

By Fate I Conquer Cora Reilly

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I was thinking what to do to you, if I should have you watch the whore getting f*cked by each of us before killing you, but I realized keeping you alive at this point is a risk I just can't take."

I turned my head to the side until I could see everything. Earl unlocked the cage door and Cody removed the other dog from the cage. Earl unleashed Satan. "I think we both know it has to end like this." Earl's smile was cruel. He locked Satan in the cage with Maddox, who slowly turned around so his back was pressed against the bars.

My blood turned cold, realizing what Earl was about to do. But Maddox knew the dogs... Satan wouldn't attack him... right? "Satan, kill," Earl shouted. I pushed up despite the pain in my back. Satan hesitated a moment before she charged at Maddox and lunged at him. Maddox brought up his arms to protect his face and throat. Satan barked and bared her teeth but didn't bite Maddox yet.

"Kill him!" Earl growled. I stumbled to my feet and toward the bars, clutching them. "No, Satan, stop!" "Release!" Maddox screamed. "No!" Satan dropped back on her paws and turned around herself, obviously confused by the myriad of orders. Earl might have been her owner but he'd never treated her how a dog was supposed to be treated. Maybe that would bite him in the ass now.

"Stupid bitch," Cody hissed. Earl stalked toward another cage with a big male Rottweiler and grabbed him by the neck, dragging him toward Maddox's cage. "No," I whispered. Blood rushed in my ears. I was starting to feel nauseous from fear and the inking, but I clung to the bars despite my wobbly legs.

Earl unlocked the door again and thrust the other dog inside. Satan whirled around, baring her teeth. These dogs were trained to fight against each other. "Kill," Earl ordered, pointing at Maddox, and the male dog didn't hesitate. He charged at Maddox but Satan obviously wanted to defend her territory and collided with him.

Earl shrugged. "He's got twenty-five pounds on her. When he's killed her, he can chew off your face, Mad. Enjoy the show, whore." Cody and Earl turned around and left. The bigger dog was on top of Satan, but it was difficult to follow their vicious fight as they snarled and bit and struggled. Satan yelped in pain. "Maddox!"

"F*ck," Maddox muttered. He removed his belt and wrapped it around his hand so the buckle covered his knuckles then he stalked toward the fighting dogs, grabbed the bigger male by the collar and jerked him back.

The animal was heavy so it didn't fly very far and quickly turned back on Maddox who aimed a punch with the buckle at the dog's snout.

With a loud whine, the dog jumped away, shaking its head. Maddox towered over it. "Down, now!" The dog laid down, panting heavily, its muzzle covered in blood. Probably Satan's. She laid on her side, breathing heavily.

I sank down on my knees, feeling shaky. My back throbbed and I was terrified. For myself, for Maddox, even for Satan. It was too much to stomach. Everything caught up with me in that moment and part of me wanted to curl up in the corner. "Snow White?" Maddox murmured, his voice laced with concern. "Marcella?"

I lifted my head too quickly and regretted it almost instantly as a sharp pain shot through my back. My skin felt as if it was too small for my body and might tear at any moment. Ignoring this, I straightened fully again then perched on the edge of the hut. When my vertigo had disappeared, I locked gazes with Maddox.

"Is Satan injured badly?" He shook his head. "Don't think about it now. We have to get you out of here alive." His gaze darted to my exposed back. Guilt and fury created a potent combination in his eyes. "What does the tattoo say?" I asked, surprised at how raw and dry my voice sounded.

"Don't think about it now. There are more important things to worry about." "Don't tell me what to worry about, Maddox. I want to know." I needed to know. Everything was better than this soul-crushing uncertainty. My mind would conjure the worst scenarios.

"Marcella," he rasped, his eyes urging me to let it drop. "Tell me," I growled. "I'm not breakable, so don't treat me like that!" "Vitiello whore." I nodded, then shoved to my feet and briefly turned my back on Maddox to hide my expression from him. I was so mad at him. This was his fault.

"I'm f*cking sorry. This was never supposed to happen. I swear. If I'd known—" "Then what?" I asked harshly, whirling on him. "You wouldn't have kidnapped me?" Maddox dropped his forehead against the bars. "Yes. And I would have done everything in my power to stop Earl from letting anyone else kidnap you either."

I gave him a disbelieving look. "You hate my father more than anything in the world. You said it yourself. You would have done anything to get revenge on him. What do you care about a lost earlobe and an insulting tattoo for the daughter of your worst enemy?"

"Sometimes priorities shift. You don't have to believe me but it is the goddamn truth."

I walked closer to him. The wind picked up, touching my aching back. "And what are your priorities now, Maddox?"

Maddox stretched out a tattooed arm, his palm upward, waiting for me to take it.

I didn't budge.

"I betrayed my brothers for you. Maybe I'll die for you once your father gets his hands on me."

"You brought this upon yourself, not me."

"If someone had killed your father right before your eyes, wouldn't your brother have wanted revenge?"

"Not just my brother," I admitted.

Maddox nodded grimly.

I put my hand in his and his fingers closed around mine. "You want to kill my father. As long as that's the case, we're lost."

