



Maddog (Black Reign MC #10)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Who knew we'd get ambushed by the cartel on our way to a village deep in the Amazon jungle?

Holly: I was sick as a kid. Leukemia. Felt like someone always had to drop everything to take care of me. Hate being dependent on people now, so I try to do everything myself. When my best friend takes up with a creep and won't believe me when I tell her something's not right with the man, I decide it's safer (for her) if I go with her on a trip to Columbia he's organizing. Bad news: I'm right. Fortunately the most annoying man I've ever come to count on thinks it's his job to rescue me. This time, I might just let him. And that's where the trouble starts...

Jax: I've known Holly nearly all her life. I've been her protector and the person she wants most when things go horribly wrong, which they do, more often than not. To say we have a contentious relationship is an understatement. I put a claim on Holly she never accepted, but it's time to force the issue. Not because she doesn't love me. Because she's afraid history is doomed to repeat itself. She's wrong. I'll always come for her when she needs me. Like it or not, Holly's more than my responsibility. No matter the cost, she's mine.

Warning: Contains scenes of graphic violence, adult content they may be triggers for some readers. HEA, no cheating, and a possessive man who'll do anything to keep his woman safe, even if it's from herself, and less than 100 uses of the word JUST.

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Jax

“Let me get this straight.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to stave off the headache threatening to split my skull open. Funny how that worked when I talked to Holly. “You’re voluntarily going to a country with a level four travel advisory . Unarmed. With a bunch of college students. With no security to speak of. Have I got that right?” I tried to keep my voice low and even, to fight my way through the rage that she’d be so cavalier with her life.

“Sweet God, could you be a bigger buzzkill?” Holly, ever the little ray of sarcastic sunshine, sounded like she was exasperated with me. Or, quite possibly, like she thought I was being unreasonable.

“Answer the question, Holly.” If I let her distract me, she’d talk her way around the point I was trying to make and hang up before I could forbid her from going. Not that it was going to help. Holly always did what she wanted. Usually, only her mother was able to knock some sense into her.

“You do realize you’re not the boss of me. Right?”

“I realize that, when you’re considering putting your life in danger for no good fuckin’ reason, someone has to rein you in. I’m surprised Wrath even considered letting you go, much less gave his blessing.” The silence on the other end was deafening. “You didn’t tell him.” It wasn’t a question.

“Again, not your business, Jax. This is my life and I’m living it. If I get into trouble, I’ll accept the consequences.”

“Even if it costs you your life?” I tried to go for a matter-of-fact tone, but my words came out a low growl.

“Even if it costs me my life.”

Neither of us spoke for long moments, the silence so long I was afraid the call had dropped. Then she sighed.

“Look, Jax. I’ve got a sat phone. Even if there’s no cell coverage where we’re at, Shotgun will be able to see where I am. He and Esther are great with that shit. If we get into trouble, I can call him. They can either send someone to come get me or let me work it out myself. I’m only agreeing to any of this so my mom doesn’t worry.”

“Did you at least tell Celeste? Because I don’t see your mother letting you do something like this at all.”

“No one lets me do anything, Jax.” Holly’s tone was hard and firm. She was barely out of her teens, yet I’d never met anyone more in control of her life. Which was to say she lived in utter chaos most of the time, but that was exactly the way she liked it. “But yes. I told her what I was doing. She’s not happy about it, but she knows she can’t talk me out of it.”

“Did you ever stop to think how your mother and father would feel if you got hurt or killed? I realize it could happen anywhere, but going to Columbia increases those chances exponentially over anywhere in the U.S. She almost lost you once and gave everything she had to keep you alive. Don’t you think you’re being incredibly selfish?” I winced. Yeah, this wasn’t my finest moment. Had I been trying to push her away I couldn’t have done a better job.

“Go fuck yourself, Jax.” She disconnected the call.

“Motherfuck!” I hissed the expletive under my breath. I knew better. I fucking knew better. The best way to get Holly to do anything other than what you wanted her to do was to tell her she had to do it. Pushing her into doing what you wanted was even worse. Trying to lay a guilt trip on her? Yeah. I’d just guaranteed Holly’s heading straight to Columbia on that humanitarian aid expedition.

I pressed her contact and waited for her to answer the Facetime call. She let it go to voicemail once, so I tried again. She picked up this time and... yeah. She hated me right now.

“Got nothin’ else to say to you, asshole.” I recognized that mulish look on her face. She thought I was going to try to talk her out of going again, but I knew better than that.

“Can you give me two days, Holly? Two days and I’ll go with you. You can still do what you do with your college friends, but I can make sure you’re safe.”

“We’ve got plenty of security. There’s no need for that.”

“Holly. Two days.”

She shrugged one delicate shoulder, a look of indifference and disinterest on her face. “Sorry, Jax. I don’t make the schedule. Plane leaves tomorrow morning at six.”

I wanted to throttle the younger woman. She was constantly bucking me, doing exactly the opposite of what I wanted her to do. To be fair, I was twelve years older than she was, and had decided she’d be mine long before I should have. I’d been sixteen when she came to the compound with Wrath and Celeste. She’d been a precocious but sickly child of four. She’d survived leukemia like a champ, never letting anything get to her. No matter how sick I’d seen her from the chemo, the girl had no “quit” in her. I knew because I’d been with her for the last few treatments.

Which she'd not appreciated. I'd insisted, because she'd been so mad at me she hadn't focused on all the needles and unpleasantness. I'd been happy to take her wrath then, even if what remained of the kid in me had been slightly hurt that she hadn't accepted me as her protector.

Even when she was so young, I'd been drawn to her. She was this little pixie who'd absolutely cut you if you displeased her, but needed someone looking after her. I'd taken that task on my own, growing into a man protecting the girl until she'd started becoming a woman. The plain truth was, it scared me the first time I caught sight of her in a bikini at the pool. Freaked me the absolute fuck out. Once I'd come to terms with my feelings for Holly, I'd inserted myself into her life but kept playing the part of mean and annoying older brother. Why? Because I knew if she learned to stand up to me, she always would. And if she could stand up to me, she could stand up to anyone.

"Holly, I'm half a fuckin' world away right now. All I'm asking for is two fuckin' days. It's the right thing to do and you know it. I may be a bastard, but I would never let anything happen to you."

Her expression didn't change. "I don't need your protection, Jax. Shotgun and Esther have my back. I'll be fine. Besides, the father of one of the students going is a senator. They always have security."

"And their priority will be the senator's kid. They won't give two shits about you or the others."

"And if you were with me, you'd give a shit about the others?" Oh, the sarcasm was strong with this one...

"Of course not. But I'd care about you. I'd be the one protecting you and I'd do it with my life."

She snorted, scowling at me over the video. “Dramatic much?”

“Holly --”

“No. You listen to me! Nothing’s going to happen. And if it does, I’ll deal. I don’t want or need your help, Jax.”

“You’re wrong there, baby. You need all my help you can get. But I’m telling you right now, if you don’t wait for me, when I find you, I will turn you over my knee and blister your bare ass until you don’t sit for a fuckin’ week.”

Oh, that got her attention. The resolution of the new phones Shotgun had gotten from Argent Tech recently was so great, I could actually see the sweat erupt on her brow. She sucked in a breath and her face and neck flushed a becoming pink. The pulse at her throat beat like mad. All of which, of course, meant pissed her the fuck off something fierce.

“Go find something to do and stay out of my life. Mm’k?” She gave me a saccharine smile before disconnecting the call again.

“I’m really gonna spank that little brat when I see her again.”

“Didn’t know you had a kid, Jax.” Loki clapped me on the back as he walked by. The grin on his grizzled face told me he was fully aware I didn’t actually have a kid.

“You know better.” I fell into step beside him as we made our way to the transport back to the States. We were headed home from a high-profile protection detail with ExFil. Thankfully, it had been an exceedingly boring assignment. I knew Holly had been planning something but hadn’t figured out what it was when the assignment came down. So, of course, she waited until I left before letting anyone know she was going.

“Hmm. Woman, then.”

“Isn’t it always?”

Loki appeared to think about that, giving it serious consideration. “You know. I think you might be right about that.”

There was a beat of silence before we both chuckled. Again, Loki clapped me on the back and we boarded the big troop carrier headed back to South Carolina and ExFil.

I strapped myself in and pulled out my phone. I shot a text to Shotgun, needing him to look into what the fuck was going on. If Shotgun wouldn’t help me, I’d take it to Holly’s daddy. No way Wrath approved of this or would allow it. I’m surprised El Diablo hadn’t put a stop to it because no way he didn’t know.

Me: What outfit is Holly going to Columbia with ?

Shotgun: Holly’s going to Columbia ?

Me: What she said .

There was a long pause before the dots signifying Shotgun’s reply appeared.

Shotgun: There’s a charter flying out of Miami International. Fifteen passengers, including one VIP. Looks like she’s a passenger .

Me: When’s it leave ?

Shotgun: 6PM tonight .

The little witch had lied to me! Probably hadn’t expected I’d be thorough enough to

actually check myself. She knew I was out of the country. She also knew how these tours worked and the timeline. Little hellion likely thought I'd wait until I got back to South Carolina. The flight was only ten hours, so when I landed I'd still have a couple of hours before she was supposed to leave.

Me: Find out if Wrath knows. Stop the fuckin' plane .

Shotgun: On that already, but they already left. They were ready early and there was a window for them to depart .

I was truly going to beat her ass when I got to Holly. Right there in front of God and everyone. Her daddy'd have to get over it.

Me: Get details. I'll talk to Samson and see if he'll get El Diablo to approve transport to her .

Shotgun: He will. What would you do if he didn't ?

Me: Steal something and go get her myself .

Shotgun: ??????????

Me: Smartass !

Cain, our boss at ExFil, didn't spare any expense to keep us all safe. As a result, we all had a personal sat phone. It's how I'd been able to contact Holly before, and now Shotgun. I debated my next move. Shotgun would contact Wrath. But if he heard this from someone other than me, he might think I would avoid coming to him with something to do with Holly.

"Fuck." I swore as I pulled up Wrath's number. It went to voicemail, so I tried again.

He picked up on the third ring this time.

“What the fuck do you mean Holly’s run off to Columbia?” his voice roared through the phone and I winced. The Bluetooth was connected to the headset in my helmet, so there was no way to get away from a very pissed-off Wrath.

“Don’t yell, you bastard,” I growled. “I’m on my way back to headquarters.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the second you found out about this?”

“Because I found out about it ten minutes ago. The first five was spent loading my gear onto the transport, the next five texting Shotgun for information. You were my first actual call. Jesus!”

“Shotgun’s preparing you a flight plan. What do you need?”

That kinda threw me. “You’re sending me after her? Voluntarily?”

“Who the fuck else would I send after her? Are you saying you don’t want the job?”

“Oh, I was going whether or not you wanted me to. I just didn’t expect you to actually agree with me.”

“Dumbass. You’ve loved Holly since you first saw her when she was four. Only person who has as big a reason for needing her safe as Celeste and I do, is you.”

I took a couple of deep breaths before I spoke next. “To be clear, Wrath. I do love your daughter. The claim I already put out there still stands. I intend to make Holly my old lady.”

“Yeah? Then you might want to start calling her by her road name. No daughter of

mine is gonna sit by passively while her man takes care of every little thing for her. Not unless that's what she wants. And we both know Holly isn't the shrinking violet type."

"I can see your point. And it's a small price to pay to soften her up for me." I couldn't keep the humor out of my voice. "Maddog, it is."

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Holly (Maddog)

The second Dad started blowing up my phone was the second I decided I really was going to kill Jax this time. Slimy bastard had ratted me out! Like I was four or something! I wasn't about to answer until there was no way they could turn the plane around, or my dad would threaten to kill anyone he had to for them to head back to the States. So I turned my phone off. All that buzzing would wear down the battery. Yeah. That sounded good.

About six or seven hours later, we landed in Simón Bolívar International Airport in Rodadero, Columbia. The second we stepped outside, the heat hit me like a shockwave. It felt like I'd opened an oven door and got my face scalded. "Fuck me," I hissed.

"Anytime you want, Holly." Chris Alistair the Third purred in my ear. The guy was a fucking creep. He was also the reason I was here in the first Goddamned place. He was dating a friend from school and I had the feeling he was up to something. Since I couldn't talk Andrea into not going, I decided I was going with her. It had seemed to delight Chris that I was going, which made me incredibly uneasy.

I gave him the side eye. "Not if you were the last man on the entire fuckin' planet, Chris."

He chuckled but backed off. Bastard had been making comments like that the whole trip. Now that we were in a place it wasn't safe to navigate on my own, I was beginning to rethink not waiting on Jax. I'd actually been going to ask him to come with me when I'd called him. Then he'd gone and been the Jax I've known most of

my life. Asshole Jax. So I'd let my temper get the better of me. Which was when I remembered my sat phone was still turned off.

I stuck my hand in my jeans pocket where I'd tucked my phone and turned it on. I didn't want Chris knowing I had a working phone. Most everyone had cell phones, but where we were supposed to be headed outside the city didn't have cell service. I was thankful I'd set the device to vibrate. If he was listening for it, he'd probably be able to hear it buzzing, but it was crowded and noisy outside the airport and he wasn't close to me at the moment. The longer my dad kept trying to call without me answering, the sooner he sent someone after me. Shotgun could pinpoint my location as long as the phone was on. Though Chris gave me the creeps, I hadn't realized how nervous I was around him until this very moment. Yeah. Turning off my phone had been stupid. And not a mistake I'd make again.

Andrea was cuddled up to Chris as we waited for the bus taking us to the village. I wanted to barf. Problem was, it wasn't because I found them disgusting. I was jealous as fuck. While I knew Chris was a bastard, Andrea obviously thought she was in love. I wanted that. Not with Chris, obviously. He was a swine. No. When I thought about cuddling up with a guy, the only man I saw was Jax. Which wasn't acceptable at all.

Jax had seen me at my worst. When I was so sick all I could do was puke and sleep. He'd been with me when I'd fought so hard during the last couple of treatments. Sure, I'd just turned five at the time, but even though I didn't like him back then -- I was a kid and he was a teenager who didn't want a little girl hanging around him -- I'd taken as much comfort in his presence as I had my mother's.

The rest of my life had been one series of medical tests after another, trying to catch any sign of a recurring cancer as soon as possible. Even though he claimed not to like me, that I was a pain in his ass, he always seemed to be in my line of sight. Trying to prove to Jax that I was tough was the only thing that got me through some of it. But while I practically idolized him, Jax saw me as a kid. To be fair, I was twelve years

younger than he was. It would probably creep him out if he knew, every single time he threatened to spank me for being a brat, it turned me the fuck on something fierce.

I tried to keep someone between me and Chris every time we moved around. There were fifteen people in our party, so it wasn't too hard. What was hard was letting Andrea too far away from me. Afraid as I was for myself, I was even more so for her. Because whatever happened, when it did, she'd never see it coming. At least I had a heads up and could take precautions. Late though they might be.

We boarded a bus to take us to a village about six hours outside of Rodadero. My phone had been buzzing every half hour since I'd turned it on. It buzzed again, then the calls started coming every couple of minutes. I wanted to turn on the GPS on my watch but had to use the phone to turn the damned thing on.

Anytime I took a trip of any lengthy distance where cell coverage was questionable, my dad and Shotgun agreed to give me at least twelve hours before losing their Goddamned minds. It hadn't quite been that long, but I was hoping and praying that Jax had gotten tired of waiting and they were finally going to activate the GPS remotely. And as much as my mom and dad loved me, I knew it would be Jax who would force the issue because Mom and Dad always tried to treat me like a responsible adult and abide by the agreements we made regarding safety. If Jax thought they needed to contact me earlier, he wouldn't hesitate to ride roughshod over that agreement and do exactly what he deemed best for me.

To my tremendous relief, there was one long, continuous buzz for fifteen seconds from my watch. That was my signal that help was on the way. The phone had linked up with my watch to turn on its satellite GPS features. Now, if my phone got separated from me, Shotgun could still track my watch. It had been designed to save the battery. The satellite link would only turn on if I activated it, or Shotgun told it to.

Not a moment too soon either, because the bus braked hard. The driver gave a shout

right before we slammed into something. My head hit the seat in front of me and knocked me silly. My ears rang and my vision blurred. There were screams all around me and a flurry of Spanish. A gunshot sounded in the confines of the bus. I cried out as my ears popped. There was a wet spray across my face and someone fell on top of me, pinning me to the floor of the bus.

“Everyone off the bus, now!” A male voice speaking in heavily accented Spanish shouted over top of all the screams and cries. There was more commotion as people moved down the aisle in a hurry, shoving and tripping over each other.

The weight on me shifted and I realized the person who had fallen on me was being dragged away. I fought to clear my head, to push through the hazy fog that had settled over my brain. The rapid pounding of my heart echoed in my ears while my chest constricted in panic.

I forced myself to open my eyes, wincing as the harsh sunlight hit me where it shined in through the broken bus window. When I could focus, I saw a pair of rough boots in front of me in the aisle.

I didn’t dare move. The man standing in front of me dragged me roughly to my feet and shoved me toward the back of the vehicle where the rear door was open. I stumbled forward and tried to brace myself to jump to the ground, but I was shoved, landing with a cry in a heap.

“Get up, bitch.” Again, I was manhandled, the guy dragging me to the rest of the group and shoving me hard. I tripped and went flying into the people in my party. I’d lost sight of Andrea and Chris, but figured I needed to worry about myself at the moment. Chris would take care of Andrea. If not, I’d do what I could, but I had to face the fact that I might not be able to save her. Or myself for that matter.

Around me, the chaos continued. The air was filled with the terrified screams and

pleas for help. The heat felt like it intensified tenfold as fear and adrenaline coursed through me. I tried to stand but found myself dizzy and disoriented, falling back onto the ground. When I rubbed my face with my hand, it came back sticky. Blood streaked my fingers and the palm of my hand, but I didn't think it was my blood. Which was when I remembered the person who'd fallen on top of me.

My gaze found the bus as they rolled a body out the back and onto the dirt road. Men were speaking Spanish to each other. Though I knew some Spanish, I couldn't keep up with these guys. They gestured to the dead girl they'd shoved out the back of the bus, obviously upset for whatever reason. One of them was angry, the other on the defensive, but I couldn't catch what they said.

"Get down! Get down!" I was certain that was the bodyguard with Chris. When I turned my head toward his voice, the large man had shoved Chris into the dirt. He had a small handgun out, tracking the guys who'd attacked us but not firing. The bodyguard seemed to be reluctant to shoot anyone and was more than a little scared. From the looks of things, he was panicking as much as everyone else.

One of the attackers turned to when the big guy yelled, aimed, and shot. I jumped as brain, blood, and bone splattered over the dirt road. Chris gave a terrified yell at the same time everyone else screamed, but didn't move to get out from under the dead guard. I saw Andrea huddling at the front of the bus next to the tire. She screamed, covering her head with her hands and tucking herself into a ball.

During the chaos, all I could do was sit there and gape at everything happening. It was like I was frozen to the spot. My limbs were heavy and everything felt like it was happening in slow motion. I shook my head, trying to clear it and get my wits back.

"I said get down on the ground! All of you!" This guy spoke unaccented English, unlike the others who seemed to only speak Spanish. He was the one who seemed to be calling the shots. He had a confident stature, straight-backed and unflinching in the

face of the chaos he caused. His jet-black hair provided a stark contrast to his icy blue eyes that were scanning the area for any signs of rebellion. A thin line of sweat trickled down his temple, but he made no move to wipe it away. In his hand was a semi-automatic, the sight of which sent chills down my spine.

No one defied him, myself included. I stayed put, my hands out in front of me, shaking like a leaf. A frightened whimper left me and when the guy turned my way, I ducked, keeping my hands up and prayed he wasn't looking to kill us all. Didn't these types of things usually end up making ransom demands? We were being kidnapped. Right?

