

A  
SINS  
OF THE  
FATHERS  
NOVEL

By  
Sin I

*Rise*

PART TWO

*USA Today* Bestselling Author

Cora Reilly

By  
Sin

I

*Rise*

PART TWO

*USA Today* Bestselling Author

Cora Reilly

Copyright ©2021 Cora Reilly

All Rights Reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, businesses, events and places are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

[Subscribe to Cora's newsletter](#) to find out about her next books, bonus content and giveaways!

Cover design by Hang Le

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About This Book](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

A fatal bond that was never meant to be.

Marcella gave Maddox the impossible choice, and he chose her. Still, she wonders if Maddox is ready to commit to a relationship, or if he's scared of losing the uninhibited freedom his biker lifestyle offered him.

All his life, Maddox knew who his enemies were, but suddenly he's at a loss whom to trust. Will he ever find a place in Marcella's life and family, or will old companions give him a new home and purpose?

Can enemies ever truly become lovers if the odds are against them?

# Chapter *One*



A sense of uninhibited freedom took hold of me as I drove away from my prison of the last few days. I hadn't really believed that Vitiello would allow me to leave—even if Marcella had asked him to grant me mercy—considering he wasn't in the business of granting mercy. My heart clenched thinking of her. The last few days with only glimpses of her had been torture. I missed this woman, more than I'd ever admit to anyone, even her. My feelings for her, the decisions I'd made for her, they had taken me by surprise and still shocked me.

Now I had things to settle before I could head back to her. Otherwise, my mind would always be adrift, and I wanted my sole focus on her when I was with her. I wanted us to work out. I'd given up too much for it *not to work out*.

I headed for the first hiding place in a park near our old clubhouse in New Jersey, ignoring the bouts of dizziness. As expected, the teak box buried in the soil beneath a bush was empty. Whoever had survived the attack had been heading there first too. I hoped it had been Gray. He needed the money. He'd yet to become as resourceful—or rather ruthless—as the rest of us and thus would have a harder time getting money by other means.

Mounting the bike again, I checked two more spots within the city bounds before I headed for a junkyard about thirty minutes outside of the city. It had been Cody's, which was why I had avoided the place. He'd used it to launder our drug money.

I didn't have keys for the gates, so I had no choice but to park the bike in front of them and climb over the fence topped with barbed wire. The second my feet hit the ground on the other side, enraged barks sounded, and soon after, two Rottweilers darted out behind the small house that served as a maintenance building.

I didn't know these dogs, and worse, they didn't know me. They were most likely from one of Earl's litters.

"Fuck," I muttered. I didn't have any weapons on me. From the look of it, the way their ribs protruded, the dogs hadn't been fed in a while. Cody probably hadn't taken good care of them even before he'd been captured. He always said hungry dogs were the best guards.

The two massive Rottweilers charging at me seemed to see me as their next meal. I stormed toward the first heap of crushed cars and climbed up until I reached the top. The dogs leaped at the pile but couldn't climb it. Looking around, I figured out a way to reach the building, climbing from one pile to the next. The dogs followed me, snapping and growling. Their fur was matted and dirty, and one of them had a cut in its side that seemed to be infected. I got rid of my shirt, tore it in two and tossed it in the other direction. The dogs chased after it. This would give me a few seconds. I climbed on the roof of the building then grabbed on to the edge and lowered myself until my feet were level with the window. My biceps screamed in protest.

After days of malnutrition, my body was in no state for top sporting achievements. Gritting my teeth, I kicked back from the wall, trying to gain momentum to smash in the window. The glass splintered as my feet crashed into it. The snarl of a dog forced me to release my hold on the edge and I swung through the window. Shards caught on my naked arms and back. Hissing in pain, I landed on the floor, on even more shards.

I blinked up at the window for a moment. But the heads of the jumping dogs trying to get in as well quickly tore me from my exhaustion. I jumped to my feet, swaying briefly before I looked around for something to defend myself with.

