's ears and the harsh sound

of her own breathing.

"Blade," she whispered, then louder, "Blade!"

She ran to him, heedless of potential danger, dropping to her knees beside his prone form. Blood soaked his shirt, spreading in an alarming stain across his chest.

"You're hit," she said unnecessarily, hands hovering over the wound, afraid to touch, afraid to make it worse.

"So... observed," he managed, a pained grimace that might have been attempting to be a smile crossing his face. "What part... of 'stay in the safe room'... didn't you understand? You are in so much trouble little girl."

"The part where you get ambushed and killed because I wasn't here to save your ass," she retorted, tearing open his shirt to assess the damage.

The bullet had caught him high on the left side of his chest, near the shoulder. A through-and-through, from what she could tell. Serious, but probably not immediately fatal if she could stop the bleeding.

"We need to get inside," Blade grunted, trying to sit up. "More might be... coming."

"Don't move," she ordered, pressing her hands firmly over the wound. "You'll bleed out faster."

"Bossy," he muttered, but complied, sinking back onto the ground.

Lily looked around frantically. They were exposed here, vulnerable. But moving Blade in his condition could be dangerous too.

"Can you walk if I help you?" she asked.

He nodded grimly. "Done more... with worse."

Together, they managed to get him upright, his good arm draped over her shoulders, her arm around his waist. Blood soaked them both as they staggered toward the cabin.

Inside, she helped him to the couch, then grabbed the first aid kit from the kitchen. Her hands moved automatically, cleaning the wound as best she could, applying pressure bandages to stem the bleeding.

"You're... good at this," Blade observed, his voice strained but clearer now. The pain seemed to be focusing him, bringing him back from the initial shock.

"Dad made sure of it," she replied, working quickly. "Gun safety, self-defense, field medicine. Said I needed to be prepared for anything."

"Smart man," Blade murmured.

"He would like you," she said softly. "You're a lot alike."

Blade's eyes, clouded with pain, searched her face. "Lily... you shouldn't have left the safe room. I told you?—"

"To stay put, I know," she interrupted. "But they were waiting for you. They knew you were coming back. They were going to kill you and take me to Zeb. They were military, or ex-military. Professional."

"Reynolds," Blade said grimly. "The tracker Zeb hired."

"You knew?" she asked, surprised.

"Found out at the cabin," he explained. "Tried to call, warn you. No signal in the mountains." His hand caught hers, gripping tightly despite his weakened state. "I was afraid I'd be too late."

The raw emotion in his voice made her throat tighten. "I was afraid too," she whispered. "That's why I couldn't just hide and wait. I had to try to warn you."

His eyes held hers, something powerful and unspoken passing between them. "You saved my life out there."

"After you saved mine," she reminded him. "Call it even."

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Not even close, baby girl. Not even close."

The term of endearment, spoken in his pain-roughened voice, sent a wave of warmth through her. Despite everything, despite the danger, the violence, the blood staining both their clothes, she felt safe for the first time since he'd left.

Because he was back. Hurt, but alive. And they were together.

"I killed two men today," she said suddenly, the reality of it hitting her anew. "One in the woods, with your knife. And the leader, when he was about to shoot you."

Blade's expression softened. "I know. I'm sorry you had to do that."

"I'm not," she replied, surprising herself with the honesty of it. "Not if it meant saving you."

His hand reached up, cupping her cheek gently. "That's a heavy weight to carry."

"Then we'll carry it together," she said simply.

For a moment, they just looked at each other, the air between them charged with unspoken emotions. Then Blade winced, a fresh wave of pain clearly washing over him.

"We need to get you to a doctor," Lily said, reality intruding once more. "You've lost a lot of blood."

Blade shook his head. "Can't risk a hospital. Too many questions. Call Savage. Tell him to bring Doc here."

She nodded, reaching for the satellite phone on the coffee table. As she dialed, Blade's hand caught hers again.

"Lily," he said, his voice suddenly urgent. "I need you to know something. In case... in case things go sideways."

"Don't," she protested. "You're going to be fine."

"Just listen," he insisted. "These past few days, with you... they've meant something. To me. More than I expected. More than I thought possible." He swallowed hard. "If I don't make it?—"

"You will," she interrupted fiercely. "I didn't just kill two men to save your life only for you to give up on me now."

A pained chuckle escaped him. "So stubborn."

"You have no idea," she muttered, squeezing his hand before returning to the phone.

As she connected with Savage, explaining the situation in rapid, efficient terms, she kept her eyes on Blade. His color was bad, his breathing shallow. The bandages she'd

applied were already soaking through with blood.

He needed help, and soon. But he was strong. A fighter. He'd survived worse, she was sure of it.

And he had something to live for now. Something they both did.

Each other.

That realization should have terrified her. Should have sent her running in the opposite direction. Attachment was dangerous. Caring meant vulnerability. Love, if that's what this was becoming, meant opening yourself to devastating loss.

But as she watched Blade fighting to stay conscious, his eyes never leaving her face even as pain etched lines around them, she knew it was already too late for caution. Too late for fear.

Whatever this was between them, was growing, strengthening, becoming something neither of them had expected but both, perhaps, had needed more than they knew.

"Doc's on his way," she told Blade, returning to his side. "Savage too. They'll be here within the hour."

He nodded weakly. "Good. That's... good."

His eyelids were growing heavy, the blood loss taking its toll. Panic seized her.

"Stay with me," she urged, taking his face in her hands. "Blade, look at me. Stay awake."

"Trying," he murmured, his words slurring slightly. "Just... need to rest a minute."

"No rest," she commanded, her voice taking on the firm tone he often used with her. "That's an order, enforcer. You stay awake until Doc gets here."

A small smile tugged at his lips. "Yes, ma'am."

"I mean it," she insisted. "Talk to me. Tell me... tell me about when you were a SEAL. Tell me anything."

He blinked slowly, fighting to focus. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," she said softly. "I want to know everything about you."

And as the minutes ticked by, waiting for help to arrive, that's exactly what he gave her, pieces of himself, shared in a pain-roughened voice that sometimes drifted but never quite faded. Stories of missions and brotherhood. Of loss and triumph. Of a life lived on the edge of danger.

Lily listened, hanging on every word, offering sips of water, changing blood-soaked bandages, doing anything she could to keep him present, to keep him with her.

Because somehow, in the space of three chaotic days, this man had become her anchor. Her protector. Her...

Daddy.

The word surfaced in her mind, no longer frightening or embarrassing. Just right. Fitting. True.

And as Blade fought to stay conscious, his eyes never leaving hers even as pain clouded them, she made him a silent promise.

Whatever happens, wherever this leads, I'm all in. We'll figure it out together.

Because that's what you did when you found your person. You held on, through blood and pain and danger.

You held on, and you never let go.

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The steady beep of the heart monitor was both reassuring and nerve-wracking to Blade. Reassuring because it meant he was still alive. Nerve-wracking because it meant he was stuck in this makeshift hospital bed in the club's medical room, useless while others handled his responsibilities.

While others protected Lily.

He shifted, wincing as pain lanced through his chest. The bullet had missed anything vital, Doc had confirmed that, but he'd lost a lot of blood, and the wound itself was serious enough to keep him bedridden for at least a few days.

Days he didn't have. Days Lily didn't have.

"Stop moving," Savage ordered from his position by the door. "You'll tear your stitches. Again."

Blade scowled at his friend. "I need to get back to the cabin. To Lily."

"What you need is to heal," Savage countered firmly.

"Lily's fine. Rampage is with her, and the cabin's security has been upgraded.

Triple perimeter sensors, satellite uplink, the works.

Jay came out and ran it all for free. The highest tech you can get.

Valhalla wants your land secure for their own reasons and have placed extra patrols

along the border.

No one's getting near her without us knowing. "

"Reynolds did," Blade reminded him darkly.

"Reynolds is dead," Savage replied. "Along with his entire team. Thanks to you and your little warrior princess."

Despite his frustration, Blade felt a surge of pride at the description. Lily had been magnificent in that firefight. Brave beyond reason, deadly when necessary, gentle in the aftermath.

"She saved my life," he said quietly.

Savage nodded. "I know. Doc says if she hadn't gotten those pressure bandages on you when she did, you might have bled out before we arrived."

The memory of Lily's hands, steady and sure despite the fear in her eyes, pressing against his wound, flashed through Blade's mind. Her voice, commanding him to stay awake, to stay with her.

He'd never had anyone fight that hard to keep him alive before. Never had anyone look at him with such fierce determination, such raw need.

It was... addictive. Terrifying. Precious.

"I need to see her," he insisted.

"And you will," Savage assured him. "Once Doc clears you. But for now, you focus on healing, and we'll focus on keeping her safe. She threw a pretty big fit when we

didn't bring her here. It's too risky. We don't know what contacts Zeb made, who stepped up to take his place and where they might be looking.

We are fairly certain that no one other than the men who were out there knew where your cabin was. "

Blade knew his friend was right, but that didn't make the forced separation any easier. It had been two days since the attack at the cabin. Two days since he'd seen Lily, touched her, assured himself she was really okay.

They'd rushed him to the clubhouse after Doc stabilized him at the cabin, the medical facilities there better equipped for his recovery. Lily had wanted to come with him, had argued fiercely against their separation, but Blade had insisted she stay behind with Rampage as protection. He'd threatened to spank her ass in front of all the men if she argued with him anymore, although everyone in the room knew he wasn't capable of following through on the threat at the time he'd made it.

Savage was right, it was still the safest place for her. But being right didn't make him miss her any less.

"Any word on Zeb's replacement?" he asked, changing the subject before his thoughts grew even more sentimental. A few minutes after he'd left to go to Lily, Jose had pulled up with several reinforcements.

Luckily, they'd left with Tim already. The surveillance the men had left behind picked it all up.

Jose's reaction when he found the slain men inside and his vow to kill every last one of the Watchmen.

Turns out, Jose is Zeb's first cousin and they grew up together like brothers.

Tim, a half brother, hadn't the connection that Jose and Zeb had.

They had to get rid of him before he was able to put his threats into action.

Savage's expression hardened. "Jose is in the wind. Irish tracked him to a private airfield outside of Denver, but he was gone by the time we got there. Headed east, we think."

"East," Blade repeated. "To his compound? The one Hammer mentioned?"

"Possibly," Savage acknowledged. "We're working on pinpointing the location. It's somewhere in the mountains of North Carolina, based on what we could get out of Tim before he went into surgery."

"How is he doing?" he asked.

"Still critical, but stable," Savage reported. "Doc thinks he'll pull through, though he'll never be the same. Too much damage. Too much trauma."

Guilt twisted in Blade's gut. They should have found Tim sooner. Should have protected him better. Just like they should have protected Lily from the beginning, should have seen through the blackmail scheme before it ever got to this point.

"This isn't on you," Savage said, reading his thoughts with unnerving accuracy. "Tim made his choice when he helped Lily escape. He knew the risks."

"Doesn't make it any easier to stomach," Blade muttered.

"No," Savage agreed. "It doesn't."

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation. Irish poked his head in, his

expression grim.

"We've got a problem," he announced without preamble.

Blade immediately tried to sit up straighter, ignoring the fresh wave of pain the movement caused. "What kind of problem?"

"Jose sent a message," Irish replied, stepping fully into the room. "Video file, delivered to the clubhouse email."

Something cold settled in Blade's stomach. "Show me."

Irish exchanged a look with Savage, who nodded reluctantly. Pulling out his tablet, Irish queued up the video and handed it to Blade.

Jose's face filled the screen, his eyes gleamed with malevolent certainty.

"Greetings, Spartan Watchmen," he began, his voice smooth. "By now you've discovered what happens to those who cross the Rejects. Tim was just the beginning. A warmup act, if you will."

The camera panned to show a room behind him, some kind of industrial space, concrete walls, metal support beams. And hanging from one of those beams, bloody and barely conscious, was a man Blade recognized immediately.

"Fuck," Irish breathed. "That's Kylie's brother, Marcus."

Blade's blood ran cold. Kylie was the club's secretary, one of their most loyal members. Her brother wasn't a patch holder, but he'd always supported her involvement with the club. He was a civilian. An innocent.

"As you can see," Jose continued as the camera returned to his face, "I've acquired a new guest. Marcus here has been quite informative about your club's operations, your security protocols... and about a certain little blonde you're protecting."

Blade's hands tightened on the tablet, rage building in his chest.

"I want the girl," Jose stated flatly. "In exchange for Marcus's life. Simple trade. You have forty-eight hours to deliver her to the coordinates I'll send separately. Come alone, Blade. Just you and the girl. Any sign of your brothers, any hint of a trap, and Marcus dies slowly."

Jose leaned closer to the camera, his eyes burning with hatred. "And after him, I'll start working my way through every person connected to your club. Wives. Girlfriends. Children. No one will be spared."

He smiled then, a chilling expression devoid of any real humor. "Forty-eight hours, enforcer. Tick tock."

The video ended abruptly, leaving Blade staring at a black screen, his mind racing with implications and possibilities.

"When did this come in?" he asked, his voice deadly calm.

"Twenty minutes ago," Irish replied. "Lucky's already called an emergency church meeting. We need to decide how to handle this."

"There's nothing to decide," Blade said, already pushing back the covers, ignoring the pain that threatened to overwhelm him. "We're not giving him Lily."

"Of course not," Savage agreed, moving to stop Blade from getting up. "But we need a plan. A way to rescue Marcus without endangering Lily."

"And we need you at full strength," Irish added. "Which means you stay in that bed until Doc clears you."

"Fuck that," Blade growled, though he allowed Savage to push him back against the pillows when a wave of dizziness hit him. "I need to be at that church meeting. Need to make sure everyone understands that Lily is non-negotiable."

"No one's suggesting otherwise," Savage assured him. "She's under our protection. But Marcus is family too. We need to find a way to save both of them."

Blade knew he was right, but the mere suggestion of using Lily as bait, of putting her anywhere near Jose's reach, made something primal and protective rise within him. Something that went beyond his duties as enforcer, beyond his loyalty to the club.

Something that felt dangerously close to love.

Focus, asshole. This isn't about your feelings. It's about keeping her safe.

"We need more information," he said, forcing his emotions aside to think tactically. "The compound's layout. Security measures. Number of hostiles. We go in blind, we're all dead, and Marcus along with us."