“ Muévelos a todos aquí. Manténlos a todos juntos.” He gestured to all of us in a sweeping gesture with his arm. I thought he said he wanted us all in the same area. Kind of like he was corralling us to better keep us contained.

Andrea still huddled in front of the bus, visibly trembling, a look of abject terror on her face. Chris was still underneath his dead security detail. The gun the guard had dropped when he fell lay next to him, well within Chris's reach. I thought Chris might reach for it, but he didn't even try to move. For a moment, I was afraid he might be dead. Of the fifteen in our group, five had been killed. Much as I thought he was a creep, I didn't want him dead.

There were seven men around us, all of them armed with automatic rifles. All of them pointed at us. Someone pulled Andrea up by her hair from where she huddled at the front of the bus and tossed her in our direction. She stumbled and fell before crawling the five or six feet to me where I huddled. I reached for her, pulling her to me and wrapping my arms around her while she sobbed, as terrified as I was.

The conversation among our attackers was a cacophony of rapid-fire Spanish. They were obviously arguing, but my brain couldn't translate quickly enough. The guy in charge scanned those of us who were left. Two of his men pulled the bodyguard off

Chris and shoved Chris into the group of us. I thought Andrea might go to him, but she stayed with me, looking around her fearfully.

The leader stared down every one of us, studying all of us intently. Turning his gaze toward me, he paused. A chill ran down my spine as I huddled with Andrea on the dusty road, my throat dry as I tried to swallow.

I could feel his gaze on me as I stayed as still as I could, keeping my head down so he didn't think I was challenging him. My only thought was to keep myself as safe as possible until Jax came for me. Because I knew it would be Jax who came for me. My heart pounded in my ears and still shook uncontrollably, but it was only a matter of time.

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Jax

When I got Holly home safely, I was gonna blister her ass. If Wrath had spanked her more as a child instead of coddling her because of her cancer, she might take her safety more seriously. And yeah. I get why Wrath coddled the little princess. I coddled her too. And despite my bravado now, I'd continue to fucking coddle her. Why? Because the thought of losing Holly for any reason made me want to lose my Goddamn mind.

Mechanic gestured toward the screen where he was tracking Holly. "She's not moving." Since he'd landed our Osprey as close to Holly's position as he reasonably could given the size of the aircraft, we'd been following her movements and heading steadily in her direction for the better part of an hour. The Phantom Badger we were using was loaded to capacity with men and equipment. Which was to say, me and Razor and some serious hardware.

Holly's group had been headed toward a small village about six hours south of Rodadero. Which was bad. With the heavy traffic from Rodadero and Santa Marta to the U.S., there had been increased drug traffic south of Rodadero. The whole general area was considered very high-risk for traveling. ExFil had been hired to extract more than one goodwill mission.

"Have they reached their destination?" Razor was native to the area. He studied the screen from our end same as Mechanic did back at the Osprey. "See if you can zoom in. There's a dirt road in that area they should be following to the village. It's been a couple years, but that road is in exactly the wrong spot if they want to live."

“Yeah.” I snagged a weapons vest and shrugged into it before checking my sidearm. “Bettin’ they’ve been stopped.” My vest had several extra clips as well as some grenades. “How far are we from her, Razor?”

He shrugged. “We can get there in the Badger in less than five. They’ll hear us, but as long as they’ve been stopped, that might be a good thing.”

I gave him a crisp nod. “Let’s move. Mechanic, have Iron and Tank ready in case we come back hot.”

“We expectin’ trouble, Jax?” Razor spoke softly, raising an eyebrow.

“With Holly?” One side of my lip curled up in a half grin. “Always.” I was trying to lighten the mood, but the truth was, my insides were screaming at me to get to her. I wasn’t as seasoned as some of the guys in Black Reign, but I’d done my time with Special Teams. The most important lesson I learned was to always trust my instincts. It had saved my life more than once. Now, I was counting on it to save Holly’s.

The ride took less than five minutes. Even before we got there, we could hear gunshots. Normally, Razor would have stopped before we got too close so we could scout the situation, but that wasn’t happening.

Without prompting from me Razor hit the accelerator hard, and we charged through the forest until we burst onto the road. Razor managed to maneuver the vehicle to a skidding halt between the small group of people and gunmen. We were practically on top of them, and even though we weren’t expecting to take fire and hadn’t put the roof on the Light Utility Vehicle, I was glad for the bulletproof glass on the door of the Badger.

I stood and fired over the window, taking down two hostiles. Razor got another one and the rest fled.

“We may have to ditch some ordinance.” I spoke through my throat mike to Mechanic, back at the Osprey. “Got at least ten civilians still alive.”

“Copy that. Dump it, then destroy it on your way out. It’ll have the added effect of takin’ out their road.”

“If you do that, you’ll cut off the village from supply trucks.” That was one of the women in the group. “We should leave.”

“I can’t fit all of you in this vehicle unless I drop equipment in the back. If I do that, I can’t let the locals take that equipment. My only option is to destroy it where I drop it.” I tried to be patient, but I needed to get Holly and get the fuck outta here.

“Can’t you drop it somewhere else?”

“Look, lady,” I snapped. “Either I dump the shit and destroy it, or I leave you here. Don’t care which. But if you stay, they will come back and they will kill you. Eventually.” I dismissed the woman as I scanned the group until I found Holly.

The lady protested or something. I dismissed her, but her voice was like a buzzing gnat in my subconscious. The only thing that mattered right now was Holly.

She sat huddled with her friend against the side of a large rock. Both women looked terrified. Blood streaked down Holly’s temple and she looked a little dazed. Her gaze locked on mine, and she let go of her friend and shoved herself to her feet, half running, half stumbling toward me. When she threw herself at me, I caught her with one arm, my pistol in the other as I tracked the area for threats.

“Jax! Oh, God! Jax!”

“I’ve got you, baby. Gonna keep you safe. But you’re gonna have to let me go so I

can dump some stuff to make room for everyone. OK?”

She stiffened, then shoved herself away from me. “I’ll h-help.” She clasped her hands behind her back and took a couple steps backward, a not-so-subtle retreat. “What has to go?”

“Everything, honey. Anything in the back of this vehicle needs to be offloaded.” I hated not being able to comfort her like I knew she needed, but we didn’t have a lot of time. And if worse came to worst, I’d grab Holly and take off. I would not hesitate to leave every single person in the fucking group behind if it put Holly in unreasonable danger. If that happened, she’d never forgive me. Or herself.

“Got it.” And she went to work. Honestly, the work would help her focus on something other than what had just happened or what would happen next.

It didn’t take me, Razor, and Holly long to completely empty out the bed. While we did that, the group gathered their dead to take with us. Only one or two of them didn’t help. Both were in obvious shock.

The second the last of our weapons and ordinance was unloaded, the group started loading into the truck. They managed to get all but one of their dead in the back before we left. They’d argued for a few seconds before Razor put the vehicle in gear and sped off. Most of the group yelled and screamed at us to stop and go back, to get the last of the bodies, but Razor and I were in silent agreement that we needed to get back to our transport. Pronto.

Holly was between me and Razor. I had my left arm around her waist, my gun still firmly in my right hand as Razor pushed the vehicle as fast as he could. She trembled but said nothing. Holly gripped my thigh with one hand and the hand around her waist with the other. Seconds later there was a deafening BOOM! as the ordinance detonated behind us. Hopefully, even if those guys came back with reinforcements,

the destroyed road would at least slow them down.

“We can’t leave the village like this!” A young man a few years older than Holly leaned forward from where he’d piled in the back with the others. “We have a responsibility to fix what we broke!”

“Report it after we’ve gone,” I snapped. “Or I can toss you out here and you can fix it yourself.”

“I’m not tucking my tail between my legs and running home! If you’re military, you should know I’m Christopher Alistair the third, United States Senator Alistair’s son. My Secret Service detail was killed, so you have to act as my detail. That means I’m in charge.”

“Ain’t military, kid. We’re in the private sector, and we’re here for her.” I indicated Holly. “Only reason you’re with us in the first place is because it wasn’t in her best interest to leave you behind. If that status changes, you’ll find yourself on your ass on the side of the road, no matter who your daddy is.”

Up ahead, the Osprey was powering up. Razor approached it and skidded the vehicle to a stop several feet away.

“Everyone out!” I yelled, tugging Holly out my side of the vehicle. Never letting go of her hand, I trotted with her to the transport while Razor drove ahead to pull the vehicle into the Osprey. I urged her to the front of the plane and the troop seating. When I would have helped her fasten her seatbelt, she brushed my hands away and did it herself. I knew then she’d be all right. For the first time since Wrath had told me what was going on, I felt the band around my chest ease up a little. It wouldn’t be completely gone until we landed safely in the Black Reign compound with Holly safe and sound.

ExFil had arranged for a midair refuel for us to head home. Once the refueling was complete, all there was left to do was wait. Mechanic and Razor had the bird well in hand. They'd let me know if they needed me. In fact, I expected Razor would be back with us soon. Once they got everything settled from the refueling and all the other pilot shit they did, Mechanic wouldn't need Razor until we got closer to our destination.

I turned slightly to look at Holly. She still gripped my hand, but didn't meet my gaze.

"Hey, baby. Look at me." She sucked in a breath and blinked several times, like she'd been startled awake. She obeyed, looking up at me with wide, vulnerable eyes. "That's my girl. Are you hurt? Did you get hit?"

She looked slightly confused, then stiffened. "I-I hit my head." Her voice was high-pitched and slightly husky. "When the bus wrecked."

"Do you know what happened?"

"Not really." She frowned, rubbing her temple as though she had a headache. If she'd hit her head, she likely did. "The bus swerved, and we hit something. I'm not sure when those men got on the bus. But I don't think it was too long after we wrecked."

"You're right. This is what the cartel does."

"But... no one uses that road other than supply vehicles. And those only come once a month at most. The villagers know to stay off the road and it's the wrong time of year for the cartels to be moving their products north." She rubbed at her head. "This should have been relatively low risk."

I had to bite my tongue to keep from telling her that no place in Columbia was "relatively low risk," but didn't think now was the time. Once she'd had time to

process everything that had happened, and accepted my claim on her, I'd have plenty of time to address her life choices. And I was afraid this one wasn't going to go away any time soon. She'd taken ten years off my life.

Instead, I leaned in to brush a kiss on her forehead, wrapping an arm around her. She rested her head on my shoulder, but didn't quite relax. She still didn't let go of my hand, but other than that small gesture, she didn't move. I thought she might be close to falling asleep, but she slowly pushed away from me. With a sigh, she let go of me and laid her hands in her lap.

"Talk to me, Holly. I'll make everything all right if you'll tell me what you need." I meant it too. She was breaking my fucking heart.

"This is all my fault." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"What's your fault, honey? You're not making sense."

"That you're here. This plane. All that money everyone spent. This time because I did something stupid." Tears had been streaming down her cheeks in a steady flow since I found her. The only time she seemed to be able to fight them off had been unloading the Badger.

"Honey, I'm here with all this shit because I will always come for you. By any means necessary. Bad choice on your part or not, I will always come for you."

She sucked in a small sob but held on to her emotions by the tiniest of fingernails. It wouldn't take much for her to shatter.

"Hey, man!" The angry demand came across from me. I wanted to drive my thumbs into his fucking eyeballs. "I'm filing a formal protest against your company when we land." Fucking Chris Alistair the fucking Third. There was every possibility either me

or him wouldn't make it to Lake Worth alive. And he was too big a pussy to even think about taking me.

“For doin’ what? Savin’ your sorry ass? I can see how that could get me in trouble. Especially if you’re as big a pain in your old man’s ass as you’re starting to become in mine, but also because you weren’t my problem or my job. Holly is the only person I was authorized to spring. I’m beginning to think it might be best to remedy that mistake right now.”

“You left that whole village with no way to get food or supplies! If they die, it’s on you. And I’ll tell every reporter I come across that you committed genocide.”

“Do you have any fuckin’ idea what you’re talkin’ about?” Razor plopped down in a seat on the other side of Holly putting her solidly between our wall of protection.

Alistair gave Razor a withering look. “I know exactly what I’m talking about,” he snapped. “It’s the only road in or out of that village! How are they supposed to get supplies without that road?”

Razor chuckled. “Fuuuuck. Did you know they made ‘em this stupid, Jax?”

“I mean, I’ve heard stories.” I shrugged like it was really no big deal. “Not sure I believed ‘em. Till now.”

“Son, the villagers that close to the Amazon want nothing more than to be left alone. They couldn’t care less if people show up with stuff they’ve never heard they needed. They distrust the few things that could make their lives better. No. Those trails you call roads are made by the cartel. If you went into this situation and didn’t bother to find out, you really are fuckin’ stupid.”

Razor waited until Alistair finally dropped his gaze before speaking to me. “Got you

guys a small space with a little privacy if you want to look her over. Make sure she's not injured and in too much shock to feel it."

"If anyone gets a private room here, it's me, you asshole." Alistair piped up again. "I'm the important one here. I don't care what you say, I know you were sent to find me. Not her. She's nobody! You're supposed to do what I say!"

"Hate to tell you, bro," I took over before Razor lost his cool. I could practically see steam coming out the other man's ears. I felt pretty much the same way, but Razor was bigger than me and his punch was harder than my punch. "But real life don't work that way. No one knows you guys were missing. The only way your father knows now is if your body man got a message off to him, and my boss ain't sayin' nothin' if he did. Nothin' gets by Cain. No matter how recent the development. So you're on your own. No one knows you're in trouble. Nobody is sending you help. Nobody." The threat wasn't even thinly veiled. Razor was ready to do his worst, and I was right behind him.

"Of course they knew! They sent me help! You're here, aren't you?"

"Yep," I continued. "Because her family hadn't been able to speak with her in several hours, and I wasn't willing to wait another two or three hours they'd agreed upon before finding out where she was. Like I told you in Columbia. You're only here because it was of no benefit to her at the time for me to leave you behind. I don't give a good Goddamn who your daddy is."

"OK." Razor stood. "That's our cue to leave before I have to explain to our boss how a senator's son accidentally smashed his face and fell out of the plane on the way home." He wasn't joking. The only question was which one of us would follow through first. Looked like it would be a tight race.

The room Razor took us to wasn't much. Just a small conference type room someone

had furnished with a cot in addition to a desk. There wasn't room for more than two large men or maybe three small women, so adding the cot to the room made it tight. On the desk was a basin of water and some washcloths. On the cot was a change of clothing for both of us and a couple of blankets and pillows. Other than these added luxuries, the whole plane was spartan. 'Cause, you know, military cargo and troop transport. The Hilton, it was not.

"It's not much, but we can wash the worst of the mud and grime off us, change clothes, and get a little rest. Got another five hours before we get home. I don't know about you, but I'm beat." I wanted her to understand I wasn't leaving her here by herself, but didn't want to be obnoxious about it. She might not want to admit it to anyone, including herself, but I know her well enough she needed me with her right now.

"Yeah." She picked at her clothing. She was smeared in mud, but I thought I could help her get the worst of it off. The trick was to take charge and do what needed doing without seeming like I was taking charge. That was the quickest way to get Holly to completely withdraw and push me away, and there was no way I was letting that happen. She sighed and looked over her shoulder. "Thanks for coming after me, Jax. I owe you one."

"I told you, Maddog. I'll always come for you. No questions asked. I will always be there." I tried to use the road name she and Blade had come up with to help her be strong for a little bit longer, but I knew she was done. She'd had all she could take.

Tears that had slowed now flowed freely again, but Holly still held on to her control. She was trying to fight me when she didn't really want to.

She put a washcloth in the basin and left it there. Then she pulled off her tank and stepped out of her shorts. Her shoes and socks followed, and she stood facing away from me in nothing but her bra and panties.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d help me wash the grime off my back. I’m tired and sore and I can’t reach or see everywhere I need to get.”

“Well, that went much easier than I thought it would.” I gave her what I hope was an amused smile when I was more relieved than I was prepared to admit she needed my help.

“I can’t very well have the road name Maddog if I’m too big a pussy to admit to someone I trust I need help when I do, now can I?”

I chuckled softly before leaning in and kissing her temple. The more I gave her little kisses like that, the more I had my lips on her skin in even the most platonic of kisses, the more I wanted to taste her lips, to slip my tongue into her mouth and taste her until she was whimpering with need in my arms. Unfortunately, now wasn’t the time. Didn’t mean I wasn’t going to have the pleasure of holding her. I was going to wrap her up in my arms while she slept and keep the nightmares at bay. Because I knew from experience, the second she closed her eyes the nightmares would definitely come.

“Nope. If you’re gonna have a name like Maddog, you have a certain reputation to maintain. I’m proud of you for livin’ up to your name, baby.”

That got a genuine snort of laughter from her. Then she chuckled. It didn’t last long, though. As I started washing her back, her chuckles turned to quiet sobs. I got the worst of the dirt and mud, then helped her put on the T-shirt Razor left for her. I reached under the shirt and unfastened her bra and helped her thread her arms through the straps and her sleeves. Holly didn’t protest once.

I almost helped her into the soft cotton pants without having her remove her underwear, but I knew she had to be uncomfortable. They hadn’t exactly been wallowing in mud, but it looked like she’d landed in a puddle at some point. So,

without saying anything or making a big deal out of it, I faced her away from me and pulled her panties over her hips and let them pool at her feet. I used the cloth to wash her hip where she was starting to bruise. She must have landed on that side because she had dried mud from there to the top of her thigh. She winced once but didn't move or say anything. She didn't balk at my care of her, or the fact that I'd just removed her underwear without her permission.

When I wrapped my arms around her and held the pants in front of her, she took the material and stuck her feet into the holes. With a muffled groan of pain, she paused and gripped my wrist to steady herself. I didn't waste time or ask if she wanted my help. I pulled them up her hips and tied the drawstring in a bow at her belly button.

I did my best to keep my touch as clinical as I could. The very last thing I wanted was for her to feel like I was taking advantage of her vulnerable state of mind. I turned her to face me before I picked her up. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and I sat on the cot.

I reached for one of the blankets lying beside us and draped it over her before pivoting a quarter turn on my ass and resting my legs on the cot so I could fully recline with Holly draped over me. She lay her head on my chest and continued to cry softly until she finally drifted off to sleep with me rubbing her back in a gentle caress.

As I lay there holding her, another band of pressure released from my chest. Not only that, but a deep satisfaction filled me at having her in my arms like this. Wrath was right. I had loved Holly from the moment I saw her. It had taken time to develop into the love I felt for her now, but it had been there from the start. I had to figure out a way to keep her from pulling away from me, because now that I knew what it was like to have this woman sleeping so trustingly in my arms, I knew there was no way I could ever let her go.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:04 pm

Holly

Raised voices penetrated my sleep fogged brain. I was alone, but my head rested on a surprisingly comfortable pillow and there was a blanket draped over me. The room was lit by only a couple of small markers at the base of the wall, like safety lights or something.

One of the voices was Chris. It took a couple of minutes, but once my head cleared somewhat I could make out what he was saying.

“We’ve been treated like dogs on this trip home,” he snarled. “I demand you let me in there to get some rest. We’ll all be going back to Rodadero to finish what we started, and I have to be ready.” Yep. That was definitely Chris. Pompous, selfish asshole. And who in their right mind would turn around and go back into that hell? I knew I wasn’t going. Fuck that shit.

I sat up on the cot and groaned. The walls must have been paper-thin, because Chris heard me.

“See? She’s awake. Make her go back and sit with the others while I take a power nap. You can come get me when we’re ready to land.”

“Jesus Christ.” I swore under my breath. “What a fuckin’ pussy.”

I didn’t have on shoes, but a thick pair of socks were on my feet. I was dressed in a T-shirt that was a size or two too big and some soft, cotton pants. The pants fit loosely but weren’t overly big on me. It took me a second to remember how I’d gotten

changed. When I did, I sucked in a breath at the memory.

Jax had washed me off and helped me change. I'd told him to help, and he'd been so careful with me. I remember crying myself to sleep while lying on his chest. He'd held me in a protective embrace, rubbing his chin over the top of my head gently. I hadn't exactly had a restful sleep, but I doubt I'd have slept at all if not for Jax.