Inside one of the drawers of the desk, I found a gun with three bullets. But then my eyes landed on a huge package with dog food. I stumbled toward it and dragged it to the door. The first dog jumped through the window and landed on the floor with bloody paws. I kicked over the dog food so it spread all over the ground away from the glass shards. The dog perked up and, not paying me another glance, began scarfing down food. Poor beast.

I carefully opened the door and the other Rottweiler charged in. Like his companion, it ignored me in favor of food. I caught my breath for a couple of moments, half tempted to eat a couple of dog treats as well. My body was screaming for food. But I had come for money. I began searching the other drawers until I found rusty car keys that Cody had mentioned on occasion. Secrecy had never been his strong suit.

I grabbed them and rushed outside toward an old Chevy. I unlocked the trunk then dragged out the leather suitcase and opened it. My face split into a grin when I found several plastic bags with cash inside. At least fifty thousand, from the looks of it. Closing the suitcase, I carried it into the building then searched for the keys for the gates. When I finally found them, the dogs lay amidst the food, panting softly but looking appeased.

With the keys and suitcase, I headed out toward the gates. Scratching behind me made me turn around prepared to fight off an attack. To my surprise, the two Rottweilers followed me and hesitantly wagged their tails.

I scratched my head. "What am I going to do with you?"

I didn't know Growl's number or I would have called him so he could pick them up. If I left them here, the next person who came looking for money would probably shoot them. Not to mention that the bigger dog, a male, needed treatment for the cut and its bloody paws.

My gaze strayed over the junkyard until it landed on Cody's big ass Ford with the truck bed. With a pang, I put the Kawasaki on the truck bed then stowed the suitcase in the legroom of the car. The moment I stepped back from the door, first the female Rottweiler then the male jumped in and made themselves comfortable on the passenger seat.

I had one more place to go before I could drop off the dogs, though. It was an encounter I was dreading.

I went over what to say as I drove to Mom's house to explain what had happened, why I had killed Earl, but no matter how long my brain fumbled

over the words, they sounded hollow and wouldn't make sense to my mother. Most of what had happened didn't make sense to me either.

She came out with a shotgun when I pulled up, obviously worried about unwelcome visitors. When she spotted me, she didn't lower the gun. Her blonde hair was in curlers all over her head and she was in a plush pink bathrobe, her lips painted in a matching tone. At least one thing never changed.

I hopped out of the car, raising my hands above my head with a crooked smile.

"It's me, Mom."

Mom nodded, her eyes narrowing. Apparently, I was one of the unwelcome visitors she wanted to intimidate with her shotgun. "What are you doing here?"

The suspicion in her voice made me wonder if she knew about how I'd killed Earl, but there was no way word could have gotten out. Nobody knew except for Vitiello's men, and I doubted they would tell anyone my mother knew. Vitiello had said he hadn't allowed word to get out anyway. And whatever I thought of Vitiello, one thing was certain, he was in absolute control over his men.

"Are you going to shoot me, Mom?"

My arms still raised over my head, I walked closer.

She lowered the gun a few inches but still aimed it at my chest.

"What happened to you?" Mom asked, eyeing my naked, cut and bruised upper body.

"This and that," I said, not ready to divulge more information with her pointing a gun at me.

She nodded toward the truck. "Isn't that Cody's?"

"Yep. But he won't need it anymore."

Mom nodded and smiled bitterly. "He dead?"

"Yep." I slowly lowered my hands. Mom eyed me warily but didn't shoot. I didn't doubt that she could shoot someone if provoked. "I grabbed his dogs from the junkyard."

"Not just the dogs, I bet," she said quietly. "He kept a stash of cash over there. You know how he could never keep his mouth shut when he was drunk."

"He had a big mouth on him." I gave her a wry smile. "Will you put the gun away?"

Mom shook her head. “Not yet. Word on the street has it that you’re working for the Italians now.”

“I’m not working for anyone, Mom. You know how badly I take orders.”

She motioned to the truck. “You should have shot the dogs. Don’t you have enough problems?”

