

Shade's Lady: Epilogue

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Author's Note: When I originally wrote this story, I left it very open ended. I felt that was true to the characters and their story. The story definitely ended on a happy note, but it was a “Happily for Now” rather than a “Happily Ever After.”

Readers immediately requested an epilogue for the couple, but I resisted writing it at first. My characters are very real to me, and I hate pushing them to do things that don't feel like they're a natural part of the story. Then I woke up one morning with an epilogue for Mandy and Shade in my head—an epilogue some readers may find a bit more sentimental than what I generally write.

Those readers are just going to have to suck it up, because this epilogue is based on a true story, one I'll share at the end. I was there to see it happen and it was *very* sentimental. It was also sweet and beautiful and a full thirty-five years in the making.

This story takes place two decades after Shade and Mandy met, and it contains spoilers from Shade's Lady.

Columbia River Gorge
Maryhill, Washington

Mandy

It was still dark when I woke up needing to pee something fierce. Shade slept folded around me, one knee shoved between mine. He gave a low growl when I pushed at him.

“Let me up,” I whispered. His arm tightened, and he nuzzled my hair.

“Fuck that. I'm not done with you.”

My butt settled against the length of his dick, and I had to smile. Twenty years I'd slept next to this man. Twenty years spent mostly on the road, constantly on the move, always ready to discover what lay over the next hill. All that time and he still got hard like a teenager whenever we were together. Had to admit, it was good for the ego. Very good.

“You’ll be done with me fast if I tinkle in the tent,” I said, and he gave a low chuckle, loosening his arm.

“Want me to come along?” he asked. “Wouldn’t want anyone bothering you.”

This was sweet, but considering we were surrounded by more than a hundred brothers of the Reapers MC and their women, the odds of anyone bothering me were slightly less than zero.

Being the national president’s old lady came with a few perks.

“No, I’m fine,” I said, but he was already sitting up to grab his boots. I crawled out of the tent, looking around the campground. The sky was just starting to glow over the gorge, throwing everything into shadows. Here and there a campfire still sparked. A few people sat in clumps, speaking in low tones.

My back cracked as I stretched upward, reminding me I wasn’t as young as I used to be. Shade smacked my ass and I grinned at him.

“Wanna go for a ride?”

“What kind?” I replied, smirking.

“Up through the hills,” he said, surprising me. “Maybe find somewhere to watch the sunrise.”

I’d expected another kind of ride entirely, because after all these years, my man was still a horn dog.

“Sure thing,” I said. “Pee first, though.”

“You’re such a romantic.”

“You know it, baby. Give me five and I’ll be ready to go.”

“You always are,” he replied, chucking my chin.

“Damned straight.”

Ten minutes later I was on the back of his bike, arms wrapped tight around his waist. We’d passed through this area hundreds of times over the years, making runs between Oregon, Washington and Idaho in the course of his duties as president. Most women tended to settle down at home after a while, often making their own lives independent of their men. I’d never done that, although there were definitely times he had to leave me behind.

For the first few years I’d worried about the fact that I didn’t have a normal life or regular job. I’d worried he’d meet another girl on a run, or that he’d get bored of whatever the hell it was that we had.

It’d never happened.

My sister thought I was crazy, but I’d never wanted what she had with Heath. The thought of owning a house freaked me out. I didn’t want to worry about mortgages and insurance and repairs and lawns.

Hell, my car was almost more than I could handle.

Not that we didn’t have a place—Shade owned a duplex that was our home base, and he always seemed to have enough money to cover our needs. I got health insurance through one of

the club businesses, and pitched in wherever I could. Probably didn't hurt that I'd always been a fairly low-maintenance kind of girl.

Maybe our lives weren't what most people would consider the perfect happily ever after, but it worked for me.

We hadn't been riding for long when he slowed, pulling in to the giant Stonehenge Memorial overlooking the river. Shade cut the engine, letting the silent solemnity of the circle of stones fall over us.

"Let's go watch the sunrise," he said. I hopped off the bike and hung my helmet on the handlebar. Shade caught my hand. Together we walked to the edge of the henge. He sat, leaning back against one of the stones, pulling me down to sit between his legs.

