

By Fate I Conquer

Chapter 31 – 35

“No,” she whispered. She began to shake, backing away until her back hit the kitchen counter. Tears burst from her eyes. She put a shaking hand over her mouth, gasping for breath as her anguish stole it from her. I wanted to touch her, to console her but I wasn’t sure if she wanted my touch.

I was the reason for all this. Marcella had become a target because of my actions in the past. “She’s alive,” she said—not asked, as if her saying it would make it true.

“Yes, of course she’s alive. The president probably wants to blackmail me. They won’t kill her. They know I’d pulverize them and every MC in my territory and beyond in revenge.” I didn’t trust in Earl White’s word or his honor, but I had to trust in his instinct of self-preservation. That didn’t mean they wouldn’t hurt her. But even if they didn’t Marcella had to be terrified in the hands of those men, terrified of what they might do... I didn’t want to consider the horrible options.

Aria closed her eyes, swallowing. “Oh Marci.” Aria sagged against me with a choked wail, her fingers digging into my arms. I caught her and pressed her against my chest.

Her pain cut me worse than any blade ever had. “I’m sorry, love. Our daughter is paying for my sins. I’ll never forgive myself and I don’t expect you to ever forgive me either.”

Aria pulled back slowly, wiping her eyes before she looked up at me. She clutched my hand. “These men are at fault, not you, Luca. There’s nothing to forgive. When I married you, I knew of the risks of being with a Capo.”

The marriage had never been her choice though, even if we’d chosen each other over and over again in the years since our wedding day.

“I’ll offer to exchange myself for our daughter. It’s me they want, not her.”

Aria’s expression became unexpectedly fierce. “Save our daughter and kill those men. They can’t survive or we’ll never be safe. You’re the strongest man I know. Show them, and don’t you dare not come back to me.”

Aria’s unwavering faith in me was the greatest gift I could imagine and a burden I gladly carried. I wouldn’t disappoint her trust. I’d save our daughter with sheer brutality and with my life if necessary.

Amo stepped into the dining room, and his face didn’t bode well. I got up at once. I hadn’t been hungry anyway. The only reason why I was at the dining table was because

Aria wanted to preserve a semblance of normalcy for Valerio. He knew more than she wanted, but he humored her pretending he didn't.

Aria and Valerio fell silent.

I moved closer to Amo, keeping my voice low as I asked, "What's wrong?"

Amo's face was red with anger. "The bikers posted a video of Marcella on the internet."

Aria got up and approached us. "Is Marcella all right? What happened?"

"What kind of video?"

Amo's phone beeped repeatedly with incoming messages. He slanted a look at the screen. "Fuck. I'll kill them all."

I grabbed his wrist. "Amo, what kind of video?"

My own phone began to buzz with messages.

"They posted a video of Marcella naked and tagged her on social media. It's all over Insta, TikTok and Twitter."

I balled my hands into fists, my fury so overwhelming, I had trouble reining it in. Valerio and Aria were watching me worriedly, and I needed to keep my fucking composure until I was away from home.

Aria glanced down at her cell phone and the color drained from her face.

"Mom?" Valerio asked, but she didn't react.

I went over to Aria and touched her shoulder. She lifted her head. "I want them all dead," she whispered softly. As if she had to ask. They would die, one way or another. Either by my hand or by Amo's and Matteo's after they'd killed me.

I hunched over my desk, glaring at my phone. My last call with Earl White had been yesterday. I hadn't heard from him since then and I didn't have a number to call. His last words made me fear the worst for Marcella.

Matteo paced the room. "He wants you to beg. I can't wait for the tables to have turned and to make him beg."

I'd as good as begged, not in the exact words and keeping my fury at bay had been close to impossible after the video of Marcella that the MC had posted but I had offered myself to Earl White on a silver platter, but he'd refused. If my men were closer to

finding Tartarus' current hiding place, then things would be easier. I'd pulverize every biker. Fuck, I'd enjoy it more than anything I'd ever enjoyed before.

"I dream of killing the Whites every night. It's all I can think about," Amok said from his spot on my couch. He had spent every waking hour searching for Tartarus and his sister since she had been kidnapped. Even Aria who was usually so adamant about him focusing on the upcoming school year hadn't argued.

Nothing was more important than family.

Two days ago, we'd followed a lead all night but the hut we'd found had only been an abandoned storage for guns and ammo. There wasn't a trace of the current Tartarus clubhouse. If we could only get our hands on one of the bikers. They would reveal the location, but the last guy we'd followed and cornered had put a bullet in his head before we could grab him.

A knock sounded and Valerio poked his head inside my office.

"Mom just got a package. There's a hellhound print on it."

Amo jumped up from the sofa but I was already out the door, rushing after Valerio who led the way to Aria. We found her in the living room. She stared down at the package, a letter knife in her hand, but it was still closed.

"Don't open it!" I shouted. Aria jumped, her gaze darting to me. I reached her and gently pulled her away, shielding her with my body.

Amo took the knife from her hand. I shook my head. "I'll open it."