I wasn’t sure how much she knew, but considering her reluctance to lower the gun, too much. “Earl’s dead.”

She nodded solemnly. “I know. He and a few men were caught by the Italians. Nobody survives the wingtips.”

“Yeah.” I wasn’t sure if I’d expected tears or at least more sadness on Mom’s part because of Earl’s death but considering how he cheated on her constantly and was barely home, I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Word has it that you were captured as well.”

I sighed, walking up the steps to the porch until I was right in front of Mom with the barrel almost touching my chest. “What else have you heard?”

“That you are a traitor. Gray told me you betrayed their whereabouts.”

My relief over this confirmation that Gray had indeed gotten away alive almost knocked me over. “I did—” I didn’t get further when Mom’s palm hit my cheek.

“If something had happened to Gray that day, I’d never forgiven you.”

“I know, which was why I made sure he could save his sorry ass.”

“He told me.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. He left yesterday. Only dropped some money off and told me not to worry about him and that he’d make me proud.”

“Fuck. What the hell does that mean?”

Mom searched my eyes. “Why are you alive, Maddox, if you aren’t working with the Italians? They didn’t kill you. Gray said you made the Vitiello girl your woman.”

My woman.

I liked the sound of it. “She means a lot to me.”

“More than that if she’s worth becoming a traitor for. You lived for the club. Is one woman enough to make you forget what happened to your father?”

“I didn’t forget, but I’m sick of living in the past. Marcella makes me want to think about the future.”

“What kind of future? What do you want to do without the club? You don’t know any other life.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

She laughed darkly but at least she finally aimed the barrel at the floor. “If you work with the Italians, every biker will want your head. They’ll probably want it anyway once word gets around that it was you who killed him.”

I tensed. “What are you talking about?”

Mom slapped me again. I saw it coming but didn’t try to defend myself. She had every right to be angry at me. “Don’t lie to my face, Maddox. I’m not stupid. The info comes from the Italians. Or are you telling me they’re spreading rumors to destroy your reputation?”

I looked away from Mom. Who had spread the truth? Only very few people that I knew of had been in the Famiglia prison. Luca, Amo, Matteo, Growl, and Marcella.

If one of them spread that I’d killed my uncle, that could only serve the purpose to make the other Tartarus chapters in the country and the Nomads of our chapter seek revenge on me. Someone had pretty much put a bounty on my head. They wanted me dead. Question was who.

On the first glance, Luca seemed unlikely since he could have me killed easily while I was his captive—but not without making Marcella resent him. Making the other bikers hunt me gave him an easy way to have me killed without getting his hands dirty and Marcella wouldn’t blame him. “Do you know who’s spreading the rumors?”

“Gray didn’t tell me.”

“Gray is the one who told you?”

“Did you kill your uncle, Maddox? That’s all I want to know.”

“You know how Earl could be, Mom. He was obsessed with revenge, even more than me. If we turn into monsters to kill a monster, we are as bad as him. Did Gray tell you what he did to Marcella?”

Mom nodded. “He’s become more radical over the years. But you should have handled it in the club. You could have challenged him for the spot as president.”

“I would have never been voted president. The more progressive, liberal members have all become Nomads over the years. The men who remained

in the club were absolutely loyal to Earl. And even if I'd won, he would have never accepted the vote. The club was his whole life. Nothing else mattered."

"I know," Mom said bitterly. Her eyes searched my face. "I don't know what to think. I don't know if you are the same boy I raised."

"I am, Mom. I had to make a choice just like Earl made his choice when he tried to kill me with his dogs. But I'm sorry you are alone."

Mom laughed. "Oh Maddox, you know Earl hasn't been around in almost a year. But without the club, I can't pay bills. The ten grand Gray left me won't last forever." She put on a rubber glove as she always did when she smoked to prevent her fingers from becoming yellow. Considering she smoked about forty cigarettes a day, that was probably a good idea.