"You sleep okay last night?" he asked.

"Always," I told him, snuggling back into his arms.

"You weren't partying with the girls much."

"Sure I was," I told him. "I just wasn't drinking. Not in the mood, I guess. It worked out okay, all things considered. Probably wouldn't have felt like coming out here with a hangover, and the sunrise is pretty."

"Glad you had fun," he replied, sounding pleased. "You know what today is?"

Shit, had I forgotten something? Not his birthday, that was in December. Not mine. Not Hannah's or the kids or... Nope. I was drawing a blank.

"Saturday?"

Shade shook his head.

"It's our anniversary," he replied, and I heard the laughter in his voice. "Twenty years ago today, I dragged you back to the clubhouse with me."

I frowned, trying to think. "Which time?"

"The first time. I was so fuckin' pissed at Rebel for trading you away, and then even more pissed that I didn't get to fuck you as part of the trade."

"Bet you never thought we'd still be together twenty years later," I said, teasing him. "If I remember correctly, I was just trying to get the breakfast you owed me. You weren't interested in anything long term. You made that very clear. How could I have known I was supposed to mark the date on my calendar?"

"Tell yourself whatever story you like," he said, giving me a squeeze. "I think we all know you threw yourself at me. Couldn't get enough. Happens a lot, you know. Women just—"

I jerked my elbow back into his side and he grunted.

"Okay, so I may have been an active player in the whole thing, too," he admitted with a laugh.

"Fucker."

"Bitch."

I twisted my head around and we kissed, savoring the closeness.

“You ever regret it?” he asked when we finally pulled apart.

“Regret what?”

“Leaving with me? You could’ve had a family. A white picket fence and a dog. Hell, you could be president of the PTO right now.”

I sighed, settling back into his chest, considering the question. The sky was streaked with red now, the puffy white clouds glowing with the light.

God, what a perfect morning.

“No,” I said, and it was true. “I’m not like Hannah. I never really wanted kids—growing up was hard enough, and then watching the girls go through hell with their dad...that wasn’t for me. To be honest, I’m not sure I ever had a clue what I wanted... I just knew I didn’t have it. Not until you showed up.”

“So you’d do it again?” he asked, his voice serious. I twisted to look at him again, frowning.

“What’s up? This isn’t like you.”

“Maybe I’m getting old. Humor me.”

I pretended that I had to think about it and Shade’s eyes narrowed.

“Okay, I’d probably do it again. It’s been a good life together. So far, at least. Even if you never bought me breakfast with a capital B.”

I winked at him, but he didn’t smile. Nope. His face stayed dead serious.

“Babe, is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, I think it’s probably just right,” he replied, confusing me. “Hold out your hand.”

Twisting around further, I pulled away from him.

“What the hell?” I asked, raising my right hand.

“Other one,” he said, reaching into the pocket of his leather vest. Something shiny glinted in the sunlight.

Oh, wow.

Was he doing what I thought he was doing?

He was.

That was a ring. A sparkly, silvery, very shiny ring.

“You’ve spent twenty years on my bike, and you never asked for a thing,” he told me, catching my hand. “You’ve always got my back, you’re selfless, and I’m a bit of a bastard because I think I took that for granted. I’m not taking it for granted anymore, babe. I’d like to make this official and marry you. Legally. So that what’s mine is yours and yours is mine. What do you say?”

I swallowed. “Why?”

Shade cocked a brow, amused. “I’m laying out everything I have here and you ask why?”

“Well, when you put it like that, I suppose I’ll say yes,” I told him, my eyes filling with what felt suspiciously like tears. He slid the ring over the fourth finger of my left hand. It fit perfectly, because of course it did. He knew everything there was to know about me. Then he leaned

forward and kissed me, catching the back of my head in his big hands.

It wasn't one of our usual kisses.

This wasn't about desire and need and hunger... it felt different. Almost sacred, like a promise. Everything was still around us, the massive stones casting perfect shadows in the dawn light. This place had been built as a monument to those who'd died in World War I. In that instant I felt like those long-dead soldiers were watching over us.

Protecting us.

Sort of like Shade had always protected me.