"I've lived for revenge for so long, it's difficult to let go of something like that. But if there's anyone I'd do it for, then it's you, Snow White. I'd do anything for you."

I wanted to believe him. But after everything that had happened, I wasn't willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Attack!" someone screamed.

Maddox's hand around mine tightened. "Your father is here to save you and kill me, Snow White."

"Unless one of your biker brothers kills me first," I said.

He tugged me toward him, his eyes burning with emotion. "I'm going to make sure you'll get to your father safely. Now give a dying man his last kiss."

I allowed him to pull me even closer until my lips touched his through the bars. He deepened the kiss, filling it with longing and desire. I sunk into him even as more screams rang out, as the world around us exploded into war. Shots cut through the yelling. The quick-fire of machine guns. Like a drowning man coming up for air, Maddox ripped away from me and released me. "Press against the wall until I tell you to move or you see your father. Now!"

I did what he asked and stumbled toward the back of the kennel.

Maddox and I looked at each other again, and this felt like a goodbye. One of us would likely die, maybe even the both of us. My heart clenched thinking this was the end for us, for a love that was never meant to be, a love without a chance at a happy end.

I needed to make sure Marcella got out of this alive. I'd die either way, either by the hands of my club brothers or by her father. There was a strange sense of relief in the knowledge of certain death.

I scanned our surroundings, hoping for Gray to dash past. He was our only hope. None of the other men, not even Gunnar would help me escape. I wasn't even sure if Gray would do it. The rift between us had grown in the past weeks. Gunfire sounded down at the fence. Our gun power would keep Vitiello and his army back for a while. I wouldn't wait here like a mouse in the trap.

I tried not to glance at Marcella who was pressed to the wall of her kennel. I wanted her out of harm's way. The chances of being hit by a stray bullet were just way too high. Not to mention that Earl might still kill her to punish Vitiello.

I cast a cautious glance at the dog. It hadn't moved from its place, but it was watching me. I hoped it had forgotten Earl's orders. Being torn apart by teeth wasn't my wish for death. Not that death at Luca's hands would be much better. Satan was still breathing but blood had gathered under her hind leg. I doubted she'd make it.

And then I spotted a flash of bright blond hair and the matching cut. "Gray!" I shouted.

His eyes darted to me, wide with disorientation and anxiety. He bowed down to escape the bullets.

"Gray! Come here!"

He glanced my way once more, conflict reflecting on his face. When Earl had been off with his club brothers, getting drunk or pussy, and Mom had been down with a bout of depression, I had taken care of him, had held him at night when he'd been scared of the monsters of the dark.

Then he dashed toward me, his head low. I wasn't sure if Luca and his men had breached the fence yet, but I suspected they had. A wire-mesh fence wouldn't hold them back for long but getting past our armed guards would take longer.

When Gray finally arrived in front of my cage, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"What happened to the dogs?"

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chapter – 37 "You've got to help me, Gray. I'll die if I stay locked in here."

Gray's gaze flitted to Marcella and he narrowed his eyes. "You are the reason why we're under attack. If I release you, you'll only fight against us." "Gray," I said

imploringly, pressing tightly against the bars. “Earl set the dogs on me so they could tear me apart.”

Gray shook his head as if he couldn't believe it. “He wouldn't—” “Do it? Come on, we both know that's not true.” Gray didn't say anything, only watched Satan.

“We're brothers. Do you really want me defenseless in a dog cage so Vitiello can tear me apart? You know what he did to my father. And he'll do the same to me, no matter if I helped his daughter, which is all I did. You saw what Earl did to her. It's not right. This has nothing to do with Vitiello. I still want him dead and won't hesitate to kill him if given the chance.”

I needed to get through to Gray quickly before Earl spotted us, or my brother was hit by a Famiglia bullet.

He glanced back to the clubhouse then to me. “I don't know if I can trust you.”

“You can,” I said fiercely, but I wasn't sure he could. Right in this moment, my sole priority was to get Marcella to safety. Once that was taken care of, I'd do my best to help Gray. If something happened to him because of my betrayal, I'd never be able to forgive myself. I wanted him safe. I wanted a different life for him.

Gray took out his key chain, and I had to resist the urge to rip it out of his hand. Instead, I waited for him to unlock my cage. The moment the familiar click sounded, I shoved open the door and rushed to Marcella's kennel.

“Now her.”

“No,” Gray growled. “I don't care what happens to her. She ruined everything.”

“It wasn't her f*cking choice to be kidnapped by us.”

“But it was her choice to seduce you and mess with your mind. Before her, the club always came first. You lived for the club, for revenge, and now look at you.”

“You were never for kidnapping her. Look at her back!” I turned to Marcella. “Show him.”

She presented her naked, tattooed back to us. The sight still set my blood aflame with rage. The place between her shoulders was red and bloody, and Vitiello whore was written in ugly black letters across her skin.

Gray's eyes widened and he swallowed.

“Gray, help me. Do you want an innocent woman's death on your conscience?”

Screams rang out.