Irish nodded. "Lucky's already reached out to some contacts. Former military guys who might know something about Jose's operation in North Carolina."

"And Jay is digging through property records, shell companies, anything that might give us the exact location," Savage added.

"Good," Blade acknowledged. "But Jose's not stupid. He'll be ready for a rescue attempt."

"Which is why we need something he's not expecting," Irish mused.

The germ of an idea began to form in Blade's mind. Something risky, potentially catastrophic if it went wrong, but possibly their best shot at saving both Marcus and Lily.

"What if we give him what he wants?" he suggested slowly. "Or what he thinks he wants."

Savage frowned. "You mean use Lily as bait? Not happening, brother. Even if you were in fighting condition, which you're not."

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"Not exactly," Blade clarified. "What if we make Jose think we're complying with his demands, but on our terms? Draw him out into the open where we can control the situation better?"

Irish looked thoughtful. "You're talking about setting a trap."

"I'm talking about turning his trap against him," Blade corrected. "But it would require Lily's cooperation."

"Then it's off the table," Savage said firmly.

"We'll find another way." All the men were protective of the women. It was in their blood. Didn't matter who the little belonged to, they were protected. Blade knew Lily. He knew what she was capable of and although he didn't want her in danger anymore than anyone else did, he knew they could come up with a way to do it while keeping her safe at the same time.

Blade shook his head. "We might not have another way. Not in the timeframe Jose's given us." He met Savage's eyes. "And it's not your call. Or mine. It's Lily's. She deserves the right to choose."

There was a brief silence as both men considered his words.

"He's right," Irish finally acknowledged. "She's not some helpless little thing we need to coddle. She's proven that already. But, if we are to do it, we need to go over the plan until it's foolproof."

Savage still looked unconvinced. "Taking on a few goons at the cabin is one thing. Deliberately walking into Jose's operation is another level entirely."

"She wouldn't be alone," Blade insisted. "We'd have her back every step of the way. But it has to be her choice."

Before Savage could respond, the door burst open, and Lucky strode in, his imposing figure filling the doorway. As club president, he radiated authority despite his casual attire.

"Tell me you've seen the video," he said without preamble.

"Just finished," Irish confirmed.

Lucky's eyes found Blade's. "How mobile are you?"

"I can ride," Blade lied immediately.

"Bullshit," Savage countered. "He lost half his blood volume two days ago. Doc said at least a week before he's back on his feet."

Lucky frowned. "We don't have a week. Jose's deadline is firm, and I believe him when he says he'll start targeting our families if we don't comply."

"We're not giving him Lily," Blade stated, his tone leaving no room for debate.

Lucky's eyes narrowed. "No one said anything about giving up the girl. But we need options, and we need them now."

"I was just outlining a potential strategy," Blade began.

A commotion in the hallway interrupted him, raised voices, hurried footsteps. Then the door flew open again, and there she was.

Lily.

She looked different than when he'd last seen her. Stronger, somehow. More determined. Her hair was pulled back in a practical ponytail, and she'd exchanged her usual soft clothing for jeans, boots, and a fitted t-shirt. Rampage towered behind her, looking both apologetic and amused.

"Sorry," the big man offered. "She can be very persuasive when she wants to be."

"What are you doing here?" Blade demanded, though he couldn't keep the relief from his voice at seeing her safe, whole. "You're supposed to be at the cabin."

"And you're supposed to be resting," she countered, moving immediately to his bedside. Her eyes cataloged his appearance, lingering on the bandages visible beneath his hospital gown, the IV in his arm, the pallor of his skin. "You look terrible."

Despite everything, a chuckle escaped him.

"Missed you too, baby girl. But, as soon as I am healthy, you are getting that spanking I promised you. This is twice now you've broken the rules."

"His spanking hand was itching to connect with her bare ass."

Every man in the room would take their girl over his knee for doing the same.

Something in her expression softened. She reached out, her hand finding his, squeezing gently. "I know," she said. "And when you are healthy I might just let you."

“Let me?” He growled. “There is no letting me. You have it coming.”

All but ignoring his words, she spoke again. “I overheard Rampage on the phone being told about the video,” she said, addressing the room at large, although her eyes never left Blade's face. “About Marcus. About Jose's demands.”

The men exchanged looks of surprise.

She turned to face the club president. “Jose wants me. In exchange for Marcus's life.”

It wasn't a question, but Lucky nodded anyway. “Yes.”

She took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. “Then that's what he'll get.”

“No,” Blade said immediately, his hand tightening on hers. “Absolutely not.”

“It's not your decision,” she told him, echoing his own words from earlier. “It's mine. And I won't let an innocent man die because of me. Not when I can prevent it.”

“Lily,” Savage began, his tone gentler than usual, “Jose doesn't want to make an exchange. He wants to make an example. If we hand you over, you'll die. Horribly.”

“I know exactly what he wants,” she said, her voice steady despite the fear that briefly flickered in her eyes. “He made that clear enough. But I also know that I can't live with myself if Marcus dies because of me.”

“This isn't on you,” Blade insisted. “Jose's actions are his own. His vendetta, his choice to escalate by taking Marcus.”

“Maybe,” she acknowledged. “But my conscience is my own too. And it won't let me hide while others pay the price for my safety.”

The quiet conviction in her voice silenced the room. Even Lucky, never known for his patience, seemed unwilling to interrupt her.

"Besides," she continued, "I'm not suggesting we give Jose what he actually wants. I'm suggesting we use his demands against him."

Blade felt a surge of pride and alarm. She'd reached the same conclusion he had, independently. "You're talking about setting a trap."

She nodded. "Exactly. He thinks I'm some helpless little girl he can torture and kill to satisfy his ego. Let's use that assumption against him."

Lucky studied her with newfound respect. "You understand what you're proposing? The risk involved?"

"Better than most," she confirmed. "I've been in The Rejects hands before. I know what they are capable of. Jose was there when they captured me, I've met him in person, unlike anyone else in this room. He's arrogant. Overconfident. And that makes him vulnerable."

"She's right," Irish chimed in. "Jose's ego is his blind spot. He'll be so focused on getting his hands on Lily that he might not see the trap until it's too late."

Savage still looked skeptical. "It's a huge risk."

"Life is risk," Lily replied simply. "My father taught me that. The question isn't how to avoid risk, it's how to manage it. How to stack the odds in your favor as much as possible."

She turned back to Blade, her eyes full of determination.

"I know you want to protect me. I know that's your instinct, your.

.. nature." The slight hesitation, the way her cheeks colored faintly on the word 'nature,' told him she was thinking of their unspoken dynamic.

The one they'd barely begun to explore before chaos erupted again.

"But sometimes protection means fighting alongside, not shielding from the fight entirely. "

Blade wanted to argue. Wanted to forbid her from putting herself in danger, to lock her away somewhere safe until the threat was eliminated.

But he recognized the steel in her spine, the resolve in her eyes.

This wasn't just bravado or self-sacrifice.

This was a woman making a conscious choice about her own life, her own risks.

And he respected her too much to take that choice from her.

"So what's the plan?" he asked instead, surprising everyone in the room, including himself.

Relief and gratitude flashed across Lily's face. "We meet Jose's demands, sort of. We go to the coordinates he provides, but on our terms. With backup in place, with contingencies. We make him think he's getting what he wants, but we control the situation."

"Easier said than done," Lucky commented. "Jose will be expecting a trap."

"Of course he will," Lily agreed. "But his arrogance will make him believe he can counter whatever we throw at him. We just need to be one step ahead. Give him a trap within a trap."

"Double bluff," Rampage rumbled appreciatively from the doorway. "I like it."

"It might work," Irish conceded. "But it would require perfect execution. Perfect timing."

"And it would put you at actual risk," Blade told Lily, needing her to understand the full implications. "Not theoretical risk. Real danger. If anything goes wrong, if we miscalculate even slightly..."

"I know," she said softly. "But it's a risk I'm willing to take. For Marcus. For the club." Her eyes met his. "For you."

Something in his chest tightened at her words. At the simple courage behind them.

"There's another problem," Savage pointed out. "Blade's in no condition to ride. Doc said at least a week before he's even walking without assistance. Jose specifically demanded that Blade bring you."

"So we work with that," Lily suggested. "We tell Jose that Blade was injured in the last attack. That I'm insisting on coming alone, to spare any more bloodshed. It plays into Jose's ego, the idea that I'm surrendering myself to save others. He'll love that."

"And when you show up without Blade?" Lucky asked skeptically.

"You think Jose will turn down the opportunity to have me in his grasp, just because Blade isn't there to witness it?" Lily countered. "His primary goal is me. Blade's presence is secondary, just his way of ensuring it's personal, of twisting the knife."

Blade hated to admit it, but her assessment was probably accurate. Jose wanted Lily above all else. The rest was window dressing.

"I don't like it," he said finally. "But I can't offer a better alternative. Not one that saves Marcus and keeps you safe."

Lily squeezed his hand. "I don't expect to be completely safe. I just expect to survive. With your help, all of your help," she added, looking around at the assembled men.

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A silent communication seemed to pass between the club members. Finally, Lucky nodded. "Alright. We'll take this to church, work out the details. If we're doing this, we're doing it right. Full resources, full commitment."

"I want in on the planning," Blade insisted. "Even if I can't physically participate in the execution."

"Of course," Lucky agreed. "We'll need your tactical expertise. And your knowledge of Jose's psychology."

"And I need to be there too," Lily added firmly. "No planning my part in this without me present."

Lucky raised an eyebrow at her assertiveness but nodded. "Fair enough. Church meeting in one hour. That gives you two some time to... catch up." His knowing look as it passed between Blade and Lily made her blush slightly. "Rampage, Irish, Savage with me. Let's start working through the logistics."

The men filed out, leaving Blade and Lily alone for the first time since the attack at the cabin. For a moment, neither spoke, the weight of everything that had happened, and everything still to come, hanging between them.

Then Lily moved closer, perching carefully on the edge of the bed to avoid disturbing his injuries. "You really do look terrible," she said softly, her free hand coming up to brush his hair back from his forehead.

"You look beautiful," he replied honestly. "Fierce. Ready for war."

A small smile curved her lips. "Is that a compliment?"

"The highest I know how to give," he confirmed. Then, more seriously: "I've missed you."

"It's only been two days," she reminded him, though her expression told him she'd felt the separation just as keenly.

"Longest two days of my life," he admitted.

Her smile widened briefly, then faded as her gaze dropped to his bandaged chest. "How bad is it, really? No bullshit."

"Bad enough," he acknowledged. "Through-and-through, missed anything vital, but I lost a lot of blood. Doc says I'll recover fully, but it'll take time."

"Time we don't have," she murmured.

"Yeah." He reached up, ignoring the pain the movement caused, to cup her cheek. "Lily, are you sure about this? About walking into Jose's trap, even with backup? Even with a plan? It's a hell of a risk."

She leaned into his touch, her eyes closing briefly. "I'm terrified," she admitted. "But sometimes being brave means doing what's necessary even when you're scared out of your mind."

"Your dad again?" he guessed.

She nodded. "He never ran from a fight. Never left anyone behind. I can't do any less."

Pride and fear warred within him. Pride at her courage, fear for what it might cost her. "You're something else, you know that?"

"So I've been told," she replied with a small smile.

Then, more seriously: "We're going to get through this, Blade.

Together. And when it's over, when Jose is no longer a threat.

.." She hesitated, a vulnerability entering her expression that hadn't been there when she'd been discussing plans to face down a sociopath.

"When it's over, maybe we can figure out.

.. this. Us. Whatever this is between us. "

His heart stuttered at the naked hope in her eyes. "I'd like that," he said softly. "Very much."

She bit her lip, seeming to gather her courage. "Before all hell breaks loose again, before we're out of time, I need to tell you something."

"Anything," he encouraged when she paused.

"These past few days... you've become important to me.

More than important. Essential." The words tumbled out now, as if she'd been holding them back too long.

"I know it's fast. I know it's complicated by everything that's happening around us.

But I need you to know, in case... in case things go wrong. "

"Lily—" he began, wanting to reassure her, to promise her that nothing would go wrong, that he wouldn't let anything happen to her.

"No, let me finish," she interrupted gently.

"I need to say this. When I first met you, I was scared, desperate. I was being blackmailed to spy on your club and get close. You were kind to me, built blocks and made me snacks at The Citadel. Your kindness made me decide not to spy on them. I couldn't do that to you.

And then, weeks later, you were just the enforcer sent to collect me.

But now..." She took a deep breath. "Now you're the man I think about when I wake up.

The voice I hear in my head when I'm doubting myself.

The arms I want around me when I'm afraid. "

Her cheeks flushed with color, but she held his gaze, determined to get through this confession.

"And maybe it's just trauma bonding. Maybe it's just the situation we're in, pushing us together.

But it doesn't feel like that. It feels.

.. real. The most real thing I've felt in a very long time. I want to explore us. I might not be looking forward to the spanking you've promised me, but I look forward to

what it means. It means us. You. Me. As my Daddy."

Blade's throat tightened with emotion. Words had never been his strong suit, especially words about feelings. But for her, he would try.

"It is real," he said, his voice rough with conviction. "What's between us. It's not just circumstance or proximity or shared trauma. It's something else. Something... right."

Relief softened her features. "So I'm not crazy?"

"If you are, then so am I," he replied with a small smile.

"And I've never felt more sane than when I'm with you. Even in the middle of all this chaos. You are mine. My girlfriend. My life. My little. I've known since the last playdate at The Citadel. I thought I had time... time for you to come to the same conclusion. I'm so grateful you have, little girl. "

She leaned forward, resting her forehead against his. "I'm going to do everything in my power to come back to you. To come home to you."

Home.

The word resonated through him, powerful and perfect. Yes, that's what they'd found in each other, despite the unlikely circumstances. A home. A belonging.

"And I'll move heaven and earth to make sure you can," he promised. Then, because he needed to say it, needed her to hear it at least once before she walked into danger: "I love you, Lily Hart. It's too soon, and it's too complicated, and I don't deserve half of what you are, but I love you."

Tears welled in her eyes, but they were accompanied by a smile so radiant it nearly

took his breath away. "I love you too. God help me, but I do."