He handed me the knife and I cut through the package wrap. I doubted there was something dangerous inside, but even if there were it should be me who got hurt.

I ripped open the package and found a jar with a bloody piece of flesh inside. My pulse sped up as I read the label. "The first piece of your daughter that you get back. More will follow until you show some respect."

Matteo's eyes widened. "What is that?" he murmured. Amo still kept Aria and Valerio back.

I brought the glass closer to my face. "An earlobe."

Matteo gritted his teeth and looked away, muttering something under his breath. I wasn't sure I could speak. My fury burned too brightly.

"Luca?" Aria called, her voice ringing with panic. "What is that?"

"Take your mother and brother upstairs," I ordered Amo. Aria wouldn't have it. She shook Amo's grip off and he obviously didn't dare grab her again. I shoved the package at Matteo before I went over to Aria, stopping her from looking at the jar.

"Luca." Aria's voice trembled, her eyes filling with tears and terror as she peered up at me.

"Trust me, love. Marcella will come back to us soon."

"I'm not weak. I want to know what's happening."

I motioned at Amo to remove Valerio from the room who followed his brother under protest.

Aria clutched my arms. I couldn't find the words, couldn't tell her what was happening to Marcella and what I couldn't prevent. Even I, who had seen and done so many horrible things, couldn't bear the thought of what Marcella had gone through. The pain, the fear...

The words wouldn't pass my lips. I closed my eyes briefly. "They want to punish me, love. I won't let them hurt Marcella more."

Aria looked at Matteo who was still holding the package. She moved past me. "Show me," she ordered. Matteo glanced at me. I nodded.

Aria took the jar then dropped it back in the package. I wrapped my arms around her from behind, holding her as she cried.

Tartarus had hit me in the worst way possible, and Earl White knew it. He relished in it, and knowing men like him, he would loathe to lose this source of power. He wouldn't release Marcella. If we didn't find her soon...

Helplessness was a feeling I wasn't accustomed to, and I didn't allow it to take root. As long as I took breath, I'd search for my girl, and I'd kill every biker on my way to her.

I had been avoiding Earl as much as possible since our argument two days ago, but if I wanted to make sure everything finally moved in the right direction, I had to talk to him and find out what went on in his head. We had a meeting scheduled for the evening, and almost all patch-owners had agreed to come.

Marcella had been awfully quiet all day, and I wondered if she regretted our night together. She had mentioned that she'd regret me, but now I wanted her to have changed her mind.

Marcella sat on the bed and brushed her hair with a brush I'd grabbed from one of the club girls, the motion almost hypnotic. I couldn't look away. She turned her head, fixing me with those penetrating eyes. "What will you discuss at your meeting?"

"When we're going to exchange you for your father."

Marcella gave me a strange smile as if I couldn't really believe that.

"I'll convince them. They're going to listen to reason," I said, hardly believing it myself.

"What is it you want, Maddox?"

You. Ever since I met you, only you. I was half tempted to run off with her, to leave everything I'd ever known, ever wanted, behind. But I couldn't. MC life was all I knew, all I wanted. I didn't have friends or family outside of this club. I only had Tartarus.

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And yet... suddenly there was Marcella, a woman, my enemy's daughter, who took up more and more of my headspace.

I didn't say anything. My thoughts were madness and betrayal. I headed over to her and bend over her. Grabbing her neck, I tilted her head back for a deep kiss. She responded at first but then she turned her mouth away, robbing me of those irresistible lips.

"This will be over once your uncle hands me back to my father. Unless he decides to torture and kill me to punish my father."

She said it as if she were talking about someone else, her voice cool and controlled but her eyes reflected the fear she'd never admit to. My heart sped up at the mere mentioning of her death. "I'd never allow Earl to kill you. I'll protect you."

She smiled but it wasn't happy. "Can you? Protect me? Your club brothers want to burn me at the stake like the witch they think I am."

My club brothers wanted to stake her in a very different way. I wouldn't allow that either. As long as Marcella was under our roof, I'd make sure she wouldn't be harmed worse than she already had been. But once she was released...

The thought of letting her go, of never seeing her again, it added a heavy weight on my shoulders.

"You don't want to lose me," she whispered, pushing to her feet and grabbing my cut. Her eyes held me captive as they always did.

I considered lying, but I simply couldn't do it with her looking at me like that. I cupped her neck harder. "Of course, I don't want to lose you." I reached under my shirt that reached her thighs and shoved the boxers aside.

"I'd miss that pretty pussy." I would, but it was only a small part of the reason why I couldn't imagine letting her go. Sharing details from my childhood, talking about more than drug deliveries, moonshine and guns, she was the only person I could do that.

My fingers found her clit and I began to circle it lightly, only teasing her when I really wanted to plunge into her.

"It's more than that, Maddox," Marcella said softly, her breath hitching as I kept stroking her sensitive flesh.

I leaned down and sucked her lower lip into my mouth before I kissed her. Her tongue met mine for a gentle and slow dance so very unlike our previous kisses. Her eyes stayed locked on mine and she sighed into my mouth as my fingers stroked up and down her slit, gathering her arousal to slide even more easily over her little nub.