Gray turned back to the fights but I couldn't allow him to leave with the keys. I lunged at him and grabbed his arm. "Give me the keys."

He turned to me with a disbelieving expression. "I knew it!"

"You know nothing, Gray. Don't be a sheep that blindly follows the herd into death. Leave while you still have the chance."

"I won't leave the club."

I pulled him even closer. "Gray. Our club took a wrong turn when we kidnapped Marcella, but we sure as f*ck went straight into hellfire territory when Earl started torturing her. Don't tell me you're suddenly okay with what happened?"

"No," he growled. "I was against the kidnapping from the start but Earl's the president of this club and it's our job to follow his orders."

Gray shook off my grip and stumbled away. I hoped he'd get on his bike and save his own ass. He was a good guy and didn't deserve to go down with this club. If Vitiello got his hands on him, he wouldn't show him mercy, even if he was still pretty much a kid.

I whirled around to Marcella's cage. She stumbled toward the door when I unlocked it and fell into my arms. I kissed her fiercely, not caring about the bullets and screams. I needed another taste of her before I might never see her again. She briefly relaxed against me and time seemed to stand still. Nothing mattered but her lips, her body, the fire burning in her eyes. "We need to get you to your father," I rasped.

"What about Satan?"

"Marcella, we can't help her now. She's too heavy for us to carry." I linked our hands and guided her away from the cages. The other dogs had quieted and hidden in their huts. The vision in my left eye was still impaired. Maybe blood had dried on my eyeball, or the hit to my head had left lasting damage, I wasn't sure. Marcella had trouble keeping up with my steps but she didn't complain.

I spotted Gunnar and a couple of prospects storming out of the clubhouse and toward the fence, probably to defend our borders but knowing Vitiello's numbers, I doubted they stood any chance. He would barrel right through us and would leave nothing in his wake.

An explosion sounded, blasting splinters of wood and fence all around us. I shoved Marcella down and shielded her with my body. My back burned but I didn't move until a new wave of screams and shots rang out. The sound of shotguns made my head swivel up. As I'd feared, Earl and several bikers stormed out of the clubhouse and in the direction of the kennels.

I jerked Marcella up onto her feet. She, too, had seen the bikers heading our way. I dragged her away but running toward the fence line where the majority of the fighting was happening posed the risk of being hit by a bullet from either side. Vitiello was on his way, I only needed to make sure Marcella stayed alive until then. Nothing else mattered.

I stormed to the most unlikely place, to the clubhouse. As expected, it was empty except for one terrified looking prospect. He fumbled with his gun but didn't manage to loosen the safety pin. I released Marcella's hand and lunged at him, ripping the gun out of his hand before I hit him over the head with the barrel. I grabbed another gun and his knife, then I dragged Marcella behind the bar. It had been enforced with wooden boards and could hold off a few bullets. Of course, the shotguns would eventually tear through it, but I had to trust that Vitiello would find us.

The shooting and screaming came closer. It sounded as if World War III had broken out. Marcella peered at me with wide eyes, panting softly.

"Everything will be okay. Your father will be here any moment and I'll keep you safe until then." And then all hell broke loose around us. The shelf behind us exploded. Alcohol and glass shards catapulted our way. My back lit up with new pain, but I only focused on Marcella who cowered in front of me. I touched her cheek briefly, wanting to burn the image of her face into my mind so I could recall it in my last moments.

Steps rang out and a door was thrown shut. "Barricade the door!" Earl screamed and I held my breath, realizing he was in the house and judging from the myriad of voices several men were with him. Maddox and I were trapped.

"Earl!" Dad roared. "I give you five seconds to hand over my daughter before I tear down the f*cking house and chop you and your f*cking family into pieces."

My heart swelled with relief hearing Dad's voice.

"F*ck you! I'll send her head out to you, that's all you get. We'll keep her cold pussy to keep us entertained."

Maddox's muscles tautened as he raised the guns. "Stay down," he mouthed.

Another explosion sounded and splinters flew through the room. A man staggered toward us, probably to seek cover. "Prez, they are—"

Maddox shot him in the head before he could finish the sentence and all hell broke loose. My ears rang from the gunfire. Maddox jumped up, raising his guns. "Earl, don't be stupid. Everyone's going to die because of your ego." Maddox ducked and a bullet burst through another of the liquor bottles.

"Damn dogs, I'll drown them all."

“For f*ck’s sake! Be reasonable and hand Marcella over!”

More gunfire sounded followed by the sound of breaking wood. A moment later something hit the ground with a loud bang.

“Door down!” someone yelled.

Maddox jerked to his feet when Gunnar showed up, holding a knife in his hands. They began grappling. It was obvious that Maddox didn’t want to kill the older man. Eventually he managed to land a hard hit to the man’s temple. Gunnar crumpled on the floor and didn’t stir again.

The next biker who lunged at Maddox wasn’t as lucky. Maddox impaled his knife in the guy’s chest.

I began shaking, my ears ringing from the gunfire and wounded men screaming in pain. Maybe I’d die right in front of Dad.