With an irritated sigh, I stood and jerked the door open. "There you go, Sir Whines-A-Lot. Get your beauty sleep. Looks like you need it." I shoved past the bastard and back to the passenger seats. Which... yeah. Military transport. Not exactly Air Force One, but the fucking prick should be glad we were on the aircraft at all. We could be fucking dead.

I sat next to the other women with us. The only people in our group I knew were Andrea and Chris. Chris could go fuck himself, but Andrea was the whole reason I was here. Even though this had been a clusterfuck of epic proportions, I was glad I'd been here because I knew Andrea needed someone, and it was obvious Chris didn't give a damn.

Andrea looked up at me when I sat next to her, then immediately looked down at her lap. "You told me not to do this." Her admission was soft. "This never would have happened if we'd stayed home."

"It would still have happened. Just not to us. Everyone else here would likely be dead or wishing they were." That's when I realized that the only men on the trip had been Chris and his bodyguard, and two other men, both of whom were killed in the attack. I think in the back of my mind I knew there were more women than men on this trip, but I'd been focused on other things.

"Chris says you're all going back to Rodadero."

Andrea gave me a funny look. “He said what?”

“Yeah. Before he demanded to have the room Jax let me use to clean up. He said he needed to rest before you guys headed back once we landed. Sounded like it was going to be a pretty quick turnaround.” I was fishing. From the expression on Andrea’s face, this was news to her.

“I’m not going back.” Andrea shook her head violently. “He can’t make me this time, either.”

“Make you?” That surprised me. “I thought you wanted to go.”

“I didn’t want to go, but he said if I wanted to be with him, I needed to get used to international travel and charity work.”

“He seriously told you that?” One of the other girls sitting near us questioned Andrea. “Those exact words?”

Andrea swallowed as comprehension washed over her. “He did.”

“Me too.”

“Me too.”

“Fucker.”

All the women on the plane other than me seemed to have been sold the same song and dance. And the motherfucker had been so cool and smooth, he’d managed to make it from South Carolina all the way to Rodadero, Columbia with every single one of them and no one knew the secrets he was keeping.

“What about you, Holly?” Andrea looked ashamed, but like she really wanted the answer to that question.

“You mean, did I betray you and try to take your boyfriend?”

She ducked her gaze then, her shoulders hunching. “I’m sorry I asked that question, Holly,” she said softly. “I didn’t mean it like that. Honestly.” She took in a shuddering breath. “OK, that’s not exactly true. I did mean it like that. But I swear, I’ve never thought you’d do that kind of thing. It never crossed my mind before this very moment.”

“Relax, Andrea. I understand. You thought you had something real with Chris, and everyone else said he played them too. You’re emotionally raw and still scared after everything. Wondering how I fit in is natural.” I tried to give her a smile, but the very last thing I felt like doing was smiling. “I’m here because I knew something was up with Chris but couldn’t put my finger on it. That’s why I tried to talk you out of going on this trip.”

“I should have listened to you.” Andrea was crying now.

I waved her off. “The heart wants what the heart wants. What I can’t figure out is what he planned to gain from taking all his girlfriends to Columbia. Together. Or why he welcomed me with open arms when I wasn’t in his... err... circle.” I almost said harem but knew it would only insult and alienate the women here. They were victims. Not polygamists. And Chris had played them like a fucking master. Which likely meant he’d done something like this before.

That’s when Andrea started crying softly. I put my arm around her, trying to console her. She shook her head and pushed away from me, crying all the harder. “This is all my fault.”

“Of course it’s not your fault, Andrea. How could you know we’d be attacked like that? Besides, Chris has done this before. Whatever this is. You weren’t looking for it. I knew something was off, but never imagined he had a dozen girls he was stringing along. But had I been as close to the situation as you were, I probably wouldn’t have noticed either. He’s a pro at manipulating women. Man needs to be castrated.”

Instead of helping, my words seemed to make Andrea cry harder. “You don’t understand!” she wailed. “Stop being nice to me! I’m a horrible human being and don’t deserve anyone to be nice to me, least of all you, Holly!”

“What?” My internal radar started going off, telling me to leave it alone. Unfortunately, I’ve always been too curious for my own good, even knowing that curiosity killed the cat. “Why would you say that? You’re my best friend. I’m always going to have your back and, though I’m a first-class bitch and never nice to anyone, I’ll never be horrible to you. Especially not now.”

That seemed to make her cry even harder. She fell against me, her arms going around my neck in a tight embrace. I tried to comfort her, but now I was on guard.

One of the other girls sneered. “She’s upset she knows she’s caught.” This girl had been sitting quietly in the corner, but she seemed to have had all she could take.

“Caught?” I glared at the other woman. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“She’s the reason most of us are here.” This came from another woman who sat huddled in the corner, her feet on the seat with her knees drawn up to her chest. “It’s probably why Chris keeps trying to get off on his own, too.”

Still sobbing, Andrea clung to me like her life depended on it. I was stunned and wasn’t sure exactly what to say, but I knew I needed to hear it all, no matter how

much I didn't want to.

"What's going on?" Jax approached us, a wary look on his face. His gaze landed on me first. Checking on me? Then he took in everyone and frowned. "What happened?"

None of the other women said anything. Even the two who had engaged earlier looked away, obviously not trusting Jax. Andrea continued to cling to me and sniffle, but stopped her loud weeping.

"I don't know," I said softly. "But maybe you better check on Chris."

Jax gave me a long, assessing look, then turned and headed back the way he'd come. Not long after, there was a banging on the door to the room Chris had taken over after I left.

"Open up, Alistair." I was relieved to hear Jax actively checking the situation. He might be an asshole, but Jax and I had a connection. It was like we were drawn to each other. No matter how many times I told him to fuck off, the annoying asshole was always there when I needed him. And me? No matter how many times I told him to fuck off... yeah. I always welcomed him with open arms. Eagerly.

"Andrea, please tell me what's going on." I turned and gripped her slim shoulders gently, pulling her away from me so I could get a good look at her face. When I did, I felt an overwhelming rage start to simmer in my mind. Despite all the weeping and wailing, Andrea's eyes were completely dry. Her makeup was as perfect as always.

I gasped, standing abruptly and taking two steps backward, away from the woman I'd called my best friend since grade school. I looked at the other women. The ones who'd spoken out, especially, gave Andrea looks of scorn, all but rolling their eyes. How had I not seen these looks before? Had they been there since the beginning of the trip? Had I missed some really strong anger there?

“I’m curious.” The bold woman looked from me to Andrea a couple of times. “You hated Chris. You obviously didn’t want him for a lover or partner, so why did you come with us?”

“I thought he was up to something. That he’d hurt Andrea. I came to have her back.”

“Uh-huh. So she didn’t encourage you to join us?”

“Well, yeah. She did. When I asked her not to go, she said I should come with her. That way I could see she was fine, and I’d get to help some really disadvantaged people. She knows I like to participate in projects that help people in poor communities. She said these people were about as poor as it got.”

“She introduced most of us to Chris.” The other woman picked up the explanation. “I thought it was odd there were so many people going when I’d thought it was going to be me and Chris alone. It wasn’t until after we landed in Rodadero I started putting it together that my relationship with Chris wasn’t everything I thought it was.”

“I can’t prove it and I have no idea how to explain it,” the first woman interjected, “but I’d almost bet she and Chris set up that ambush. At least, they both knew it was coming before it happened.”

“Razor, get that motherfucker out here before you really do have to explain to Cain how this bastard decided to jump out of the plane.” Jax sounded angrier than I’d ever heard him.

“Shit,” I muttered. I turned and headed toward Jax and the other guys. I thought I should probably stay with the women to offer as much support as I could. After all, we’d all gone through something horrific and come out traumatized, but physically unharmed. At least, most of us had. Besides, I knew that, wherever this conversation was headed, I needed to divert it for a little while. Like for at least a week. I needed

time to heal both mentally and physically. Though I hadn't been hurt too badly, I was still going to be pretty Goddamned sore.

"Jax? What is it?" I went to his side. He put out an arm to keep me from getting near the door, but tucked me in behind him, holding me to him with one arm, urging me to press myself against his back.

"Motherfucker's locked himself in and refuses to open the door. Do you know what's goin' on?"

"Not sure. At least some of the girls think he might have been responsible for the attack on us."

He started, looking over his shoulder at me before turning around. "That's a pretty serious accusation."

"I know. And it might be all an attempt to get even with him, but something isn't right. Andrea was only pretending to cry a while ago. And the women who are talking for the group say Andrea introduced most of them to Chris. She actively pushed for them all to go on this trip. She pushed me too. Just passively."

"OK," Jax said, nodding his head. "Assuming they're right and he had something to do with the attack. What does he gain?"

I shrugged. "Bust in the fucking door and ask the bastard."

Razor grinned. "I always liked you, Holly. This is just one of many reasons why."

Jax bared his teeth at Razor and pulled me into his arms. "Mine. Don't even look at her."

Razor chuckled. “Lock her down if you want to keep her, man. She has enough of a vicious streak to make the perfect old lady.”

“She knows I’m keepin’ her. Had her property cut made when I made prospect.”

“Uh, hello? I’m right here.” I shoved away from Jax, but he refused to let me go. I wasn’t as torn up about it as I should have been. “Don’t talk about me like you think I can’t hear you.”

“Wouldn’t think of it, Maddog.” Razor winked at me, and it was hard to keep the grin off my face, but I managed. Barely.

“I know you have no reason to suspect Chris had anything to do with the attack. Aside from being a shitty human being, I can’t figure out how hurting everyone he brought on a private jet, including a congressional security detail, benefits him in any way. All I’m saying is, maybe Shotgun or someone should look into the trip. See if they can find any breadcrumbs leading off in a tangent.”

“Do you want to call Shotgun? Tell him what you suspect and give him some details?” Jax spoke softly. Neither man continued to pound on the door to the room where Chris was hiding. It wasn’t like he could go anywhere. He’d probably try to call someone if some kind of deal had gone south, or to have his daddy’s lawyers meet us at the airport. But, unluckily for him, we weren’t going to the airport.

“Yeah. I need to let my mom and dad know I’m OK, too.”

“Wrath’s been in constant contact with us since we left, so he knows.” Jax stroked my cheek and smiled down at me. “But I know it’ll be much better to hear your voice.”

“I’d offer you the use of the conference room, but it seems to have been requisitioned

by Senator Alistair's office." Razor's dry humor was almost welcome. I fought another grin.

"Well, I voted for the other guy," I quipped. "So unless the senator actually did hire ExFil to come get his son, tell that rat bastard he needs to sit out here with the women he played. If you give the green light, there's at least one of them who'd gladly change him from a rooster to a hen."

"Noted." Razor nodded to Jax. "You want to do the honors, or do you want me to?"

"I got this." Jax took one step forward and kicked the door to the small room so hard, the whole thing splintered off its hinges. The room wasn't supposed to be secure or anything, so the doors were pretty flimsy. I had no doubt the effect was what Jax was going for. If so, it sounded like Chris was suitably impressed if his screams were any indication.

"Now," Razor boomed, stepping in the doorway, his massive shoulders so wide he had to turn sideways. "Time to buckle in for landing." Razor snagged him by the arm, jerking Chris's cell phone out of his hand as he did. He glanced at the screen before putting the phone to his ear. He listened for a brief moment before speaking. "Sorry. Your son's a little busy right now. I'll have him call you back after we land." Razor ended the call and tossed the phone to Jax. "Might need this later."

"Hey! Gimme back my fucking phone!"

"What are you talking about?" Jax said, looking at him all innocent-like. "I didn't see no phone." He lifted his chin at Razor. "You seen one?"

Razor grinned. "Nope. Now, come on. Let's go sit over here. There's a nice seat waiting for you in the middle of some really beautiful women."

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:04 pm

Jax

“I’ve seen some stupid motherfuckers in my time, but this guy takes the fuckin’ cake.” I was watching Shotgun go through the files on Alistair’s phone while we were still in the air. Holly had called Celeste and Wrath, both of whom had said nothing other than how happy they were that she was OK. They hadn’t mentioned how worried they were or how stupid it had been of her to take off like she did, and I breathed a small sigh of relief. After that, she and Shotgun had discussed what she’d found.

Holly had gone to sit in the crew section while Shotgun and I looked this over. Shotgun because he was the Black Reign MC tech guy. Me because I wanted the information first, Goddamnit. If Wrath got this before me, he’d murder the man the second he stepped off the aircraft. Shotgun said the plane’s sat connection was secure and not as slow as I might think, but he wanted to take more than a couple of hours to analyze the phone data. Working on this now might not speed things up, but it didn’t hurt to try. We were less than an hour out, but we continued to comb through what we could. The more questions and answers we had before we had to interrogate the man directly, the better.

“Surely to God neither him nor the senator could be this fucking stupid. There’s got to be a simple explanation.” Shotgun sounded as perplexed as I felt. Thing was, I absolutely could believe this guy was that stupid.

“I mean, no one ever accused anyone in Washington of being smart. Right?”

“Humm... You have a point there. OK. So, if we assume they are that stupid, is there

any possibility we've interpreted this wrong? I mean, maybe the phrase, 'get top dollar for the bitches' could mean almost anything." Shotgun actually said that with a straight face.

"I want you, Eden, and anyone else you want to have eyes on it, to make sure this is legit, not some blackmail scheme or political entrapment or whatever bullshit they do in Washington to get and hold power. I want concrete proof, Shotgun."

The other man raised an eyebrow. "You givin' me orders, pup?"

"I'm lead in the field on this one, so yeah. I'm givin' you fuckin' orders." I kept my gaze leveled on Shotgun until the man burst out laughing.

"You're so full of shit. And a dumbass." Shotgun looked genuinely amused, not like he was calling me out for not showing respect for my elders. Which reminded me, I needed to apologize to him for that very thing. And phrase it that exact way. Should be fun. "You were trying to stare me down, bro."

When I continued to stare at him, he cracked up again. "Over a video call! Which means you're lookin' at my eyes, but you're really lookin' into the screen. Not the camera."

"I don't know how Eden puts up with you, man. Now I'm thinkin' you're the one who's stupid."

The other man grinned at me. "In all seriousness, Jax. Don't kill the fucker. In fact, stay as far away from him as possible. Let Razor babysit."

"You afraid I'd kill him?"

"Absolutely that's what I'm afraid of. Not that I care overmuch, but El Diablo will.

You know he takes killin' seriously. And if these guys really are guilty of human trafficking, El Diablo gets to set and carry out their punishment."

"I can be as creative and diabolical as El Diablo." I winced. Because yeah, I sounded sulky.

"Not sure I'd bet on you there, Jax. Just get Holly as far away from that guy as possible."

I started to tell him I could absolutely get behind that plan when there was a bloodcurdling scream. Followed by several battle cries.

"The fuck was that?" Shotgun's eyes were wide. You comin' in hot?"

I hurried out of the little room to the main part of the plane and to where the women had been sitting in a group. Razor leaned against the bulkhead in front of the seating separating the passenger section from the crew section. In one of the seats, Chris Alistair was tied with his hands behind his back and his legs tied at the knees, spreading them as far apart as they'd go in his chair.

"Nothing." I shrugged. "The girls are having a, err, therapy session. Yeah. Therapy session."

"Great." Shotgun's dry tone and the roll of his eyes nearly made me grin. But I honestly didn't feel like it at the moment. And yeah. I knew the other man was trying to take the edge off my anger. "I'll let El Diablo know you guys are bring home a half-dead senator's son."

"You're assuming he'll be only half dead."

"Point." Shotgun gave me a little wave before ending the call.

I wasn't sure how much I trusted myself to be anywhere near Alistair at the moment, but I had to get Holly and make sure she was ready to face everyone when we landed. No doubt her mother and father would have some words. Wrath and Celeste would give Holly time to process, but I was feeling more than a bit protective of her.

With a shrug I went forward to the crew section. Fuck that little prick, Alistair. If the girls castrated him, so much the better. There were usually soldiers at the monitor banks, but this mission had been extraction only. This close to home, Mechanic kept up with the flight instrumentation and Razor would be back in the cockpit before they got ready to land.

Holly sat in one of the console stools. She was spinning around and round. Whenever she slowed, she'd push off with the workstation and start spinning again. I'd seen her do this same thing all the time at the bar in the compound. It always meant she was stressed about something. When she was little, it had been her cancer. Having childhood leukemia meant she'd grown up used to needles and medications and chemo treatments...

Part of the reason she'd caught my interest was because, when she first came to Black Reign, she'd given Wrath what-for when he and Celeste had been going through a rough patch after they'd first gotten together. The door to Celeste and Holly's room hadn't been fully closed, and I heard Holly's shrill little voice in the hallway. She'd said, "Don't you hurt my mommy again, or I'll get Blade to do surgery on you. He said if it hurt when I woke up, it would hurt even worse if he hadn't put the needle with the medicine in my arm to make me sleep." I'd only been a teenager, but even I could tell the child meant it, and she was fully confident Blade would do exactly what she described. That show of protection for her mother told me how much she loved Celeste, and how brave she was to stand up to a man as big and scary as Wrath. She'd been all of about four at the time, and already hell on wheels.

I was reluctant to say anything to break her concentration. She'd used to do this for

hours. She said it was comforting. I didn't have to start the conversation, though. Holly did it all on her own, after she'd thought through what she wanted to say. It was her way.

"Turns out, Andrea wasn't as great a friend as I thought." She gave a self-deprecating snort but looked anything but amused. She kept twirling on the stool.

"Some people are shit, baby. Don't know what to tell you there."

"The whole reason I came on this stupid trip was to protect her." She stopped spinning, her hands gripping the workstation desk tightly. "I never guessed she might have her own agenda." She turned her head to meet my gaze then. "Did she know about the attack, Jax?"

"Lookin' that way, baby. Unless me and Shotgun are both wrong, it looks like she was eyeball deep in this shit. And believe me, it's shit. I'd say the senator and Chris are both lookin' at hard prison time, but this is the kind of stuff that gets people killed. Prison or not."

"Yeah. Not that I expect anyone to go to prison." She leveled me with a look. Yeah. This girl was definitely aware of how "Uncle El" dealt with problems like the Alistairs.

"You gonna be good with that?"

"With Chris? Yep. I won't lose a moment's sleep over that motherfucker."

"But you're upset over Andrea."

"She's been my friend for a long time. Even though I know in my heart she's a horrible person, I need to know the why of it. Maybe she was threatened. In which

case, it's still not all right. But I'd rather she threw me under the bus than someone who didn't have people who cared about them and were willing to put a sophisticated GPS tracker in my phone and my watch, then send an expensive paramilitary plane to come get them."

"Dear Lord." I sighed, rolling my eyes. "Holly, it is not OK for you to wade into danger. That's what you have me for. Me and every man in the fuckin' club. You tell us, and we take the danger."

"I didn't know, Jax," she whispered, turning away from me. "I had a feeling, but that's it. I couldn't send in the cavalry based on a feeling. Besides, she's my best friend. I gave her my misgivings and she didn't share them. I was trying to protect her without causing problems for her."

"Hey. Look at me." She shook her head, but I stepped closer and gripped her chin gently and turned her head toward me. "Did you give me gray hairs with this stunt? Yeah. An abundance of them. I have a feeling it will always be like that with you. You were trying to protect a friend. While I wish you'd've gone to me or Wrath, I'm proud of you for protecting those you love. Just promise me that next time you'll come to me. OK?"

"I suppose I owe you that much. More, even. So, yeah. I'll make that promise."

I grinned. "Good." Then I brushed my lips over hers in a tender caress. It wasn't an aggressive or intense kiss, but the sensation nearly brought me to my fucking knees. Holly was perfectly still beneath me. She was sitting on a raised stool, but I still towered over her. She didn't resist, but didn't participate for several seconds.