He closed the small distance between them, capturing her lips in a kiss that was both gentle and desperate, mindful of his injuries but unable to hold back the emotion behind it. She kissed him back with equal fervor, her hands cradling his face as if he were something infinitely precious.

When they finally parted, both slightly breathless, she rested her forehead against his again.

"We're going to make it through this," she whispered fiercely. "Both of us. And then we're going to figure out what comes after."

"Together," he agreed. "No matter what."

And as they sat there, holding each other close in the quiet of the medical room, both knew that the coming days would test that promise to its limits. That danger and violence lay ahead. That nothing was guaranteed.

But they also knew that what they'd found in each other was worth fighting for. Worth risking everything for.

A home. A belonging. A love neither had expected but both now refused to surrender.

No matter what Jose threw at them. No matter what fate had in store.

Together. No matter what.

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Lily stared at her reflection in the mirror, barely recognizing the woman looking back at her. She'd always been petite, with her blonde hair and soft features making her appear even younger than her years. The kind of woman who drew protective instincts from others, especially dominant men.

But the woman in the mirror now looked... different. Harder. More focused. Her hair was pulled back in a practical braid. The bruises from the cabin fight had faded to yellowish smudges on her jaw and neck. Her eyes held a determination she'd rarely seen in herself before.

She was still herself, still Lily, still a little who found comfort in regression, still someone who craved the security of a Daddy's care. But she was something else now, too. A fighter. A survivor.

Someone worthy of standing beside Blade, not just being protected by him.

"You ready?" Makenzie's voice came from the doorway of the clubhouse bathroom.

Lily turned to face her. Makenzie was Irish's girl, another little in the DDLG community. She'd been nothing but kind to Lily since her arrival at the clubhouse, despite the danger Lily's presence brought to everyone.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Lily replied, adjusting the tactical vest they'd fitted for her.

It was lighter than Blade's, designed for mobility rather than maximum protection, but it would stop most handgun rounds.

Beneath it, she wore fitted black pants and a long-sleeved compression shirt, Blade had instructed her on what to wear.

It was practical clothing that wouldn't restrict her movement.

"Irish says the meeting's about to start," Makenzie said, her usually bubbly demeanor subdued. "Everyone's in the chapel."

The chapel was what the MC called their meeting room, where official club business was conducted. Lily had been surprised when Lucky insisted she attend the planning session, but grateful, too. If she was going to risk her life as bait for Jose, she deserved to know exactly what the plan entailed.

"I'll be right there," she promised. "Just need another minute."

Makenzie hesitated, then stepped fully into the bathroom, letting the door close behind her. "Can I say something? Girl to girl?"

Lily nodded, curious.

"What you're doing is really brave," Makenzie said earnestly.

"Like, superhero brave. And I just wanted to say that if.

.. when you get back, if you ever want to talk about little stuff, or DDLG, or anything.

.. I'm here. So are Trinity, Emilee and Savannah. We take care of each other and we'd all love to get to know you better. "

Unexpected tears pricked at Lily's eyes. She'd spent so long feeling alone, feeling like her desires and needs were somehow wrong or shameful. The idea of having a

community, friends who understood that part of her, was almost overwhelming.

"Thank you," she managed, her voice slightly choked. "That means a lot."

Makenzie smiled, then surprised her with a quick, fierce hug. "Now go kick Jose's ass so you can come back and we can have a proper little playdate. My Daddy makes the best chocolate chip pancakes in the world."

Lily laughed despite herself, the tension breaking momentarily. "It's a date."

Together, they walked through the clubhouse to the chapel.

The mood shifted as they entered the main area, patches moving respectfully out of their way, nods of acknowledgment passing between them.

These men, these warriors, were treating her not with pity or concern, but with respect.

Like one of their own going into battle.

The chapel doors stood open, revealing a room dominated by a large wooden table.

Around it sat the club's officers. Lucky at the head, Irish and Savage flanking him, Rampage and Arrow on the sides.

Blade was there too, looking pale but alert in a wheelchair Doc had insisted upon.

His eyes found hers immediately, warm with pride and cold with worry all at once.

"Perfect timing," Lucky said as Lily entered. "We were just about to begin."

Makenzie squeezed Lily's arm once more, then moved to stand behind Irish's chair, her hand resting on his shoulder. The other officers' little ones were present too, standing behind their men in a show of support. Trinity behind Savage, her expression analytical as she studied the maps spread across the table. Emilee behind Arrow, her usually cheerful face solemn. Blade had explained to her that the little ones didn't normally attend these meetings, but, when they'd heard about Lily's bravery and her part in all of this, they wanted to come as a show of solidarity.

Sometimes, Blade said, it was easy for the men to forget about the adult side of their women, and this was a good reminder of the dichotomy of each woman.

Lily moved to Blade's side, her hand automatically finding his. His fingers entwined with hers, warm and reassuring.

"How's the pain?" she asked softly.

"Manageable," he replied, though the tightness around his eyes told her otherwise. He was suffering, but too stubborn to admit it, too determined to participate in this planning session to allow Doc to medicate him fully.

"Jose's deadline is tomorrow at noon," Lucky began without preamble.

"We've received the coordinates for the exchange.

" He nodded to Jay, who pulled up a satellite image on his tablet and transferred it to the larger screen on the wall. Jay, Phantom, and several other members of Valhalla were honorary brothers. They helped out when needed even if they didn't ride motorcycles.

Blade explained operator brotherhood was even stronger than MC brotherhood.

"Middle of nowhere," Savage observed. "Abandoned quarry about three hours from here. Open sight lines, minimal cover. He's chosen his ground carefully."

"Defensive positions here, here, and here," Irish added, pointing to elevated sections around the quarry's rim. "Perfect for snipers. He'll have the high ground, literally and figuratively."

"Unless we get there first," Rampage suggested. "Secure those positions before the meet."

Lucky shook his head. "Too risky. Jose will have advance scouts checking the area. If they spot our people, Marcus is dead."

"So what's the play?" Arrow asked, his tactical mind already working through scenarios.

All eyes turned to Lily. This was her mission, her risk. Her call, ultimately.

She took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. "We give Jose what he's expecting. Me, alone, arriving at the coordinates at the specified time. Seemingly surrendering myself to save Marcus."

"While we..." Savage prompted.

"While you're in position, but not where he'll be looking," she continued. "Not on the high ground, not in the obvious defensive positions. Somewhere unexpected."

"Below," Blade said suddenly, his tactical mind latching onto the idea. "The quarry must have access tunnels, maintenance shafts. Old equipment bunkers."

Jay was already typing furiously on his tablet. "Checking geological surveys... yes,

there's a network of tunnels beneath the quarry floor. According to this, they were used for moving equipment and personnel during the mining operations."

"Can we access them without being detected?" Lucky asked.

"There's an entrance point half a mile from the quarry," Jay confirmed, highlighting it on the map. "Overgrown, probably forgotten. It doesn't appear on newer maps of the area."

"That's our way in," Blade declared. "We position our force underground, beneath the exchange point. When Jose springs his inevitable double-cross, we come up behind him, catch him in a crossfire."

"What about Marcus?" Lily asked. "How do we ensure his safety during the chaos?"

The room fell silent as they considered the problem. An exchange this volatile, with gunfire likely from multiple directions, put the hostage at extreme risk.

"We need someone on the inside," Savage said finally. "Someone close enough to protect Marcus when it all goes to hell."

"I could--" Lily began, but Blade cut her off.

"No. You're already the primary target. You can't divide your focus."

She wanted to argue but knew he was right. Her role was to draw Jose out, to be the bait that sprung the trap. Someone else would need to ensure Marcus's safety.

"What about me?" Makenzie suggested unexpectedly. All heads turned toward her. "Jose's looking for club members, patched brothers. He won't be suspicious of another little coming along for moral support."

Irish immediately tensed. "Absolutely not."

"Think about it," Makenzie persisted. "Jose sees Lily and me, two scared littles, no obvious threat. His guard will be down. I can stay close to Marcus while everyone focuses on Lily."

"It's too dangerous," Irish argued, but Lucky was already considering it.

"She's not wrong," the president said thoughtfully. "Jose's intelligence will have identified all patch holders. But the littles? They're largely invisible to him. Just extensions of their men, not threats in their own right."

"That's exactly why it will work," Makenzie insisted. "He'll underestimate me. They all will."

Irish looked like he wanted to object further, but Savage intervened. "It's actually tactically sound. The best insertion strategy is often the one the enemy never sees coming."

"I can train her," Trinity offered. "Basic defensive moves, how to shield Marcus when the shooting starts. It's not ideal, but..."

"But it might be our best option," Lucky finished.

Irish's jaw worked as he struggled with the idea of putting his woman in danger. Lily understood completely, if their positions were reversed, if Blade were suggesting putting himself at risk while injured, she'd be just as opposed.

But sometimes the logical tactical choice wasn't the emotionally comfortable one.

"I know how to shoot," Makenzie added quietly. "My father made sure of it."

That surprised Lucky, who turned to look at her with raised eyebrows. "You never mentioned that."

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She shrugged. "Never came up. Being a little doesn't mean I can't also be my daddy's daughter."

The simple statement resonated with Lily. That was exactly it—the duality she herself was navigating. Being someone's little girl didn't negate her ability to be strong when necessary, to fight when required.

"If Makenzie is willing, I think it's a good plan," Lily said. "We'll look exactly like what Jose expects, scared women being sacrificed by their men. His guard will be down."

Irish still looked unhappy, but nodded reluctantly. "If she's protected at all times," he insisted. "Someone with eyes on her constantly."

"Me," Rampage volunteered immediately. "I'll be her shadow. First one through the tunnels, positioned directly beneath where the exchange will take place."

That seemed to ease Irish's concerns somewhat. If anyone could protect Makenzie, it was Rampage. He was the club's largest, most physically imposing member, a former Delta operator with a reputation for unstoppable force in combat.

"Never thought we'd see the day when we allowed littles to go into combat," Blade said.

"I don't like it. I know everyone of our protective instincts is crying out to find another way."

But—" He held up his hand before Lily could interrupt him.

"If we have all of us together, working to protect them and keep them safe, and can't come up with another plan...

I have to concede that although they are little, they are mighty and they are adult women and not helpless.

I don't like it, but I can tolerate it. Once.

Only once. And I swear to God, Lily. If anything happens to you... "

"Alright," Lucky conceded. "So we have Lily and Makenzie on the surface, making the exchange. The rest of us come in through the tunnels, positioned to strike when Jose makes his move. What about extraction? Once it all goes down, how do we get everyone out safely?"

"Multiple vehicles," Savage suggested. "Staged at different exit points. Plus air support if we can get it."

"Helicopter?" Arrow asked skeptically. "Bit conspicuous, isn't it?"

"Not if it's already in the area for legitimate reasons," Jay interjected. "There's a hospital twenty miles from the quarry. Their medevac does regular flight training in that sector."

"Can you get us that bird?" Lucky asked.

Jay smiled coolly. "Give me an hour with their scheduling system."

Lily marveled at how methodically they worked through the problem, identifying

risks and solutions, contingencies and backups. This was what Blade had meant when he spoke of brotherhood—not just loyalty, but seamless cooperation, each person contributing their unique skills toward a common goal.

"What about Jose himself?" she asked, bringing them back to the primary target. "What's the end game here? Capture? Elimination?"

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees at her question. The men exchanged looks that spoke volumes.

"Jose doesn't leave that quarry alive," Lucky stated flatly. "After what he and Zeb did to Tim, what he's doing to Marcus, what he planned for you... there's only one appropriate response. We eliminate all of the leadership, make sure another head doesn't grow back."

Lily nodded, neither surprised nor disturbed by the pronouncement. Some people forfeited their right to exist through their own actions. Jose was one of them.

"I want to be clear about something," she said, her voice steady despite the gravity of the discussion. "I'm not going in unarmed. I know the plan requires me to appear vulnerable, to play the sacrificial lamb, but I need to have some means of protecting myself if things go sideways."

"Of course," Blade agreed immediately. "We'll fit you with a gun, something easily concealed but effective at close range."

"And comms," Savage added. "Subdermal transmitter, virtually undetectable. We'll hear everything that happens, and be able to communicate with you."

The planning continued for another hour, covering every contingency they could imagine, assigning roles and responsibilities, timing each element of the operation

down to the second.

Throughout it all, Lily remained focused, asking questions when needed, offering insights from her previous encounter with Jose and his men.

By the time they finished, a comprehensive plan had taken shape, dangerous still, with multiple potential failure points, but the best they could devise given the constraints of time and Jose's demands.

"Get some rest," Lucky instructed as the meeting concluded. "We move out at 0500. Jay will distribute comms and final briefing packets tonight."

As the others filed out of the chapel, Blade remained, his hand still holding Lily's. She could feel the tension radiating from him, see the conflict in his eyes.

"What is it?" she asked softly once they were alone.

"I should be there," he said, frustration evident in his voice. "Not stuck here, useless, while you walk into danger."

"You're not useless," she replied firmly. "You helped plan the entire operation. Your tactical insights will save lives tomorrow, maybe mine included."

"It's not enough," he insisted. "My place is between you and danger. Always."

She moved to kneel in front of his wheelchair, taking both his hands in hers. "And it will be again. But right now, your job is to heal. To be here when I get back." She squeezed his hands. "Because I am coming back, Blade. To you."

The raw emotion in his eyes nearly undid her. For a man who kept himself so controlled, so armored against the world, the naked fear and love she saw there was

staggering.

"I can't lose you," he said simply. "Not now. Not after everything."

"You won't," she promised, though they both knew it wasn't entirely hers to promise. Tomorrow held too many variables, too many potential points of failure. But she would fight with everything she had to keep that promise. To return to him. To the future they'd barely begun to imagine together.

"Come here," he said, tugging her gently into his lap, mindful of his injured chest. She went willingly, curling against him, her head tucked beneath his chin. His arms came around her, strong despite his weakened state.

For a long moment, they simply held each other, drawing comfort and strength from the contact. No words were needed, everything important had already been said. Their feelings laid bare, their commitment to each other clear.

"Stay with me tonight," he murmured into her hair. "In my room. I need... I need to hold you. While I still can."

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be," she assured him. "But Doc will have a fit if you don't stay in the medical room."

Blade made a dismissive sound. "Doc can deal with it. I'm not spending what might be our last night together hooked up to monitors in a hospital bed."