Blood splatters covered the wooden boards and the walls. Maddox stepped out from the cover and fired. I crawled forward, peering out from behind the bar. Brutal carnage reigned around me. Blood and body parts lay on the ground.

And amid it all stood Dad, Matteo and Amo and several Famiglia soldiers, right before the front door while Earl and his men hid behind the overturned pool table. It took me a moment to recognize Amo. His eyes were wild and in his right hand, he held an ax, covered in blood and flesh. I didn’t know how many of the savagely killed bikers were his fault. This wasn’t the Amo I remembered.

The brother I’d left behind had seen fights as a fun game. Becoming a Capo had been a distant goal, one he hadn’t been prepared for yet. He’d been a cocky, thrill-seeking boy who liked to impress girls with his future title and looks. His induction had been proforma. Up until this point, Dad had kept him away from the worst of the business by Mom’s request.

Amo had always had a penchant for violence. It ran in his blood, like it ran in mine, albeit not as strong. But it had lain dormant. Now as I saw his blood sprinkled face and the raw hunger for revenge in his eyes, matching Dad’s, I realized his true nature had been awakened.

chapter - 38 -

chapter – 38 Maddox pushed me back when another biker jumped at us and rammed a knife into the man, killing another one of his MC brothers to save me.

Behind the couch on the right, I spotted Gray. Maddox would be devastated when he realized his brother hadn't fled but stayed for the fight.

More Famiglia men pushed into the house until Earl and a few other bikers made a dash for the stairs to seek safety on the second floor.

Maddox grabbed my arm and helped me to my feet, dragging me across the room and shielding me with his body. "Go to your family." He pushed me forward, away from his warmth and I stumbled a few steps, disoriented. Matteo caught me in his arms but I gasped in pain when he touched my back. He briefly looked at my exposed back, and his expression twisted with disbelief then fury. "I'll have a blast killing them."

"Take Marci to safety," Dad growled. Marci, the name no longer seemed fitting for the girl I had become.

Matteo began to drag me away from the scene but I turned in his hold to address Dad. "Don't kill him!" I pointed at Maddox, but I couldn't say more because Matteo tightened his hold on me and dragged me away. My gaze brushed over Maddox and his parting smile as he stood covered in blood amid his dead club brothers. He had made peace with death. The last thing I saw was how he jumped behind the sofa beside his brother Gray to fight at his side.

"No!" I screamed.

"Come on, Marcella. Let's get you to a doctor."

I peered up at my uncle. "Tell Dad he can't kill Maddox."

"Let your dad and me handle those assholes. And don't worry, your dad wants to keep as many of them as possible alive for questioning and thorough payback."

I glanced back at the clubhouse as I stumbled along with my uncle. Two armed guards were by our sides and didn't leave even when we got into a black van. Inside, the Famiglia doc was already waiting. Dad had thought of everything.

"Why didn't Amo take me to safety?" I asked, surprised Dad had allowed him to stay.

Matteo twisted his knife in his hand, obviously eager to use it on someone. "Your brother insisted he was allowed to fight and your dad prefers to keep an eye on him so he doesn't do something stupid. But I'll keep you safe." His mouth pulled into a smile that looked completely wrong. Matteo was easy going for a mobster but today his darker side had come out to play.

His expression twisted again when he regarded my back. I could only imagine what it looked like. I faced him. "Can't you go to Dad and tell him not to kill Maddox? I won't let the doc treat me otherwise."

Matteo scanned my face curiously. "The plan is to keep Earl, Maddox, and Gray White as well as the sergeant at arms alive so we can deal with them thoroughly in the next few days." Excitement swung in his voice, reminding me of the stories about Matteo's penchant for torture that I'd heard. It was always difficult to imagine considering how funny he often was.

"Is everyone else safe? Mom? Valerio? What about Isabella and Gianna? Lily and the kids?" I was rambling but my lips moved on their own accord.

"Romero and Growl are responsible for their safety. Don't worry. Soon everything will be over, and the men who hurt you will be dog food."

Maddox.

I knew what my family had planned, but it gave me time to figure out what to do with Maddox and how to convince Dad not to slice him into bite-sized pieces. I could only pray that Maddox didn't get himself killed today.

"Do you have any injuries?" the doc asked calmly as he sat down on the bench beside me.

I gingerly touched my ear, which Maddox had covered with a fresh bandage yesterday. "My ear and my back."

"Let's start with your back, shall we?"

I nodded numbly. The doc had free access to my back due to my ripped-apart shirt. After a few minutes of careful prodding, he said, "I'm going to disinfect everything and refresh your tetanus shot. And just to cover all our bases, I'll get some bloodwork done to check for possible infections the needle might have carried." What he didn't dare to say: possible diseases through intercourse.

My heart skipped a beat and I stared at him in horror.

"What kind of infections?" Matteo asked before I could utter a word.

"Hepatitis, HIV to name a few."

I could feel the blood slowly leave my face. I hadn't even considered that the needle might be contaminated. The ugliness of the tattoo had been my only concern so far.

Matteo squatted before me, giving me a reassuring look. "You'll be fine, Marcella."

"What about a possible pregnancy?" the doc asked in a very quiet voice.