As I was about to pull back and reassess the situation, Holly sighed and surrendered to me. Her hands went to my sides, and she pulled me closer to her. I framed her face with my hands and deepened the kiss, lapping at the seam of her lips until she opened

her mouth to let me inside.

The taste of her was intoxicating, the scent of her hair, the feeling of her body against mine. My heart pounded in my chest, a quick staccato rhythm. I pulled away reluctantly but needed to make sure she was good with my kiss. I hadn't exactly asked her, though I knew Holly wasn't the type of woman to sit passively while a man assaulted her. Not even me. Especially not me.

Her eyes fluttered open, wide with surprise and what I hoped was desire. Her breathing came in shallow pants, her cheeks flushed with a rosy hue. The sight of her -- tousled hair, swollen lips, and bright eyes -- nearly undid me. With all the self-control I could muster, I stepped back slightly.

"That was, uh," she stuttered, searching for the right words. "Unexpected."

"Is it?" I smiled at her, my hand still caressing her cheek.

A small crease formed on her forehead as she tried to process what had just happened. She narrowed her gaze in concentration. When she looked up, she framed my face in her hands much like I had hers and leaned in to kiss me.

This time, our tongues danced together, exploring each other in a slow, rhythmic waltz. It was a sweet longing and surrender, of promises and a possession so acute, I had to keep myself from growling. The last thing I wanted to do was scare her.

Her hands threaded into my thick hair, gripping the strands in an almost spasming hold. She returned the kiss with equal passion and longing. I could almost believe maybe she felt the same way about me I felt about her. Did she? Could she see me as something other than an annoying, overprotective older brother? Because I stopped seeing her as my little sister years ago.

When I pulled back this time, Holly grunted her displeasure. I looked down into her upturned face to see her flushed cheeks and nearly glazed eyes. She seemed dazed, as if she couldn't quite believe what had happened but wasn't willing for it to end. At least, that's what I hoped she was feeling. God knew I was.

"Jax." She sighed my name, her eyes still wide and shocked. There was also what looked like a wildness blossoming inside her. I could see it plain as the nose on my face. One second she was simply dazed, the next she was locked on me. Like the prey had now become the predator. And, wouldn't you know it, that show of aggression made me hard as fuck.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:04 pm

Holly

I knew I didn't want my first time with Jax to be like this. Not only did I want it to last longer than five minutes, but my dad would kill him and Jax wouldn't lift a finger to defend himself. That didn't stop me from imagining what it would be like. Jax at my back. Taking me like he'd die if he didn't. I wasn't ready for that, and now definitely wasn't the time...

"Get that look off your face, girl. Your body can't cash that kind of check." Jax stared down at me, a stern look on his face. Unfortunately, I saw the primal interest in his eyes.

"Why? You're thinking the same thing."

"Yep. But if I show that kind of disrespect to you, your mother would never forgive me." He gave me a sheepish grin. "And your father would kill me."

"Who says it's disrespectful when it's what I want?" I put my chin up. The thought wasn't as embarrassing as it probably should have been.

"Your dad says it's disrespectful when, A, it's our first time together, and B, when I haven't given you a property patch yet. Not saying I always agree with him on that, but with regard to you?" He chuckled and shook his head. "His opinion is the only one that counts."

I opened my mouth to argue, then realized how stupid it would sound. "You know, you're right. Not sure why I even thought about arguing the point."

“Good. Because once we get home, you and I need to have a conversation. Then, what you and me do willingly, in the privacy of our own home, ain’t none of anybody’s Goddamned business.”

There was no way to stop the smile from curling my lips when I felt like anything other than smiling. Anger. Sadness. Pain. Even grief. Jax had always had a way of making me smile even through all the chemo treatments and tests after my leukemia was in remission. If he couldn’t make me laugh or smile, he pissed me off. Well, until he figured out it was easier to piss me off sometimes. When he did that, I toughed it out to spite him. It was over before I knew it.

“There’s my girl. My little Holly Sweetness.” Jax pulled me closer, wrapping me up in his arms tightly. There was no way for me to not snuggle into him. There were very, very few times in my life when I let him hold me like this. All of it revolved around being sick in one way or another. Only when I was at my very end did I allow it, and during those times, Jax was the only one I wanted.

“Did you know how much I needed you? When I was sick, I mean.” I spoke softly, barely able to get the words out at all. “Sometimes.”

“Yeah, baby. I didn’t really understand it back then, and it was different than it is now, but yeah. I knew.”

I trembled in his arms but clung so tightly I was afraid he’d call me out on how shaky I was. Then, to my utter horror, tears started to leak from my eyes in steady streams. I wanted to let him hold me, to use him as a human shield to hide me from the rest of the world like I used to when I was small. Jax deserved better than me using him, though. I wasn’t going to sound like a wuss when I confessed my feelings though.

“Jax.” I pushed back slightly. I still clung to his shirt, but I had to look at him when I said this. I needed to know his true feelings so I’d know how much trouble I was in.

“I’m only going to say this once, so consider yourself warned.” I took a breath. “I can’t... pretend with you. I can’t do casual. I can’t even have any kind of romantic relationship with you, then lose you. I’m probably already too far gone because when I think about being scared, or in trouble, or in pain, the only person I’ve ever wanted to be with me is you.”

He grinned, then opened his mouth, probably to tell me something like all he’d ever wanted was to be my rock to lean on or some equally sappy bullshit, but I cut him off. “I’m not even sure I could leave you now and walk away for good without leaving a huge piece of my heart behind. So you’ve got this one chance. We’ve known each other long enough to know if we can spend our lives together. Don’t make a commitment if you don’t think you can honor it. If you can’t, put a fuckin’ screeching halt to this... whatever it is, between us because if you decide a week from now or a month from now or a year from now that you want one of the club girls, I’ll fuck you one last time. The second you come, when you let your guard down, I will fuckin’ stab you in the kidney. Both kidneys if you don’t make me come first.” There. That sounded tough enough for the road name Maddog.

Jax blinked down at me in surprise. Then he grinned. “That’s good to know.” He pulled me back to him, squeezing me tight. “You’ve got nothin’ to worry about, Holly Sweetness.”

“That’s the second time you’ve called me that. Only Uncle El calls me that.”

“Have you noticed he does that with all our women? He gives each of them an endearment for a nickname.”

“Yeah. I figured it was his way of showing affection.”

Jax nodded. “In a way, I suppose. But, more importantly, it’s his way of reminding us how precious our women are to us all. I learned that lesson well the first time I sat

with you after a chemo treatment when you were five.”

“You were nearly an adult. Why were you spending so much time with me when you should have been out drinking and getting laid?”

That got a bark of laughter from Jax, real merriment dancing in his eyes. “God, Holly. Don’t ever fuckin’ change.”

“I’m just sayin’! Why did you give up so much of your time to stay with me? Especially when I was so awful to you.” I kind of felt bad about that. “Still am awful to you.”

“It’s your love language.” Jax gave me a big smile. “And I’m not too proud to admit I like goading you. Besides, when you fought me, it kept you too busy to cry.”

I wasn’t sure exactly how I expected Jax to respond, but this wasn’t it. My first instinct was to scowl at him but it didn’t last, and the tears came even harder. Jax closed his arms around me, surrounding me with... him. He murmured softly to me, rubbing my back occasionally with one big palm.

“I thought you were angry with me.” I blurted out my worries without thinking. “Before. When you found us during the fight.”

“Why would you think that, baby?” He didn’t loosen his hold or even let me pull away. Instead, he tightened his hold on me and actually lifted me. I let out a soft whimper but wrapped my legs around him. He carried us back to that small room. The crew area was beyond the half wall, a long aisle separating left and right with canvas chairs along the walls. I caught sight of Chris and Andrea. Chris was in pain, and Andrea looked scared. Her gaze met mine and she started “crying” again. Probably with no messy tears and snot like before. Thankfully, the moment didn’t last and Jax kicked the broken door so that it blocked most of the opening, separating us

from the chaos of my life on the outside.

“I... Because...” God, I hated feeling this fragile! I’d been doing OK until I saw Andrea again. She’d utterly played me. I still didn’t know exactly what the plan had been, and wasn’t sure I wanted to. It made me doubt my judgment. Specifically, it made me wonder why a man like Jax would want someone like me long term. And I told him the stark truth. I couldn’t have him only to lose him. Losing him would destroy my heart.

“Honey, I can’t understand why you’d think I was angry if you don’t tell me what made you feel that way.”

“You didn’t seem to... You pushed me away and...”

“Christ, honey,” He sat on the cot, his back to the wall, urging me to straddle his hips. He still held me close, like he didn’t want to let me go.

“I know you were trying to protect me, looking for more of those fuckers, but it still felt like a rejection, so it’s not you. It’s me.”

“Baby, your feelings matter. Especially after what you just went through.”

“Jax, my whole life has been about my feelings. Mom tried so hard to make sure I had everything I wanted, especially when I was sick. Then she met Wrath and we got Grandmama and Pop Pops and everyone doted on me. I’m not too proud to admit I was a spoiled brat. This whole trip has been about what I wanted. I was so busy trying to prove to myself I could do anything I wanted, I never stopped to consider how everyone I loved would feel if something happened to me. My bruised feelings are my own problem. You did exactly what you had to do, and I’ll never be able to thank you enough.” I was babbling now, but once I started, I wasn’t able to stop. “I feel so selfish, Jax! I’m so fuckin’ sorry!” And there went the tears and snot.

Jax held me tight. I thought he whispered softly to me, trying to take as much of my pain as I'd give him, but I wasn't sure. It didn't really matter. His voice was comforting, like it had been all my life. He let me get everything out, never hurrying me or telling me I had to get myself under control. Like always, Jax was incredibly patient with me.

When all I had left in me was a few hiccups and sniffles, Jax brushed my hair away from my face and urged me to look up at him. "This is what we need to talk about, baby." He gave me a smile before leaning in to give me a gentle kiss. He brushed my cheek, then my lip before kissing me once more. "I am angry with you. I'm angry with you for not trusting me enough to tell me why you had to go. I'd have come with you if you'd told me the second you knew you were going. I'd have found a way home sooner. Even not knowing, I was on my way home to go with you, baby. But, more than anything, I'm angry with myself for not making you understand you could always count on me to have your back. No matter what."

"Do you promise?"

"On my life, Holly Sweetness. On my fuckin' life."

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:04 pm

Jax

Mechanic landed the big Osprey in the courtyard of the Black Reign MC compound. We were met by every patched member and old lady who were in the compound. Wrath and Fury were the first two on the aircraft.

“What the fuck happened, Jax?” My dad, Fury, wasn’t angry, just genuinely curious. “You and Holly good?”

“We’re not hurt, sir.”

My dad gave me an impatient look. “You don’t have to be so formal with me.”

“No, sir. But If I practice with you, maybe I won’t forget my manners with Wrath.” I tried to keep the grin from my face but failed miserably.

“Good plan, pup.” Wrath huffed out an irritated grunt but slapped me on the shoulder good-naturedly. “Being your father-in-law is gonna be so much fun. Especially since I’m gonna insist you call me sir . All the fuckin’ time.” The big bastard grinned but looked like he was only half joking. “Now, where’s my daughter?”

I jerked my head toward the shut door. “We had some... developments.”

“Yeah.” Fury looked past us where the other women and Alistair were. The women had beat the shit outta the man for the better part of an hour. He was somewhat the worse for wear but I doubt he’d be complaining about how he got beat up by a bunch of women for a variety of infractions, not the least of which looked like trafficking.

He wasn't the kind of man to appreciate a strong woman, or any woman at all really. Especially if she fought back. "Heard you rolled up on an attack. How many killed?"

I shrugged. "Not exactly sure. Some of the women didn't even realize they were all together. I'm tellin' you, this kid did a real good number on all of them."

"Holly too?" Wrath was all business now.

"Yes, but not in the same way. And it wasn't Alistair who played her. It was Andrea."

Wrath's gaze narrowed and he let his gaze track to the other women in the back. I saw the moment his gaze locked on Andrea. It was a predator's stare, the kind you saw right before he nabbed his prey. "I'll be right back."

I snagged the other man's arm and stepped in front of him. "Not now, Wrath. Talk to Holly first. Reassure her you're not angry with her. Coddle her for a while, then we'll deal with this. Andrea and Alistair aren't going anywhere."

"Where's my Holly Sweetness?" El Diablo and his wife, Jezebel, hurried up the ramp in back of the aircraft, the anger and worry in El Diablo's voice echoing inside the aircraft. Mechanic hadn't unlocked the back hatch immediately after landing to make sure Chris Alistair didn't get out of the aircraft with one of the women, hoping we'd leave him alone and not risk hurting an innocent. We wouldn't, but we'd also never let him leave this place until we knew exactly what part he'd played and doled out a punishment to fit the crime. We just happened to believe the best defense was a good offense. Keeping Alistair contained meant he couldn't hurt anyone else in the compound. Of course, in the shape he was currently in, I doubted he was able to do much.

The fact El Diablo hadn't entered at the forward hatch of the aircraft with Wrath and Fury meant he intended to go in from the aft cargo hatch. Any question as to whether

or not Shotgun had kept our president up to date on the information he was getting from Alistair's phone was answered as he passed the man in question. As El Diablo approached Chris Alistair, he lashed out, crushing Alistair's nose with the heel of his hand in one hard, vicious strike. Unfortunately, he didn't knock the man out with the blow.

Alistair screamed, covering his nose with his hands. Blood poured through his fingers and dripped onto his lap. All the women hurried down the ramp except Andrea. She was closer to the front of the aircraft, a couple seats up from Alistair. She had her eye on El Diablo -- who didn't spare her even a dirty look -- and completely overlooked Jezebel. I doubted it was a mistake Andrea would make again. I could have told her she was fucked either way. Jezebel was more bloodthirsty than El Diablo, and she had no qualms about hitting a woman. As was proved when she landed a hard, open-handed slap to Andrea as Jezebel passed her. Andrea whimpered, but didn't say anything in her own defense. Which was probably a good thing, since anyone could see Jezebel wasn't in the mood for it.

Holly chose that moment to open the door. She gave Andrea only a passing glance before looking away. I saw the pain in her eyes. No doubt everyone else could see it too. She gave El Diablo a small smile before going to Wrath. "I'm so sorry to have worried everyone."

Wrath didn't hesitate to enfold her in his arms. Celeste shoved her way onto the plane at the front where her husband and my father had boarded, then she hugged Holly from behind. Effectively, Wrath and Celeste surrounded Holly with their love where no one could get to her or hurt her anymore. All three of them stood there, clinging to each other. Wrath didn't even try to hide the moisture shining in his eyes.

"Your mother was worried, honey. We're both really glad you're back home safe and sound."

“Mom was worried, huh?” Holly chuckled through her tears.

“Yeah. She was.” Wrath sounded gruff as usual. If his voice was a little scratchy... well. It was dusty where the Osprey kicked up dirt when we landed.

“Tough guys don’t worry?” She was obviously trying to put her father at ease, but I knew Wrath could hear the distress in her voice because he squeezed her tighter.

“Yeah. Tough guys worry too, kiddo. At least this one does. You, your mother, and your sisters are my entire world. I know you’re not supposed to have favorite children, but you’ve got a special place in my heart no one else can touch, Holly.” Wrath cleared his throat. “Might have been because you were sick when I met you, but I’m pretty sure it was more the way you busted my balls for hurtin’ your mom’s feelings. Even at four years old, you didn’t let me get away with shit. Your sisters think I’m always right and never question anything I do, but you always keep me honest.”

That got a startled laugh from both Holly and Celeste. “You’re so full of shit,” Celeste said through a watery smile.

“What? They do! Just ask them. They never tell me I’m wrong or that I’m too overprotective, or that they want to date boys or some shit. They are my precious angels, and they love me as much as I love them.”

“No doubt about that last part, Daddy.” Holly smiled up at her dad. It was a genuine smile, even though there was still a world of pain in her eyes. She was enjoying this brief respite from the dumpster fire this day had been. “They manage you,” Holly said, patting Wrath on the chest in commiseration. “That way they can do whatever they want, and you don’t even realize they’re not where they’re supposed to be.”

“They do not.” Wrath sounded scandalized, even gave Holly a fierce scowl like she’d

affronted his dadhood or something.

“Hate to break it to you, honey,” Celeste chimed in. “But she’s right. I tried to tell you early on, but you wouldn’t listen.”

Wrath narrowed his gaze, looking from one of them to the other. Several times. Slowly, his face morphed from irritated, to confused, to stunned realization. “Well, I’ll be Goddamned.”

“Yep.” Celeste urged Holly closer to Wrath and steered them toward the front of the plane. Obviously, she didn’t want any issue with Andrea or Alistair and likely knew exactly what Wrath knew. I was sure Wrath was very aware of what his wife was doing. In fact, I’d bet that whole conversation had been staged to lead her in the direction her parents wanted her to go, both physically and mentally. Keep her distracted and she’d be less likely to panic. Just like when she was a kid.

I let Celeste lead Holly away, knowing I needed to meet with El Diablo and Shotgun to decide what was going to happen next. Wrath stayed. Probably because he wasn’t sitting by and let everyone else punish the people who’d hurt his daughter. Everything inside me told me to follow Holly, but I knew she’d be safe with her mother until I could get this straightened out. Hell, she probably needed time with her mother to get a better perspective on... well, many things. But most of all, me. Above all, I had to have the blessing of her mother and father to make my claim valid. That was going to take them being certain I was who Holly wanted.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” El Diablo marched toward me, a look of utter fury on his face. Wrath closed in on the other side of me. Same look.

“El Diablo...” My dad, Fury, stepped between me and our president. I think it was pure instinct on his part and, even though I trusted El Diablo with my life, and, more importantly, Holly’s life. If he and Wrath were getting ready to throw me a beating, I

wanted to know what I'd done to screw up. You know. So I didn't make the same fuckup again.

"What'd I do?" I was a grown-ass man in my thirties, but I felt like a green prospect under El Diablo's displeasure.

"Get your ass inside the clubhouse and get my Holly Sweetness settled, asshole," he snapped, using Holly's nickname for me, likely on purpose. El Diablo could certainly come up with more creative derogatory names to call me than asshole.

"I wanted to check in with you and Shotgun first. Once I shut myself in a room with Holly, I don't intend to leave it until we have a plan firmly in place for the two of us. She has more grieving to do, and I intend to let her get it all out. No matter how long it takes. She knows I won't be long." Now that I knew what the problem was, I was totally throwing both him and Wrath under the bus. "Unlike some people on this aircraft, I've been as straightforward with my woman as I can be about my activities and why and how long I intend on being away from her. Only misunderstanding we've had was in me not recognizing how my feelings for her changed over the years. She didn't realize I no longer saw her as a kid sister, and I didn't explain because I wasn't sure she was ready."

El Diablo glared at me for long moments. "Show-off." Was it possible for him to sound equal parts disgruntled and proud?

"Yeah. Agreed." Wrath gave me a sheepish grin as he scrubbed the back of his neck. "I'd tell you not to tell Celeste what happened, but I know you well enough to know that's a futile request."

I chuckled. "Hey. I may be an asshole, but I'm not a dumbass. I learned from your and El Diablo's mistakes. Mainly because I make enough of my own without repeating someone else's. Your secret's safe with me. You know. Unless I need

leverage.” There was no way to keep the grin off my face.

“That’s my boy.” Fury clapped me on the shoulder, sharing a proud smile with me. I’d only gotten to know my dad over the last eight or so years but I kinda felt like this one moment was when me and my dad finally came together as father and son.

He met my gaze. I was fairly certain I saw a sheen of tears in his eyes. I grinned. “Rotor dust can be a bitch when it gets into your eyes, old man.”

“Fuckin’ allergies,” Fury grumbled, but still smiled at me like the proud father I’d been determined to make him when I first came here to live with him after my mother died.

“Sure, allergies.” I smirked back at him. The banter was a welcome relief from the tension of the past few hours. It wouldn’t last long, but I needed the break before going into this meeting with the officers of my club. We all shared a quick chuckle before sobering.