She wanted to argue that it wouldn't be their last night, that she would return from tomorrow's mission, that they would have countless nights ahead of them. But the reality of the danger she was facing couldn't be denied. Tomorrow might indeed be the end.

"Okay," she agreed. "Your room it is."

He nodded, seemingly satisfied, then gestured toward the door. "Would you mind finding Savage? I need him to help me get situated. Doc restricted my pain meds for the planning session, but I could use something stronger now."

The admission of need, of vulnerability, touched her deeply. Blade wasn't a man who easily acknowledged weakness or asked for assistance. That he would do so with her spoke volumes about the trust between them.

"Of course," she said, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips before standing. "I'll be right back."

As she moved toward the door, his voice stopped her. "Lily."

She turned back. "Yes?"

His eyes held hers, intense and earnest. "I'm proud of you. No matter what happens tomorrow, no matter how this all turns out... I want you to know that."

A lump formed in her throat, emotion threatening to overwhelm her. "Thank you," she whispered.

With a final shared look, one that contained all the things still left unsaid between them, she went to find Savage, to help Blade prepare for their night together. A night that might be their last, but one they would make count, regardless.

When Lily returned, Blade was already back in bed, propped carefully against a stack of pillows, his injured shoulder freshly bandaged, a sheen of sweat still clinging to his temples.

Savage had just finished adjusting the IV line and gave her a nod as he stepped past her toward the door.

“He’s all yours,” Savage said with a faint smirk that tried to mask the tension in his jaw. “Don’t let him talk you into anything stupid.”

“I never do,” she said softly, eyes locked on Blade’s.

The door clicked shut behind Savage, and silence settled between them. Not awkward but thick with everything they both felt and couldn’t yet say.

Blade watched her, his gaze dragging over her as if trying to memorize every inch of her face, every detail of her presence. “You came back.”

She smiled faintly, stepping toward the bed. “You didn’t think I would?”

“I hoped,” he admitted, his voice low, rough. “But hoping and believing aren’t the same thing.”

She reached the edge of the bed and sat gently beside him. “You told me you were proud of me,” she said. “That meant more than you know. And I needed to say something back.”

He tilted his head toward her, wincing slightly with the movement. “Yeah?”

“I’m proud of you too. For fighting. For staying alive. For not shutting me out when I know every instinct in you wants to.”

His hand reached for hers, warm and strong despite everything he’d been through. “You make it impossible to shut you out.”

She leaned in, their foreheads brushing, noses nearly touching. The air between them felt charged, electric, every breath thick with anticipation, desperation, need.

“Lily,” he whispered, her name like a prayer on his lips.

She didn’t respond with words. Instead, she kissed him.

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It was slow at first, reverent. Her lips brushed his with careful precision, mindful of his injuries, of the bandage, of his exhaustion. But when his good arm slid around her waist, anchoring her against him, the kiss deepened and turned molten.

All the moments of longing poured into it.

The pain, the fear, the time spent wondering if they'd ever have this moment, if they'd be alive for it.

If they'd ever get to taste each other like this, with the threat of tomorrow's mission hanging overhead, gave the kiss a desperate intensity.

Her hands framed his face, thumbs stroking his jaw as their mouths moved in sync, drinking each other in.

Blade groaned softly, the sound buried in her mouth. His grip tightened on her hip, guiding her carefully to straddle him without touching his injured side. She moved slowly, every motion deliberate, her body instinctively protective of his.

"You okay?" she whispered against his lips.

"Yeah," he rasped, eyes dark and glassy with emotion. "More than okay."

She kissed him again, deeper this time. Tongue sliding against his in a sensual dance that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with soul-deep connection. Her fingers tangled in his hair, while his good hand explored her back, her waist and every inch between.

When they finally pulled apart, breathless and trembling, their foreheads rested together. Silence fell again, but it was full of meaning, of love unspoken, of two hearts holding onto something bigger than the fear.

“I don’t want this to be our last night,” she said quietly.

“Then make it count,” Blade murmured. “Right here. Right now. With me.”

And so she did.

Wrapped in moonlight and each other, they held on for tonight, for whatever came after, or whatever didn’t.

Tomorrow wasn’t promised to either of them, a fact they were both too keenly aware of.

They couldn’t have sex, not in his physical state, not with the medication being pumped into his veins, but there was intimacy in laying together, cuddled in each other’s arms and talking.

They talked and kissed until Blade fell asleep next to her.

Hours later, Lily lay in Blade's arms, her head on his uninjured shoulder, her body curled protectively around his larger frame. The clubhouse had gone quiet, most members either sleeping or on security detail outside. Moonlight filtered through the blinds, casting silver shadows across the bed.

Blade was deeply asleep, the pain medication allowed him to relax. Lily, however, remained awake, her mind cycling through tomorrow's plan, identifying potential risks, visualizing her responses to various scenarios.

Her father had taught her this mental preparation technique years ago. "The body can't go where the mind hasn't been," he'd say. "Run through it in your head first. Again and again. See yourself succeeding. See yourself overcoming."

So she did. She imagined arriving at the quarry. Facing Jose. The exchange for Marcus. The moment when the trap would be sprung.

She imagined herself being strong. Capable. Worthy of the trust these men had placed in her.

Worthy of Blade's love.

Beside her, he stirred slightly, his arm tightening around her even in sleep. Protective. Possessive. As if some part of him sensed her thoughts and sought to comfort her.

"I love you," she whispered, so softly it was barely audible even to herself. "I'll come back to you. I promise."

In response, he mumbled something unintelligible, nuzzling closer to her in his drugged sleep. The simple, unconscious gesture brought tears to her eyes.

This was what she was fighting for. Not just survival, but this. Connection. Belonging. A future with this complicated, fierce, tender man who'd somehow become the center of her world in the span of a week.

A man who saw all of her, the strong and the vulnerable, the fighter and the little girl, and cherished each facet equally.

Eventually, lulled by the steady rhythm of his breathing and the warmth of his body against hers, Lily drifted into sleep. Her last conscious thought was a prayer, not for her own safety, but for the strength to protect those she had come to care for. To be

worthy of their trust. Their brotherhood.

Their love.

Morning came too soon, gray light seeping through the blinds as Lily opened her eyes. For a moment, she remained still, savoring the warmth of Blade's body against hers, the solid presence that had somehow become her anchor in a chaotic world.

Then reality intruded. Today was the day. Jose's deadline. The exchange. The trap.

Carefully, trying not to wake Blade, she began to extricate herself from his embrace. But his arm tightened, refusing to let her go.

"Not yet," he murmured, voice gravelly with sleep and medication. "Stay a little longer."

She settled back against him, unable to deny either of them these few precious moments. "I thought you were still asleep."

"Been awake for an hour," he admitted. "Just watching you. Memorizing you."

The simple confession, delivered in that unguarded morning voice, made her heart clench. "I'm coming back," she reminded him. "This isn't goodbye."

"I know," he said, though the shadow in his eyes betrayed his fear. "But if it was... if this was our last morning... I wouldn't want to waste a minute of it sleeping."

She leaned up to kiss him, soft and sweet, mindful of his injuries. "It's not our last," she insisted against his lips. "I refuse to accept that."

His hand came up to stroke her hair, tenderness in every touch. "So stubborn," he

murmured with fond exasperation.

"You like that about me," she reminded him.

"I love that about you," he corrected. "I love everything about you, Lily Hart. Even the parts that terrify me."

"Like me going on this mission today?"

"Especially that," he agreed. "But I understand why you need to do it. Why you can't stand by while others risk themselves." His eyes held hers, serious now. "Just promise me you'll be careful. That you'll follow the plan. No unnecessary risks."

"I promise," she said solemnly. "I have too much to come back for."

A knock at the door interrupted their moment. "Lily?" Mak's voice called. "We need you for final prep. Twenty minutes."

"Coming," Lily called back. She turned to Blade, regret in her eyes. "I have to go."

He nodded, releasing her reluctantly. "I know. Just... come see me before you leave? One last time?"

"Of course," she promised, pressing a final kiss to his lips before sliding from the bed.

She dressed quickly in the clothes they'd prepared for the mission, the fitted black pants and compression shirt she'd wear under the tactical vest until the final approach, when she'd throw a dress on over it, to maintain the illusion for Jose.

She deftly braided her hair into two side French braids.

Not only would it help with the little persona, it would also keep her hair out of her face and make it harder to grab in a combat situation.

At the door, she paused, looking back at Blade propped up against the pillows. Strong even in his injured state. Fierce even in his vulnerability.

"I love you," she said simply.

"I love you too," he replied, no hesitation. "Now go be the warrior I know you are. And come back to me, baby girl."

She nodded once, drawing strength from his confidence in her, then stepped out into the hallway, closing the door behind her.

Makenzie was waiting, already dressed in the same tactical gear, her expression businesslike. "Ready?"

Lily squared her shoulders, her mind shifting into mission mode. "Ready."

Together, they moved through the clubhouse toward the main area, where the rest of the team would be assembling. With each step, Lily felt herself transforming, shedding the softness of the woman who had slept in Blade's arms, becoming the fighter she needed to be today.

The little girl retreating, the warrior advancing.

Not gone, her little side was never gone, but protected deep within, where Jose and his men couldn't reach her. Couldn't hurt her. Couldn't use her vulnerability against her.

Today, she would be steel. Today, she would be fire.

And tomorrow, God willing, she would be Lily again. Whole. Safe. Home. Little.

In Daddy Blade's arms, where she belonged.

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Blade had never been good at waiting. As a SEAL, he'd learned to endure it when necessary.

Patience was needed for surveillance operations, intelligence gathering, mission prep.

As the club's enforcer, he'd perfected the art of the patient hunt.

He tracked targets, studied patterns, choosing the perfect moment to strike.

But this, sitting helplessly in the clubhouse while Lily walked into danger, this was torture beyond anything he'd experienced before.

"Blood pressure's up again," Doc observed, checking the monitor Blade had reluctantly agreed to wear. "Need to keep that under control if you don't want to tear those stitches."

"I'm fine," Blade growled, not taking his eyes off the tactical display Jay had set up in the main room.

On the large screen, GPS markers tracked the team's progress toward the quarry.

The main convoy consisting of Lucky, Irish, Savage, Arrow, and several trusted club members, moved along the primary approach route.

A separate marker showed Rampage's position, already near the tunnel entrance they'd identified.

And there, at the front of it all, the marker that mattered most.

Lily.

She and Makenzie had departed an hour ago, driving a nondescript sedan with Kylie at the wheel. The official story for Jose: two littles and a club secretary, coming to make the exchange for Marcus. Three women, no obvious threat, exactly as he'd expected.

Except Lily wasn't just a little anymore. She was a warrior now too. And Jose had no idea what was coming for him.

"Your girl will be fine," Doc said, following Blade's gaze to the screen. "She's got the whole club behind her."

"She should have me behind her," Blade replied, frustration evident in his tone. "Beside her. In front of her. Wherever the danger is."

Doc checked the bandages on Blade's chest, his expression professionally neutral. "You'd be a liability in your condition, not an asset. You know that."

He did know it. Logically. Rationally. But logic and reason had little to do with the primal need burning in his chest. The need to protect what was his, to stand between Lily and harm, to tear apart anyone who threatened her.

To kill any bastard that even looked at her wrong.

That was his job. Not to sit here and watch as she put herself in danger.

Mine to protect. Mine to cherish. Mine.

The intensity of that possessive instinct should have alarmed him. A week ago, it would have. But now, it simply was as fundamental as breathing, as undeniable as gravity.

"Any change in Jose's position?" he asked, changing the subject before his emotions betrayed him further.

"Last intel had him already at the quarry with six men," came Trinity's response from her workstation nearby. "They arrived two hours ago, likely securing positions and sweeping for traps."

"And Marcus?"

"Confirmed alive as of thirty minutes ago. Jose sent proof of life via a video showing today's date." Jay's voice hardened slightly. "He's been worked over, but he's conscious and mobile."

That was something, at least. If Marcus could move under his own power, it increased their chances of getting him out alive when the shooting started.

And there would be shooting. Of that, Blade had no doubt.

Jose hadn't gone to all this trouble just to make a clean exchange and walk away. He wanted blood. Revenge. Revenge for Zeb. Revenge for the men Blade had taken out in the cabin. Evil men who were now in hell. They wouldn't hurt another innocent person, but if Jose had his way, The Rejects would continue to hunt, torture and destroy.

Jose wanted a spectacle to reinforce his dominance.

He was after legitimizing his club. If The Watchmen had anything to do with it,

they'd be dismantled beyond the ability to recoup.

No, The Watchmen wouldn't let Jose get his revenge. Not today. What he'd get instead was the fight of his life.

"Comms check," Jay announced, adjusting his headset. "All units report."

One by one, the team leaders radioed in, their voices clear over the clubhouse speakers.

"Lucky, in position at checkpoint one."

"Irish, moving to the secondary approach."

"Savage, eyes on the high ground. Two sentries visible on the north ridge."

"Rampage, at the tunnel entrance. Clear to proceed."

And then, the voice that sent both relief and fear coursing through Blade's veins.

"Lily, twenty minutes from the rendezvous point."

She sounded calm. Focused. None of the tremor he'd have expected from someone facing what she was about to face.

God, he loved her. Her courage. Her determination. Her willingness to risk herself for others.

It terrified him.

"Switch to channel two for team updates," Jay instructed. "Primary channel reserved

for the exchange."

The background chatter faded as Jay isolated the feed from Lily's subdermal comm. Now they would hear everything happening around her, be able to whisper guidance directly to her if needed.

If things went bad.

When things went bad.

Blade leaned forward in his wheelchair, ignoring the pull of stitches and the throb of pain from his chest wound. Physical discomfort meant nothing compared to the psychological torture of listening while Lily faced danger without him.

"Five minutes to the quarry entrance," came Kylie's voice, somewhat muffled as she wasn't wearing a comm herself.

"Remember," Lily replied, her voice steady, "once we're inside, you stay in the car. Engine running, ready to move the moment we have Marcus."

"I know the plan," Kylie assured her. "Just... bring my brother back to me. Please." She hadn't wanted to be a getaway driver. She wanted to be in the action, like she had been in the Army. But, she was too close to the situation, and wanted revenge too badly. They couldn't have any mistakes. She'd eventually given in and went with the plan.