I jogged back to the truck and grabbed thirty grand from the suitcase. She watched me with a healthy dose of suspicion and didn't look mollified even as I handed it to her. "This should get you through the year. I'll send you money once I start earning again."

She finally put the shotgun down. "You really going to work for the mob?"

"I won't work for them, but I might work with them for now. I'm just so mad about this girl... I can't..."

"I hope she didn't trick you. I really hope giving up everything was worth it. You gave up the only home you had for this girl. Does she even realize it?"

She was right. The club had been my home for as long as I could remember. Mom's house in Texas and now here had always only been the place where I'd gone to sleep.

So much had happened in the last few days that I hadn't had time to realize I was homeless now. I'd never had my own place, always only a room in the clubhouse. I'd had club brothers or club girls to keep me company when I needed it. I'd become a Nomad but without a place to return to. Marcella and I... we didn't have a place yet, and just thinking about moving in with a woman, my pulse picked up. How would it even work?

"I hope you don't come to regret your decision, Maddox."

"I won't," I said firmly. I'd never regret saving Marcella in the only way I'd known how. And killing Earl? I'd done him a service. He'd been spared

a cruel death at Vitiello's hands. Still, a tiny part of me felt a pang thinking of the good times we'd had.

Mom grabbed my forearm, her long nails digging in. "I worry for Gray. You uprooted him. He's lost and you know how badly he needs people to look up to. He'll get in trouble, I can feel it. He'll look for another Tartarus chapter to join and get himself killed because they are going to go on a warpath with the Italians. Protect him. Bring him back here. Make sure he stays."

"I'll protect him. When I find him, I'll drag him back here and make him finish school and find a decent job. He's still young, he can choose a different path."

"I'd always wished for a different path for you as well, but not with the mob. Oh Maddox, stay safe."

"You know me. I can't be killed."

Mom became stern. "If something happens to Gray, I won't forgive you. Don't come back here without him, you hear me? This is on you. You took everything he had from him, now give him something else to live for."

I swallowed, a heavy feeling of guilt settling in my chest. I had ripped Gray out of his home too, had taken his father, even if they'd only fought and barely gotten along. Gray hadn't had a choice, unlike me. I wasn't sure if I was the person he wanted to see. If he'd listen to me, much less come back home with me.

I looked over to the truck. "I should go now, I don't want to bring trouble to your door."

Mom gave me a look that made it clear it was too late for that. "Swear you'll return with Gray," she whispered harshly, her grip on me tightening even more.

I wasn't sure if I could really promise it. Gray wasn't a little kid anymore. Still, I said, "I swear."

She finally released me. It was a promise I desperately hoped I could keep, for her sake, for Gray's sake, but mostly for my sake. I didn't need more guilty baggage added to my conscience, thanks a lot.

"Can you give me one of my old shirts before I leave?"

Mom disappeared inside without a word and I didn't follow her. I had a feeling she didn't want me inside her home right now. I wasn't welcome and wouldn't be until I found Gray, and even after that... we'd never been

close but this was probably the nail in our relationship coffin. She returned with two black shirts and handed them to me.

After I'd put on one of my old shirts, I drove back toward the city but eventually pulled over on the side of the road and let the dogs out for a piss. My gaze caught on the Kawasaki on the back and I couldn't resist. After I'd heaved it down, I drove up and down the road for a while, hoping it would clear my head. I couldn't stop thinking about Gray. Mom always said he wouldn't have survived what I had witnessed. He was softer than me, maybe that was why Mom had always preferred him to me. If I'd been in her stead, I'd have done it too.

The dogs waited beside the car, watching me. Eventually I pulled up beside them but stayed on the bike. I couldn't explain why I suddenly felt hesitant to ride back into the city. I wanted to return to Marcella. I'd given up everything for her, and I wanted to be with her, but someone had ratted me out. I doubted it was Growl. He didn't seem like the vindictive type and didn't really have reason to do so unless Luca had ordered him to do it. Matteo had definitely wanted me gone. Maybe he had spread the information. Or Amo. The big guy definitely hated my guts and wanted to see me dead and far away from his sister.