He pulled away. The kiss must've felt the same to him as it did to me, because he didn't seem interested in taking it further, not like he usually would.

"We're gonna go talk to the preacher," he said, scooting me forward before rising to his feet. Then he reached down to offer his hand.

"Right now?" I asked.

"Right now," he replied.

"What preacher?"

"Pastor D is in town," he said, naming the club's unofficial chaplain. He'd officiated at countless weddings and funerals, and when a biker went down, he was always the first to show up at the hospital and the last to leave. I hadn't realized he'd be here this weekend.

"Really?" I asked, startled. "I didn't see him ride in."

"Yup, he's here. Let's go talk to him."

"This sounds like a setup if I ever heard one. Did you ask him to come?"

He raised a brow, and I knew I wouldn't be getting any answers before he was ready. Fair enough—he couldn't crack me when I wasn't in the mood, either.

That'd been part of why our relationship had always worked. I could stand up to him, and I'd long since come to realize that made me unique among the women he'd known.

Shade didn't take me straight back to camp. Instead we rode across the bridge to The Dalles, stopping at a little greasy spoon diner. There were a couple bikes parked out front, and I recognized the cross surrounded by a starburst that marked Pastor D's classic Indian motorcycle, beautifully restored and meticulously cared for.

Pastor D and his old lady—Mama Jane—were sitting in a booth side by side. The couple had to be in their mid-sixties, but they always managed to keep up with the pack. Jane rode her own bike, and there was something about her that made a person feel comfortable.

Safe.

I scooted into the seat across from them as Shade and D shared a handshake-half hug thing that involved a couple slaps on the back and some manly grunting.

"Shade texted us and said you'd be coming," Jane said, smiling at me. "Hungry?"

"Sure," I told her, reaching for the menu.

Shade slid in next to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder, giving me a squeeze.

“So what brings you?” D asked, reaching for the cup of coffee that sat in front of him. “You finally gonna make an honest woman of this girl?”

I stiffened, wondering if I should take it as an insult. Jane must have sensed it, because she nodded toward my hand.

“That’s a pretty little rock you have there,” she said. “All shiny and new. It stands out a little.”

I felt my cheeks flush, feeling silly.

“Yeah, he asked me first thing this morning. We rode up to the Stonehenge Memorial and watched the sun rise over the river. Then he sprung it on me. I didn’t even realize it, but it was twenty years ago today that we first...”

The words trailed off. I wasn’t sure exactly how you went about explaining a situation like ours to a pastor’s wife. But Mama Jane had seen a lot in her life and she wasn’t the kind to judge.

Nope. She just smiled knowingly.

“So I’m guessin’ you’re here because you want to do this thing?” D asked, catching and holding my gaze. I glanced to Shade but he didn’t say anything.

“Um, yeah,” I said. “I guess I do.”

Pastor D raised a brow.

“All due respect, Shade, but you think you could give us a minute alone with this pretty lady of yours?”

Shade didn’t like that. I felt his body tense.

“Son, if I’m gonna marry you two, I’m gonna talk to your girl about it first,” D said firmly. “Not even the president of the Reapers MC can tell God what to do, and at the end of the day I’m taking my orders from the big guy.”

I had to bite back a laugh as Shade growled, “Need to grab a couple things at the convenience store across the road. You got ten minutes.”

With that he shoved out of the booth, walking across the diner with long strides. My eyes followed him, taking in the long, lean body that’d warmed my bed for so many years. He might be older and the hair was definitely tipping toward the gray end of the spectrum, but my man was still fine.

Very fine.

Pastor D started to laugh.

“Guess that covers part of the conversation,” he said. “You’re obviously still in love with him.”

“What?” I asked.

“D wants to make sure you really want to marry Shade,” Jane said softly. “These men can be a little forceful.”

I laughed, because that was a true statement if one ever existed.

“Yeah, I’m still in love with him,” I replied, looking down at the shiny ring on my finger.

“And we’ve had a real good life together.”

“So tell me why you said yes,” the pastor said. “Shade told me he was going to ask you, and I know what he’s thinking. Now I want to hear your side of it. You’ve been together a long time and never took this step. I’m curious why.”

