

## Chapter 16 – By Fate I Conquer Cora Reilly

Earl shook his head at Cody. His disapproval would only increase Cody's desire to pay Marcella back for humiliating him.

I turned to Marcella. Her blouse had lost another button and was covered in grime just like her feet but the look in her eyes was as proud as the first time I'd seen her. I held out my hand to her and to my surprise she took it without hesitation. I pulled her to her feet.

She stumbled against me and I wasn't entirely sure if it was an accident. Instead of pushing her away at once, I enjoyed the feel of her breasts pressed against my chest for a moment as I looked down at her face. Grabbing her shoulders, I moved her back. "Does it hurt?" I asked, motioning at her red cheek.

She shrugged. "Your biker buddy has it worse. I think I knocked his last brain cells out of his head."

"Maybe you should get down from your high horse before someone knocks you down. Everyone around here is eager to break the spoiled princess. Keep that in mind before you act out again."

"My father will save me soon. I bet he's already on his way with an army of loyal followers at his heels. And you'll find I'm difficult to break," she said simply.

Her absolute certainty that her father would save her rubbed me the wrong way. Her absolute trust in her father enraged me. I wanted her to doubt him, to hate him. I wanted her to show a crack in her cold New York princess façade. This side of her was too much like her father.

I smirked. "Maybe because nobody's tried to break you yet, Snow White." I stepped closer again until I towered over her and inhaled her scent. "You grew up in a castle behind protective walls built by your fucking father."

Fuck, part of me wanted to break her, but the other, the other wanted to find out more about her, wanted to win her over to my side. Breaking women wasn't my thing anyway. Cody and a few other guys, on the other hand might find it enjoyable.

Marcella only watched me but there was a flicker of unease in her eyes. She knew what I said was true. She'd had a very sheltered life. The only problems she'd encountered so far were if her shoes didn't match her dress. I came from a very different world, one filled with blood and pain.

"Do you want to break me, Maddox?" Marcella asked, and the way she said my name, her tongue caressing every syllable, raised goose bumps on my skin. Fuck. Never before had a woman given me goose bumps.

Her blue eyes seemed to bury in my soul, digging and searching. "I'm pretty busy." I backed away and picked up the shoe. "I'm afraid I'll have to confiscate this until your release. Though, I'm sure you've got an impressive collection at home and won't miss a pair."

"When will I be released?"

I walked out of the cage and closed the door. "When your daddy is ready to hand himself over." She didn't need to know the truth. Maybe she'd finally learn to despise her father if she thought he hesitated to offer himself for her.

"Will you give me clothes to change or an opportunity to wash myself?"

I shook my head. I wasn't sure if she was trying to piss me off on purpose. "I'll send someone down with a bucket of water later. But I don't think any of the girls want their clothes ruined in the kennels."

"You'd probably prefer me to sit here naked," she muttered.

"No," I said, and I wasn't even lying, because I had a feeling seeing Marcella naked would mess with my brain in a way that I really didn't need.

I got off my bike. Since Marcella's arrival three days ago, I always parked my bike farther down the hill so I had to walk past the kennels and could catch a glimpse of her. What I saw made me pause.

Her blouse was ripped. One of those fancy see-through sleeves hanging by a thread. This morning before my run that definitely hadn't been the case yet. Fuck. Why did Earl have to insist I check our gun and drug storage?

I made a beeline toward her, my pulse already speeding up. "What happened?"

Marcella poked around in her bowl of scrambled eggs. I got why she didn't eat them. They looked like they had already been eaten.

"Someone needs to take a cooking course," she said, as if she didn't know what I was referring to. She had a talent to drive me up the wall. I unlocked the door and a subtle tension entered Marcella's body. I'd noticed it before and as usual it rubbed me the wrong way.

I motioned at her ripped sleeve. "What happened?"

She finally looked up from the bowl. Her cheek was still slightly swollen from when Cody had slapped her and the sight still upped my rage.