Now every member of Tartarus in the country would know I'd killed Earl and they'd see me as a traitor. I'd be their main target. Finding Gray would be especially difficult like that. If I returned to Marcella to tell her I had to search for my brother Gray, whoever had ratted me out would very likely find out soon after and then spread that information, maybe even make it look as if I wanted Gray dead as well.

"Fuck," I muttered. I needed to find my brother before someone could get it in his head that I was actually a danger to him, if it wasn't already too late for that.

I perched on the bike and watched the sunset. Riding my Harley into the sunset had always meant freedom, even if MC life had been full of responsibilities and rules.

I decided to spend the night on the truck bed before I would make up my mind what to do next. I was dead tired and needed a night to really come to terms with the turn my life had taken.

# Chapter *Two*



When I woke on the truck bed early the next morning, my longing for Marcella was just as strong as the call of the street. The two loves of my life: the endless road ahead of me and the woman with the cold blue eyes. Mom's parting words kept repeating in my head. "I don't want to see you again until you've made sure your brother is safe. This is your fault."

Finding Gray would be difficult. The majority of my old contacts would avoid me and those that didn't might try to kill me. They had every reason not to trust me. But Mom was right. I needed to save Gray from himself. Not only was he probably still on the hit list of Vitiello but pissed off bikers out for revenge might be after him as well. If Gray got it in his head to attack Vitiello in revenge, I wouldn't be able to save him.

I hoisted the Kawasaki back onto the back of the truck. I needed to get rid of it and the dogs, preferably without running into any of the Vitiello men. Once the dogs had taken their seats again, I headed toward New York. The male Rottweiler was panting constantly, probably from pain because of the gash, so I decided to take the dogs to a safe place first. During our research on the Famiglia and its many affiliations, we'd also come across the dog shelter run by Vitiello's enforcer, Growl.

Vitiello probably wouldn't be happy if I showed up on his mansion's doorstep uninvited and I had no way to contact Marcella. We'd destroyed her phone when we'd kidnapped her and so far there hadn't been time to ask for her number anyway. I didn't even know what exactly to tell her that wouldn't jeopardize my search for Gray.

Growl had been semi-friendly when I'd talked to him, so he seemed like a safer option than any other Famiglia soldier.

When I pulled up in the driveway of the shelter, I parked beside another big pickup. I hadn't even gotten out when Growl and a tall, lanky boy came out of the house and headed my way. Growl became more alert the moment he spotted me, but at least he didn't pull a gun. That was the most friendliness I'd gotten from the Italians in years, and it still felt strange. I doubted being on semi-friendly terms with the Famiglia would ever not feel strange.

I got out of the car, making sure to keep my hands in sight. I really didn't want to end up with a bullet in my head, unless I'd really given them reason to.

"What are you doing here?" Growl asked.

"I have two more dogs for you, saved them from the junkyard of one of my dead club brothers. One of them is injured."

Growl still looked wary, but some of his vigilance disappeared as he saw the dogs on the passenger seat. "Lead the way."

I went over to the passenger door and opened it. "Hop out." The dogs actually obeyed and leaped out of the car. The bigger one growled when Growl walked up to him, but the tall man got down on his haunches and talked in a calm voice with the dog. Soon they calmed and trotted closer to him.

He patted them. "I'll call our vet so he can look at the wound, and you should head back to the city and meet with Luca."

I ignored the last part and motioned at the truck bed. "I have Matteo's bike. Can I leave it here so he can pick it up?"

Growl straightened, the suspicion returning to his face. "Why don't you bring it to him?"

"I'm not returning to New York right now. I still have a few matters to attend to before I can join Luca's team."

Growl shook his head. "That's not how it works."

“It’s how it works with me,” I said simply. “I’ll probably be back in a couple of days, tell Luca that.”

“What business do you have to take care of now?”

“That’s only my business. But it’s nothing that concerns the Famiglia.”