I sighed, knowing this was gonna be messy. I was simultaneously looking forward to the carnage about to ensue next, and dreading coming back to Holly with blood on my hands. I knew she’d be OK with it, but I still didn’t like it. “Nothing like this shit should ever fuckin’ touch her.” The muttered comment came out before I could censor it.

Turning back to El Diablo, I scrubbed a hand over my face, suddenly wearier than I could ever remember being. “So, what now?”

El Diablo flashed a small grin, his dark eyes burning into mine, and I knew whatever he and Shotgun found left him little doubt how to continue. “First things first -- we need to figure out what the hell Alistair’s game is. How deep does this betrayal go?”

“And does his father know about it?” I was remembering the conversation Chris Alistair had had earlier. “Little punk called his old man about halfway through the flight home. I figured he’d called to complain so his daddy could ruin our lives and shit. Could have been something more to it.”

I half expected everyone to tell me I was crazy, but they all looked deadly serious. “Did Holly say anything about it?”

“No. I don’t think she suspected anything like this. All she knew was that she had a bad feeling about Chris and Andrea wouldn’t listen to her. So, she made herself her best friend’s protector.”

“Why was she there?” Wrath stroked his short beard in agitation. “Why did she insist on going on this trip in the first Goddamned place? Then not tell me or her mother? I’m upset she ran off on her own and tried to hide it from me, but I’m more upset that she didn’t come to me if she thought something was off with this guy.”

“Already talked with her about that.” Even though I knew Wrath would rather chew off his own arm than say anything to intentionally hurt Holly’s feelings, I was feeling super protective of her at the moment. A combination of her running away from me straight into danger and the newness of our romantic relationship. And I can’t believe I even thought the word romantic . That alone could get my man card revoked. “She said all she had was a feeling and that she didn’t want to call out the big guns until she knew for sure there was an actual problem.”

“Sounds like Holly.” Wrath met my gaze.

“And before you ask, I’ve already made sure she knows to bring things like that to one of us in the future. I’ll go a step further and tell her to keep going to someone in the club until she gets someone to listen and help her investigate until she’s satisfied she has the answers she’s looking for.”

Fury smirked, lifting his chin at me. “Always knew you were smarter’n this lot.”

El Diablo clapped me on the shoulder. “He’s always been perfect for our little Holly Sweetness.” He glanced back over his shoulder. “Rycks and Warlock have secured a, shall we say, safe area for these two.” He indicated Chris and Andrea.

“My... father... will ruin... you.” Chris Alistair was beaten and bloodied. I’m pretty sure his testicles were singing a very sad song. More than one of the women had been slightly disgruntled at how he’d played them.

“Senator Christopher Alistair the Second won’t be interested in fighting me for anyone. Even his own son.” El Diablo’s mocking chuckle let me know exactly what was going to happen to Christopher Alistair the Third.

Alistair smirked -- or tried to. He wasn’t in shape to spar with anyone. Verbally or physically. “My dad will do anything to protect me.”

“He won’t protect you from this. Not if he wants to continue his cushy life as a United States Senator.” El Diablo gave the man a false sympathetic look. “I’m afraid having his son disappear on a relief mission to Columbia plays far better in the news than having him imprisoned for human trafficking.”

“Just because I have a few girlfriends doesn’t mean I was trafficking them.” There was still the ghost of a smile on his lips. “Besides, I’m sure this will all have disappeared by the time my dad gets here. He’ll take me home and yell at me a little, then I’ll have to behave for a few months.”

“Hmm...” Fury raised an eyebrow. “Maybe bring Archangel in to question him? Sounds like there’s a pattern of bad behavior here.”

El Diablo waved him off. “Archangel will be especially valuable in questioning

Andrea, but there's really no need for him to talk with this one. Unless Shotgun finds something compelling on his phone to explain this to my satisfaction, there's nothing he could say to justify what we've found so far." He shrugged. "We'll give it a few days. See if Shotgun and Eden find anything that tells them the phone data was manufactured in any way. Until then, we'll see to it Mr. Alistair here has the best accommodations."

"You're bluffing." Alistair looked from El Diablo to me and back. I hadn't said anything to the motherfucker, so I had no idea why he was looking at me.

"About what?" El Diablo's crisp British accent made him seem more civilized than he actually was, but that was all part of the mystique that was El Diablo.

"You can't keep me here. I have rights." He was sounding stronger now. Probably because there was just that inkling of doubt. El Diablo was good at this kind of warfare. Mental torture. There was no doubt Alistair was guilty. El Diablo wanted to ferret out everyone Alistair knew to be involved in the supply chain. Once he did, he'd destroy them all. I wasn't being dramatic, either.

"All evidence to the contrary." El Diablo smiled brightly. "I can honestly say that I'm not sure I've ever looked forward to an interrogation more." The bastard sounded cheerful.

Samson and Tank walked up the ramp, both of them looking grim. "Got a place all picked out for 'em." Tank and Samson were both big motherfuckers. If nothing else, their sheer size was a deterrent against shenanigans. Samson spoke for both of them since he was the vice president for Black Reign.

"Ah, good." El Diablo rubbed his hands together in glee. "You and Tank see Mr. Alistair to his new accommodations. Me and my lovely wife will escort Miss Andrea."

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Andrea spat out.

Jezebel grinned. “Sure you are. Only question is, will you be coming conscious or unconscious?”

Andrea shook her head, looking at each of us, her gaze resting on me. “You can’t let them do this to me. I’m Holly’s best friend.”

“Why do women always think those big, pleading, doe eyes will get them anything they want?” I frowned at Andrea. “You’re not Holly’s friend, Andrea. You lost the right to claim that protection when you helped your boyfriend hurt her.”

“But I didn’t mean for anything to happen.”

“You didn’t mean...” I took a step toward Andrea. Woman or not, I was about to beat the shit outta her.

Jezebel stepped between me and Andrea. I thought she might have pushed me back or warned me to not hit the woman. Instead, she lashed out herself, landing another open-handed slap across Andrea’s face. “Now.” Jezebel smiled down at the other woman like they were having a pleasant conversation. “You’re going to come with me. We’re going to have a talk. It’s not going to be pleasant and you’re not going to enjoy it. But you will give me what I want, or I’ll see to it what was going to happen to Holly, happens to you.”

“You can’t do that!” Andrea looked more than a little scared but still defiant. “You’re lying to get me to cooperate.”

“Oh, you’re going to cooperate.” Jezebel practically purred her words. “The only question is how long it takes to break you. Now personally, I’m looking forward to the task. I’m not sure you’re going to feel the same way. Oh!” Jezebel grinned as

though she had a big surprise and had almost forgotten to tell the other woman. “Shotgun found out the cartel leader you promised your... merchandise... to put out a capture order on you and your lovely boyfriend. They’d like to know what happened. Also, there was something about showing the greedy Americans what happens when they cross La Familia Rosa .”

Andrea paled and shook her head, fear etched in every line on her face. “Do you know what they’ll do to me?”

“Yep. Absolutely. You might want to consider what they’ll do to you, too, baby girl.” Jezebel grabbed Andrea’s upper arm and forced her to her feet. “Because what they will do is a bit tepid compared to what I’m gettin’ ready to do.” She gave Andrea a wicked smile. “You think about all the horrible things you imagine they would have done to you and multiply by... oh, say five. Ten, if you piss me off further.” Jezebel’s expression hardened, and I began to understand now why she and El Diablo were so perfect together. “No one messes with my family and gets a happy ending. Every person inside these walls is my immediate family. My brothers and sisters. My children. My husband. The people in the city around us are my extended family. You’re in deep shit for what you did to young women and children in the community. For what you did to Holly, the rest of your life will be miserable and way too long, and if you don’t understand what that means, you soon will. When the miserable part starts.”

Andrea sobbed loudly as Jezebel dragged her off the plane with a handful of the other woman’s hair to a waiting Explorer. Hardcase was driving while Iron was in the passenger side. He got out and opened the back door for Jezebel who, instead of going around to the other side and getting in, shoved Andrea over and pushed her way inside the vehicle next to Andrea.

El Diablo’s lips thinned into a hard line. “My lovely Jezebel is feeling a bit vicious this afternoon.” After several seconds as he seemed to think about something, a slow,

eager smile spread across his face. “I love it when she gets vicious.”

“And that’s my cue to get my jump kit ready.” Fury turned and headed to the door. “Go see to Holly, Jax. I’ll call you when I’m ready to leave for the interrogation. You can ride with me and Noelle.” Fury was the club doctor. During intense interrogations, he was called on to keep their subject alive. Sometimes it worked, others not. Fury told me once the theory was, if they didn’t need to be taken apart, El Diablo wouldn’t take them apart. I hadn’t really understood what he’d meant back then. I believed a person needed to think for themselves and not blindly follow orders. Now, I realized no one in Black Reign MC was blindly following El Diablo. They trusted their president to do the right thing because he’d proven time and time again he wanted what was best for the members of Black Reign. Not just the club in general, but the individual men, women, and children within the compound walls. They trusted him to say someone needed to be tortured because he’d earned their trust. So yeah. Dad was going to be OK with what was about to happen. I was too.

But first, I needed to go to Holly. El Diablo was also right that I didn’t need to spend any more time away from her than strictly necessary. Now, it wasn’t necessary.

Even given the gravity of everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, there was a lightness in my soul. Holly... was mine. She always had been. I just hadn’t grown into my feelings and neither had she. She was right. We knew way more than enough about each other to make a definitive decision about our future together. And I knew without a doubt there was no future for me without Holly in it.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:04 pm

Holly

Mom took me to her and Dad's house in the big compound that was Black Reign MC. I'm not really sure why they wanted to be called a motorcycle club other than that Uncle El, as I'd called him since I was four, liked to pretend to be normal. I suppose being known as an MC was better than being thought of as a bunch of rich people doing shady shit. While the latter might be more easily overlooked, I always had the feeling El Diablo liked looking the part of a leader of rough and rowdy bikers. He was essentially thumbing his nose at conventionality and inviting law enforcement to keep an eye on the club. Probably because he liked watching them try to puzzle out what the fuck was going on and not being able to figure it out. The truth was, Black Reign MC had more money and resources at their disposal than some small countries. All thanks to El Diablo.

Wrath, my father, was also District Attorney for Palm Beach County. As such, there was no way anyone was touching Black Reign from a legal standpoint. My mother met Vincent "Wrath" Black when I was four. I didn't know the whole story, but the end result was my mother didn't have to work two or three jobs to pay for my medical care. Didn't mean I hadn't given him shit. Even as a young kid I was full of piss and vinegar. Mostly, I think I'd wanted to see how far I could push him. The answer was pretty Goddamned far.

When he and my mother married, he'd adopted me the same day. Being a big-shot lawyer tended to pave the way, I guess. That and having access to a really good computer guy. I'd never known my biological father. As far back as I could remember, it was always Wrath. He was the only father I'd ever known, and he'd been a great one. My little sisters had him wrapped around their fingers as much as I

did, but they were sneaky about it. I never cared if he knew what I was doing or not. He'd proven to be incredibly patient and caring with me, my sisters, and of course, my mother. Especially my mother. The only time he and I had ever had words was when I was a smart-mouthed teenager and I'd said something to hurt my mother's feelings. I got it now. Sometimes, a woman needed her man to have her back, even with her own children.

Mom shut the door behind us, and I let her lead me to the bathroom. My father hadn't followed us home yet, but I knew he'd be here soon. Probably with Jax right behind him.

"I'm so sorry, Mom," I said as a tear tracked down my cheek. "I know how much you and Dad love me and knew you would worry. I don't know why I plowed on without even talking to you guys about what was going on."

"Honey, Jax explained it. And I get it, baby. I do. What I hate is that I didn't make you feel like you could come to me or your father about stuff like this. We'll always have your back and take your concerns seriously. Wrath would have been happy to check into this guy for you. I hope you know that."

"I do. But I also know Dad. He'd have sent an army with me, but only as far as the nearest black site he knew of to interrogate and torture Chris. Then they'd have packed me and Andrea up and carted us home." I winced as I said Andrea's name and a fresh flood of tears slid from my eyes.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

"No." I was firm in my denial. "Don't feel sorry for me about Andrea. She played me. I was blinded by my loyalty to her and never once considered she was doing something shady with Chris." I shook my head. "I don't even know for sure either of them was doing anything. I mean, we suspected, and I know Jax got Chris's phone

data to Shotgun, but everything else is just speculation right now.”

“We can talk about this after you get a shower. I know you’re a grown woman and I’m not trying to baby you, Holly, but I’d feel better if I was in here with you in case you fall.” Mom gave me a small, unsure smile, and I knew she needed this. She was right that I didn’t want my mother to be in the bathroom with me while I showered, but having company in my bathroom was a small price to pay to ease my mother’s worry. God knew she’d worried enough about me over the years.

“Thanks, Mom. It’s probably best to have someone close. I’m dirty, hurt, and exhausted. Not taking a shower isn’t even an option, and a bath would be gross.”

“I love you, baby.” She was tearful but smiling. “I’m so glad you weren’t seriously hurt. You’re my world.”

“I love you too, Mom.” I looked at the floor and took a breath. “Are you...” I looked back up at her, needing to see her immediate reaction to my question. “Will you be OK with me and Jax being together?”

I needn’t have worried. Mom had always liked Jax. Especially when she’d seen him interact with me when I was so sick. “Holly, I’ve known since you were in your teens you’d claim that man for your own. I hated it when you were that young, but he kept you at arm’s length. Probably for that very same reason. He was a man. You were a teenager. Jax is many things, but he’s not a creep. He was never anything but appropriate with his care of you. He’s had my respect for a very long time, Holly. So yeah. I’m going to be fine with it.” When my mother genuinely smiled, there was nothing more beautiful. She’d always been that way. It wasn’t so much her looks as her inner light. My mother had walked through hell and back when I was sick. She’d done anything she had to, to make sure I had the medical care I needed.

“It’s important to me that you approve. Dad too. I... Sometimes, I think with my

heart too much. Living in the moment is something I guess is ingrained in me after being so sick as a kid. I never subscribed to the mentality that if a guy picked on you, then he liked you. But when Jax picked on me, it was never malicious or hurtful. He was trying to get a rise out of me. Looking back, I know it was his way of distracting me. He'd do it over and over until I cried."

Mom gasped, a look of horror on her face. "He did what?"

"No! Mom! It's not like that!" I took Mom's hand in mine and gripped it hard. "Jax knew that, once I started crying, it was time to stop picking at me because I'd gone past the point of any kind of distraction being able to hold me together. He knew that, when I stopped fighting him, I was ready to be held. And that's what he did."

I was afraid Mom might not believe me or accept my explanation, but my description was accurate. And it was exactly how it had to be. I'd never have surrendered to Jax. I couldn't let him beat me. Jax knew what I could accept. He and Fury and Noelle had been the ones to teach me that even strong fighters get tired. Your muscles need a brief rest period after intense contraction when working hard. Your mind was the same way. Both needed a brief rest occasionally, and sometimes my body quit before my mind could. He called the times when he had to hold me "end of round two" since there were typically three rounds in an MMA fight. Noelle had been a fighter and Fury her trainer. Jax learned it from them, and held me to it the best way he could.

Instead of not believing me, my mother nodded and looked thoughtful. "I think I understand a lot of things more clearly now. And why during the worst of it, the only person you wanted was Jax."

"I'm surprised you figured it out. Instead of telling you I wanted him, I'd make up something horrible he'd done to me earlier." I smiled at the memory. It was a dark, miserable time in my life, but my relationship with Jax had been forged in those fires. And the fires had been so very hot.

“And I’d go tell your father to make him come apologize to you.” She grinned, wiping a tear from her cheek. “You demanded I get your father to bring Jax to apologize that first time when I asked you what you wanted to happen. After that, I knew what to do.”

“I’ve loved him my entire life, Mom. That love evolved over time as I matured, but I can’t imagine my life without him in it.”

“You don’t have to convince me, honey. To be honest, Jax is the only man I could ever see me or Vincent giving our blessing to. If he’s your choice, he’s earned our blessing many times over. As long as he treats you right and takes care of you, I’ll never say a bad word against him.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Mom, he brought an Osprey and a paramilitary unit to my rescue. I’m not sure it’s possible for anyone to take better care of me than Jax.”

“Fair point.”

I took my time in the shower while Mom chatted lightly with me. It was exactly what I needed. Her voice had always soothed me. She had a way of knowing the perfect amount of conversation and when it was time to keep it light or when we could discuss harder realities. By the time I’d washed myself thoroughly and let the hot water pound on some of my sore muscles, I was so tired I was practically asleep on my feet.

I’d never been able to have long hair as a child. Thankfully, after I’d gone into remission my hair had grown back nice and healthy. Once it had, I’d refused to cut my hair again. Now I was rethinking that decision. It was long and thick. Without help from a blow dryer, it would take hours to fully dry. I wrapped a towel around my head. I’d figure it out later. Right now, I wanted to find Jax. I also had to talk to my dad before I left, but I needed Jax more and more with each breath.

Mom helped me into a pair of athletic shorts and an oversized T-shirt before we left the bathroom. The second I stepped into the living room, I automatically looked for Jax.

He was sitting on the couch with my dad. Both men were deep in soft conversation. When they spotted us, they both stood. Wrath went to my mom and put his arm around her while Jax came to me.

Instead of pulling me into his arms, he steadied me at arm's length before bending to pick up a shallow box. He opened it and urged me to pick up the contents.

"My property cut?"

"Yeah, sweetheart. If you'll have me."

"You know I will, Jax." I threw myself at him, needing to be in his arms. I lost the towel, but it didn't seem to matter. Jax hugged me, wet hair and all. When I finally let him go, he helped me into my cut before lifting me into his arms. I put my legs around his waist and clung to him. I knew there were things that needed saying, especially with my dad, but I couldn't right now. It was obvious Wrath and Jax had worked it out since Dad didn't voice his objections. I'd trust everything was fine.

"Razor's gonna take us to the little house in the middle of the property. It's not far from you guys and was just finished. El Diablo said to take it if we wanted. Thought we could try it out. See if Holly likes it."

"I like you, pup," Dad said, leveling a look at Jax. "But you only get one shot at this. You break her heart, I cut yours out with a rusty knife."

Jax gave my dad a solemn nod. "On my life, Wrath. I'll protect her heart, body, and soul."

“Dad?”

“Yeah, baby.” He stroked the back of my head, and I looked up from where my face had been pressed against Jax’s neck.

“I’m sorry I left without telling you anything. I’m so sorry.” I needed Dad to understand I knew I’d fucked up.

“We’ll talk about it later. I’m not mad. I promise. I’m just happy you’re home safe. If Jax ain’t good to you, you come get me and I’ll take care of everything.” He kissed my temple. “You’ll always be my baby girl, Holly. Nothing will ever change that, or how much I love you. We’re good, you and me. I’m sure you’ve already talked with your mother, so you two are good, too.” It was about as much of a reprimand as my dad was capable of giving me, and I almost grinned.

“We did,” I whispered. “I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, Maddog.” He smiled at me. It was yet another piece of my past that had shaped who I was. For years after I’d come here and settled in with all the people here, I’d refused to answer to anything other than Maddog. I’m sure a therapist would have loads of fun with that little tidbit. I was sure I did it because “Maddog” wasn’t afraid of anything. Holly was afraid of everything.

Jax carried me to the waiting Bronco in the driveway. Razor drove us to the little house Jax had described. It was only four houses down the small block, but there was no way I was up to walking that distance and Jax knew it, bless him.

Once inside, he took me to the bedroom and sat on the bed, settling me between his legs. I was confused at first, but then he picked up a brush on the nightstand and began working it through my hair. I rested my chin on my knees and let the soothing strokes of the brush lull me into a space between asleep and awake when all I cared

about was the next stroke of the brush.

The next thing I knew, Jax had laid me on the bed and wrapped himself around me. My hair lay in a long braid over my shoulder and Jax's arm was solidly around my waist.

"Jax?"