Matteo's expression shifted to fury but then his gaze darted to me.

I shook my head vigorously but I couldn't be sure I wasn't pregnant. I'd been on the pill for over a year when Maddox kidnapped me. Of course, I didn't have them with me. But I didn't want to consider it now. I'd take care of this problem when I was home.

The relief in Matteo's face was overwhelming. He touched my arm. "Soon you'll be home and forget this ever happened."

I nodded, but I felt shaky and cold. Up until this point, I'd managed to put up a mask of control but it was slipping quickly. I barely registered as the doctor removed the bandage to check on my ear. "There's the option to reconstruct your earlobe. I know one of the best plastic surgeons in New York who'll gladly treat you."

"As if your dad and I will give him a choice," Matteo muttered, hitting his palm with the blade of his favorite knife.

I shook my head. "It stays the way it is. Only make sure it doesn't get infected."

Matteo met my gaze, obviously confused. Maybe he worried I suffered from PTSD, but I didn't think that was the case.

"I want a reminder."

"I hope you don't consider keeping the tattoo as well," he joked in a dry voice.

I shrugged. "How bad is it?"

"Bad," he said.

"There are options to remove a tattoo."

"I know," I said. I hadn't even dared to peer over my shoulder yet. Later would be time to face the horror.

The doc covered the tattoo with bandages and Matteo threw a blanket over my shoulders then we sat in silence, waiting for the fight to be over. I could see in Matteo's face that he wanted to return and be part of the bloodshed. I was thankful he stayed with me. I didn't want to be alone right now.

My mind drifted to Maddox, who'd risked everything to save me. Calling my father and tell him about the clubhouse was suicidal. He'd told me he loved me. I didn't trust my own feelings. Could true love be born in captivity?

I watched Marcella being dragged away by Vitiello's brother, the knife lover. Her eyes flashed with panic as they settled on me, and she shouted at her father to spare me.

I smiled wryly. The look I saw on Luca Vitiello's face was one I'd seen many years ago. He'd come to maim and kill, not spare anyone. Certainly not me, and not Gray either. I didn't deserve mercy, and I never wanted it. My gaze darted to my brother hunched behind a sofa. I didn't care for my life, but I'd get Gray out of here alive even if I had to kill Luca and his men.

I made a mad dash for the sofa and landed on the floor beside Gray. He was bleeding from a bullet wound in his upper arm but otherwise looked unharmed. I checked the wound, ignoring his wince as I prodded around in his torn-apart flesh. The bullet was lodged inside, which wasn't a bad thing considering it prevented worse bleeding. There would be time to remove it later.

Gray held a gun in his left hand but knowing he strongly favored his right, now injured arm, he might as well be unarmed.

"You got ammo?"

He nodded. "Four more shots."

That wasn't nearly enough against the army we were up against. It wasn't even enough against Luca f*cking Vitiello out for blood.

"Okay, listen to me, Gray. I'll try to distract them and fire every bullet I have on them so you can save your sorry ass."

His eyes widened. "I won't run off like a coward. Dad needs my help."

"Earl ran off upstairs to save his own ass, leaving you here to deal with Vitiello and his army. He doesn't deserve your worry."

Gray shook his head. "I'm not a coward."

"No, you're not. But you aren't a fool either, and staying here is foolish. We can't get out of this alive, not with the numbers against us. But you know all the secret pathways out of the woods. If anyone can get away from here, it's you." Gray kept shaking his head. I grabbed his cut. "F*ck. Mom needs you. If Earl and I die, then she needs you."

That seemed to get through his thick skull.

"Get out of there, White," Luca called. I assumed he meant me, considering that Earl had run upstairs to hide.

I gave a nod toward Gray. "You run toward the back door as fast as your legs carry you when I give you the sign, understood?" I wouldn't be responsible for his death.

"Understood," Gray muttered.

“Good.” I pushed to my feet and began firing at everything that moved. Luca and another man I didn’t know sought cover outside but kept firing at me. Amo Vitiello hid behind the overturned pool table but he too shot at me. I ducked behind the sofa, glad for the metal sheets Gunnar had attached to the underside a few weeks ago in preparation for a possible attack.

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chapter – 39 I jumped back up just when Luca and two men stepped in again.

I raised my gun, ready to blast holes into everyone. Luca was distracted by his son making a crazy-ass dash upstairs, probably to kill the remaining bikers by himself. I knew that invincible feeling of my teenage days. “Follow Amo!” he roared at his men.

They didn’t hesitate and rushed after the younger Vitiello, leaving their Capo alone with me. “Run,” I screamed at Gray as I used this once-in-a-lifetime moment and lunged. Vitiello reacted too late and I barreled into him, sending us both flying to the floor.

He grabbed me by the throat, cutting off my air supply, but I only tightened my hold on the knife and rammed it into his leg, the only place I could reach. The f*cker hardly winced but his hold on my throat loosened enough for me to suck in a deep breath. In his eyes, I saw the same hatred I felt.

His son let out a roar upstairs, followed by shots, screams, and more gunfire. Outside, the gunfire ceased, which meant soon the rest of Vitiello’s soldiers would arrive. Their Capo would be dead by then.