"We will," Lily promised. "One way or another."

Through the comm, Blade heard the car slow, gravel crunching beneath the tires as they apparently approached a checkpoint.

"That's far enough," an unfamiliar male voice called. "Out of the car. Hands where I can see them."

The sounds of car doors opening. Footsteps on gravel.

"We're here to see Jose," Lily said, her voice clear and defiant even through the tiny speaker. "He's expecting us."

"Arms up. Against the car. All of you."

Sounds of movement, of bodies being patted down, searched for weapons. Blade's hands clenched into fists. If those bastards took liberties with the search...

"They're clean," the man reported to someone Blade couldn't hear. "The blonde's the one Jose wants. Other one's another club whore. Driver stays with the car."

"Watch your fucking mouth," Lily snapped, and Blade couldn't help the small, proud smile that briefly curved his lips despite the circumstances. His girl had fire.

A harsh laugh was the only response, followed by, "Move. Boss is waiting."

More footsteps. The crunch of gravel giving way to firmer ground. The quarry floor, Blade guessed from the change in acoustics, the sound bouncing differently off the stone walls surrounding them.

"Right on time," came a new voice, smooth and controlled. Jose. "I do appreciate punctuality."

"Where's Marcus?" Lily demanded, skipping any pretense of pleasantries.

"My, my. Eager, aren't we?" Jose's tone was amused, condescending. "No small talk

first? No negotiation? I'm disappointed."

"I'm not here to entertain you," Lily replied coldly. "I'm here to make an exchange. Me for Marcus. That was the deal."

"So it was," Jose agreed. "But I'm curious. Where's your protector? Where's the fearsome Blade? Too cowardly to face me himself?"

Makenzie's voice joined the conversation, her usual bubbly tone replaced by something harder. "He's injured, no thanks to your men. The club honored the deal anyway. We're here, aren't we?"

"Indeed you are," Jose mused. "Two little girls, all alone in the big bad quarry." A pause. "Bring out our guest of honor."

Shuffling sounds. A grunt of pain. Then a hoarse voice: "Mak? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you too, Marcus," Makenzie replied, relief evident in her voice at finding him alive. "We're getting you out of here."

"No," Marcus protested weakly. "It's a trap. You shouldn't have?—"

"Touching reunion," Jose interrupted. "But let's get down to business, shall we? I've held up my end of the bargain. Marcus is alive, relatively intact. Now it's your turn, little Lily. You for him."

"First, I want to see that he can walk," Lily insisted. "That he can make it to our car unassisted."

Smart girl, Blade thought. Making sure Marcus was mobile enough for the extraction.

Minimizing the time they'd be vulnerable during the transfer.

"Reasonable enough," Jose conceded. "Marcus, if you would demonstrate your ambulatory capabilities for the ladies."

Sounds of movement, shuffling steps. A muffled groan.

"Satisfied?" Jose asked.

"Release him," Lily demanded. "Let him walk to Makenzie. Then I'll come to you."

"So impatient," Jose chided. "But very well. Marcus, you're free to go. Consider your debt to the Rejects paid in full."

More footsteps. The sound of someone stumbling forward.

"Easy," Makenzie murmured, presumably catching Marcus. "I've got you."

"Now your turn, little girl," Jose called. "Come to papa."

The words sent a surge of rage through Blade. The mockery of the daddy dynamic, the perversion of something sacred between Lily and himself... it took every ounce of his self-control not to roar his fury.

"Steady," Jay murmured, noticing his reaction. "She's got this."

Through the comm, they heard Lily's measured footsteps as she apparently moved toward Jose.

"That's it," Jose encouraged. "Such a brave little thing. I can see why Blade's so... attached."

"Just get this over with," Lily replied, her voice tight with controlled fear.

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"Oh, we're just getting started," Jose said, his tone changing from mock kindness to something darker. "Did you really think I'd let any of you leave here alive? After what you've cost me?"

And there it was. The inevitable double-cross.

"Move, move, move!" Lucky's voice cut in on the second channel, ordering the teams into action. "Jose's making his play. All units converge!"

On the tactical display, the GPS markers for the team began moving rapidly toward the quarry center. But they were still minutes away. Minutes Lily might not have. Blade's heart was damn near beating out of his chest.

"Take them," Jose ordered, his voice fading slightly as if he'd stepped back from the confrontation.

The sound of a scuffle came through the comm. A feminine grunt of pain. Makenzie? Lily? Blade couldn't tell. A man's shout. The thud of a body hitting the ground.

"Run!" Lily's voice, urgent and commanding. "Get to the car! Now!"

The crack of a gunshot echoed through the speakers, then another. More scuffling, more shouting.

Blade surged to his feet, ignoring the tearing pain in his chest, the warm wetness that immediately began to spread across his shirt as stitches gave way.

"Sit down!" Doc ordered, trying to restrain him. "You can't help her by bleeding out here!"

"The hell I can't," Blade growled, shoving the smaller man aside. "Give me a weapon."

"Blade, don't—" Jay began, but he cut him off with a look that promised violence to anyone who tried to stop him.

"A weapon," he repeated. "Now."

Jay hesitated, then reached into a drawer, producing a handgun. "At least let Doc redress that wound before you go getting yourself killed," he said, not releasing the weapon yet.

"No time," Blade insisted, holding out his hand. "Our people are in the shit, and I'm not sitting here listening while it happens."

Another gunshot through the speakers. A man's scream of pain. Then Lily's voice again, breathless but determined.

"Fall back to the extraction point! I've got Marcus!"

She was fighting. His Lily, his baby girl, was fighting for her life, for Marcus's life, while he stood uselessly in the clubhouse, miles away.

Unacceptable.

Doc must have seen the resolve in his eyes, the willingness to go through him if necessary.

"There's a bike ready outside. Keys in the ignition.

Blade, you won't make it in time. The action's happening now.

Lily is going to be devastated if you end up dead on the side of the road, bled out from stupidity. "

"I'll be fine and if I don't make it there in time, I'll deal with the aftermath," he replied grimly, checking the weapon before tucking it into his waistband. "Coordinates?"

Jay rattled them off, then added, "At least take some backup. Prospects are on standby."

But Blade was already moving, the adrenaline temporarily masking the worst of the pain from his reopened wound. He'd deal with that later. Right now, only one thing mattered.

Getting to Lily.

The clubhouse was largely empty, most able-bodied members having joined the operation at the quarry. Only a few prospects remained, lounging in the main area until they spotted Blade emerging from the tactical room, blood soaking his shirt, murder in his eyes.

"You," he barked at the nearest one, a young man named Jordan who'd proven himself reliable. "With me. Now."

To his credit, the prospect didn't hesitate, falling in behind Blade as he stalked toward the exit.

Outside, the promised motorcycle waited, a Harley Road King, not Blade's preferred ride, but powerful enough for what he needed. Beside it, a second bike for the prospect.

"We're headed to the quarry," Blade informed him, swinging his leg over the motorcycle with a grunt of pain. "Stay on my six, do exactly as I say, and don't ask questions."

"Got it," Jordan replied, already mounting his own bike.

Through the tiny comm unit still in his ear, Blade could hear the sounds of battle intensifying. Gunfire. Shouts. The distinctive whomp of flash-bang grenades as the club's rescue force presumably emerged from the tunnels beneath the quarry.

"Lily, status!" Savage's voice, urgent and commanding.

No response.

"Lily, do you copy?" Savage again, more insistent.

Still nothing.

Cold fear gripped Blade's heart as he fired up the motorcycle, the engine roaring to life beneath him. Had her comm been damaged? Had she been hit? Captured?

Worse?

"All units, be advised," Lucky's voice cut through the chaos. "Primary package is down. I repeat, primary package is down."

The world seemed to stop spinning. Primary package. Lily. Down.

"Status?" Savage demanded, the single word carrying the weight of the question they were all asking.

A pause that stretched into eternity.

"Unknown," Lucky replied grimly. "Area still hot. Cannot reach her position."

Blade gunned the engine, the motorcycle leaping forward as he tore out of the clubhouse lot, the prospect scrambling to keep up behind him.

Hold on, baby girl. Just hold on. I'm coming.

The journey passed in a blur of speed and pain, Blade pushing the motorcycle well beyond safe limits as they raced toward the quarry. Each mile was a battle against his injured body, against the blood he could feel soaking his shirt, against the fear threatening to overwhelm his tactical mind.

Through it all, he kept the comm channel open, listening to the sporadic updates from the battlefield.

"North ridge secured."

"Two tangos down by the equipment shed."

"Jose spotted moving toward the eastern exit."

"Marcus secure, en route to extraction point alpha."

But nothing about Lily. No updates. No confirmation of her status. Just the terrible silence where her voice should have been.

By the time they reached the outskirts of the quarry, the sounds of combat had largely subsided. Occasional gunshots still echoed through the comm, but the intense firefight appeared to be over.

Blade slowed the motorcycle as they approached a roadblock, club members securing the perimeter, turning away any civilian traffic that might happen upon the scene.

One of them recognized him immediately. "Blade! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Where's Lily?" Blade demanded, ignoring the question as he dismounted, wincing as the movement pulled at his wound.

Decker's expression told him everything he needed to know. "Man, you should talk to Lucky or Savage. They're?—"

"Where. Is. She." Each word was a bullet, precisely aimed.

Decker swallowed hard, then pointed toward the quarry floor. "Medical tent. They set up a triage point by the old office building."

Blade was moving before the man finished speaking, leaving the prospect to deal with the bikes. The pain in his chest was distant now, secondary to the driving need to find Lily.

The quarry was a scene of controlled chaos. Club members secured the area, checking bodies, collecting weapons. A helicopter sat on the far side, the medevac Trinity had arranged, its rotors still as medical personnel worked nearby.

And there, near a dilapidated building that must have once housed the quarry's administrative offices, a large tent had been erected.

Red cross symbols marked it as a medical station.

Blade moved toward it with single-minded focus, ignoring the surprised looks from brothers who clearly hadn't expected to see him here, much less upright and mobile.

At the tent entrance, Savage intercepted him, blocking his path with a firm hand on his uninjured shoulder. "Blade, wait."

"Get out of my way," Blade growled.

"You need to prepare yourself," Savage insisted, not releasing him. "It's bad."

A roaring filled Blade's ears, drowning out everything but the terrible implication of those words. Bad. It's bad.

"Let me see her," he demanded, his voice raw with emotion he couldn't contain. "Now."

Savage studied him for a moment, then nodded once, stepping aside.

The tent was crowded with the injured, club members with various wounds being treated by the medical team. Blade scanned the space desperately, searching for blonde hair, for the small form he'd come to cherish.

There, on a cot at the far end. A still figure, surrounded by medical personnel from the med transport working with urgent efficiency. Blood-soaked bandages. IV lines. Monitoring equipment hastily set up.

And Lily, pale as death, unconscious as they worked to save her.

Blade's legs nearly gave out at the sight. Only iron will kept him upright, moving

forward through the tent toward her. The medical team parted silently at his approach, recognizing either his rank in the club or the devastation on his face.

"Two GSWs," one of them reported quietly as Blade reached the cot. "One to the shoulder, through and through. The other to the abdomen, more complicated. We've stabilized her for transport, but she needs a trauma center. Helicopter's being prepped now."

Blade barely heard them, his focus entirely on Lily's face. So still. So pale. Nothing like the vibrant, determined woman who'd left the clubhouse that morning. Who'd promised to come back to him.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice a rasp.

"She saved Marcus," came Lucky's voice from behind him. "When Jose's men made their move, she put herself between them and Marcus. Took fire meant for him. Then kept fighting, kept him moving until Rampage could reach them." A pause. "She's a fucking hero, Blade."

A hero. Yes. His brave, stubborn, incredible Lily.

He reached out, hand trembling, to brush a strand of blood-matted hair from her forehead. "You promised to come back to me, baby girl," he whispered, too quietly for anyone else to hear. "Don't you dare break that promise now."

Her eyelids fluttered at his touch. A tiny movement, almost imperceptible, but Blade caught it.

"Lily?" he called, hope surging. "Lily, can you hear me?"

Another flutter. Then, miraculously, her eyes opened, just barely, unfocused and

clouded with pain, but open.

"Bl...ade?" Her voice was a whisper, barely audible.

"I'm here," he assured her, carefully taking her hand in his. "I'm right here, baby girl."

"Told you... I'd come... back," she managed, each word clearly requiring immense effort.

A choked sound escaped him, something between a laugh and a sob. "Yes, you did. Now you need to rest and let these people help you."

Her fingers tightened weakly around his. "Jose?"

"Don't worry about him," Blade said firmly. "Just focus on staying with me, okay?"

Her eyes drifted closed again, but her hand maintained its tenuous grip on his. "Kay... Daddy."

The word, spoken with such simple trust despite her pain, nearly broke him. He pressed his forehead to their joined hands, fighting for control.

"Sir," one of the medical team interrupted gently, "we need to move her now. The helicopter's ready."

Blade nodded, understanding the urgency, but found himself unable to release her hand. Unable to let her go, even for the time it would take to transport her to the hospital.

"I'm coming with her," he stated, his tone making it clear this wasn't a request.

The medic glanced at his blood-soaked shirt. "You need treatment yourself."

"I can be treated there. But I'm not leaving her side."

Something in his expression must have conveyed the absolute non-negotiability of this point, because the medic simply nodded. "Alright. But you'll need to let us work during transport."

"Understood," Blade agreed, finally allowing himself to be ushered back slightly as they prepared to move Lily's cot.

Savage appeared at his side as the medical team began the transfer. "Jose escaped," he reported quietly. "Three of his men are dead, two captured. But he slipped away in the confusion."

Blade absorbed this information, a cold, deadly calm settling over him. "He won't get far."

"We'll find him," Savage agreed. "But right now, you need to focus on Lily. On getting yourself patched up too, from the looks of it."

Blade glanced down at his shirt, now thoroughly soaked with blood from his reopened wound. The adrenaline that had carried him this far was beginning to fade, allowing the pain to resurface with vengeance.

"I'll live," he said dismissively. "Unlike Jose, when I get my hands on him."

Savage didn't argue the point, just clapped him carefully on his uninjured shoulder. "Go with her. We've got this handled here."