The waitress stopped by to pour me a cup of coffee, asking us if we wanted to order. I scanned the menu quickly as Pastor D and Mama Jane told the woman what they wanted.

“You folks serve the whole menu all day?” I asked her.

“Yup,” she told me.

“Then I’ll take a club salad with the dressing on the side and my man will have pastrami on rye with chips.”

Handing her the menu, I turned back to the couple sitting across from me.

“We started out as a one-night stand,” I told them. “And he told me it couldn’t end between us until he bought me breakfast, because he was classy like that. Since then we’ve eaten out together like this a thousand times on a thousand runs, but we never order breakfast food. We cook it at home and eat it with friends, but never at a restaurant. It’s kind of silly, but I guess it’s our way of reminding each other that we aren’t done just yet.”

Pastor D nodded, smiling.

“That’s good,” he said. “So if you get married, does that mean you’ll finally get to order breakfast?”

I had to think for a minute. “You know, at this point I think it might feel weird. Maybe.” Through the window I saw Shade’s tall figure headed back toward us across the street. “He’s coming back. If you had anything else to talk about, better tell me now.”

“Nope, I think that’s about it,” D said. “It’s not like you’re a young couple just getting together, and I know for a fact he’s in it for the right reasons. You seem to be, too. Good enough.”

A bell hanging from the front door rang as Shade pushed through, and then my man was sitting next to me again.

“I ordered for you,” I told him. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Did you order me breakfast?”

“Nope. You’re gonna have to settle for a sandwich.”

“Then I don’t mind at all.”

We spent a good hour visiting with D and Jane, who said they’d see us on the other side of the river. I followed Shade out to his bike and climbed on behind him. The day was settling out to be nearly perfect, everything bright and clear and gorgeous. There was a little wind as we came over the bridge, but nothing too bad.

Shade caught me off guard, though, when he kept going past the camp and rode toward Wishram instead. The tiny town only had a few hundred residents, and I couldn’t think of a

single reason we'd be going there.

When he pulled up to a very cute little church, my eyes narrowed.

"Okay, I've been following you all morning, but we're at the point that I think I need an explanation," I said as soon as he turned off the machine. "I already got a proposal, a ring and a visit with a minister this morning, and now we're at a church. How far are you planning to take this?"

"Have you ever known me to do anything halfway?" Shade asked.

"I'm not going to marry you without time to plan a wedding," I said flatly. "I love you, I want to be with you, but if we're doing this and I don't do it right, Hannah will kill me dead. My nieces will want to be bridesmaids, their girls will want to be flower girls, and they'll give me hell the rest of my life if I don't wear a poofy white dress."

"Do you want to wear a poofy white dress?" he asked. I rolled my eyes.

"Of course not."

Doesn't every women want to wear a poofy white dress and be a princess at least once?

Wonder Woman whispered in my ear.

Bitch. She knew me too well. I did want a pretty dress. Not too poofy, though. I didn't want to look like a marshmallow.

Don't worry, you can wear it and blame Hannah. Pretend you hate it, she said. I won't tell.

"Let's go inside," Shade said. "I heard it's pretty and this would be a great place to get married. Central, so everyone in the club and your family can come. We'll camp out and have all our friends with us. Wouldn't have to be too formal, but I think we could make it fancy enough to keep your sister happy and comfy enough for us."

"You've given this a lot of thought..."

"I had twenty years to mull it over," he said, shooting me a grin. "Although I'll admit, the first fifteen I was mostly thinkin' about getting laid."

At least he hadn't turned into a total stranger.

Catching my hand, Shade drew me up and along the walkway to the little church. We'd just reached the steps when the door flew open and two girls came crashing out. Little blonde twins wearing poofy bell dresses.

Callie's daughters—three years old and hell on wheels.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

"Sorry!" Callie said, poking her head out the door. She bit her lip as she caught Shade's eye. "They got away from me."

"I get to be a bridesmaid!" Rose shouted. Her sister grabbed her arm, swinging her around to glare at her.

"No, you're a flower girl. And it's a *secret!*"

I took a deep breath, all of it coming together. The whole thing was a setup. A giant fucking setup, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to kiss him or kill him. My nails dug into Shade's hand as Callie ducked out and grabbed the girls, then disappeared back inside.