Vitiello tightened his hold on my throat once more, his eyes burning with rage. I rammed my knife into his thigh again. My head began to swim from lack of oxygen. I tried to shove away from him but his fingers around my throat were like a f*cking vise. I brought up the knife and his other hand shot up, grasping my wrist to stop me from plunging the blade into his head and split his skull.

A scream rang out upstairs and for an instant Vitiello’s attention shifted, full of worry, and I ripped from his hold and brought the knife down, aiming for his eye. This was the moment I’d been waiting for all my life.

Marcella’s face flashed before my mind, and I jerked my arm to the side in the last moment, grazing the side of his head and ramming the knife into the wooden board. I couldn’t do this to her. F*ck. What had this woman done to me?

Vitiello’s eyes locked on mine, furious and questioning. He didn’t understand why I hadn’t killed him. I hardly did myself.

“This is for Marcella, only for her, you murdering bastard.”

His eyes moved to something behind me but before I could react, pain radiated through my skull and my vision went black.

The door of the van opened and Dad climbed in, limping badly. A long gash on the side of his head was bleeding profusely, dripping blood all over his shirt, face and arm. He immediately pulled me into a tight hug which he loosened when I winced. He stank of blood and even less appealing bodily fluids but his closeness still felt like a balm on my tumultuous soul. He pulled back and cupped my cheeks, searching my eyes as if he worried I wasn't the same daughter he remembered. I'd certainly changed but I was still me, the version of me that had never surfaced because my cozy life had never required it. Behind Dad, still outside of the van waited Amo. He wiped blood and flesh off his arms. I marveled at the harsh lines of his face that hadn't been there before. He briefly looked up and forced a smile that looked grotesque on his bloody face. I could still see the violence and wrath in his eyes.

For some reason, I couldn't bear seeing him like that. The kidnapping had changed me. How could it not? But I'd hoped it hadn't done lasting damage to the people I loved. Seeing them now, I realized my wish hadn't been granted.

"What happened to your leg?" I asked Dad, looking away from Amo.

"Nothing. We'll take you home now," he said in a gruff voice. I'd never seen Dad like this, covered in blood and at the edge of control.

"What about Maddox?" I asked, couldn't help it. I needed to know. Maybe his death would have made things easier, but my heart clenched agonizingly at the mere thought. He was the reason why I was here today, in more than one sense. He was guilty of my kidnapping and responsible for my freedom. I hated and... maybe loved him—if love could even bloom in a situation like ours.

Dad thrust his fist against the side of the van, expression twisting with rage.

My heart thudded harder. "Dad?"

Dad's face darkened. "He's alive like a few others and will be taken to a location where they can be questioned."

Relief washed through me. I knew what questioning meant in mafia terms but as long as he hadn't been killed yet, there was still hope for him, for us. If I should even hope for us or him. My thoughts were confusing and too unsteady to grasp hold of. Every new thought slipped away like quicksand before I could finish it.

Matteo grabbed his phone and jumped out of the van. "I'll call Gianna. She'll rip me a new one if I don't tell her we're fine."

So many people had worried for their loved ones who risked their life for me. I couldn't imagine what Gianna and Isabella had gone through while Matteo fought against mad bikers to save me.

Dad picked up his phone. His expression told me he was calling Mom. "She's safe," he said first thing.

I could hear Mom's shuddering sigh. Then Dad held the phone out to me. I took it with shaking fingers.

"Mom," I said. "I'm fine."

"Oh, Marci, I'm so happy to hear your voice. I can't wait to hold you in my arms."

"We'll be home in about an hour," Dad called.

"Hurry," Mom said softly.

Dad wrapped his arm around my shoulder as he led me into the house, trying to hide his limp but it must have been bad if he couldn't hide it even around Mom. And even Amo hovered close by as if I needed constant surveillance now. Some of the violence had left his expression but not all of it.

"Get a grip," Dad murmured. "Your mom doesn't need to see you like this."

Amo nodded and briefly closed his eyes. I could see his face morphing to something gentler and more boyish, but it was an obvious struggle, and his eyes, when he opened them, still felt off.

The moment I stepped into the house, Mom jumped off the couch. Valerio was with her and so were my aunts Gianna and Liliana, and my cousins, Isabella, Flavio, Sara, and Inessa. Romero and Growl kept watch like Matteo had said. Mom rushed over to me and Dad finally released me, only for Mom to take his place.

Mom hugged me so tightly I could barely breathe. I winced when her palms brushed the fresh tattoo on my upper back. She pulled back with tear-filled eyes full of worry. Her gaze flitted over my ruined ear before she forced it back to my eyes. Her palm still lightly rested on the bandage over my back. "What happened to your back?"

I didn't want to tell her. Not because I was ashamed. I wasn't. I was furious and scared. Furious because Earl had done this to me and scared that I'd always have to carry his judgment of me on my skin. When I didn't say anything, she looked to Dad. The man who'd slaughtered several bikers in an act of fury and strength looked tired in that moment. His guilt over what had happened to me was unmistakable in every line of his face, but worst of all in his eyes. Amo made sure to look anywhere but at Mom, which was probably for the best, considering he still had that madman gleam in his eyes.