"I'm right here, baby. Ain't goin' nowhere. Get some sleep and I'll keep you safe. I'll still be here when you wake up." The last thing I felt was his lips on my neck as he whispered. "I love you, little Holly. I love you."

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Jax

Holly slept like the dead. After a couple hours, I had to move to a chair I'd pulled up beside the bed so she could see me if she woke and I could hold her hand if she needed me to. I wanted to hold her hand whether she was awake or not, but Wrath was blowing up my phone with information they were getting out of the girl. Alistair, the prick, wasn't talking. Didn't matter much if he talked or not. Apparently, his phone, and a private server he thought was impenetrable, had a wealth of information on them. None of it good for Chris Alistair the Third.

I'd just finished reading a text when Holly moaned and rolled over on her side, facing me. Her eyes opened and I reached for her hand.

"Hey, baby. Sore?"

She gave me a sleepy smile. "A little."

"Fury sent something for pain if you need it. Not too strong, but it'll help you sleep."

"No." Holly gripped my hand. "We need to talk first. Probably should have already." Those clear blue eyes of hers could drown a man. Especially when she looked at him like she was looking at me now. There was no guile, no hedging. Holly was exactly as I saw her now. Sure, she could be brash and sarcastic, but I knew it was how she protected herself. When things were going wonderful in her life, she was like this all that time. When things got rough, she shored up her defenses and concentrated on surviving. Likely due to the leukemia she'd had as a child.

“We’ll talk about whatever you want to talk about, whenever you want to talk about it.”

She smiled. “Are you always going to give in to my demands?”

I couldn’t suppress my chuckle. “Probably. I’ll make sure I’m there when the fireworks start, and stand between you and whatever I have to until you’re ready to leave.”

“That’s such a ‘you’ thing to say, Jax.” She focused on my hand, threading her fingers through mine. “Are you and my dad OK?”

“We are, baby. Don’t worry about your dad. He and I can work out our own problems, but he’s going to allow me to make you my old lady.”

“I mean, you gave me a property cut and everything. It’s a little late, I suppose.”

“Never too late for a daddy to protect his little girl, but Wrath knows I’ll take care of you.”

Moisture leaked from her eyes, though she smiled through her tears. “You’ve always taken care of me.” With slow, deliberate movements, she raised her hand to my face, stroking my short beard. “I’ve loved you my entire life, Jax.” Her voice was barely a thread of sound, almost like she was talking to herself. “I know I haven’t always acted like it. I’m sorry for telling Mom and Dad you were mean to me when I was little. That wasn’t very nice of me.”

“Baby, don’t apologize for that. Never for that. It was the only way you could get one of them to come get me.” I chuckled softly, bringing her fingers to my lips where they were still laced with mine. I kissed her knuckles gently, letting my mouth linger on her skin. When I spoke, it was with her fingers still against my lips. “I admit the

first time startled me. Especially when I opened the door to a scowling Wrath. He took a swing at me before telling me what was going on. Once he did, I knew what was wrong.”

“Were you even out of your teens?”

“Not that time. But I was eighteen. Barely. It’s why he took a swing at me. I was legal and he knew I knew better than to hurt your feelings.”

“And I told him you had. And he believed me.”

“Of course, he was gonna believe you. It’s why you told him I’d been an asshole. You told him you wanted me to come apologize and that’s what he was makin’ me do.”

“Then you let me berate you for a solid hour. I think I hit you more than once.”

“Yeah, baby. You did. I took it proudly because once you tired yourself out, you crawled up in my lap and went to sleep with me holding you.” I stroked a lock of hair off her forehead. “That’s one of my favorite memories. The first time you showed me you trusted me and that I was able to take away at least some of your pain and frustration.”

Holly sat up and moved to the edge of the bed before crawling up into my lap. She wrapped her arms around me and cried against my neck. I held her and let her cry. The sooner she got out all her pent-up negative emotions, the better she’d feel. And we could get about the business of us.

When she finally stopped crying, Holly showed no signs of being ready to let me go. I was content to simply hold her. Wrath still shot off the occasional text, but as I’d told him when I stopped answering my phone, Holly was awake and needed my full

attention. If he called, I'd know it was urgent. Otherwise, I was going to ignore everything but Holly.

"So, what now?" She played with the front of my T-shirt, picking at the neckline and brushing her fingers over the material and my chest.

"You mean, what now for us?" I shrugged, leaning down to kiss her forehead just to feel the silky-smooth texture of her skin against my lips. "We live happily ever after."

She pulled back, meeting my gaze with an exasperated one of her own. "Nothing is ever that simple, Jax."

"It is with us. Sure, there are a couple things that need ironing out, but I'm pretty sure our major problems are going to disappear. After that, you and I get busy figuring out what makes you happiest."

"Me? What about you? Despite our history, I don't want you to be miserable."

That got a bark of laughter out of me. "I never thought you wanted me miserable, Holly. You needed a way to vent your anger and frustration. You chose me. I accepted the challenge willingly."

"But you didn't know I didn't mean all the stuff I said." The tears were starting again. I hated seeing her cry. Especially about our past.

"I knew. Call it intuition. Or wishful thinking." I chuckled.

"You couldn't have known I didn't mean it, because I didn't know I didn't mean it!" There was a little fire in her eyes now. That spark of temper was the thing that made me relax. Holly was ready to start fighting again.

“All I knew was I needed to make you better. Since there was nothing I could do to cure your illness, I knew I’d do the only other thing I could. Be there for you when you needed to lash out. You couldn’t do it with your parents, and certainly not the McDonalds. You had parents and other people who loved you, and all kinds of bikers in this compound who’d kill anyone you needed killed. You even had a doctor doing everything in his power to make sure you were with us for a very long time to come. What you didn’t have was a person you felt safe to release all the pent-up anger and frustration inside you. I knew exactly what I was signing up for, baby.”

“I don’t deserve you, Jax.” Her chin trembled with emotion.

“Yeah you do, baby. You deserve way more than I can give you, but there is no one on this earth who will be solely focused on you and seeing to your happiness.”

“You know, the leukemia came back once. Blade said he got on top of it because he monitors my markers aggressively. Says it’s better to do a blood test more frequently and get a negative result than to not test enough and get a positive result months later.”

“I remember.” As if she had to remind me. “I was on pins and needles for months, afraid to leave your side.”

“What? You weren’t there until I got sick from the chemo.” She sounded equal parts pissed, hurt, and resigned.

“Oh, no, honey. I sat outside your door every waking moment. The only time I left was when Wrath and Fury made me sleep. The women even made me a plate of food every time they brought you something. Then Wrath told them to stop. He told Lyric the only way to get me to leave was to not feed me. Then I’d either man up and come inside and sit with you, or go get my own food. At which time he’d simply lock me out.”

“That sounds like my dad.”

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t have mattered. I’d have sat outside your window. You kept it open in the evening, and I could sit and listen. I’d be there if you cried out in the night.”

“So that’s how you got into my room.”

I grinned. “Yeah. I know it’s kind of creepy, but I didn’t look at it that way. I was protecting you. Even if it was from nightmares. Or pain.”

“It’s not creepy.” She cupped the side of my face. “I think it’s wonderful. Thank you so much for always being in my life when I needed you, Jax.”

“Hardest thing I ever did was leave for the service. In the back of my mind, I was always on edge. If you needed me and I wasn’t there, I’d never have forgiven myself. The only reason I did it was because I wanted to work for ExFil. It provided a stable income for me and made El Diablo happy. I had to do my time like everyone else.”

She sucked in a breath. “So, me leaving on this trip was a special kind of hell for you.”

“Not really. I mean, yeah. I was upset you left before I could get to you, to go with you, and impatient to shake those losers and find you, but I knew I was coming after you and I was on my way.”

“I should have known you’d come after me. I mean, I did, I just wasn’t sure how I was going to let you know where I was. When my phone started blowing up with calls every little bit, I knew they were giving me time to answer before they activated the satellite GPS in my watch. After that, I knew whoever they sent, you’d be with them.”

“That’s my girl.” I pulled her closer. “Now. Any objections to me kissing you? Because I really need another taste of you.”

The smile she gave me was so fucking beautiful, if I’d been standing I’d have fallen to my knees and wept. “I’d like that very much. I need you, too.”

Holly

I tried to kiss a boy a couple of times. Hated every single thing about it. Tried to have sex once, too. Nope. I'd barely gotten the guy alone with me before I backed out. Nothing felt right. I didn't like the feel of his touch on my skin or the way his lips were wet. Kissing felt... slimy. Icky. I hated it.

Then Jax went and kissed me on the plane. His kiss had been nothing like I'd experienced before, and everything I'd always longed for. This kiss was even better.

His lips were firm yet tender, his touch gentle yet commanding. The mere press of his mouth against mine elicited a fire within me, as though he was the key to igniting my very soul. I wanted to believe love and romance like my mom and dad had wasn't a fluke. Hadn't I seen it in the other members of Black Reign and their women? Kissing Jax felt as though all the love songs and cheesy romance novels suddenly made sense.

He was patient and understanding, letting me explore the contours of his lips with mine at my own pace. His hands roamed my back in soothing circles, as though reassuring me and encouraging me to keep going. His body was molded against mine in a comforting embrace which felt like home. Of course, Mom and Dad had given me a loving place to live and protected me as much as possible, but Jax was different. He was mine. And I was his.

Jax pulled away slightly, creating a distance that allowed me to catch my breath. My eyes fluttered open to meet his gaze. His hazel eyes were molten with affection, reflecting an intensity that made my heart skip a beat. His thumb grazed gently across

my lower lip, coaxing me to open. When I did, he slipped the tip of his thumb into my mouth. I closed my lips around the digit, sucking gently.

Jax looked me straight in the eyes, searching mine the same as I searched his gaze for some kind of clue to what he was thinking. “Just so you know, this only goes as far as you want. There’s no expectation on my part. Tonight is all about you. What you want. What you need. I’m going to give you everything. And you’re going to tell me what you desire most for us right now.” He removed his thumb, and I wanted to chase it down and suck some more. I have no idea why that simple act was so erotic, but there it was.

“I want you, Jax. I want to make love with you.” The words were out before I could censor them or maybe phrase it differently. I was certain no self-respecting biker would ever “make love.” But it was what I wanted. This time. I needed him to guide me, and I needed to be able to understand what was happening.

I wasn’t sure if I expected him to scoff at me or be amused. I could be naive enough to think he would even want to make love to me. What I got was a slow, wicked smile. “Oh yeah, baby. I can definitely do that. I’m going to take my time and prove to you I’m the only man you’ll ever need.”

“Yes. That’s what I want.”

Jax slid his fingers through my hair to cup the back of my head as he lowered his lips to mine again. This time the kiss started off slow and careful, like he was feeling me out or maybe giving me time to adjust to the sensations. I slid my hands up his chest and around his neck.

With his fingers tangled in my hair, Jax angled my head where he wanted me while his other arm tightened around me, holding me close. Goose bumps erupted over my skin and I shivered. I’d always loved being in Jax’s arms. This was altogether

different, though. This time, I was really his. His woman. I found his strength exciting, and even a little daunting. I knew he hadn't been a saint -- he was twelve years older than me -- so there was no doubt he was the experienced one in this relationship. While I wanted to claw out the eyes of every single woman he'd been with, I couldn't fault him for it when I'd been too young for him to even consider being with. At the same time, I wanted to thumb my nose at the lot of them. They might have had him in the middle of his life, but I'd had him first and now I had him last.

Slowly, as if sensing my comfort with his touch, Jax intensified the kiss. His teeth grazed my lips enough to make me gasp. His tongue swept inside my mouth to dance with mine. Small sighs filled the air as I settled into his embrace and simply let Jax have me. I'd trust him to guide me, and I'd be everything he needed.

I shifted so that I could wrap my legs around him. As turned on as I'd gotten just from his kiss, my clit felt like it was being licked by fire every time I rubbed over his jeans. I might never have had sex, but I knew how to pleasure myself and often did. What I was feeling now had nothing to do with physical stimulation and everything to do with the man doing the stimulating.

He stood and planted a knee on the mattress, laying us both down so that he pinned me. I loved his weight on top of me, his body resting between my legs. I tilted my hips, trying to get some more friction on my clit and Jax grinned down at me.

"Is my girl greedy?"

"For you?" I tried to flash him a grin, but my words came out as breathless as I felt. I wasn't in a smiling mood. I was nearly desperate to come. "Always."

"Good. Because I doubt I'll ever get enough of you, Holly."

“You’ll always be with me?”

“Always, baby. Nothing could make me leave you. Nothing.” I could see in his eyes and expression he meant what he said. Thing was, Jax had seen me at my worst already. If he still wanted me, I was all in, and I wasn’t asking him if he was sure because then I’d have to decide what I’d do if he changed his mind.

“Good. Now, show me what to do.” It was as much of an order as I was capable of. I was pretty sure it was more of a plea than a demand.

“With pleasure.”

Jax kissed me again. This time his hands touched the skin of my waist and slid up my sides until I arched my back and whimpered into his mouth. He pushed up slightly, grabbed a fistful of his shirt between his shoulders, and pulled it over his head. Then he slid my shirt from my body in a slow, gentle caress.

My nipples were pebbled, and hard, aching points. I arched again, hoping he’d mash his chest to mine so I could rub my nipples over his muscles. Instead, he wrapped an arm around my back and lowered his head to take one breast into his mouth and suck.

I screamed at the foreign contact. I’d always imagined how this would feel, but the experience far outweighed the fantasy. I tightened my legs around Jax, afraid he’d leave. Or, worse, not give me the friction I needed over my clit. That might be grounds for a beating.

Jax’s warm laughter vibrated through my chest. “I know you need friction on your clit, baby. And I’ll give it to you. Just not yet.”

“Oh, God!” I should have been horrified that I’d said that comment out loud, but my brain was scrambled. I shivered and jerked when his fingers caught my nipple

between them and gently squeezed and twisted while his tongue flicked magic over the other. “Oh, God! Jax!”

“That’s it, honey. Scream my name. Let me know who you belong to.”

“Only you, Jax,” my voice came out breathy and desperate as his teeth grazed my nipple. He chuckled against my skin, sending shivers down my spine. “I belong to you.”

Lifting his head, he grinned at me with those wickedly beautiful eyes of his. “I’ll never tire of hearing that,” he murmured, pressing a firm kiss to my collarbone. “And so you know and understand, I belong to you, too.”

That made me smile, and a satisfying contentment began to bloom inside my chest. This was where I was meant to be all along. It took time to make the journey. Now that I was here, I wasn’t letting a moment pass by without appreciating what I’d found.

Jax moved his hands down to the waist of my shorts, his fingers caressing my skin over my hips and upper thighs as he slid them off. He sat up to pull them over my feet and toss them to the floor before lying back on top of me once again. A wave of nervous anticipation washed over me. I’d been exposed in front of him before, but not like this.

My illness had left scars from surgeries and chemo ports. But knowing there were scars on my body and actually seeing them were two different things. What if he... didn’t want the reminder?

“Honey, whatever you’re thinking, stop.” Jax didn’t sound angry or impatient. In fact, he smiled at me as he stroked my hair. My breasts were mashed against his chest now, like I’d wanted a few moments ago, but the thought he might not like what he

saw when he looked at my naked body, no matter how briefly, had me doubting myself. And him.

“I’m sorry.” I was afraid the tears were gonna start again and did my best to blink them back.

“Why are you sorry.” It was phrased as a demand instead of a question. An order to be obeyed.

“I have scars. You know. From the cancer.”

“Battle scars. Yep.” He gave me a look that said, “And?”

“It was hard. What we went through. And I include you in that because you were the one I always clung to. You saw the very worst of it all. As much or more than my mother sometimes. You were barely an adult. I’m sure you don’t want the reminder of it every time you see me.”

Jax looked at me for a long time. I thought maybe I’d broken the mood, but I could feel his erection through his jeans. He was still hard and didn’t seem to be flagging. “That’s not it.” His confident tone grated on my ears. I hated it when he pulled that superior act. Like he knew me better than I knew myself.

“Is so.” I stuck my chin up defiantly.

Jax chuckled softly, that tender expression still on his face even though he was still as intense as ever. “OK, so let me rephrase. That’s not all it is.”

“Have I ever told you how annoying you are?” My irritation might have been more convincing if I hadn’t been clinging to his arms.

“Every chance you get.” He gave me another brief but tender kiss. “Now, tell me what else is bothering you.”

I closed my eyes, taking a breath before meeting his gaze once more. “My cancer already came back once. Blade said there was a possibility it could recur again. Could you go through all that again with me? Because, if you can’t, you need to tell me now.”

It was Jax’s turn to sigh. I could almost feel the disappointment radiating from him. “Honey. I’m sorry I haven’t made it clear to you. I guess I thought you’d know. No matter what happens, I’m always going to be with you. If you get sick again, I’ll be with you every step of the way. Face it, Holly. You’re stuck with me. As long as I’m alive. You’re stuck with me.”

He held my gaze, really staring at me. I could see the truth in his eyes. “You really would, wouldn’t you?” I know I sounded a bit starstruck, but honestly. Jax was my hero, as well as my only love.

“Yes. I really would.”

“Also, I don’t want to have kids.” I couldn’t stop myself from blurting that out. He needed to know this, though. It affected his future as much as it did mine.

“Sweetheart, if you don’t want to have kids, I’m good with that. Could you tell me why? It’s your body and with everything you’ve already been through I could understand if that’s why you made your decision.”

“Partly, but not really. It’s the specter of the cancer coming back. I know that there are studies showing pregnancy hormones can sometimes stimulate cancer growth or even revive dormant cancer cells that didn’t completely die. I don’t want to die, Jax. While it’s selfish on my part, I also don’t want to leave my child without his mother.

I'm not sure I could do chemo knowing I was pregnant, and I don't think I'd want to get an abortion. So, my options would be to do the chemo regardless of the risk to a fetus or hold off on the chemo until after the baby's born. Which would likely be a death sentence. If my cancer comes back. I'd rather adopt or foster. It's considerably lower risk all the way around and I could still have children." I ducked my head. "But that's all unfair to you. So I get it if you can't do this. Just tell me now."

He was silent for a moment, then he stroked my jawline tenderly. "I think you've clearly thought about your decision from several different angles. And I agree. But if you change your mind at some point, we'll get Blade to walk us through everything and help you make the decision that's best for you. I'd never risk your health -- mental or physical. And that kind of event would do both." Jax's gentle smile made my eyes mist over again. "A parent is the person who loves and raises you. Sometimes you don't find that person -- or people -- until you're an adult. So, any child I bring into my home to care for will be my child. Biological or not. Also, there's a ton of kids around the compound to spoil. You know that from growing up here."

"Why are you so reasonable?" I slapped at his chest as I yelled at him. Those blasted tears started in full force again. "You weren't supposed to agree with me!"

He gave me a genuinely puzzled look. "I wasn't? Why wouldn't I?"

"You're supposed to act like a guy ! A guy would bitch and moan about not having offspring or an heir or whatever. If you did, it would make you seem less perfect and I could finally find a reason to back off before I lose myself completely." I was acting crazy and I knew it but, Goddamnit, I was scared!

Jax looked confused for a moment, then realization dawned on him and he rolled his eyes. "Maddog, you are not gettin' rid of me that easily. Besides, I already gave you my property patch in front of your parents. You accepted it. No take backs." He

narrowed his gaze and pointed a finger at me as if daring me to defy him.

I laughed, more relieved than I'd felt in a long time. "Fine. No take backs. I don't know why I'm trying to push you away. I don't mean to." It was the truth. It was also far too late for pushing him away to do any good. I was already in love with him. The damage was done.

"You're pushing to see if you can find my boundaries. You're pushing the ones most important to you first. I can respect that. When it's all over and you finally realize I not only know exactly what I'm getting into but welcome it a thousand times over if I get to have you be mine, I'm going to remind you of this conversation. There's not a Goddamned thing I wouldn't do to keep you, Holly. Not one Goddamned thing."