"Whatever it is, we can't have it, not forever," I growled.

She shook her head. "We can have whatever we want. We just have to reach for it. You can have me all for yourself if you help me escape."

"Escape," I echoed. "My brothers would kill me as a traitor."

"You could come with me and ask my father for help."

I grimaced. The mere idea of asking Luca Vitiello, the man who'd slaughtered my father, for help, left a bitter taste in my mouth. "Your father would kill me for kidnapping his precious daughter."

"He won't if I ask him to spare you."

"I don't want to be at your father's mercy. He should be at mine and I definitely won't grant it to him."

Marcella's expression hardened and she tried to pull back but I held her in place by her neck and plunged my tongue into her mouth the same time as two of my fingers plunged into her wet pussy.

She moaned into my mouth, her walls clenching deliciously. I thrust into her at a fast pace, relishing in her arousal and the fire burning in her eyes. Desire and anger, a beautiful combination. Eventually Marcella's grip on me turned painful as her hips rocked against my hand, chasing an orgasm.

When her walls clamped down on my fingers and her eyes widened from the force of her orgasm, I pulled away from the kiss to hear her cry of ecstasy.

"Yes, Snow White," I growled, fingering her even faster. She clung to me until finally her orgasm subsided. I lowered my hand and opened my fly.

Marcella tugged at my hair, forcing me to meet her gaze. "You can live and have me, if you leave your MC life behind and work for my father."

I scoffed. "You want me to serve under your father."

She became serious. "You can either serve under my father or you can rule over a graveyard."

"We aren't dead yet, and me and my brothers are very difficult to kill as you will see."

"My father killed Tartarus men before. He will again."

I jerked down my pants and shoved Marcella toward the bed. She gave me a challenging smile and parted her long legs. I grabbed her ankles and tugged her toward me before I slammed into her in one hard thrust. She was still tight and her face flashed with discomfort but I only waited a second for her pussy to adapt to my cock.

My balls furiously slapped against her pussy and my hips against her ass until it was red. But this wasn't enough, could never be. I needed to see her face, wanted to see it every f*cking morning when I woke and every night before sleep. I flipped her over and climbed on top of her.

Her eyes burned a hole into my soul and heart.

"F*ck," I growled. "I can't f*cking lose you."

After our f*ck, she lay in my arms, her breathing low. I'd soon have to get up to go to the meeting.

"I'm scared to die, scared they'll hurt me worse, Maddox," she whispered so softly, at first, I wasn't sure I heard her right. She had every reason to be scared.

"I'm here," I murmured, kissing her neck. Her bandaged ear taunted me with the truth.

Her breathing evened out and I got up, feeling a nervous energy take hold of my body. As I made my way downstairs, I crossed Gunnar. He touched my shoulder. "You're spending a lot of time with her. Everyone's noticed. Soon you'll have to make a choice."

"I made my choice a long time ago," I said, pointing at my cut. "Tartarus runs in my blood."

Gunnar shrugged. "Still. Some people worry. Tonight's meeting is your chance to appease them."

"F*ck 'em. I've bled more for this club than most."

"Calm down. I'm just saying."

If a man like Gunnar already started to be wary of me, I had to be careful. When Gunnar and I entered the meeting room five minutes later, most patch-holders were already seated around the table and some leaned against the walls. Most nods I received were as friendly as in the past but I could see distrust in a couple of faces.

Judging by Cody's expression, he was probably the one talking shit about me. Earl sat at the head as usual. I took my seat beside him but he barely acknowledged my presence. We'd had arguments in the past, especially when I was a hot-blooded teen but it had never felt final. This time, it felt as if a rift had opened up between us that couldn't easily be bridged. I wasn't sure how to close it, wasn't sure I wanted to try.

To my surprise, Earl didn't open the meeting with the most obvious topic: the kidnapping. Instead, he wanted to discuss new routes for our weapon transports and a possible co-operation with other MCs. Considering how many we'd killed over the years, I doubted there would be many willing to talk, even if the Famiglia was a common enemy.

I was close to bursting when we were finally ready to move on to the next topic.

"How about we discuss Vitiello now?" I said, failing to mask my annoyance.

There were a few chuckles from older members who probably felt reminded of my teenage days when I constantly interrupted Earl and got banned from the table several times for my hot-blooded outburst.

Earl's eyes cut to me, full of fury. "There's nothing to discuss at this point. Vitiello fails to get off his high horse and as long as that's the case, the Italian whore stays with us."

The insult incited a new wave of rage in me which I had trouble extinguishing. I slammed my fist down on the table. "Tartarus doesn't torture women. We deal with our enemies, not their children. We want Vitiello and he offered himself to us. Let's finally get our revenge. It's time. I call for a vote."

Earl sank back in his chair, but his played calm didn't fool anyone. His eyes reflected the same fury I felt. If it wouldn't have made him look weak, he would have shouted right back at me and refused the vote.