Blade nodded, already moving to follow as Lily's cot was carried toward the waiting

helicopter. The rotor wash whipped dust and debris around them as they approached, the noise making communication impossible except through gestures.

The medical team loaded Lily first, securing her cot in the specially designed interior.

Then, with surprising gentleness given his size and intimidating appearance, they helped Blade aboard as well, settling him in a seat adjacent to Lily where he could maintain contact with her without interfering with their work.

As the helicopter lifted off, carrying them toward the trauma center, Blade kept his eyes fixed on Lily's face. On the gentle rise and fall of her chest that confirmed she still fought. Still lived.

His baby girl. His warrior.

Jose had tried to take her from him. Had very nearly succeeded. For that, there would be a reckoning. The club would hunt him down, would make him pay for every drop of Lily's blood spilled today.

But that was for tomorrow.

Today, all that mattered was that she lived. That she healed. That she came back to him fully, as she'd promised.

Everything else; vengeance, justice, the future they'd begun to imagine together, all of it hinged on her survival.

"Stay with me, baby girl," he whispered, the words lost in the helicopter's roar but the sentiment burning like fire in his chest. "Just stay with me."

And as if she somehow heard him despite her unconscious state, despite the noise

surrounding them, Lily's fingers twitched against his. The smallest response. The greatest promise.

I'm still here. I'm still fighting. I'm coming back to you.

It was enough. It had to be.

B eep. Beep. Beep.

The steady rhythm of the heart monitor was the first thing Lily became aware of as consciousness slowly returned. The second was a deep, throbbing pain in her abdomen and shoulder that even the fog of medication couldn't completely mask.

The third was the warm weight of someone holding her hand.

She struggled to open her eyes, her lids feeling impossibly heavy. When she finally managed it, the harsh fluorescent lights of the hospital room sent spikes of pain through her skull, forcing her to close them again immediately.

"Lily?" A gruff, familiar voice. Blade's voice. "Baby girl, can you hear me?"

She tried to respond, but her throat was parched, raw. All that emerged was a dry croak.

"Here, ice chips." The sensation of something cold against her lips. "Just a few. Doctor's orders."

She accepted the ice gratefully, the cool moisture a blessed relief to her parched mouth. When she tried again to open her eyes, she did so more cautiously, squinting against the light until her vision adjusted.

Blade's face slowly came into focus above her. He was a mess; haggard, unshaven, dark circles beneath his eyes suggesting he hadn't slept in days. But his eyes... his eyes were alight with relief, with a desperate kind of hope as they met hers.

"Hey," she managed, her voice a raspy whisper.

"Hey yourself," he replied, a tremulous smile breaking through his exhausted expression. "Welcome back."

She tried to take stock of her situation. Hospital room. Monitors. IV lines. The distinct heaviness of bandages on her shoulder and abdomen. Memories began to filter back. The quarry, Jose, the exchange gone wrong. Gunfire. Pain. Darkness.

"Marcus?" she asked, the name taking significant effort to produce.

"He's okay," Blade assured her. "Recovering well. Thanks to you."

The last part was said with a complex mix of pride and something like fear.

"Everyone else?" Her tongue felt clumsy, unwilling to cooperate fully.

"All our people made it," Blade told her. "Some injuries, but nothing life-threatening." He paused, his hand tightening slightly around hers. "Except you."

The gravity in his tone told her how close it had been. "Bad?"

He nodded, swallowing hard. "Two gunshot wounds. The shoulder was clean through and through. But the abdominal shot... it nicked your liver, causing significant internal bleeding. You were in surgery for six hours."

Six hours. No wonder he looked like he hadn't slept. "How long...?"

"Three days," he supplied, correctly interpreting her fragmented question. "You've been in and out of consciousness, mostly out. This is the first time you've been truly lucid."

Three days of her life, gone. Three days of Blade sitting beside her, waiting, hoping.

"Sorry," she whispered, though she wasn't entirely sure what she was apologizing for. For scaring him? For getting shot? For not being more careful?

He shook his head firmly. "No. Don't apologize. Not for being brave. Not for saving Marcus. Not for any of it."

"Guess you aren't going to spank my ass for endangering my life?" she teased.

"Oh, you still have the one coming you earned previously. But not for this. We gave you permission. Never again. Never fucking again. You'll never be in danger again as long as I live."

She tried to smile, though it felt more like a grimace. "Jose?"

A shadow crossed Blade's face. "He got away in the confusion. But don't worry about that now. Focus on healing."

But there was something in his expression, something hard and cold beneath the relief and tenderness, that told her Jose's escape wasn't the end of the story. That Blade had plans for the man who'd nearly taken her from him.

"You haven't left, have you?" she asked, realizing suddenly that the exhaustion in his face wasn't just from worry, but from maintaining a constant vigil.

"No," he admitted. "The hospital staff tried to throw me out on day two. Lucky had to pull some strings with the administrator. The charge nurse in the ER is Samantha. Her husband is the head of the ER and a member of Valhalla. I wasn't leaving your side and they understood."

Of course he hadn't left. Not Blade. Not her protective, possessive enforcer who took his responsibilities so seriously. Who took her safety as his primary mission.

Who loved her.

"Your chest," she said, suddenly remembering his injury. "Are you okay?"

A hint of sheepishness crossed his face. "Tore my stitches coming after you. Doc was... not pleased. But I'm fine. They patched me up here after they stabilized you."

"Coming after me?" she repeated, confused. "But you weren't supposed to be at the quarry."

"I wasn't," he acknowledged. "Not until I heard you were down. Then wild horses couldn't have kept me away."

The simple statement, delivered in that matter-of-fact tone, made her heart clench. He'd come for her. Despite his injuries, despite the doctors' orders, despite everything. He'd come for her.

"I killed two of Jose's men," she said suddenly, the memory surfacing with unexpected clarity. "When they tried to grab Makenzie. I didn't even think about it. I just... reacted."

Blade nodded, unsurprised. "Your training kicked in. Your father's lessons."

"I'm not sorry," she admitted, searching his face for judgment and finding none.

"You shouldn't be," he replied firmly. "They were trying to hurt you, hurt people you care about. You did what you had to do."

His simple acceptance of her actions, of the violence she'd committed, was strangely comforting. No condemnation. No shock that his little girl could take lives when necessary.

Just understanding. Respect, even.

"The club," she began, struggling to organize her thoughts through the fog of medication. "Are they still...?"

"Looking for Jose?" he supplied. "Yes. Savage is leading the hunt. Jose's gone to ground, but he can't hide forever. Not from us."

The cold promise in those words should have disturbed her. Instead, she found herself nodding slightly. Jose had to be stopped. Had to answer for Tim's torture, for Marcus's abduction, for the bloodshed at the quarry.

For nearly taking her away from Blade.

"I should be there," Blade continued, a hint of frustration creeping into his voice. "But I couldn't... I needed to be here. When you woke up."

"I'm glad you are," she whispered, squeezing his hand weakly. "I needed... needed to see you too."

His expression softened. "Doc said once you're awake and stable, we can discuss transferring you back to the clubhouse. He's set up a proper recovery room there. More comfortable than this place. More secure, too."

The thought of leaving the hospital was both appealing and frightening. "Is that safe? Medically, I mean?"

"Only if you're stable," he assured her. "And we'd have round-the-clock care. Doc's got a full team; nurses, medical equipment, everything you'd get here."

She wasn't surprised. The club clearly had significant resources, connections that extended far beyond what a typical motorcycle club might command.

Another reminder that the Spartan Watchmen weren't ordinary bikers, but highly trained former military operating with precision and discipline even in civilian life.

"Okay," she agreed, the prospect of recovering in a more secure, more private location definitely appealing. "When?"

"Let's see how the next twenty-four hours go," he suggested. "If you continue to improve, maybe tomorrow."

She nodded slightly, already feeling exhaustion pulling at her again. Fighting against it, she struggled to keep her eyes open, to stay with him a little longer.

"Rest," Blade told her, noticing her battle. "I'll be right here when you wake up. Promise."

"Don't want... to sleep yet," she protested weakly. "Just got... back to you."

A soft smile crossed his face, tender in a way few people ever got to see. "I'm not going anywhere, baby girl. Neither are you. We have time now."

The reassurance, coupled with the gentle stroke of his thumb across the back of her hand, was enough to let her surrender to the fatigue pulling at her. Her eyes drifted closed, the beeping of the monitor fading as sleep reclaimed her.

The next time Lily woke, the light in the hospital room had changed, suggesting

several hours had passed. The pain was more pronounced now, the medication wearing thin, but her head felt clearer.

True to his word, Blade was still there, his large frame somehow folded into the uncomfortable hospital chair, his hand still holding hers. He appeared to be dozing, his head tilted at an angle that would surely leave him with a crick in his neck.

She watched him for a moment, taking advantage of the rare opportunity to study him unobserved. He was sleeping like a baby, snoring softly.

And he was beautiful. Strong features, the shadow of stubble now a full beard after days without shaving, dark hair falling across his forehead in a way he'd never allow when awake.

Her protector. Her warrior.

Her Daddy, though they'd barely begun to explore that aspect of their relationship before chaos had intervened yet again.

As if sensing her scrutiny, his eyes opened, immediately alert despite his fatigue. His gaze focused on her face, relief washing over his features as he found her awake and lucid.

"Hey," he said, his voice rough with sleep. "How're you feeling?"

"Like I got shot," she replied with a weak attempt at humor. "Twice."

A small smile quirked his lips. "Yeah, that tracks. Pain level?"

"Climbing," she admitted. "But tolerable for now."

He nodded, reaching for the call button. "Nurse should be coming to check your vitals soon anyway. They can adjust your meds."

"Have you slept at all?" she asked, noting the deepening shadows beneath his eyes. "I mean really slept, not just catnaps in that torture device they call a chair."

"I'm fine," he deflected, a non-answer that told her everything she needed to know.

"Blade," she pressed, using what little strength she had to squeeze his hand. "You need rest too. Real rest."

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"I'll rest when Jose's dealt with," he replied, an edge of steel entering his voice. "When you're safe at the clubhouse. Not before."

She recognized the implacability in his tone. This wasn't a battle she would win, not in her current condition.

"Speaking of Jose," she said instead, changing tactics, "what's the latest?"

Blade hesitated, clearly debating how much to share with her in her weakened state.

"All of it," she insisted. "I'm not some fragile flower, Blade. I took two bullets and lived to tell the tale. I think I can handle information."

Pride flickered across his features at her words. "Fair enough," he conceded. "Savage tracked Jose to a private airfield in Wyoming. He was too late to intercept, but we know he was headed east. Probably to his compound in North Carolina."

"The one Lucky mentioned," she recalled.

"Exactly. Jay's been working non-stop to pinpoint the location. We know it's somewhere in the Blue Ridge Mountains, heavily fortified, off-grid. Jose's final fallback position."

"And once you find it?" she asked, though she already knew the answer.

"We end this," Blade stated simply. "Permanently."

The cold finality in his voice should have disturbed her. Instead, she found herself nodding. "Good."

His eyebrows rose slightly at her response.

"What?" she challenged. "Did you think I'd argue for mercy? After what he did to Tim? To Marcus? After he tried to kill me, would have killed you if given the chance?"

"No," Blade admitted. "I just... part of me is still getting used to this version of you. The warrior beneath the little girl."

"They're both me," she reminded him. "Always have been. The little who needs care and protection. And the fighter my father trained to survive in a dangerous world."

"I know," he said softly. "And I... I love both parts. Equally."

The simple admission, delivered with such raw honesty, made her breath catch. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he confirmed, his eyes never leaving hers.

"The little girl who curls up with stuffed animals and needs someone to care for her?"

I cherish her. I want to protect her, provide for her, and be her safe place.

"His voice deepened slightly. "But the warrior who can take down armed men to protect those she cares about?"

Who stands her ground even when terrified?

I admire her. Respect her. Want to fight beside her, not just for her. "

Tears pricked at Lily's eyes, unexpected emotion welling up at his words.

No one had ever understood both sides of her so completely.

Had ever valued both equally. Greg had wanted only the little, the submissive, the dependent.

Others had been uncomfortable with that aspect of her entirely, wanting only the independent, capable woman.

Blade wanted, no he loved , all of her. Just as she was.

"I love you," she whispered, the words feeling insufficient to express the depth of what she felt. "So much it scares me sometimes."

"I know the feeling," he replied with a rueful smile. "Never thought I'd find this. Never thought I'd want it. Then you crashed into my life, and suddenly nothing made sense without you in it."

Before she could respond, a nurse entered the room, clipboard in hand. "Good to see you awake, Ms. Hart," she said cheerfully. "Time for vitals and medication."

Blade released Lily's hand, moving back slightly to give the nurse room to work. But his eyes never left Lily's face, the connection between them unbroken despite the interruption.

As the nurse checked her vital signs and administered a fresh dose of pain medication, Lily found herself thinking about the future.

About what might come after Jose was dealt with, after she recovered.

About the life she might build with this complicated, fierce, tender man who loved all parts of her.

If she survived. If he survived.

A shadow crossed her mind at the thought. Jose was still out there, still a threat. And Blade would be at the forefront of the hunt for him, putting himself in danger yet again.

"Your vitals are improving nicely," the nurse observed, making notes on her chart. "Doctor will be in shortly to examine your wounds. If everything looks good, we might be able to discuss transfer options soon."

"Thank you," Lily replied, managing a small smile despite her growing concern.

Once the nurse had left, Blade returned to her side, immediately noticing the change in her expression. "What is it?" he asked.

"I just realized," she began hesitantly, "when I'm transferred to the clubhouse, you'll be going after Jose."

He didn't deny it. "That's the plan, yes."

"Without me," she added, the words tasting bitter.

"Lily," he said gently, "you've been shot. Twice. You nearly died. You're in no condition to?—"

"I know," she interrupted. "Logically, I know that. But the thought of you going after

him without me there to watch your back..." she trailed off, unable to articulate the fear gripping her heart.

Understanding dawned in his eyes. "You're worried about me."

"Of course I am," she replied with a hint of exasperation. "I love you, you idiot. The idea of you walking into danger while I'm stuck in a bed, useless..." She swallowed hard. "I hate it."

A slow smile spread across his face, surprising her.

"What?" she demanded.