“This is a surprise wedding, isn’t it?” I asked him.

“Didn’t want to give you time to change your mind.”

Kill him, I decided. I wanted to kill him. But how? Slow strangulation? No, slit his throat. Harsh but fast. Merciful, even.

Better than he deserved.

Planning weddings is a lot of work, Wonder Woman pointed out. And you hate planning things. You want to marry him, right?

Can I still kill him if I marry him?

The two aren’t mutually exclusive, she replied.

Hard to argue with that logic.

“So let me get this straight,” I said slowly, turning to Shade. “You planned a surprise wedding, invited everyone, and then waited to ask me until this morning? What if I’d said no?”

“I knew you’d say yes,” he replied, looking smug. Way too smug.

“I should dump you and catch a ride home with my sister,” I snapped. “I’m assuming she’s here? Seeing as Callie and the girls are?”

“Her and Heath and the whole wedding party,” he said. “Everyone else is still down at the camp.”

“And they all knew about this? Everyone but me?”

“Just the family, Pastor D and Mama Jane—I haven’t told the whole club, just in case you really did say no. And you can still say no,” Shade said, his face growing serious. “I did this because I love you and I want to marry you. But I figured your sister would make a big deal out of it and we’d have to spend months planning it. At some point we’d have a stupid fight over flowers or something—because everyone does—and then it would suck and I don’t want to fight with you. I just want to marry you. If I had my way, we’d do it by the bonfire tonight with all our friends, but that’s not right for your family. This way Hannah and the girls get all the fun of planning, you don’t have to do the work, and you’ll even have that poofy dress you’ll pretend to hate but secretly want. Tonight we can do the bonfire and party with our friends. None of the stress—just the happiness.”

I took a deep breath, considering. I still wanted to kill him, but the man really did know me. I wanted Hannah and the girls to be happy, but didn’t want to spend months planning. I couldn’t imagine trying to figure out churches and dresses and what the hell we were going to feed everyone... Hannah and Callie loved this shit. They knew me way too well to fuck it up and all I had to do was walk in the door and get it done.

“How long do I have to decide?” I asked him.

“Plenty of time,” he said. “I told everyone to be ready to ride in two hours.”

“I think we need to talk about what the words ‘plenty of time’ mean.”

Shade caught my hands, pulling me close as he looked straight into my eyes.

“Mandy, do you want to marry me?”

I sighed, because I did.

“Yes.”

“If you really, truly aren’t okay with this, I’ll call it off right now. Otherwise you have two hours to do your hair and nails and figure out that crazy wedding underwear they insisted you needed for the dress. Hannah has a whole plan to make you pretty, although I think you’re prettier like you are right now.”

I reached up to touch my hair, knowing it had to look like shit after the ride. I hadn’t showered that morning and I smelled like campfire smoke, gasoline and sweat. But I could see the truth in his eyes—Shade thought I was gorgeous, just like this.

So gorgeous he wanted to marry me.

And I wanted to marry him, too.

Twenty years ago, I’d taken a chance and rode off with this man into the future, not knowing what lay ahead of us, hoping like hell it hadn’t been a mistake. It hadn’t. Taking that chance was the smartest thing I’d ever done. Now he was asking me to take another chance.

“Okay,” I whispered. “Let’s get married.”

He leaned down to catch my lips, but I turned my head away.

“What?” Shade asked. “What’s wrong now?”

“It’s bad luck for you to kiss the bride before the wedding,” I said primly, because payback is a bitch. “You’re just going to have to wait. Now get the hell out of here so I can get ready. I’m assuming you have a tux you need to find, too?”

Shade froze, looking wary.

Ha! said Wonder Woman. *Chickenshit takes twenty years to propose and now he doesn’t even have a tux.*

Like I’d even recognize him in a tux, I told her. *You know how weird that would be?*

Pretty damned weird, she admitted.

“Babe—”

I started laughing, shaking my head. “You know me, okay? You got me the poofy dress. Give me some credit, because I know you, too. You’re gonna wear your best jeans, a clean dress shirt, and your colors, am I right?”