“Everything concerns the Famiglia, especially if Marcella Vitiello is concerned. Does she know you’ll be gone?”

“You can tell her. She’ll understand.” I wasn’t really sure that was true, especially because I couldn’t give her details about my plans, not with someone ratting me out. I’d never been accountable to a woman, except for my mother when I was a little boy, but even that stopped when I became a teen.

Growl narrowed his eyes. “If you aren’t sure about Marcella or where your loyalties lie, you better not come back. Luca gifted you with your life once. He won’t be as gracious again.”

“What’s it to you?”

“I know where my loyalties lie. Luca took me in when I had nowhere else to go. I’m not someone who tramples on a gift like that.”

“Just tell Marcella I’ll be back once I’ve taken care of business and tell Matteo thanks for his bike.”

I turned and got back inside the car. I didn’t need a guilt trip from Growl. I had half a mind to drive to the Vitiello mansion and ask for Marcella, clear things up with her, but finding Gray before he got himself killed was my top priority. Once he’d told me who’d leaked the information about me killing his father, I could decide how to handle it. I wasn’t even sure how long that would take, but Marcella and I had gone through worse than a few days of separation.

Soon we’d be reunited, and fuck, I couldn’t wait to taste her again.



Being at home still felt strange after weeks of captivity. I had spent pretty much every second of the day with Maddox and being separated from him felt odd. I missed his presence, even his dirty mouth, and in more than one sense, but he obviously had made his choice to move on and enjoy the freedom only the biker lifestyle could offer him.

My lips twisted with bitterness as I glanced out of the window, down at the street in front of our house. I kept doing it, even if Matteo had told me an hour ago that Maddox wouldn't return. The kidnapping had messed with my mind, even if I didn't want to admit it to anyone. Maybe it was good that Maddox had made the decision I had been too weak for, too infatuated for, and cut ties between us. Was it really possible to rebuild a relationship on the basis of a normal setting, without fear and lack of freedom? We'd never find out.

I didn't hate Maddox for leaving. I too had held doubts if it hadn't been better to let Dad kill Maddox because then things would have been easier. A life with Maddox would have been a challenge not just for me but for my family and the Famiglia, one I wasn't sure everyone would have mastered.

Amo let out a low sound of displeasure. "Stop staring out of the window like a dog waiting for its owner. He won't come back. He's a disloyal biker, and you're better off without him."

I gave my brother my best death glare, furious about his comparison. "A dog would wag its tail and welcome its owner after his return, but you can bet your ass on me kicking Maddox in the balls when he struts back into my life."

Amo shook his head. "I know you would, but you should let Dad handle the idiot and have him killed. That's the clean cut you need, Marci. That he's still out there is holding you back and you really shouldn't let that

happen. You need your energy and brain to show Dad's soldiers who's boss."

I finally turned my back to the window. Only Amo's window had a view of the streets while my window pointed out toward the gardens, probably one more of Dad's safety measures.

"Nothing is holding me back. I can separate my heart from my brain. My work in the Famiglia doesn't have anything to do with Maddox and me."

"There's no Maddox and you. He dumped you."

I narrowed my eyes. "He can't dump me. We weren't in a relationship to speak of."

Amo waved me off. "Don't go on. I don't want to know details about your prisoner with benefits status."

I hurled the next thing I could grab at Amo, a heavy algebra book from the floor. He barely managed to dodge it, then he raised his arms. "All right. Let's not mention the biker again."

"Thanks." I walked over to his sofa and sank down. Amo returned his focus to his computer screen where he was reading up on the topography of Pennsylvania. I wasn't sure if it was for homework or for their biker hunt.

"Our soldiers will accept you eventually," Amo said but there was a hidden *but* in his tone. Our soldiers. To him, everything about this came naturally. He was welcomed with open arms, and nobody ever questioned that he would become Capo once Dad retired.

I also knew what Amo wasn't saying.

"Because they respect and fear Dad."

He didn't deny it.

"I'll earn their respect."

"You'll have to work harder for it than I ever will."