"Then let's vote," he said with a harsh smile. "Who's voting for yes, we should keep the Vitiello whore until Luca Vitiello shows us the respect we deserve and has suffered for

all the brothers he tortured and killed. Or no, if you want to end this quickly for him and his spawn.”

I gritted my teeth. The way he worded it, the vote was already lost. I could see it in the expressions of my club brothers and their affirmative nods.

As expected, only three voted with no, Gunnar, Gray, and I, while the rest, more than ten men voted to keep Marcella and let Luca suffer through her. Maybe I should have seen it coming.

The more moderate voices in our club had become Nomads over the years or joined smaller chapters of Tartarus in Texas or up north because they didn't want to be involved in our revenge plans. The men who remained now were absolutely loyal to Earl and in line with his radical views.

When the meeting was over, I stayed in my chair and watched how my club brothers went to the bar to celebrate a successful meeting. Gunnar touched my shoulder in passing. “You tried,” he said. “Soon this will be over and then we can focus on better things than revenge.”

I nodded, but I didn't believe it.

Earl spotted me and came back in, towering over me. “The whore needs to move out of your room, Mad. She's messing with your mind. It's the Vitello gene. This is our moment of revenge, don't allow her to ruin it.”

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chapter – 33 I got up and gave Earl a forced smile.

“The last few weeks took a toll on me, Earl. That's all. I just want to get my hands on Vitello before he slips away.” “He can't. Not this time. Now let's celebrate.”

I followed him toward the bar and shared a couple of drinks with the club, to put their suspicions to rest and as a goodbye to those who wouldn't survive.

I'd sworn to get revenge on Luca Vitiello, to make him bleed emotionally and later, physically. I wanted him to suffer as much as I'd suffered.

Marcella had been the means to an end. She was meant to be the ransom we needed to get our hands on Vitiello. I'd despised her before I'd known her, and now this woman owned me in a way I should have never allowed. I hadn't seen it coming but I should have. Marcella Vitiello was a woman unlike any I'd encountered before.

And today I'd betray my club for her. I'd give up my life goal for her. And maybe I'd even lose my life for her. I'd never thought anything could ever be worth it, least of all a woman. Relationships come and go in a biker's life, the only lasting bond was that to your club and its brothers, but with Marcella I knew I wanted it to be an until death do us part kind of thing. Of course, death would likely do us part very soon.

She was worth it. F*ck. I knew it now. I'd die a thousand deaths for her.

Taking a last deep drag, I flicked away my cigarette. It was around ten in the morning, and I'd come out here after celebrating with my brothers last night, instead of going to bed. I couldn't sleep and also couldn't face Marcella. I needed time to think. Today Marcella was supposed to move back to the kennels, as far away from me as possible. Earl had granted me a few more hours for a f*ck with her before she'd be fair game. I'd strolled the premises, had checked the fence, but it was guarded heavily.

I grabbed my phone, then stared down at it as the first sunrays of the cloudy day touched the ground beside my feet. Too many guards surrounded the perimeter for me to save Marcella alone. F*ck.

My pulse pounded when I dialed the number of Vitiello's nightclub where he had his office. I'd never talked to him before. That had always been Earl's privilege as prez.

After a few minutes, I was finally put through to the Capo's cell phone because he wasn't in the club. I wasn't surprised that he wasn't at work. He and his men probably worked 24/7 for a way to save Marcella. "What do you want?" Vitiello asked. His voice was tight with suppressed rage.

I could imagine what he wanted to do to me, and I probably deserved it. But Vitello was the last one who should judge anyone. "You better listen carefully because what I'm telling you next is where you can find Marcella."

I gave him the address, then added, "You should hurry if you want to protect your daughter from more harm."

"We both know it's a f*cking trap," Vitiello growled.

"Does it matter? You'd die for her. This is your chance to prove it."

He didn't deny it, and for the first time in my life, I had something in common with my worst enemy. The funny thing was the person probably going to lose his life was me. If Vitiello attacked our clubhouse with the full force of his soldiers, none of us would survive. A quick death was all we could hope for and would probably be denied. "Be quick. Earl has more in store for your daughter."

"I'll tear you all apart," he growled, but I hung up before he could elaborate on his promise. I'd seen what he was capable of.

I sagged against the wall of the shed, staring up at the sky. It was ironic that the sun came out now that I'd decided to destroy the one thing I'd clung to all my life. Then I dragged my eyes to the tattoo of the hellhound on my upper arm. I'd been born into the club. I'd loved it with all my heart, had sworn my loyalty and life to it and my club brothers, but in only a few weeks Marcella had turned my life upside down.

Her kidnapping had shown me Tartarus' ugly head, one I always tried to ignore. I'd still fight at my club brothers' side and try to kill Vitiello once Marcella was safe. I wanted to help her not spare him.