I didn't want to put the burden of telling Mom about the tattoo on Dad. She didn't look at him as if she blamed him for what happened, but I still worried that their relationship had suffered because of my kidnapping. My parents were absolute relationship goals in my mind and the thought that something might change that was almost worse than what had happened to me in the last few weeks.

"They tattooed me," I said, trying to sound blasé.

The color drained from Mom's face and Dad's lips tightened in an effort to restrain his fury for the men who'd done this to me.

Mom glanced at Dad questioningly, but she didn't ask what the tattoo was.

"We'll have it removed as soon as you feel up to it," Dad said firmly. "I told the doc to make all necessary arrangements."

"Thanks, Dad."

Valerio came up to me and hugged me too. "Next time I'll kick biker ass too when they kidnap you."

I choked on laughter. "I sure hope this was the last kidnapping, and you aren't supposed to curse."

He rolled his eyes and I tousled his blond mane before he could duck away. After more hugging from Gianna and Isabella, Aunt Lilitana, Romero, and my cousins, I finally went upstairs, bone tired. I quickly excused myself, overwhelmed by the wave of emotions I felt.

Alone in my bedroom after the first shower in what felt like days, I peeled the bandage off my back and turned toward the long mirror. I sucked in a sharp breath. Maddox had told me what the tattoo said but seeing it with my own eyes still felt like a punch in the stomach.

The black letters looked almost smudged and were thin. They reminded me of tattoos that prisoners got behind bars. The words Vitello whore glared back at me. They sat right between my shoulder blades below my neck. A whore stamp how Earl had called it. I swallowed once, then I turned away from the mirror. Once people found out about what went on between Maddox and me, I would hear the insult often.

chapter - 40 -

chapter – 40 A knock sounded and I jumped, my heart rate picking up immediately.

I grabbed a bathrobe and threw it over before I went to the door, trying to banish my unreasonable anxiety. This was my home. I was safe here. When I opened the door, Mom smiled at me. "I just wanted to check on you." I let her in. "Is Dad home?"

"Yes, he's downstairs with your uncles, discussing their plans for tomorrow. He wants to tell you good night later." I smiled, feeling reminded of all the times he did it when I was younger. Mom hesitated then touched my shoulder. "Is there anything you want to talk to me about?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. I'm fine for now." There were so many things I was confused about, I needed time to sort through them before I could talk to anyone. "Will you be all right alone tonight? I could stay with you." I kissed Mom's cheek. "I'll be fine, Mom. I'm not scared of the dark."

Mom nodded, but I could tell she still worried about me. "Good night then." After she left, I put on one of my favorite nightgowns to feel more like myself again and slipped under the covers. As I lay awake, I made the decision to transform the tattoo on my back into something that proved I was stronger than Earl thought I could ever be. I wouldn't hide or back down. I'd attack.

I picked up my phone and began searching tattoo artists. I wouldn't let anyone's judgment determine who I was. Not now, not ever.

Despite my words, horrible images haunted me the moment I turned off the lights. Crude tattoos, cut-off pieces of me, torn-apart bodies, and fighting dogs. My stomach churned.

A knock made me jerk up in bed. "Yes?" I called, sounding shaky.

Dad stepped in, brows puckering. "Are you all right, Princess?"

"Can you not call me that?" I asked, remembering the many times Earl or Cody had used the term to make me feel dirty.

Dad stiffened but nodded. He remained by the door as if he suddenly wasn't sure how to act around me. I could tell he had many questions he wanted to ask, but he didn't. "I came to wish you a good night."

"Thanks," I said quietly. He turned to leave.

"Dad?"

He faced me again.

"I'm coming with you tomorrow when you question the captives."

“Marci—”

“Please.”

He nodded, but his expression still said no. “I don’t think it’s a good idea, but I won’t stop you. Amo and I are going to head over to the prison very early. You should sleep in and come over later with Matteo.”

Once he’d left, I tossed in bed for another hour, but the dark brought up bad memories and I couldn’t sleep with my lights on. In the last few weeks, Maddox had been by my side at night, and no matter how ridiculous it was, I’d felt safe by his side. Now all alone, anxiety got the better of me.

I got out of bed, threw on my bathrobe, and crossed the corridor to Amo’s room. I knocked.

“Come in,” Amo called.

I slipped in and closed the door. Amo sat at his desk in front of his computer, only in sweats. “Playing Fortnite?” I asked, relieved he was back to his routine.

“That’s for kids and losers,” he muttered. “I’m doing research on interrogation methods used by the Mossad and KGB.”

“Oh,” I whispered. I felt a strange sense of loss. My little brother was gone. His sixteenth birthday was still two months away but he had grown up in the weeks I had been gone.

Amo looked up from the screen, frowning. “Do you need help?”

I shook my head. “Can I sleep in here tonight?” I couldn’t remember the last time Amo and I had slept in the same room together. We were too old for sleepovers, but I didn’t know where else to go.