"I'm holding you to that," I quipped. "No take backs."

He grinned. "Good. I'm holding you to it as well."

Not giving me time to continue the conversation, Jax kissed me again, building me up to where I was before things took a serious turn. Now, I wanted to feel. To learn. To pleasure. And I wanted to do it all with Jax.

With a contented sigh, I surrendered completely to him. There was no better man for me to give my virginity to. Not only would he be careful with me, but he'd make sure I enjoyed it. It wasn't in Jax to do anything else.

Jax

Holly was breaking my heart. She actually thought her not wanting to risk getting pregnant was a deal-breaker for me. She'd soon learn that I wasn't going any-fucking-where. And just let anyone try to make me.

I stroked her skin from her neck down her collarbone and the scar from her chemo port right below it, over her breasts, down her ribcage, and to the tops of her thighs. She lay passive beneath me, only stiffening once when my fingers traced the raised area.

Leaning in, I kissed the offending spot, laving my tongue over the ridge in a tender caress. "Does it still hurt?" I didn't think so, but I was never taking a chance on accidentally hurting her.

"No." Her voice was a mere thread of sound. Her eyes were glazed and she looked almost as lust-stupid as I felt. The recent serious conversation hadn't fully left her and let her settle into the moment.

"It makes you more beautiful, you know."

That got her attention. Her eyes widened and she shook her head slightly. "I... What?"

"This scar." I traced it once again with my tongue before placing a kiss over it. "Shows how strong you are. You fought a daunting adversary. I suppose you're still fighting it. But you came out of your last battle on top. Maybe battered and bruised,

but you won. So yeah. This scar, the scars on your arms from the IVs. How you consider your future carefully and know what you're willing to sacrifice and how to achieve your dreams in an alternate way."

I kissed her chin. "Baby, I hate that you went through what you did. I saw how hard it was. I witnessed how hard you fought. I hate every single bit of it. But it made you into the woman here in my arms now. I know you're strong. I know you're a fighter. I know you are capable of making anything you want happen. Even though you're one of the most capable and tough women I know, you're still willing to admit you need help. Or to put yourself in my care and trust me not to let you down."

I grinned at her and watched in satisfaction as she gasped when I gave into that smile tugging at my lips. "You have no idea how sexy that is to a guy like me." I took her lips then, kissing her harder this time. I thrust my tongue deep and she whimpered, but opened her mouth wider, tangling her tongue with mine. When I pulled back, I stared hard at her, making sure she held my gaze. "Do not ever think your scars repel me. They are badges of honor. Wear them proudly."

She nodded her head, probably on instinct. When I used that particular tone of voice, it usually sent men scattering. At least, the men I commanded in the field did. In the Black Reign compound, I was low man on the totem pole. Most of the guys still saw me as the gangly teenager trying to keep up with a defiant Holly and her hell hounds in the form of Saint Bernard dogs. She'd had a whole herd of them at one point. Then a little Holly of about nine approached El Diablo and announced he needed to get her a trainer for the dogs so the puppies could be service dogs, and that the fully trained and ready dogs should be donated to people who need them. Especially kids. I'd helped El Diablo make it a reality.

"There really is nothing in this world I wouldn't do for you, Holly." Then I qualified my meaning. "Except for leaving you. I can't give you up to another man. No one but me can appreciate you the way you should be. No one can protect you as savagely as

I will.”

It took her several seconds to blink away the stunned look on her face. Probably because I let my ruthless side peek out. Then it was her turn to roll her eyes. “Are you gonna talk all night or fuck me?”

I couldn’t help myself. I threw my head back and laughed, rolling with her until she was on top of me, straddling my hips. “Shut up and fuck you, huh?”

“If I knew you were so chatty during sex, I’d have found something else for you to do with your mouth.” Holly looked disgruntled, but also a little impatient. If there was any lingering doubt in my mind she was ready for this, that look erased it.

“You would have, hmm? And what would that be?”

“You’re the one with all the experience! What do you want to do besides talk? There’s got to be something.”

“First of all, I want to know if you’re a virgin. And before you think I won’t like what you’re gonna say, there is no right or wrong answer. I just don’t want to hurt you.”

She huffed out a breath. “I tried to have sex with a guy once, but I chickened out because it didn’t feel right. But I’ve penetrated myself masturbating.”

I smiled up at her. “Good. Now. As to my talking so much, if the situation were reversed, I’d shut you up by having you suck my cock.” I raised an eyebrow. It was my turn to push her now. Not because I wanted her to suck me off, but because I wanted her to fucking tell me to eat her pussy. Now that the thought of her actually telling me to eat her pussy had entered my head, I had to hear it. Would she be demure and shy? Blush?

“Oh, you would?” She crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at me.

“Absolutely. Only way to shut a woman up when she gets chatty during sex.”

She gave me a narrow-eyed look of disapproval. “Challenge issued. Challenge accepted.” She pushed off me, and back to where she’d lain before I rolled us. She spread her legs and patted her mound with one delicate hand. “Put your mouth to use down here.”

“Oh, baby girl,” I purred, watching her body erupt in sweat. She liked the predatory gleam I knew was reflected in my eyes. “Challenge definitely accepted. Now. Tell me. Word for word. What do you want me to do?”

I took my time moving into position above her. The sleek muscles of her thighs bunched as I wrapped my arms around them to pull them apart, so I could gaze at her pretty, bare cunt. I loved the tension gripping her, the anticipation etched across her face. It was intoxicating, and it only fueled my own lust. She wanted me. My instinct was to give her what she wanted.

“Wh-what?” Her eyes widened.

“You heard me. Tell me exactly what you want, or I’ll put my mouth where I want it. And it might not be where you want it.”

Again, like I knew she would, Holly stuck out her chin. Cheeks growing red, a fresh layer of sweat slickening her skin, she said exactly what I wanted her to say. “I want your mouth on my pussy.”

“Fuck me...” My muttered expletive was said over her glistening lips. I had never been so hell-bent on pleasing a woman as I was for Holly right now. I loved the little bite to her voice and the willing way she did exactly what I wanted her to do, even

though it was outside her comfort zone, both humbled and excited me.

Her pussy wept with need, her lips quivering as I leaned closer. I blew a light breeze over her clit and she gasped, clenching her hands into tight fists beside her. I smirked and watched as she bit her lower lip.

“Uh-uh...” I tsked . “None of that.” I reached up and tugged her lip free of those pearly white teeth. “No holding back. You need to scream, you scream.”

“But what if someone hears?”

“What if they do? You think no one here has sex?”

She gave me an impatient look. “Of course, I know they have sex!”

I grinned. “Then don’t worry about it. They know we’re a new couple. They know this is our house. Anyone comin’ around for at least a couple months should expect to hear us havin’ sex unless they fuckin’ call first.”

To my surprise, that got a laugh out of her. She tunneled her fingers through my hair and gripped. “Then do your best. You want me to scream, you gotta earn it.”

Her bold challenge sent an electrifying thrill throughout my body, igniting all the right spots. “Oh, baby,” I drawled out, “you have no idea what you’ve unleashed. You can bet your pretty ass I plan to earn it.”

With that, I dipped my head and closed my lips around her clit in a brief, gentle suck.

I gripped her thighs with my large hands as I kissed a path up her stomach to her belly button, then back down between her legs. She squirmed under me, a frustrated whimper escaping her. She clutched the sheets beside her before her other hand slid

into my hair and she pulled me where she wanted me.

I took a moment to admire the sight before me. Holly lying naked and open beneath me, ready and waiting for my touch. My kisses.

Letting my fingers trace circles on her thigh, I blew another light puff of air at her clit. Her hips jerked up involuntarily, seeking more contact. I chuckled low in my chest at her eagerness. "Patience, baby," I muttered against her skin, causing her to shiver at the sensation.

I let my tongue dart to take a long swipe from pussy to clit. Then again. Then I covered her pussy and sucked. Her scent surrounded me, filled me with a sweet intoxication. I took a moment to savor her taste. "You're laid out in front of me like a banquet for one. Woman, I'm fuckin' starvin'."

I growled as I covered her pussy again, licking and thrusting my tongue inside her. I sucked her lips and clit, circling my finger at her entrance but not penetrating. Not yet.

"Jax! Jax! JAX!"

She chanted my name like a mantra, her hands pulling at my hair as her hips bucked. I continued to eat her out, the taste of her driving me further and further to the edge of my own control. My cock throbbed insistently against my jeans, but for now, this was about getting her ready to take me. Holly was as inexperienced as they came. The last thing I wanted to do was stretch her before she was relaxed and eager for the burn.

"Not yet." I shook my head and pressed her hips down onto the bed with my forearm across her pelvis when she tried to grind against me. "No moving, baby. Let me do all the work."

I took another long lick, savoring her sweetness before circling her clit slowly with my tongue in ever faster circles. I could feel her muscles contracting under my touch, could see the desperate pleasure on her face as she writhed beneath me.

“God... Jax... please,” she whimpered. Her fingers tugged harder on my hair and I growled in response.

“What do you want, Holly?” I asked, looking up at her as I continued to tease her clit with my tongue.

“I-I...” She shook her head and swallowed. When she opened her eyes, it was to meet my gaze without flinching. “I want to come.” Bless her heart, she looked more than a little uncomfortable, but she didn’t back down an inch.

“Do you?” Lick. “I don’t think you’re nearly desperate enough.” Suck. “Maybe I should eat you out a while longer.” Lick . Suck .

“Jax!” She screamed my name.

“Humm. Not quite there yet, but you’re getting close.”

Her legs tightened around my head and her back arched off the bed. “Jax! You asshole! Let me fuckin’ come !”

“Thaaaat’s more like it.” I chuckled against her clit while I used two fingers to penetrate her in a shallow thrust. “You’re gettin’ there fast, ain’t you, baby?”

When she cried out again, I slipped my fingers farther inside her, finding that sweet spot. While I circled her clit with my thumb, I lapped up her juices around my fingers. God, she was so fucking wet and hot for me!

“Ahh!” Holly’s body clenched and shivered, her climax taking her over.

I gave one final lick before crawling up her body to capture her cries with my kiss. My fingers were still in her pussy between our bodies. The contractions were strong, like she was trying to suck me deeper inside her. I even still had my jeans on, but I had to taste her cries.

She gasped, as I continued to kiss her while the waves of her climax ebbed. She tasted delicious and wild, like honey and spicy, raw energy. Her body was so fucking responsive under my touch, her breaths coming in short, ragged gasps. I reveled in each small tremor against my lips, each hitch of her breath, every sign that she had surrendered to me.

“Shit, Jax.” She smiled as I continued to kiss her. Her eyes were still closed and there was the most glorious euphoric expression on her beautiful face.

“I told you,” I said hoarsely, trailing kisses along her throat as I withdrew my fingers from her slowly, making sure she felt me touching her. “I told you I would make you scream.”

She shivered under me, her fingernails digging into my back as she caught her breath. Her eyes were glazed and unfocused when she finally looked back at me, a slow smile spreading across her flushed face. “That you did.”

“Holly,” I murmured against her lips, curling my fingers in her hair. “Hold on, baby. We’re just gettin’ started.”

Her eyes were wide with need as she looked up at me. She was panting hard. I could feel my own breath hitch as I watched her chest rise and fall. Her breasts were flushed pink and sweaty. I traced a thumb lightly over a nipple and watched it tighten in response.

“You’re fucking beautiful,” I said hoarsely as I unbuttoned my jeans and slid them down my hips along with my underwear. I rolled slowly until I sat on the edge of the bed, letting the garments pool at my feet on the floor. I bent over, fishing my wallet out of my pants to pull out two condoms. I tossed one to the dresser and opened the packet of the other one, tossing the empty foil next to the unopened condom on the dresser. I laid the opened latex at the head of the bed next to the pillow. I didn’t expect it would be long until I needed it.

Her eyes widened farther at the sight of me. I groaned at the hungry look she gave me. “Touch me, Holly,” I said gruffly. “Touch me, then get me ready to fuck you.”

She nodded her head eagerly and sat up and moved next to me. Climbing off the bed, she moved in front of me, then sank to her knees. She placed her hands on my thighs before leaning in to kiss the tip of my cock.

Her lips were soft and tentative as they brushed against the swollen head of my dick, her gaze locked with mine. A jolt of heat surged through me, spreading out to ignite my entire body. My hands clenched into fists as I fought to remain still, to let her explore at her own pace.

She looked unsure for a moment, before she parted her lips and took me into her mouth. It was warm and wet and heavenly. I grunted involuntarily at the sensation, my eyes sliding shut as I tipped my head back, reveling in the feel of her tongue swirling around the tip. I was sure she got a hit of precum when her eyes widened and she sucked in a sharp breath through her nose.

“Fuck... Holly,” I murmured, my voice a hoarse whisper in the silent room. I gripped her hair, the strands soft against my fingers as I guided her movements. I hadn’t even realized I’d moved, but the silky strands bunched in my fist anchored me when nothing else could.

She took more of me into her mouth, sucking me deeper while her hand began to stroke my shaft. I let out a low growl of pleasure as her ministrations sent a sharp thrill shooting up my spine. She was still hesitant, but as she continued to suck and I continued to groan with every pull of her mouth, she gained more confidence. Her tongue swirled around the head of my cock again before starting a rhythmic bobbing. I groaned, throwing my head back as her mouth worked its magic.

“Christ, Holly,” I managed to gasp out, my breath hitching each time she took me deeper. My fingers tightened in her hair, not to control her but to ground myself again. The pleasure was intense, overwhelming, and I knew I wouldn’t last much longer if she kept up. And no fucking way I was coming down her throat the first time I was with her. I’d do that later.

My hips thrust involuntarily and she pulled back slightly, her cheeks flushing a pretty pink under my gaze. But then she moved again, taking me in her mouth once more, and I had to bite back a moan.

“Holly, stop,” I bit out through clenched teeth as I gently tugged her away from me by her hair. She whimpered but eagerly got to her feet and threw herself into my arms.

“Please, Jax,” she whispered. “Please. I can’t wait anymore. What do you need to hear to fuck me already?”

My heart pounded in my chest at her words and a satisfied growl rumbled in my throat. Grabbing the condom from where it still lay on the corner of the bed already open. My hands were shaking ever so slightly. I hoped like fuck she didn’t notice because that would be the height of embarrassment. Then again, this was my Holly. It was worth as much embarrassment as it took if it put her at ease.

“Help me put this on.” The gruff order came out through the haze of need. “My

fuckin' hands are shakin' too fuckin' much."

A small nervous giggle escaped her as she reached for the small latex circle. Her fingers touched mine as she took it from me, sending another jolt through me. I'm not sure I was this nervous the very first time I fucked a woman, and this was infinitely more important.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself as she unrolled the condom over my pulsing erection. Her touch was gentle as she pinched the tip and rolled it down my length. I was long and thick, and the lip of the condom didn't roll all the way to the base.

Holly looked up at me with wide, clear blue eyes. I gripped her upper arms and pulled her to her feet. She came to me willingly, wrapping her arms and legs around my body before kissing me again. She clung as I stood and moved us back onto the bed, lying on top of her so that, once again, she was pressed into the mattress.

"I-I'm ready, Jax," she whispered against my lips, her eyes shiny with what appeared to be a mix of excitement and fear. "Please don't make me wait any longer."

I nodded at her, placing a slow, deliberate kiss on her lips before pulling back to gaze at her. Taking a deep breath, I hooked her right leg higher over my hip, angling myself at her entrance. I could feel the heat of her pussy against my cockhead through the condom, and I had to bite back a groan.

"Sweet God," I murmured, pressing against her. Her eyes widened as she felt the head of my cock press against her entrance. I watched those beautiful blue eyes clench shut as she bit down on her bottom lip.

"No, Holly," I said softly, trailing my fingers down her thigh. "Look at me. Open those beautiful eyes and watch me as I enter you."

She nodded her head, opening her eyes to look at me. “Do it.” She hissed her command, her eyes wild with need. “Do it now, Jax!”

Without another word, I pushed into her. The sound that escaped her lips was half gasp, half moan, and it was the most beautiful thing I had ever heard. The tight heat of her wrapped around me was incredible. She clung tightly to me, and I wanted to puff out my chest. This woman, this beautiful, courageous, stubborn woman wanted me.

This absolutely had to be good for her. So, slowly, with more restraint than I thought possible, I began to move inside her. Each thrust brought a new sigh or whimper from Holly, each more arousing than the last.

I pressed my forehead against hers, feeling the sweat bead there as I tried my best not to get too lost in her. Holly’s fingers dug into my back, then my ass as she urged me to take her deeper, harder. She braced her feet on my calves and tried to take control of the pace and all my aspirations of holding back evaporated as I drove into her.

“Oh God,” she whispered in my ear, her breath hitching. “Jax...” Her body tensed and then shuddered under mine. Her pussy squeezed my cock with relentless convulsions. Then Holly arched her back and screamed in a long, loud yell. She thrashed beneath me, bucking like a wild Mustang. It was all I could do to stay on top of her. Except for when she wrapped her legs around my hips and dug her heels into my ass.

Yeah. Game over.

My control snapped like a frayed wire. In the heat of her orgasm, my restraint crumbled. I drove into her with hard, powerful strokes. She took it all and begged for more. A surge of primal satisfaction coursed through me as I watched her come apart under me again.

“Fuck,” I groaned as I felt the familiar tightening at the base of my spine. My thrusts became erratic, harder and faster as I neared my own climax. The room echoed with our mingled moans and cries, the air heavy with the scent of sex and sweat.

I was teetering on the edge, staring into the abyss. “Holly,” I groaned again, feeling my release coiling tightly, ready to snap. “I’m... fucking hell. I’m comin’ right... fuckin’... now!”

Her hand cupped my face and pulled me down for a kiss that was so full of passion, so full of need that it sent me spiraling over the edge right then. But Holly wasn’t done with me.

“No,” she gasped, her body already trembling under me in aftershocks. “Don’t stop, Jax. I want more!”

“Christ, Holly...” My words were a ragged whisper, my body shuddering with the maddening climax ripping through me. Her fingers dug into my back, urging me on. “I don’t... fuck... I don’t wanna hurt you.”

But Holly was having none of it. Her eyes flashed fiercely up at me, her nails digging harder into my skin. “You won’t,” she growled back at me, pulling me closer. “Make me come one more time. Please!” The whispered plea was more than I could ignore. And wouldn’t have anyway. If Holly needed, I provided.

My groan echoed loudly in the room as I gave in to her demands, losing myself in her cries and the way she gave me exactly what I wanted. She screamed her pleasure and wasn’t shy about telling me to move the way she wanted. I thrust into her one more time and this time there was no holding back the tidal wave that crashed over me.

As my orgasm ripped through me, a guttural shout erupted from my throat. Holly’s cries mingled with mine and together our voices danced through the room until we

were both finally silent and still.

I was stunned. I'd never lost my mind so completely with a woman. And, by God, it felt right.

"Did I hurt you, honey?" I could barely muster the effort to get the words out.

"No. Not at all." Holly's sweet sigh was so filled with contentment I breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

"Thank God, because I really want to do that again. Soon."

The smile she graced me with was nothing shy of glorious. Yeah. I was a goner.

Game.

Fucking.

Over.

Holly

The next three months were the happiest of my life. Not only did Jax and Dad take care of Chris and Andrea, but I didn't have to do anything. All anyone would tell me was that I didn't have to worry about either of them anymore.

Some of the women stayed in the Black Reign compound because they had nowhere else to go. Seemed Chris had a whole thing going where he'd preyed on homeless women. Of the eight young women who'd stayed, all but one had been homeless for a few weeks when they'd met Chris. He'd given them a place to live and, after a while, convinced each of them that there was "just something about you I can't live without." Then he'd taken them all to Columbia. That's where the whole thing kind of went off the rails. I didn't know where Andrea fit in with it all, but El Diablo finally put his foot down.