I pushed away from the wall and went in search of my half-brother. He needed to get away from here before Luca arrived. I found Gray, Gunnar, Cody, and a few others gathered around the table, playing poker, most of them looking like death warmed over from drinking too much. Some of these men were like my friends. They didn't deserve death, but if I told them about what lay ahead, they'd tell Earl, and he would evacuate everyone and bring Marcella to a new hiding place. Only this time, I wouldn't be able to protect her. I only had this one chance and I wouldn't f*ck it up for anyone.

"Want to join us and stop moping around, Mad?" Gunnar asked, a cigar between his teeth. "I don't know why you have your f*cking panties in a bunch anyway. If I had a gorgeous woman in my bed, I'd run around grinning from ear to ear."

"You know me. I want Vitiello's head as a trophy on our club wall. I won't be satisfied until that's the case."

This still held true. I wanted Vitiello dead. Unfortunately, that desire was at odds with my obsession for his daughter. Maybe it was for the best if Vitiello killed me, then I wouldn't be faced with that impossible problem.

"You won't have to wait much longer. Vitiello will cut his own d!ck off to save his daughter once we've all had a go at her," Cody said with a snicker. Even more than in the past, I felt the urge to smash his stupid face in.

"Hey Gray, I need to talk to you."

Gray shook his head. "I'm winning here. We can talk later."

My patience snapped. Vitiello was probably already on the way here with every torture device ever invented on this planet. I stalked over to him and ripped the cards from his hands. "Fold."

Gray protested then he shook his head. "What's your f*cking problem?"

"My problem is that you don't follow orders. You're below me in rank, don't forget it."

"For now," he muttered, a slight slur in his voice. He must have drunk a lot to still be drunk the next morning. This kid drove me up the wall. Cody and Gunnar exchanged looks.

Gray got up. I chose to ignore his comment, even though it was probably true. His jealousy only ever showed when he was drunk. Earl would eventually favor Gray as his successor. He was his son after all. But nothing of that mattered anymore. After today, the main chapter of Tartarus MC would be dead and I was the nail in its coffin. Maybe the Nomads would come together to build a new chapter but I doubted they'd do it close to New York.

Gray followed me outside as I headed into the woods. I didn't want to risk anyone overhearing us. "What's so urgent that you ruin my Straight Flush?"

"I need you to head out now and grab a few things for me."

"No can do. Dad called the entire club in for another meeting around lunch. That's why we're all up so early. He has something planned."

My brows pulled together. Earl hadn't mentioned it to me. "What is it?"

Gray shrugged. "He usually always shares shit with you, not me."

I'd thought me celebrating with them last night had convinced Earl of my loyalty, but apparently, he was still suspicious of me. For good reason. "Whatever it is can wait. You need to go now."

Gray narrowed his eyes, suddenly not appearing drunk anymore. "Why? What's the matter?"

This discussion was wasting time we didn't have. I grabbed Gray by the collar. "Listen to me for once and get your ass away from here."

"What did you do?" he gritted out.

"Leave the clubhouse now."

He jerked free of my grip. "I'm not running off no matter what."

I might be able to live with myself if Vitiello killed my club brothers and even Earl, but I'd hate myself forever if Gray died. "F*ck, you moron, Vitiello knows our whereabouts. He's probably already on the way to kill us all."

Gray took a step back from me, horrified realization flashing across his face. "You told him?"

"I had to. Earl went too far. We all did. This was never meant to turn into a torture session of his daughter. Vitiello was supposed to pay not her."

"You're a traitor!"

He turned on his heel as if to rush back to the house and warn everyone. I didn't want them all to die but if Gray warned them, Earl might kill Marcella and probably allow every brother to have a go at her before he did. I couldn't allow it. I pulled out my gun and hit my half-brother over the head with the handle. He sagged to the ground. Grabbing him under his arms, I dragged him into the forest and hid him under a few twigs and leaves. With a little luck, he wouldn't wake before everything was over. Then at least he would survive. That was all I could do.

I hurried back to the house and paused when I noticed the tattoo machine on the bar counter. "Who's getting inked?" I asked into the round.

"The whore gets a tattoo she deserves, something really fitting," Cody said with a nasty smile, obviously enjoying that he knew more than me. He put his cards down. "Full house!"

Gunnar groaned as he put his cards down and the others muttered curses as well.

"A tattoo was never mentioned before," I said. I failed to mask my shock.

"What Vitiello did needs to be punished accordingly."

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chapter – 34 "He needs to pay, not his daughter,"

I muttered like a broken record, still hoping against reason that my club brothers would listen. "It's Earl's decision, boy," Gunnar said diplomatically. "Has her pussy clouded your judgment?" Cody asked. I gave him the finger. Then I went in search of Earl. I wasn't even sure why I was still bothering, maybe to convince myself that he hadn't lost his conscience completely.

I found him at our meeting table, lost in his thoughts, which was never a good thing. The last time he'd made that face had been when we'd found out about a mole in our rows. Only this time I was the f*cking mole. "Is it true what Cody says that you want to tattoo Marcella?"

Earl snapped out of his thoughts and narrowed his eyes at me. "She gets what she deserves. I thought we agreed on that last night."

I shook my head. "This is taking things too far. Let's grab Vitiello and make him pay."