"Now you know how I felt," he pointed out, "watching you go to that quarry without me."

The irony wasn't lost on her. She'd put him through exactly what she was now dreading—the helpless agony of watching someone you love face danger while you remained behind.

"Touché," she conceded. "But that doesn't make it any easier."

"No," he agreed, sobering. "It doesn't. But I'll have the full club behind me. Savage, Lucky, Irish, Rampage, all of them. We'll do this right. A rogue motorcycle club doesn't stand a chance against special forces operators. We are going to get him. End this. Once and for all. Promise, we'll be careful. "

"I'm going to need more than that," she insisted, her eyes holding his. "Promise me you'll come back."

He hesitated, clearly wanting to give her the reassurance she needed but unwilling to

make a promise he might not be able to keep.

"I'll do everything in my power to come back to you," he said finally. "That's the best promise I can make."

It wasn't the absolute guarantee she wanted, but she appreciated his honesty. Better than a hollow promise they both knew might be broken.

"I guess that'll have to do," she sighed.

A knock at the door interrupted them. Doc entered, wearing a white coat that seemed at odds with his tattooed forearms and gruff demeanor.

"Well, look who's finally decided to rejoin the land of the living," he said by way of greeting, his gruff tone belied by the genuine smile on his face. "About damn time."

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Lily replied, managing a weak smile of her own.

"How's she really doing?" Blade asked, his expression serious once more.

Doc moved to the foot of the bed, picking up her chart. "Better than I expected, actually. Vitals are stabilizing nicely. Latest blood work shows infection markers decreasing. Wound sites look clean from the last check."

"So we can move her soon?" Blade pressed.

"I want to examine her myself first," Doc replied, setting down the chart. "And see the hospital doctor's latest assessment. But if everything checks out, we could potentially transfer her tomorrow."

Relief washed over Blade's face. "Good. The sooner she's at the clubhouse, the

better."

Doc nodded his agreement, then turned his attention to Lily. "Mind if I take a look at those wounds? I'll be gentle, promise."

She nodded, bracing herself as he carefully pulled back the hospital gown to examine the bandaged areas. His touch was surprisingly gentle as he checked the wounds, his expression professionally neutral despite what must have been significant trauma to her body.

"Looking good," he pronounced finally, replacing the gown. "You're tough as nails, little one. Anyone else might not have made it through those first twenty-four hours."

"Told you she was a fighter," Blade said, unmistakable pride in his voice.

"That she is," Doc agreed. "Which is why I'm optimistic about the transfer.

I've got everything set up at the clubhouse.

Finally talked him into giving me the two spare apartments instead of just the bay.

We turned it into our own medical ward. Both apartments now have a hospital bed, monitoring equipment, IV stands, and the works.

Plus, Sam was able to hook me up with two nurses we can trust who'll rotate shifts. "

"Sounds like a private hospital wing," Lily observed.

"Pretty much," Doc confirmed. "The club doesn't skimp when it comes to taking care of its own."

Its own. The words warmed her unexpectedly. She'd gone from outsider to protected to... one of them. Family, in their eyes.

"I'll speak with the attending physician," Doc continued, moving toward the door. "Start the discharge paperwork if they're amenable. You just focus on resting, young lady. The hard part's over."

But as he left, Lily couldn't help thinking that the hard part wasn't over at all. Yes, she'd survived. Yes, she was healing. But Jose was still out there, still a threat. And soon, Blade would be heading into danger to end that threat once and for all.

The hard part was the waiting, the worrying, the helpless fear for someone she loved, and it was just beginning.

"Hey," Blade said softly, drawing her attention back to him. "Where'd you go just now?"

"Just thinking," she replied, forcing a small smile. "About the future."

"Good thoughts, I hope?" he prompted.

She hesitated, then decided on honesty. "Scared thoughts," she admitted. "About you going after Jose. About... what happens after, if everything goes well."

"After," he repeated, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. "You mean, you and me? The club? All of it?"

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She nodded. "We haven't exactly had time to figure any of that out, between kidnappings and shootouts and hospital stays."

A rueful smile touched his lips. "Not the most conventional start to a relationship, that's for sure."

"So what happens?" she pressed. "When Jose's dealt with, when I'm healed... what then? Do I go back to my life? Do you go back to yours? Do we... I don't know, try to build something together?"

The questions had been gnawing at her since she'd regained consciousness, since she'd had enough clarity to think beyond immediate survival.

They'd declared their love for each other, yes.

But love alone didn't answer the practical questions of how two people with such different lives might forge a shared future.

Blade was quiet for a long moment, considering her questions with the seriousness they deserved. "What do you want, Lily?" he finally asked. "If you could have any future, what would it look like?"

The directness of the question caught her off guard. What did she want? She'd been so focused on survival for so long, first from her blackmailers, then from Jose and his men, that she'd barely allowed herself to think beyond the next day, the next hour.

"I want..." she began hesitantly, then found her conviction strengthening as she

continued.

"I want a home. Security. The freedom to be all parts of myself without fear or shame.

I want meaningful work that helps others.

And I want... I want you. By my side. As my partner, my protector. .. my Daddy."

The last word emerged as barely more than a whisper, vulnerable in a way that had nothing to do with her physical injuries.

Blade's expression softened, something like wonder crossing his features. "You can have all of that, baby girl. With me. If that's what you want."

"But how?" she pressed. "You're the club's enforcer. You live a dangerous life. I'm... well, I'm me. A civilian with a social work degree and a penchant for stuffed animals and coloring books."

A small smile curved his lips. "A civilian who can field strip a handgun in under thirty seconds and take down armed men to protect those she cares about," he reminded her.

"Fair point," she conceded. "But still. Our worlds are so different."

"Maybe not as different as you think," he replied thoughtfully.

"The club isn't about violence and territory and old-school MC politics.

It's evolved. Most of the brothers have their own little girl to look after. You already fit in really well with them. We do charity work, community outreach. We only take

part in violence when absolutely necessary. To protect our own or our community. To keep Grand Ridge safe. We don't go looking for trouble. "

This aligned with what she'd observed during her brief time with the club, but it still seemed a far cry from the conventional life she'd once imagined for herself.

"And your role as enforcer?" she asked. "That's not exactly a nine-to-five job with weekends off."

"No," he acknowledged. "It's not. But it's also not as all-consuming as it might seem. And..." He hesitated, seeming to debate with himself before continuing. "I've been thinking about stepping back. Not leaving the club, but maybe taking on a different role. Something with less direct risk."

That surprised her. "Because of me?"

"Partly," he admitted. "But also because of me. The man I want to be going forward. The life I want to build." His hand tightened around hers. "The club will always be family. But you... you're something else entirely, Lily. Something I never knew I needed until I found you."

His words filled her with a warmth that had nothing to do with hospital blankets or medication. "So you're saying it's possible? Us? A future together?"

"More than possible," he assured her. "If you want it, we'll make it happen. One day at a time."

The simple confidence in his voice was comforting. Of course, Blade would approach building a life together the same way he approached everything; with determination, careful planning, and an unwavering commitment to success.

"But first," he continued, his expression hardening slightly, "we deal with Jose. Permanently. So we can have that future without constantly looking over our shoulders."

"And then?" she prompted, needing to hear him say it.

"And then," he said, his voice softening again, "we build something together. Whatever that looks like for us. I don't have all the answers yet, baby girl. But I know that I love you. That I want you in my life, by my side. The rest... we'll figure out together."

It wasn't a detailed five-year plan. It wasn't a perfect roadmap for their future. But somehow, it was enough. More than enough. The promise that they would face whatever came next as a team, as partners.

As Daddy and little girl, yes, but also as equals in the ways that mattered most.

"Okay," she whispered, a sense of peace settling over her despite the pain of her injuries, despite the uncertainty still ahead. "Together."

"Together," he echoed, bringing her hand to his lips for a gentle kiss. "Now rest, baby girl. Save your strength. You're going to need it."

As the pain medication began to pull her back toward sleep, Lily held onto Blade's hand like an anchor. The future was still uncertain, still fraught with immediate dangers that needed to be faced.

But for the first time in longer than she could remember, she had hope. Real hope. For healing. For safety. For a life where she could be all of herself, with a man who loved every part of her.

It was enough to make her believe that everything they'd suffered—all the pain, all the fear, all the bloodshed—might somehow be worth it in the end.

If it led to them. Together.

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S ix Months Later

Lily stood on the cabin porch, a warm mug of coffee cradled in her hands as she watched the sun rise over the mountains. October in Colorado painted the landscape in golds and crimsons, the aspen trees shimmering like flames against the backdrop of evergreens.

The air carried the first real bite of autumn; crisp, clean, with the promise of snow in the not-too-distant future. She breathed it in deeply, savoring the quiet and the stillness. The peace.

Six months ago, she couldn't have imagined this.

Six months ago, she'd been fighting for her life in a hospital bed, her body torn by bullets, her future uncertain.

Six months ago, The Rejects and their reign of terror had still carried weight, had still been a cloud shadowing every moment of happiness.

Now, Jose was gone. The threats were neutralized. And she was here, in this beautiful place, with the man who had somehow become the center of her world in the midst of chaos and violence.

The cabin door opened behind her, and strong arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her gently back against a solid chest. She leaned into the embrace without hesitation, a smile curving her lips as Blade's scent enveloped her; soap, leather, and something uniquely him.

"You're up early," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"Couldn't sleep," she admitted. "Too excited about today."

She felt his chuckle as much as heard it, a rumble against her back. "Nervous?"

"A little," she confessed, turning in his arms to face him. "It's a big step."

His eyes, warm and indulgent, studied her face. "Having second thoughts?"

"Not for a second," she assured him firmly. "It's just... it makes it real, you know? Official."

"It's already real," he reminded her, one hand coming up to brush a strand of hair from her face. "Has been since that day at the quarry. Maybe even before."

She nodded, knowing he was right. Their commitment to each other had been forged in fire, tempered in blood and pain and sacrifice. The papers they would sign today were just a formality, just official recognition of what they already knew to be true.

Still. There was something significant about making it legal. About standing before witnesses and declaring their intent to build a life together.

"What time is everyone arriving?" she asked, glancing at her watch.

"Lucky said noon," Blade replied. "Trinity's handling all the legal paperwork, should have everything ready to go."

"And Doc?" she asked. "He's definitely coming?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Blade assured her. "None of them would."

The "them" in question was the club's inner circle; Lucky and Trinity, Savage and Savannah, Irish and Makenzie, Rampage, Arrow and Emilee, Kylie and Marcus (now fully recovered from his ordeal), and Doc, who had saved both their lives multiple times over.

Family, really, though not in any conventional sense of the word.

Not by blood, but chosen. And sometimes, the family you chose was better than the one you were given.

Although, she and Blade had wonderful families, and they would celebrate their marriage with all of them later this summer.

This ceremony was planned for a small, intimate group. She wouldn't have it any other way.

"Good," she said, the last of her nervousness easing. "I want them all here for this."

Blade's arms tightened slightly around her, his expression softening. "They love you, you know. All of them. Not just because you're with me, but because of who you are. What you've done for the club."

The simple statement warmed her more than the coffee in her hands.

She'd found more than just Blade in the chaos of the past six months. She'd found acceptance. Belonging. People who saw all of her—the little and the warrior both—and valued her for exactly who she was. She'd spent six months playing and running through the clubhouse with the girls, getting her ass spanked too often by Blade, but also being included as an adult when big decisions needed to be made. Some of the girls lived as littles twenty-four seven, but she neither judged them for it nor did they judge her, for not being capable of doing so. She'd found the perfect

balance not only in her relationship with Blade but also with the entire Club.

"I love them too," she said softly. "Never thought I'd end up part of an MC family, but..."

"But it fits," he finished for her. "Like you were always meant to be there."

She nodded, leaning up to press a gentle kiss to his lips. "Like I was always meant to be with you."

His eyes darkened at her words, desire and tenderness mingling in their depths. That look made her breath catch and sent heat spreading through her body.

"Come back to bed," he suggested, his voice dropping to the tone that never failed to make her shiver. "We've got hours before they arrive."

"And the breakfast dishes?" she asked, though she was already setting down her coffee mug, already leaning into him.

"Will still be there later," he replied with a small smirk. "Some things are more important."

She couldn't argue with that logic. Especially not when he bent to scoop her into his arms, carrying her as if she weighed nothing at all, back into the warmth of the cabin and toward their bedroom.

He laid her gently on the bed they shared, his eyes never leaving hers as he followed her down. Even now, with her completely healed, he was careful with her, not treating her as fragile, exactly, but as precious. Something to be cherished and protected even in passion.

"I love you," she whispered as his body covered hers. "My Daddy. My protector. My partner."

"And I love you, baby girl," he replied, his voice rough with emotion. "More than I have words for."

Words became unnecessary after that, their bodies speaking a language of commitment and need and love that transcended verbal expression.

The connection between them; physical, emotional, spiritual had only deepened with time and healing, growing stronger with each challenge faced, each obstacle overcome.

His lips found hers, tender at first, then increasingly urgent.

She sighed into his mouth as his hands traced reverent paths along her sides, each touch igniting her skin.

She arched against him, savoring the friction of his bare chest against her breasts.

His heartbeat pounded against her own, a rhythm as ancient as time itself.

When his mouth traveled down her neck, she gasped, fingers clutching at his shoulders, nails leaving crescent moons in their wake.

"Please," she breathed, not even sure what she was asking for. Everything. All of him.

He understood without words. He always did. His hand slid between them, finding her slick and ready. She whimpered as his fingers worked their magic, building her pleasure with practiced ease. The coil of tension wound tighter in her belly, her thighs

trembling against his hips.

"That's it, baby," he murmured against her collarbone. "Let me feel you."

She cried out as he pushed her to the edge, then eased back, denying her release. The sweet torture continued until tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. She was floating, drowning, burning—all at once.

When he finally positioned himself at her entrance, their eyes locked again.

In that moment, she saw everything clearly, all of his devotion, his desire, his absolute certainty that she was his world.

He pushed inside with agonizing slowness, filling her completely, the stretch and burn exquisite in its intensity.

"God, you feel fucking amazing," he groaned, his voice strained with the effort of holding back.

They moved together, finding their rhythm instantly.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him deeper with each thrust. The headboard knocked against the wall, keeping time with their increasingly desperate pace.