"I've never denied you anything you wanted, Holly Sweetness." He tried to look contrite, but I could tell he wasn't a bit sorry to keep this from me. "But I will not budge on this. It's over. Neither of them will ever hurt you again." I tried to watch the news for any indication that Chris had gone back home, but Jax had kept me so busy having sex I decided it didn't really matter. Nothing was going to interrupt my happiness.

Until I woke up this morning. I hadn't felt bad, exactly. Just... off. Jax was already up. I remember him kissing me awake and letting me know he had some business to take care of outside the compound. I thought he said something about ExFil, which meant he wouldn't be back until later in the evening.

I glanced at the clock. It was after eleven, but I was beat. I'd have blamed it on Jax keeping me up all night for sex, like he did most nights, but he hadn't. I'd slept through the night.

"Fuuuuck." I groaned and turned over onto my back. I shivered and groaned again. My whole body ached. And I was sweating.

A memory flashed through my mind. The day in Blade's office when he'd told me my leukemia had returned, but we'd caught it early. I'd felt just like this. Only, we'd all thought I was just sick. A cold or something.

I sat bolt upright in the bed, instantly wide awake. My heart pounded and my breath came in sharp pants. "No," I sobbed out. "Please no."

With trembling hands, I reached for my phone. I didn't even think about calling anyone but Jax. He answered on the first ring.

"Hey, Maddog. You sleep in today?" His voice was cheerful, like he was happy to hear from me and maybe a little amused that I'd slept late. He loved it when he wore me out enough to keep me in bed half the morning and normally I did too.

"Jax?" My voice was soft and shaky. It was easy to tell something was wrong.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Gone was the easygoing lover I'd grown obsessed with and in his place was my fierce protector.

"I'm sick." My voice broke on the last word.

"I'll call Blade and Doc."

"NO!" I took several deep breaths to calm myself. "I can do it. I just panicked."

“Because of the last time.”

“It feels the same, Jax.” I started crying then. “I don’t want to do this again! Chemo sucks ass!”

“Call your mother, Holly. I’ll get Blade to come to you now. I’ll be with there in an hour. Less if I can catch Cain before he leaves. And, baby?”

I took in a shuddering breath. “Yes?”

“No matter what happens, I’m gonna be right by your side. Every step of the way. You hear me?”

Closing my eyes I took another deep breath and let it out. I pictured Jax’s face and let his warmth fill me. “Yes, Jax. I hear you.”

“That’s my girl. I’m coming. Hold it together until I get there. We’ll figure this out together.”

“OK. I can do that.”

“I know you can. Call me back when Blade gets there. If I don’t answer it means I’ll be there in less than twenty minutes. If I answer, I’m still close to an hour away.”

Not that I understood that, but I didn’t have to. I had to know he was on the way. Which meant, I really hoped he didn’t answer when I called him back.

I got up and dressed after unlocking the door for when Mom got there. She and Dad arrived five minutes later. I sat on the couch, my forearms on my knees with my phone clenched tightly in my hands. The second Mom hurried through the door, I was up on my feet and in her arms shaking and sobbing.

“It’s going to be all right, honey,” Mom said, though she was crying as hard as I was. “We’ll figure it out and get through it together. Blade will do everything he can to help us. You know he will.”

“I’m scared, Mom.”

“I know, sweetheart. Me too. Me too.”

I sat with my mother on the couch. She had her arms around me while we both cried silently. My dad stood guard at the door, watching for Blade to approach. Fifteen minutes later, the man in question skidded to a stop in a big, black Bronco in front of my house. He’d obviously hurried over the second Jax had called him.

I dialed Jax’s number, attempting to get him on a video chat instead of a call. I needed to see his face and look into his eyes. He didn’t answer so I glanced at the time. He better be here in less than twenty minutes like he said, or I was gonna kick his ass.

“What happened?” That was Blade. Dr. Donovan Muse. He was a member of Salvation’s Bane MC in Palm Beach, but his office was about halfway between there and Lake Worth where Black Reign was located. He must have hurried straight over. I recognized his medical bag immediately and a fresh flood of tears started.

“I’m sick.” I sounded as miserable as I felt. “Like last time.”

“When did it start?” He sat next to me and reached for my face, his fingers immediately seeking the lymph nodes in my neck.

“I woke up like this. Uh, achy. I woke up in a sweat, and I have no energy. I went to bed early and slept through the night. I shouldn’t be this tired.”

He pulled out his stethoscope and put it in his ears before warming the bell between his hands. “Raise your shirt for me, honey. You know the drill.”

I did. Thankfully I’d dressed and at least had a bra covering me.

Blade listened to my heart and lungs, then took my temperature, blood pressure, and oxygen level. “Your temperature is slightly elevated, but not horribly. Did you eat a good supper last night before bed?”

“I wasn’t that hungry. I had some grapes and a banana, though. And water.”

“How about during the night?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I didn’t wake at all until Jax told me he was leaving and wouldn’t be back until this evening. Something to do with ExFil but I was too sleepy to really process much more.”

“Any abnormal bleeding? Nose bleeds or anything?”

“No.”

“OK.” He stopped, smiling kindly at me. “You know I have to take blood, right?”

“Yes.” I gave a miserable sniff. I really wanted Jax here for this. I don’t know why. This wasn’t anything compared to what would come next if the leukemia had returned. I met Blade’s gaze. “Why would this happen now? Why?”

“First of all, sweetheart, we don’t know that anything’s happened. All we know for certain is that you have a slight fever and body aches. Which could be any number of things other than leukemia.”

“Yes, but the last time --”

He cut me off. “The last time you’d been feeling bad for a month and a half. Let’s not borrow trouble. OK?” Blade was firm but gentle. “First thing we need to do is get some testing started. Some of it I can get started now, some of it I’ll have to take to my pathologist. But I promise you, in twenty-four hours, I’ll have a definite diagnosis.”

I nodded and was about to surrender my arm for him to draw blood when there was a deep rumble in the background that intensified to a bone-jarring roar.

I put my hands over my ears and looked at my dad. Wrath had been leaning against the wall, looking out the front storm door. Which was when the windows on the house started to rattle. It felt like I was in the middle of the biggest, hardest, rock festival in the history of the world.

“What’s going on?” My mom had to yell to be heard over the horrible noise.

Wrath chuckled. At least that’s what it looked like. I couldn’t hear a fucking thing. He held out his hand to me, beckoning me over beside him. As I stood and made my way around the couch to the door, he pointed out the window. There, in the courtyard just beyond the houses, a huge-ass military style helicopter was slowly touching down in the grass.

“What the hell is that?” I tried to ask my dad, but he just shook his head and pointed to his ears. He couldn’t hear me.

A couple minutes later, the thing settled for a brief moment, then lifted off again. The helicopter went straight up, then banked as it turned and left the way it had come. Off in the distance, I saw a lone figure jogging from the courtyard toward the house. And I’d recognize that wonderful figure anywhere. “Jax,” I breathed.

“Yeah, baby girl. Looks like your boyfriend knows how to make an entrance.”

“He got a ride on a freaking Black Hawk?” I wanted to lash out at Jax even though I knew it was unreasonable. But it felt like Jax had been out having fun while I was scared out of my fucking mind. On the other hand, he’d definitely made an entrance. As well as gotten here in the fastest way possible. “I guess this is why he said if he couldn’t answer when I called, he’d be on the way.” I sounded disgruntled when I was really happy to see Jax. I was falling back on old patterns, needing to deflect my fear by being angry at Jax.

Wrath chuckled. My dad had an odd sense of humor because I didn’t see anything funny about the situation.

Dad held open the door when Jax approached. The man was focused on one thing and one thing only. Me . “Holly!”

The second Jax reached me, I struck, smacking at his chest. “You left me!”

He looked like I’d slapped him. “I just went to work for the day, baby. I was comin’ right back.”

“ Work ? You were joyriding in a freaking helicopter!”

“Honey, I bullied my boss into having a teammate bring me home ASAP. We had to file all kinds of flight plans and pull strings that didn’t exist to get permission. Hell, I’m not even sure Cain got permission so much as he got some higher up somewhere to ignore the big ass military bird flying in civilian airspace.” He looked panicked as he looked from me to Wrath and back.

“That’s some... creative maneuvering there, boy.” Wrath grinned and scrubbed the back of his neck with his hand. He shook his head and chuckled. “You hijacked a

Black Hawk to come to your girl when she needed you. Color me officially impressed.”

I sniffled and Jax scooped me up, sitting on the couch with me in his lap. I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face in his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“Hush.” He kissed my temple and hugged me tight. “Don’t apologize. You’ve got nothing to apologize for.” He held me like that for several minutes while Blade filled him in on what was happening. I didn’t pay much attention because I was too busy soaking up Jax’s strength. I was going to need it to get through this.

“Listen to me, Holly.” Blade pried my hand loose where I’d curled my fingers in Jax’s shirt. He gripped my hand in both of his and leveled a look on me. “You’re gettin’ way ahead of yourself. I’ve got a bunch of tests to do, but, like I said, I’ll have an answer for you in a day. Maybe less. Can you give me that long? Can you keep it together? You’re scaring Jax. I’m not dealing with that pussy when he goes all caveman on me because I have to draw your blood.” I knew it was nonsense to get so worked up, but I think I was having PTSD or something because all the memories from my childhood came rushing back.

I sniffed and wiped my nose on the back of my wrist. “He is a shade overprotective.” I took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly, doing my best to drive down the panic I knew wasn’t logical. Later. Once we knew what we were dealing with, then I could panic if necessary.

“That he is. Now. I know it’s uncomfortable, but let’s get this done so I can start testing your blood.”

I nodded. “OK.”

Blade took several different vials of blood and a couple nasal swabs, which I didn't understand but didn't protest. He'd just finished when his phone buzzed from his back pocket. "Good," he said as he glanced at the text. "I may have results for you quicker than expected." He smiled. "I wasn't sure she'd be available right away, but she's waiting at the office." He packed away the samples in a biohazard bag and put everything in what looked like a small lunch bag. "I'll be in touch the second I have something." That last he addressed to Jax.

Jax looked down at me. "I'll be right here. I'm not going anywhere."

Jax

I could see panic had Holly deep in its clutches. She was looking for something to be royally pissed at so she could deflect her fear with anger. After Blade left, Wrath and Celeste stayed and the four of us sat on the couch in silence for a long while. Celeste gripped one of Wrath's big hands in both of hers. Holly cuddled in my lap as miserable as I'd seen her since her last bout with leukemia.

"Jax," she whispered, her voice shaking with suppressed emotion. "I'm scared."

"I know, sweetheart," I whispered back, squeezing her a little tighter. "But remember what Blade said. We don't know anything yet. I'm gonna be right here with you regardless. You get me?"

She nodded miserably before tucking her face back against my chest and sitting passively. I could only imagine what was going on in her head. Scratch that. I knew at least part of what she was thinking because I was thinking it too. What if this was another relapse? How many could she have before the cancer became resistant to treatment? My reassurances didn't seem to make much of a difference for either of us.

"Why don't I make us a snack?" Celeste stood with a smile and headed to the kitchen. "Nothing fancy, just something to keep hunger at bay." The attempt at normalcy was much appreciated. I was surprised when Holly agreed without protest. She even managed to nibble on some of her sandwich before pushing it aside.

"Nervous stomach?" I murmured the question in her ear. We hadn't moved from the

couch, Celeste having brought one plate with both our sandwiches and chips on it.

“I’m afraid I’ll be sick if I eat too much right now.”

I got it. I was tied up in knots too. I ate because I knew I’d need my strength if this didn’t break our way. Again, if Holly needed, I’d provide.

As the evening wore on, Holly grew increasingly restless. Her fears chased each other in circles around her mind and I did everything I could to distract her. I could see it happening and was powerless to stop it. We watched a movie in the living room, flipping through channels until we stumbled upon an old rom com that left Holly and Celeste giggling despite the worrying. Thankfully, it was hard to hang on to a fear not right in front of you. This respite was as much a blessing as an exercise in frustration.

It was nearly dark when Blade pulled back into the driveway. Wrath was on his feet while the truck was still moving, opening the door and beckoning Blade inside.

“She’s fine,” Blade said as he trotted from the Bronco to the door. Thank God the man appreciated the urgency of the situation. Not so much in an acute illness sense, but how Holly and everyone who loved her were currently in a kind of limbo, unsure if we needed to prepare for the worst or laugh at our own panic.

“What do you mean, she’s fine ?” Wrath snapped at the other man. “She’s anything but fine! Can’t you see how stressed she is? That can’t be good for her.”

“Calm down, Wrath. I mean she’s literally fine.” Blade smiled as he moved around the couch. “You have the flu, honey.” He grinned. “Influenza A, to be exact. Your white count is slightly elevated, but that can happen as a normal progression of flu. I’m still going to run several more tests on you, which will include a bone marrow aspiration.” Holly whimpered, but nodded her head in understanding. “I don’t want to do it because anything came back abnormal. I mean, it did, but nothing the flu wouldn’t easily explain. However, since you’ve had one recurrence and several

recent stressing events, I think it's better to be safe, and that's the most accurate early detection method. I'm also going to do some scans. But your swab came back positive for Flu A. COVID was negative. We'll know for sure if you start showing more common symptoms of the flu in the next twelve or so hours. Sore throat. Cough. Congestion. Sneezing. That sort of thing."

As he spoke, Holly covered her mouth and coughed a couple of times as if to prove his point. I kissed the top of her head. Had I been standing up, I'd probably have fallen on my ass. I actually felt lightheaded with relief.

There was a loud THUMP, and I whipped my head around in the direction of the noise. Wrath lay in a heap on the floor.

"Oh, goodness!" Celeste hurried to her husband who was starting to come around now that he was no longer upright. Me and Blade took out our phones and started taking pictures. "Would the two of you quit clowning around and help me get his big ass on a chair?" Celeste was never angry. I thought she might be close now.

"I got this," Blade said with a chuckle. "You keep your woman where she is."

Blade knelt beside Wrath. Instead of helping him to his feet, he snapped a small capsule under his nose and waved it a couple of times.

"Motherfucker," Wrath roared. "The fuck was that?"

"Ammonia capsule. Also known as a Howdy Cap. 'Cause, you know, you sit up and say howdy."

"You're an asshole, Blade."

"What? You were out cold!"

“I was not! Just stunned, that’s all.” Now Wrath looked more disgruntled than angry. “Anyway, I’m fine now.” He started to get up on his own, but Celeste stopped him.

“Right,” she drawled. “You’re pale as a sheet. If you fall again and break your fool neck, I’m not waiting on you hand and foot. Not over stubbornness.”

“Fine.” Wrath stuck out a hand to Blade who pulled him to his feet. Then he eased Wrath to a chair. Celeste got him a glass of water and what looked like a couple of over-the-counter painkillers. Big fucker’d probably need it after inhaling a big ol’ lung full of ammonia.

We all sat in silence for a while. Then I got the giggles. Once I started, so did Mom. Before I knew it, everyone but Dad was laughing. Blade actually wiped tears from his face.

“I don’t see anything so very Goddamned funny.” Of course, Dad was disgruntled.

“You fainted,” Blade supplied helpfully. “Like clutched your pearls and fuckin’ fainted .”

“You’re an asshole, Blade.”

“Yep.” He clapped Wrath on the shoulder. “Holly, I’ll let you know when we can do that aspiration. I know you ain’t exactly lookin’ forward to it, but given the recent stressors I still think it’s prudent.”

“I agree. Will you promise to give me some good medicine?”

Blade leaned in and kissed the top of Holly’s head. “Absolutely. Enough for a couple of days so you can stay as high as you want while you recover. Jax, you call me if she needs anything.”

“I will.”

“Now, Wrath. Let’s get you to the truck.”

“I’m fine now.” He shrugged Blade off and stood still for a couple seconds while he made sure he was going to stay on his feet. Or at least, that’s what I’d have been doing. Knowing Wrath, he could just as easily have been trying to figure out a way to get Holly to leave me. “Holly, come here.” He held out his arms, and Holly stood and rushed to her father. He enfolded her in his larger frame and stood there holding her for a long moment. Wrath was always the cool one. His responses were measured and always in control. Just not with his daughters. “I love you, kiddo. You decide this one ain’t worth the trouble and needs killin’ you come tell me.”

“I will, Daddy.” I could see her smile and thought I might be safe. At least for a while. When Wrath finally let her go, Holly covered her mouth and coughed several times before her eyes started watering, and she instinctively looked out the window into the bright light. Then she sneezed three times. “Ohhh,” she groaned.

Blade tossed me a couple of pill bottles. “Fever reducer and antivirals. May not help a lot, but it might keep her from getting really sick. Instructions are on the bottles.”

“Got it.”

“Fluids and rest, Holly. Fluids and rest.”

“Yes, sir.” She sighed and snuggled back against me while our guests let themselves out.

I wasn’t willing to break the silence. As far as I was concerned, if I could get her to sit like this and doze off, so much the better.

“I’m sorry I panicked.” Her voice was small, like she was ashamed of herself. Which

wouldn't do at all.

“Baby, if you hadn't called me and I found about it later, I'd have blistered your ass but good. You did right to call me, and you had good reason to panic. I was there. Remember?”

“Yeah. I guess you were.” Then she looked up at me, her eyes wide. “But you came to me. In a freakin' Black Hawk! Who the fuck does that?”

I laughed, leaning in to kiss her. “I do, honey. I will always do whatever I have to do to get to you. I work for and with men who would do the same thing if it was their woman so they're all gonna pitch in and pool their resources to help our women. Do you believe me now? When I say I will always be with you? No matter what?”

“Well, if I can't give the man who basically stole an attack helicopter so he could get to me half an hour faster the benefit of the doubt, who can I give it to?”

“That's my girl.”

“Ohmigod!” She clapped a hand over her mouth. “Don' kisme!” Her words were muffled behind her hand, but I got the message.

“The flu wouldn't dare make me sick,” I quipped. “If I want to kiss my girl, I'm gonna kiss her.”

“No!” She wiggled until I let her up. “No kissing.” She pointed a finger at me just before she started coughing again. Then sneezed once for good measure. “Don't like bein' sick.” She pouted prettily, but I could see she felt more miserable.

“Come on. Let's get your medicine, then back to bed.”

“Will you stay with me? I mean, I could lie with my back to your front, so maybe you

won't get sick."

"I will definitely lie with you, honey. I'll be there to get you fluids or medicine when you wake up. I'll hold you while you sleep."

"You won't be gone in the morning?"

If she looked unsure of herself, it was fleeting. The second I smiled at her, she relaxed, and I knew she might finally get it. "No. I'll be right with you. And if you wake up while I'm in the bathroom, I'll leave the door open."

"Eww, gross." She wrinkled her nose. "I don't want to listen to you pee." Her lips twitched a little before she managed to get the grin under control.

"I'll try to do it quietly."

She finally gave in to the giggles. Until she started coughing again. I shifted her so she wrapped her legs around my waist and stood, carrying her to the bedroom. After she'd taken her medicine and drunk a full glass of water, I helped her into clean underwear and one of my shirts before putting her to bed. I got a box of tissues for the nightstand for both of us and another full bottle of water for later.

After that, I propped a pillow behind my back and sat back with my weight against the headboard. Holly cuddled into my side with one arm draped over my waist. I put on a movie and we watched in compensable silence, laughing occasionally.

Finally, she stopped giggling and her breaths were deep and even. I looked down at her sleeping form. She was my world. My everything. The one person in my life I never wanted to be without.

"Jax?" She didn't open her eyes, and her speech was slurred like she was only half awake.

“Yeah, honey.” I kissed the top of her head and spoke against her hair.

“I love you. So much.”

“I love you too, Holly. My little Maddog.”

She smiled. “It’s a better name ‘n Jax.”

I chuckled, hugging her a little tighter. “Yeah, baby. Maddog is the perfect name for you.”

“‘Cause I’m as badass as my road name.”

“You always have been, Holly. The most badass of the badasses.” She smiled again, this time, leaning up to kiss along my jaw before settling back against me again. “Sleep tight, honey. Sleep tight.”