Earl shot to his feet and got in my face, and I could tell that I was losing him, his trust and what little affection he was capable of. I wanted to save him, save us, whatever bond we had, but I wasn't sure how to do it without sacrificing Marcella, and whatever conscience I still had. "I'm not sure you're still on the right side, son."

For a while I'd loved hearing him call me by that name, but recently it hadn't sounded like a nice term. I doubted Earl had ever really seen me as his son. He'd appreciated my desire for revenge and that my sad story had created a stronger bond among our men. "Are you going to be a problem?" he snarled.

Cody stormed into the clubhouse. "Gray's out in the woods. Someone knocked him out."

Earl followed Cody at once but I turned on my heel and rushed toward my leather jacket thrown over one of the barstools to grab my motorcycle keys then I hurried into the armory. Before I could grab a machine gun, something was smashed against my back and I dropped to my knees with a grunt of pain. My forehead collided with the wall, making stars dance in my vision.

I blinked to catch myself. Blood dripped from a cut in my forehead and ran into my left eye as I looked up. Cody stood beside me with a baseball bat in his hand. "Your uncle was right to be suspicious of you. Told me to keep an eye on you while he had a chat with Gray. If the boy tells his Pa that you knocked him out for the whore, you're dead."

I lunged at Cody, trying to rip the baseball bat out of his hand, but Earl appeared in the doorway and pointed his gun at me. "Down or I'll put a bullet in your skull, Mad."

I sank back down to my knees, my vision dancing before my eyes.

Earl towered over me with a hard smile. "Gray told me you called Vitiello so he could save his little whore."

F*ck, Gray. I'd hoped the kid would listen to reason and not blindly follow his old man's judgment, especially when Earl had lost his f*cking mind.

"You went too far, Earl. I warned you."

Earl leaned down, spit flying as he snarled, "This was our revenge."

"We should leave the premises," Cody suggested, looking around nervously as if he expected Vitiello to jump out from behind a curtain any moment. It was ironic that Vitiello's appearance was my only hope right now. Who'd ever thought that day would come?

"We won't run. We have his daughter. He can't risk too much. Make sure the perimeter is safe and get Gray inside."

With a nasty smile in my direction, Cody sauntered away.

Earl's eyes settled on me. For a long time, he'd taken the spot as my father, and he was still the only family I had next to Gray and Mom. I might have lost them with my actions.

Maybe I could win their trust back by helping them in their fight against Vitiello. I still wanted the man dead but not at the cost of risking Marcella's life. No matter how much I hated her father, my feelings for her were even stronger. I was a doomed f*cker.

Earl shook his head with a harsh laugh. "Stupid boy." He aimed the barrel of his shotgun at my head and everything turned black.

I peered out of the window, the heavy feeling deep in the pit of my stomach increasing with every passing moment. Maddox hadn't come to bed last night, for the first time since he'd taken me into his room. I'd tried to listen at the door for snippets of conversation that might give me a hint why, but no one had come close to the room.

Several bikers arrived on their bikes and commotion broke out in the driveway. I sat up, curious. Everyone's face was tight with worry. Hope settled in my chest. Maybe Dad had landed a hit. My hand moved to my ear, barely touching the bandage.

Then I quickly jerked it away. I hadn't even seen the wound yet. I wasn't sure I had the courage to do so anytime soon.

What if something had happened to Maddox and that was why he hadn't shown up? What if Dad was the reason behind Maddox's disappearance?

The lock turned and I stood, smiling. The smile died when Gunnar appeared in the doorway.

"No reason to smile, puppet," he said in his rough voice.

"Where's Maddox?" I asked sharply, backing away.

Gunnar shook his head. "Stupid boy." He stalked toward me and grabbed my arm. "Maddox can't help you now. You better pray your daddy sees reason."

He dragged me outside despite my struggling. My bare feet scratched over the rough floorboards. "What do you mean? What happened?" I asked over and over again but he ignored me. Nobody was in the common area when we crossed it. Where was everyone? And what was going on?

Gunnar led me down to the kennels and shoved me inside the same cage I had been in before. I whirled around just when he locked the door.

"What's going on? Please tell me, where's Maddox?"

"He'll join you soon," he said cryptically before he walked away. The dogs paced in their cages, infected by the nervous atmosphere. Satan wasn't in her cage though, and I couldn't help but worry about her, too. The familiar stench of dog piss and feces clogged my nose almost instantly.

I sank down on the hut, watching as the bikers gathered guns and carried boards into the clubhouse as if to barricade the windows. Some of them walked by the kennels just to insult me and leer at my body. Only in Maddox's boxers and T I felt even more exposed.

"Get more men to the fence!" someone roared, worry swinging in their voice.

Hope flared in my veins. This could only be Dad. But where was Maddox? What was going on? What if Dad got Maddox in his hands? My mind wouldn't stop reeling. Fear battled with hope in me. I wanted to be freed but I didn't want to lose Maddox.

It was a fatal thought, and a fatal attraction.