Sweat slicked their bodies, the scent of their lovemaking filling the air around them.

His forehead pressed against hers as he drove into her, his breathing ragged. She felt herself climbing higher, her body tightening around him. The universe narrowed to just this. To their connection, this moment, this man who had saved her in every way a person could be saved.

"I'm close," she panted, her fingers digging into his back. "So close..."

"Come for me," he commanded softly, reaching between them to circle her clit.

"Come right now little girl."

The pleasure crested, white-hot and overwhelming. She shattered around him with a broken cry of his name, her body convulsing in waves of ecstasy. He followed instantly, his release pulsing deep inside her as he buried his face in her neck, groaning her name like a prayer.

They clung to each other through the aftershocks, neither willing to let go. Her limbs felt heavy, sated, as he carefully rolled to the side, keeping her tucked against him. Their breathing gradually slowed, heartbeats returning to normal, though the connection between them remained unbroken.

She traced lazy patterns on his chest, watching goosebumps rise in the wake of her fingertips.

The vulnerability in these moments after always took her breath away, how completely they belonged to each other, how safe she felt in his arms. They'd been laying there for a few minutes when he propped up on an elbow and looked down at her.

"Want to go again?"

"Hmmm. I don't know. Think you can handle it?"

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He wasted no time flipping her over and onto her stomach.

His hand came down on her ass several times, hard.

She squealed and wiggled, her laughter filling the air around them.

She loved this. Every moment of it. He pulled her up until she was on all fours and without hesitation thrust into her, hard.

The first time he made love to her. This time?

This time he fucked her hard and fast, claiming her completely.

She didn't ask to orgasm this time, she couldn't catch her breath, couldn't get the words out.

She came apart, screaming one word into the air.

Daddy.

Later, tangled in sheets and each other, pleasantly exhausted and utterly content, Lily traced idle patterns on Blade's chest, her fingers ghosting over the scars that told the story of their beginning.

The bullet wound that had nearly taken him from her.

The marks of their shared fight for survival.

"Penny for your thoughts," he murmured, his own hand drawing lazy circles on her bare shoulder.

"Just thinking about how far we've come," she replied honestly. "From that first day at the motel. Me, half-dead from dehydration and fear. You, all intimidating enforcer with your rules and your orders."

A small smile curved his lips at the memory. "You were a mess," he agreed. "But still stubborn as hell, even then."

"Look where that stubbornness got us," she pointed out, gesturing to their entwined bodies, the peaceful bedroom, the life they'd built together.

"Wouldn't change a thing," he said simply. "Not even the hard parts. Not if they all led here."

She understood what he meant. The suffering had been real, the danger genuine. But without those crucible moments, they might never have found each other. Might never have discovered the depth of what they could be together.

"Me neither," she agreed, laying her head on his chest, listening to the steady, reassuring beat of his heart. "Though I could have done without getting shot. Twice."

His chest rumbled with quiet laughter. "Fair point, baby girl. Fair point."

They dozed for a while, drifting in and out of sleep, content in each other's arms. Outside, the sun continued its climb into the October sky, painting the bedroom in warm golden light that promised a beautiful day ahead.

A perfect day for what they had planned.

Eventually, reluctantly, they rose to shower and dress. As Lily stood before the bathroom mirror, applying minimal makeup, she studied her reflection. The woman looking back at her was both familiar and strange. She was still recognizably herself, but changed in fundamental ways.

Stronger. More confident. Her eyes clearer, her stance more assured. The physical scars from her ordeal were fading, but the inner transformation remained. All the growth, the resilience, the certainty of who she was and what she wanted.

"You look beautiful," Blade said from the doorway, his eyes meeting hers in the mirror.

She smiled, turning to face him. He'd dressed with more care than usual wearing dark jeans, a crisp button-down shirt, his leather vest the only concession to his usual style. His hair was neatly combed, his beard trimmed to precision.

"So do you," she replied, reaching up to straighten his collar. "Very handsome."

He caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. "Ready for this?"

"More than ready," she assured him. "You?"

"Been ready since the day we built the LEGO castle together," he said simply.

Together, they moved through the cabin, preparing for their guests.

The place had been transformed in the six months since they'd first arrived.

What had started as Blade's spartan retreat now felt like a proper home.

Photographs hung on walls once bare. Colorful throws softened the leather furniture.

Bookshelves held a curious mix of tactical manuals and children's storybooks, a visual representation of the duality they both embraced.

It was their space. Their sanctuary. Equal parts adult haven and little girl's comfort zone, with Blade's protective presence the common thread that wove it all together.

As they worked side by side in the kitchen, preparing food for their guests, Lily marveled at how naturally they moved together. How easily they'd fallen into this domestic rhythm, despite the unconventional path that had brought them here.

"Think they'll be surprised?" she asked, arranging freshly baked muffins on a platter.

Blade considered this, slicing fruit with the same precision he applied to everything. "Some of them, maybe. Lucky and Savage probably saw it coming. They know me better than most."

"And the others?"

He shrugged. "Does it matter? It's our decision. Our life."

"No," she agreed. "It doesn't matter. I was just curious."

They worked in comfortable silence for a while longer, until the sound of vehicles approaching drew their attention. Through the window, they could see a procession of motorcycles and cars winding up the mountain road toward the cabin.

"They're early," Lily observed, glancing at the clock.

"Eager," Blade corrected with a small smile. "They've been waiting for this as long as we have."

She felt a flutter of nervous excitement in her stomach as they moved to the porch to greet their guests. One by one, the club members arrived. Lucky and Trinity first, followed by Savage and Savannah, then the rest in quick succession.

There were hugs, handshakes, excited chatter as everyone gathered in the cabin's main room. Lily found herself passed from embrace to embrace, receiving whispered congratulations and warm expressions of support from each of the club's members and their partners.

Makenzie squeezed her particularly tight. "So happy for you," she whispered. "You deserve this. Both of you."

"Thank you," Lily replied, her throat tight with unexpected emotion. "For everything. For being my friend when I needed one most."

"Always," Makenzie promised. "That's what sisters do."

And they were sisters, in all the ways that mattered. Bound not by blood but by choice, by shared experience, by the unique understanding that came from walking similar paths.

When everyone had arrived and settled in with drinks and food, Lucky called for attention, his imposing presence naturally commanding the room.

"We all know why we're here today," he began, his voice carrying easily through the space. "To witness and celebrate Blade and Lily's commitment to each other."

Murmurs of agreement and a few good-natured whistles filled the room. Lily felt Blade's arm slip around her waist, drawing her close to his side.

"Trinity," Lucky continued, "I believe you have the paperwork?"

Trinity stepped forward, sleek and efficient as always, a folder in her perfectly manicured hands. "All prepared," she confirmed. "Just needs signatures and witnesses."

She placed the folder on the coffee table, opening it to reveal the documents inside.

They'd been Simple legal forms, really, but their significance loomed large in Lily's mind. Trinity had gotten ordained just for them. Although, the club might be needing her services for other couples, she'd said.

A deed of ownership. Adding her name alongside Blade's for the cabin property.

A wedding certificate, granting each of them legal rights in the other's affairs.

And most importantly, to her, a BDSM contract, that Blade had labelled as adoption papers.

A written recognition of the Daddy/little girl dynamic that formed the foundation of their relationship, giving Blade certain guardianship rights in specific circumstances they'd carefully outlined.

Was it necessary? No. But, for them, it was another layer of commitment.

Daddy Blade was being given certain rights to Lily.

Rights Lily consented to. Their rules were carefully documented with discipline outlined in bullet points on page two.

It wasn't conventional. Nothing about their relationship was. But it was perfect for them, a formal acknowledgment of the unique bond they shared.

"Before we proceed," Lucky said, his expression serious, "I want to be clear that this has the full support and blessing of the club. Lily Hart has proven herself a worthy addition to our family, and this formalization of her relationship with our brother Blade is cause for celebration."

Nods and murmurs of agreement circled the room.

"Furthermore," Lucky continued, "the club has voted unanimously to extend official Old Lady status to Lily, with all the protections and privileges that entails."

This announcement caught Lily by surprise. She glanced up at Blade, who was watching her reaction with a small smile. He'd known, then. Had probably been part of the discussion.

Old Lady status was significant in MC culture.

It meant more than just being someone's partner, it meant official recognition, protection from the entire club, a place in the hierarchy that commanded respect.

Lucky stepped forward and gave her a jacket.

On the back, a large patch. Property of Blade.

"I... thank you," she managed, overwhelmed by the gesture. "That means a lot."

"You've earned it," Savage told her from across the room. "Many times over."

With the formalities established, they proceeded to the signing. One by one, they worked through the documents, Blade and Lily signing each, witnesses adding their names where required. Trinity guided them through the process with practiced efficiency, ensuring everything was legally sound.

When the last signature was in place, a cheer went up from the assembled group. Bottles of champagne appeared, glasses were distributed, and Lucky raised his in a toast.

"To Blade and Lily," he declared. "May their road be smooth, their enemies few, and their bond unbreakable."

"To Blade and Lily!" the others echoed, glasses raising in unison.

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As Lily sipped her champagne, looking around at the faces of those who had become her family, she felt a sense of completion she'd never experienced before. Of belonging. Of rightness.

Beside her, Blade slipped an arm around her waist, pulling her close. "Happy?" he asked quietly.

She nodded, leaning into his solid warmth. "More than I ever thought possible," she admitted. "Though it still feels a little surreal."

"What part?" he asked, curious.

She gestured to the room, to the signed papers, to the life they'd built. "All of it," she replied honestly. "Six months ago, I was alone, terrified, being hunted by people who wanted to hurt me. And now..."

"And now you're mine," he finished simply. "Legally, officially, completely."

"Yours," she agreed, the word carrying none of the fear or hesitation it might once have held. Only certainty.

The celebration continued through the afternoon and into the evening.

Food was shared, stories were told, laughter filled the cabin that had once been so solitary and silent.

Through it all, Blade remained close to Lily's side, his presence a constant

reassurance, a reminder of the bond they'd formalized but had felt long before any papers were signed.

Eventually, Lily found herself back on the porch, watching as the first stars appeared in the darkening sky. The October air had grown chilly with nightfall, but she didn't mind. The cold felt clean, purifying. A reminder that she was alive, something that, six months ago, wasn't a certainty.

Footsteps behind her announced Blade's approach. Without a word, he draped a warm blanket around her shoulders, then moved to stand beside her, his gaze following hers to the stars above.

"I used to be afraid of the dark," she said softly. "After those men tried to attack my mother and I. Couldn't sleep without a light on for years."

He absorbed this information, giving it the consideration it deserved. "And now?"

She smiled, leaning into his side as his arm came around her. "Now I know the difference between darkness and danger," she replied. "And I know that not all monsters hide in the shadows."

"Some wear suits and run motorcycle clubs," he agreed wryly.

"And some monsters turn out not to be monsters at all," she continued. "Just men. Complicated, fierce, protective men who become the safest place in the world for a girl who never thought she'd feel safe again."

His arm tightened around her at those words, emotion darkening his eyes. "I'll always be that for you," he promised. "Your safe place. Your protector. Your Daddy. For as long as you want me."

"Forever, then," she said simply. "Because I'll always want you. Need you. Love

you."

He bent to kiss her, soft and tender at first, then with deepening passion as she responded eagerly. When they finally parted, both slightly breathless, the first flickers of desire kindling between them, a comfortable silence settled around them.

Inside the cabin, they could hear the sounds of their chosen family. The conversation, laughter, the clink of glasses and plates.

"We should go back in," Lily said eventually, though she made no move to do so just yet. "Be proper hosts."

"They're fine," Blade assured her. "They understand."

And they did, she knew. Understood the preciousness of quiet moments like this. Understood the value of connection after chaos. Understood that what she and Blade had found together was rare and worth protecting, worth celebrating, worth giving space to grow.

"Thank you," she said suddenly, turning to face him fully.

"For what?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

"For finding me," she replied. "For saving me. For seeing me—all of me—and loving what you saw."

His expression softened, one hand coming up to cup her cheek. "Thank you for being worth finding," he countered. "For fighting to survive. For letting me be what you needed, even when it scared you."

She turned her face to press a kiss into his palm. "We saved each other, I think."

"We did," he agreed. "And we'll keep doing that. Every day. In all the ways that matter."

As they stood together under the vast Colorado sky, the stars multiplying above them, the sounds of family surrounding them, Lily felt the rightness of it all settle deep in her bones. The journey had been brutal at times, painful and bloody and terrifying.

But it had led here. To this man. This life. This love.

To a place where she could be both strong and vulnerable. Both protector and protected. Both warrior and little girl.

To Blade, who cherished every facet of her being with equal devotion.

To home.

And in the end, that made every step of the difficult path worth traveling.

Every. Single. Step.

Ready for Slash's story? [Click here to preorder Slash.](#)

"Be a good girl, Midnight ... and let Daddy take care of everything."

Nicole Carmichael has spent the last year looking over her shoulder—dodging her obsessed ex and shielding her little girl, Kayleigh, from the chaos that threatens to tear their world apart. But when danger comes riding in on two wheels, it's not the enemy at her door, it's her salvation.

Slash, a gruff but golden-hearted former Delta Force operator, has one mission: protect Nicole and her daughter from the Rejects MC, and anyone else who dares lay a finger on them.

He doesn't expect the single mom with haunted eyes and a backbone of quiet steel to gut him with one shy smile...

or to make him feel things he thought he'd buried in the sands of war.

He's all rough edges, blunt commands, and brutal justice, but with Nicole, he's something softer. Something deeper. Something dangerously close to hers. And when he sees how desperately she needs someone to take the weight off her shoulders... he realizes she doesn't just need a protector.

She needs a Daddy.

While the Spartan Watchmen MC prepares for an all-out war with their deadliest rivals, Slash is fighting his own battle—to earn Nicole's trust, keep Kayleigh safe, and prove he's the only man who can give them the life they deserve.

But Nicole's past isn't done with her yet, and the clock is ticking.

This time, it's not just about honor.

It's personal.

And Slash doesn't leave his girls behind.

A Daddy Dom MC romance filled with danger, devotion, and one battle-hardened biker who falls head over steel-toed boots for the one woman who brings him to his knees.