“Sure,” he said slowly, eyeing me critically.

I crawled under the covers. “I’ll sleep at the edge.”

“Don’t worry. I can’t sleep anyway. Too much adrenaline.”

I nodded. “You should play video games again like you used to, you know?”

“I’m going to rip the bikers to shreds tomorrow. That’s the only entertainment I need,” he muttered.

I closed my eyes, hoping Amo would be back to his old self soon, but deep down I knew neither of us could retrieve what was lost.

I didn't sleep much, so I was already awake and back in my room when Mom knocked at my door early the next morning. My thoughts had revolved around Maddox and my family most of the night.

"Come in," I said, sitting up in bed. The night had been filled with pain in my back and uncertainty in my heart.

Mom was already dressed in a thin knit dress, and unlike yesterday, her eyes were clear. No sign of tears. She looked resolute as if she'd come to save our whole family single-handedly. She held something in her hand as she headed toward me and perched on the edge of my bed. "I have something for you," she said.

I was glad that she didn't ask how my night had been. She could probably guess that I'd barely slept. I hoped Amo wouldn't tell her or Dad that I'd been too scared to sleep in my own room. Tonight I'd stay strong no matter what.

She stroked my hair like she had done when I was a little girl then she opened her hand, presenting a half-moon-shaped, white-gold ear climber studded with diamonds.

My eyes widened. "It's beautiful." I gingerly touched my ear. It was still tender but I avoided touching it.

"Until you decide to have it fixed, you can cover it with beautiful jewelry."

I picked up the earpiece. "I don't think I'll get it fixed. It's a good reminder that I shouldn't take anything for granted." I held up the ear climber. "Can you help me put it on?"

I still hadn't looked at the wound but I would have to if I put it on by myself.

Mom scooted closer, then very gently attached the earpiece to my ear. I bit back a wince as the jewelry touched my still tender ear. "It's a good thing that you have more holes in your ear."

I laughed. I still remembered how Dad had disapproved of me getting my ear pierced, but I always only wore elegant small diamonds so he made peace with it eventually.

"How does it look?" I asked.

Mom beamed. "Absolutely stunning. Go, see for yourself."

I climbed out of bed and checked out my reflection. The earpiece perfectly covered up my missing earlobe. I touched it and smiled. This way I could keep the reminder but choose when I wanted to present it to the world.

I turned to Mom. "How did you get this done so quickly? Please don't tell me Dad threatened every jeweler in New York last night to get it as soon as possible."

Mom giggled. "No, no. I actually started looking for an earpiece like that when... when we found out that your ear got hurt." She made it sound as if I'd had an accident that cost me my earlobe, and not that vengeful bikers had cut it off and sent it to my family. "But your dad would have threatened them all for you if necessary. He'd do anything for us."

"I know," I said. "I don't blame him, you know. Please don't tell me you and Dad fought because of me."

Mom got up and came over to me. She touched my cheek. "I was terrified for you. And your dad blamed himself. I could see how much he hated himself for it. But I didn't fight with him. We're all part of this world. Your dad tries to protect us from it to the best of his abilities."

"I always knew he'd save me. I never doubted it."

"He barely slept. He and every soldier in his command searched for you day and night."

Tears shot into my eyes but I didn't allow them to fall. I didn't like to cry, not even in front of Mom.

Mom, too, fought tears. She touched my arm. "Your dad said one of the bikers revealed the clubhouse whereabouts to him."

I nodded. "Maddox."

Silence spread between us as Mom searched my eyes. My voice had been off, even I could tell. I cleared my throat. "He and I got closer during my captivity."

Mom didn't show her shock if she felt any. It felt good to tell her. If anyone would understand then it was her. Mom believed in love against all odds, in true love. She'd taught me to believe in it as well. I'd clung to Giovanni, desperately hoping what we had would magically turn into the kind of all-consuming love Mom and Dad lived before my eyes every day.

I feared I'd now found it: the kind of love that left you breathless, that hurt almost as much as it made you feel good. It was a love I wasn't sure I should pursue.

"Oh Marci," Mom said, as if she could see all my thoughts.

"I wanted to use him so he'd help me escape and he basically did..."

"But you fell for him?"

Falling in love. I'd never really understood the term—as if love was something as inevitable as the force of gravity. As if it grabbed you and dragged you down with it.

With Giovanni, it had been a logical choice. But what Maddox and I had defied logic. It went against everything he and I had believed in. It went against reason, against my family's beliefs.

"Dad would never allow it. Not with a biker. Not after what Maddox did."

Mom tilted her head in consideration. "I think the latter is the bigger problem. What about you? Can you forgive Maddox for what he did? For kidnapping you? For allowing others to hurt you?"

It was a question I'd often asked myself, already during my captivity and all the more in the hours since my escape. My heart and mind were at odds. I didn't want to forgive him, but my heart already had. But I wasn't someone who acted on impulse. I thought things through, weighed the pros against the cons.

Love didn't work that way. But if Maddox's love for me, or my love for him was toxic, I'd rather find the antidote as quickly as possible.