Hugging my knees to my chest, I watched my surroundings, trying to catch up on what was going on. After the initial insults, nobody paid me any attention, but the fear I saw on many of their faces could only be because of Dad.

Movement drew my gaze back to the clubhouse.

Earl White walked out of the door, dragging an unmoving Maddox after him by the arm. I jumped off the hut and crossed the dirty kennel on my bare feet, my heart beating in my throat. The dogs in the surrounding kennels began to bark and jump against their cages. I barely flinched anymore. I had gotten used to their boisterous nature. They weren't the most dangerous beasts around.

Maddox looked lifeless, limbs dragging through the dirt, head lolling almost comically back and forth. Earl smiled darkly at me when our eyes met and immediately goose bumps rose on my skin. I tried to mask my worry but I doubted I could fool him. By now, everyone seemed to know about Maddox and me.

"Maybe this will help you clear your head and make you realize your mistake. If you apologize, I'll grant you a quick death," Earl said as he dragged Maddox into the cage beside mine. Death? What was he talking about? Maddox's left side of his face was covered with blood from a cut in his hairline.

I finally noticed Maddox's chest rising and falling. At least, he wasn't dead—yet. Something was horribly wrong. Earl turned and closed the cage, then he smiled viciously at me. "And for you, I have a special surprise soon."

I didn't even want to think about what that could mean.

I eyed the dog worriedly who paced around Maddox as if he was only waiting for the perfect moment to tear into him. The second Earl and Cody were gone, I kneeled at the bars. "Maddox," I whispered then louder. "Maddox, wake up!"

His eyelids fluttered but didn't open. The dog sniffed at his wound. What if the beast started gnawing at him? Had they'd been fed today? I hadn't paid attention to the kennels while looking out of the windows.

"Shoo," I hissed, trying to scare the dog away, but it only gave me a quick glance before it continued inspecting Maddox. "Go away!" I growled, hitting the bars. When that didn't have the intended effect, I turned around and grabbed my water bowl. I tossed the water at the dog and it jumped back. Then charged at me and jumped against the bars. I stumbled back.

chapter - 35 -

chapter – 35 Maddox let out a groan. Some of the water had hit him in the face as well.

His eyes shot open and he rolled over then pushed up on his elbows. He shook his head, very dog-like before he glanced around. His gaze zeroed in on the dog trying to tear down the bars between him and me.

"Wesson, down!" he ordered in a voice as sharp as a whip. "Down!"

The beast actually listened and sank down on his belly, his pink tongue lolling about lazily. Except for Satan, I hadn't really connected with any of the other dogs.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

Maddox rubbed his head, grimacing, and pushed to his feet. He swayed slightly as he walked over to me. "Only a m*therf*cker of a headache."

"Your uncle was really angry at you."

"He's pissed. He thinks I chose you over the club."

I didn't say anything. "He said something about a special surprise for me today."

Maddox sighed. "That's one of the reasons why I wanted to get you out of here."

"What is it?"

"My uncle wants to tattoo something on your back."

My blood turned cold. “I don’t suppose it’ll be something I’ll like,” I said, trying to sound blasé but failing. “What is it?”

Maddox shook his head.

“Tell me.”

He gripped the bars tightly, his eyes fierce. “I honestly don’t know. They don’t share things with me anymore.”

I nodded. My fingers touched the Band-Aid over my ruined ear. “I suppose I can count myself lucky they don’t choose my forehead for the tattoo. Maybe next time?”

“I can’t protect you anymore,” Maddox said quietly. “That’s why I contacted your father and told him about our whereabouts.”

My eyes widened and I pressed closer, my fingers closing over his. “You told my father?” Despite his hatred for my father—considering what he’d witnessed as a young child I could understand his reasoning even if I didn’t share it—he contacted him to save me.

“He can save you. He’s got the necessary manpower. He’s probably already on his way. With a little luck, you’ll be back home tonight.”

My heart beat faster. “What about you? After that betrayal, your uncle won’t forgive you.”

“He won’t. He’ll kill me after he’s done with you. He wants me to watch you getting hurt because he knows what it does to me. But I doubt he’ll survive your father’s attack, nor will I.”

Dad would torture and kill them all, as they deserved. Unless I begged Dad to spare Maddox. That had never been the plan. I’d originally sought Maddox’s trust and closeness to save myself in case Dad didn’t find me in time. But things had changed even if I never meant for them to do so. I didn’t want Maddox to die.

My chest tightened painfully at the mere thought of his death. He wasn’t innocent, far from it. He was guilty of kidnapping me, of delivering me to the hands of his uncle in the first place. Of course, his uncle would just have sent someone else if Maddox hadn’t agreed but that wasn’t the point. “My father won’t kill you if I ask him to spare you.”

Maddox leaned his forehead against the bars. “Why should you do something like that?”

“Because I want you to live,” I said merely. There was more to it—nothing I wanted to consider or voice at this point.

"But at what cost? What will your father ask of me, if he listens to you at all," Maddox asked quietly.