Shade had the grace to look sheepish as he nodded.

“All right, then. Get your ass out of here. I need a shower and then some primping.” A sudden, horrible thought hit me. “There’s a shower here, right?”

“Not in the church,” he admitted. “But I talked to an old friend down the street. That’s where you can get ready. Everything is arranged.”

The church door burst open again, exploding with little girls, Hannah, and my three beautiful nieces. They were gorgeous young women now. Strong and smart. Heath had legally adopted all of them a few years after they got married, and he’d been a hell of a father.

“I can’t wait anymore!” Hannah said breathlessly, rushing toward me. “I’m sorry, but you were just taking too much time talking. Are we doing it? Are we getting married today?”

“You realize I’m the one who’s getting married, not you. Right?”

She screamed and tackle-hugged me, followed by the pack of girls. I caught a glimpse of Heath and Shade sharing a manly hug with back slapping. Then they were herding me away.

Two hours later, I stood in the back of the church wearing a white dress with just the perfect amount of poof. Callie's little ones were adorable in their bell dresses, although one of them had a giant dirt smudge down the front. Callie had been devastated, apologizing over and over again. I just laughed and told her that there's something wrong with children who don't get dirty.

My grown-up nieces stood behind them, serving as my bridesmaids. They didn't all match perfectly, which I loved. Instead of something formal, they wore flowered sundresses, Callie's draping the floor while the twins wore much shorter ones. Hannah was perfect as the matron of honor in a daisy covered maxi-dress, and we all held bouquets of fresh wildflowers. I had wildflowers in my hair, too, which was done up in a loose coronet of braids with wisps down around my ears.

Heath waited next to us, wearing a suit. Hannah had asked if I wanted him to give me away, but I'd said no. The only person I could imagine walking beside me was her. The music started, the doors opened, and Mama Jane got the girls started down the aisle. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath as I waited. After long minutes the music changed.

Go hard, Wonder Woman whispered. And if you fall on your ass, tell them you did it on purpose.

"It's time," Hannah whispered, taking my hand in hers.

I opened my eyes. Everywhere I looked were my friends. People who'd stood by me for years. Women I'd cried with, men who'd helped me through the tough times. Together we'd laughed and lived, and somehow these tough Reapers had become my family.

Then I raised my eyes to the front, where Shade stood. Shade, my lover and best friend. The man who'd always been there for me.

The man who never, ever bought me breakfast.

He cocked a brow, as if to ask whether I was coming.

Smiling, I took the first step.

Author's note: I hope you enjoyed Shade and Mandy's epilogue. In the introduction, I promised to share the story behind it, and so here goes...

When I first started writing, my aunt and uncle were some of my biggest supporters. Without them, I never would have found my way to Berkley. They also attended one of my first big signings in Vegas, with Auntie working the line and Uncle occasionally sitting in for myself or Kylie when people needed to run to the restroom (you should have seen the looks on people's faces when they got to see "Kylie" in person for the first time).

Anyway, the morning of their 35th wedding anniversary, my uncle took my aunt on a drive

and asked her if she'd marry him again after all they'd been through. She said yes, and he told her he wanted to go down and talk to the minister about renewing their vows.

When she got to the church, her entire family was already there. Her sister, daughters-in-law and nieces were waiting with three wedding dresses for her to choose from, along with a beautician to do her hair, nails and makeup. Their sons the groomsmen, the bridesmaids were their daughters-in-law and their beautiful grandchildren led the way down the aisle.

I never saw Shade and Mandy having a traditional epilogue, but when I thought about that particular wedding—a wedding decades in the making—it somehow fit them.

Sentimental? Yes. But once you survive a few decades with the same person without strangling enough other, I think you're allowed one day for sentiment.

PS—Okay, after I wrote this author's note, I realized that I left out the best part. When I originally called Auntie to ask permission to use their story, Uncle answered and took a message, saying she was busy. She called me back not long afterward, apologizing for not picking up the phone herself. What was her excuse?

My Auntie couldn't answer the phone because she'd been too busy racing her Corvette... to Vegas.

Guess sentimental works out sometimes, doesn't it?