“Cody wasn’t happy with my refusal to acknowledge his presence so he made himself unmistakably known.”

I gritted my teeth against the onslaught of fury I felt toward the idiot. He always needed someone to pick on, preferably someone female. “What exactly did he do?”

Marcella narrowed her eyes in that assessing way that she had. “Why do you care?”

“You are our leverage against your father. I won’t allow anyone to mess up my plans by damaging the leverage.”

“Newsflash: the leverage has been damaged before.” She motioned at her cheek. “And I doubt ripping my sleeve will be the last thing Cody does. He seems to like it too much.” She tried to sound flippant and cool, as if nothing that could happen concerned her in the slightest, but there was the slightest tremble in her voice that betrayed her cool to be a charade.

“Cody won’t touch a fucking hair on your head again. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Your last warning didn’t have the intended effect. And your uncle doesn’t seem to care if he damages the goods.”

That was true. Earl’s concern over Marcella’s physical intactness was limited to her being alive long enough to torture Vitiello with her safety and blackmail him into handing himself over.

My phone rang. I picked it up. It was Leroy, one of the prospects detached to our old clubhouse to keep watch. His breathing was harsh. “Mad, they burned down everything.” His words tumbled over each other, ripe with fear.

“Slow down, who burned down what?” I had an inkling what might have happened though.

Marcella put down her plate and pushed to her feet. I realized it might not be the best idea to let her find out too much. Even if she didn’t have any implants that we could detect, I had a feeling she was clever enough to use any morsel of information against us.

Listening to Leroy’s rambles, I left the kennel and locked it again, to Marcella’s obvious displeasure. As I’d feared, Vitiello had burned down our previous clubhouse—which had also been in a secret location and not easy to detect. “You safe?” I asked the prospect.

"I don't know. A few of them followed me but I must have shaken them off. I don't see them anymore."

"You know protocol. Don't come here until you're absolutely sure nobody's following you. Until then, stay with one of the pass-arounds." Going to an old lady would be too risky and until we could be sure our safe houses actually were safe, he needed to stay away from those as well.

"Will do," he said. He still sounded haunted.

Ignoring Marcella's curious expression, I hung up and jogged up to the clubhouse to give Earl the bad news. I found him in his office with a club girl, one of the pass-arounds, on his lap. In the past, the sight had always made me furious on Mom's behalf but she always said she didn't care as long as she was his old lady. Bikers couldn't be faithful, especially the prez. I thought she was being too easy on Earl, but her gratefulness after he'd taken her into his house—and bed, after Dad's brutal death reached further than my reasoning.

"Club business," I said.

Earl unceremoniously pushed the girl off his lap and I didn't look anywhere near his groin area. I'd seen his dick on too many occasions like this already.

"What's so important?"

"Bad news about our old clubhouse."

Earl leaned forward on his chair as if he was preparing to lunge.

"Vitiello found it and burned it down. He must have hoped to find his daughter there and probably wanted to send us a message with its destruction."

Earl jumped to his feet. "Motherfucker! I'll give him a fucking message if he wants one!"

He looked livid. His head didn't just get red, it got purple and a vein in his forehead swelled grotesquely. That was never a good thing.

"He's trying to intimidate us. If we ignore his message, this will only enrage him more."

"Ignore it? The fuck I'll do that. He needs to realize who's pulling the strings, and it's sure as fuck not him."

"What's your plan?" I asked carefully as he paced the room, cracking his tattooed knuckles.

Instead of an answer, he stalked out of his office like a man on a mission. "Gather at the kennels!" he barked at the guys lounging in the common room.

Most of the club brothers were on runs, but Cody, Gunnar, Gray, and a prospect were around. They all got up and sent me questioning looks as if I knew what kind of madness Earl had in his mind.

"Take your phone with you, Gray!" Earl ordered.

I followed Earl as he rushed outside.

"Why do you need a phone? You can use mine as well."