"He'll ask you to burn your cut, to cut any ties to other bikers, and to swear loyalty—at the very least." And for that to happen, a near-miracle was necessary. Dad's hatred for bikers was limitless at this point, no doubt, and Maddox would be at the very top of his hate list.

Maddox shook his head slowly, his lips twisting with disgust, as if the mere thought of doing any of those things was impossible to him. "What's between us is one thing, but my feelings toward your father haven't changed."

"Then you have to put them to rest. It's your only chance if you want my father to spare you."

"It's better to die standing up than to live on your knees, Snow White. I'll die before I fall to my knees before your father and ask for mercy."

I rolled my eyes. "Things are always black or white for men, especially alphas. But life is full of gray areas. You can still be free and keep your precious pride if you swear loyalty to my father."

"Snow White, I'll say it a thousand times until it goes into your pretty head. Your father won't ever trust me, nor will I trust him. He and I have a past that can't be ignored. Even your charm and our feelings for you won't change that."

I pressed my forehead to his with the bars between us. "What feelings?"

Maddox smiled darkly. "I betrayed my club brothers and my own blood for you. What kind of feelings do you think?"

"Lust," I joked, but my voice was hushed. None of this had been part of the plan, not for Maddox, not for me.

"So much more."

Commotion and the snapping of twigs made me and Maddox pull apart to search the area. Cody and Earl were on their way down to us with two bikers whose names I didn't know. Earl had Satan on the leash and Cody carried some kind of machine.

"How sweet," Cody called, a nasty smile on his ugly face. Maddox's uncle, on the other hand, looked furious. "If I'd known how easily you allow pussy to cloud your judgment, I would have made sure you stay away from her."

Maddox eyed his uncle with contempt and wariness. "It's time to end this game. Vitiello was our target, Earl."

His uncle ignored him in favor of hovering in front of my cage and eyeing me with an unsettling glint in his eyes. "Cody has a knack for ink. I hope you'll appreciate it."

He unlocked the cage door. I resisted the urge to back away even if every fiber of my body screamed to flee. I was a Vitiello. I couldn't appear weak even if I was terrified of what lay ahead. I'd felt the same terror when I'd first been kidnapped, ready to break under the force of my fear, but I hadn't broken down, and I wouldn't now either.

Cody carried the tattoo machine, I realized now, into the cage before he grabbed my upper arm in a crushing grip as two more bikers crowded into the narrow cage. They set a generator down beside me and attached the tattoo machine to it.

"Let her go," Maddox seethed, his eyes brimming with fury as he gripped the bars, looking ready to tear them down.

"Your word means dick, asshole," Cody said. Would they torture and kill us before my father arrived?

I believed in a higher power but I'd never been much of a prayer. Still, I begged whoever was listening to let my father arrive in time. In time to spare me more pain and whatever Cody was going to ink into my skin. To save Maddox too.

Cody shoved me against the dog hut and I fell forward, bracing myself on the dirty surface. Another man gripped my neck and held me down. A rip sounded and air touched my skin as my back was exposed. I struggled but I didn't stand a chance against the three men in the cage with me.

"Earl, be reasonable, for f*ck's sake. Vitiello will be here any moment. Don't waste your time on this," Maddox tried to reason with his uncle but his voice didn't sound like someone who wanted to negotiate. It sounded like murder.

"Vitiello wants to screw us over? His daughter pays the price."

I rolled my eyes so far to the side until I caught Maddox's gaze. The buzz of a tattoo needle sounded. I dug my teeth into my lower lip. The moment the needle touched my back, pain radiated down my spine. I squeezed my eyes shut, against Maddox's desperate expression and the world as a whole.

Cody was probably making sure it was particularly painful but except for a few sharp intakes of breath, I didn't give any of them the satisfaction of a scream or my begging. They would all pay tenfold. Even if it took my last breath, I'd make sure of it.

Eventually the pain turned into a fiery burn and throbbing that I eventually got used to. I wasn't sure how long the ordeal took but when I was finally released, I felt too weak to straighten. I pretended I had passed out. My eyes burned with tears ready to fall and so I forced my lids shut.

“Not as tough as her father now?” Earl said.

I didn't react. I should have given a comeback but right this moment, I couldn't do it. I needed my energy for the fight that lay ahead. I needed my strength for the reunion with my family so they didn't have to worry more than they already had. I wouldn't waste any of it on Earl or Cody or any other ugly biker.

“You're dead,” Maddox growled.

I wasn't sure whom he was talking to. Probably Cody. His bond to his uncle was still too strong.

A warm breath ghosted over my ear, raising goose bumps all over my body and sending a shiver down my spine, which sent a new wave of pain down my back. “This is what you get for messing with us. And soon I'll f*ck your a\$\$ right before your father's eyes. Maybe I'll force him to f*ck you as well to save you,” Earl rasped.

I wanted nothing more than to kick him in the balls but I remained motionless. I still wasn't sure if my legs would have carried me if I'd tried. I felt shaky and my back was throbbing. Worse than the pain, though, was the uncertainty about the tattoo. It had to be something nasty. Earl seemed way too smug.