I knew that. Women were looked down upon. We were supposed to be pretty and know when to keep our mouths shut. I'd be spared sexist comments because of Dad, but the men wouldn't take me seriously for myself.

"You still sure about the tattoo?" Amo asked, motioning in the general direction of my back.

I tensed like I always did when I was reminded of the ugly words tattooed on my back.

*Vitiello Whore.*

“Yes. I won’t spend months trying to remove it only for scars to remain. People would know what those scars meant and that what happened bothered me enough to want to erase it completely from my body. That would look weak. I’ll keep the words but cover them with my truth.”

Amo nodded. “Maybe I’ll get another tattoo as well.”

I scoffed. “Good luck convincing Mom. You wouldn’t even have your first tattoo if you didn’t need it for the Famiglia.”

“Dad would talk to her.”

I rolled my eyes. A soft knock sounded.

“Yeah,” Amo answered.

Mom poked her head in, her expression worried but clearing up when she spotted me. “There you are, Marci. I went to your room first.”

I rarely spent time in my room. Amo hadn’t complained about my presence yet. If it really didn’t bother him or if his protectiveness came through, I wasn’t sure.

“What do you need?” I asked, giving Mom a firm smile. She still worried about me, especially since Maddox’s disappearance. Secretly, she was probably as relieved about his leaving as Dad, but she’d never say it.

“Giovanni is here.”

My mouth fell open, completely taken aback. “He didn’t call?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Mom said. She glanced at Amo.

He gave a one shoulder shrug. “I don’t have his number or he mine. We’re not that close.”

I swallowed down anger. “Dad. I doubt Giovanni would dare to come by without asking for permission first.”

Mom gave me a placating smile. “Your father worries about you as much as I do. Maybe he thought it would do you good to see him.”

I paced the room. “How will it do me good to see my ex-boyfriend only hours after Maddox left?”

“Old flames burn longer, right?” Amo muttered.

I would have hurled another book at him, and not missed this time, if Mom hadn’t been present.

“Will you see him, or should I send him away?” Mom asked. “He’s down in the foyer.”

I couldn’t believe Giovanni was here. Of all the people I didn’t want to see right now, he was at the top. “Send him away. I can’t deal with him right now.”

Mom nodded and turned.

Maddox was probably already getting cozy with one of his pass-arounds right this moment, having her give him a blowie. The idea made me sick and furious at once. I didn't regret what had happened between us, I'd enjoyed it too much, but I wished I hadn't gotten emotionally involved.

"Wait!" I shouted, stumbling after Mom.

She turned with raised eyebrows.

"I'll talk to him," I said quickly. "It would be rude to send him away when he came all the way here."

"That's true," Mom said. "Be open minded."

She meant maybe I'd reconsider Giovanni. My first instinct was to say no, because breaking up with Giovanni had felt liberating. I couldn't see how getting back together with him could make me feel better. Returning to an ex-boyfriend only because one couldn't be alone or to soothe a broken heart was the worst option.

"Should I tell him you need to get ready?"

I glanced down at myself. I was in gym leggings and a sweater, clothes I'd only ever worn in public on my way to or from the gym. Still, I shook my head. "I don't feel like dressing up."

Giovanni could see the real me, the no-makeup, sweater girl. It was only one tiny part of me, but it was one he'd never met. Only perfect Marcella. I followed Mom downstairs. Like she had said, Giovanni waited in the foyer, regarding an old family photo with mild curiosity. He must have seen it a hundred times already. He turned to me when I was on the last step, his eyes taking in my outfit. Surprise flitted across his face but he quickly masked it with a warm smile.

To my surprise, I was no longer angry at Giovanni for his words about me being ruined if I broke up with him. The kidnapping put everything into perspective. He'd been hurt and shocked, so he'd lashed out in the only way he could.

I gave Mom a nod, indicating to her that she could leave. She slipped into the living room and closed the door.

Silence spread between Giovanni and me. He was, as usual, immaculately dressed in a button-down shirt and slacks plus Budapesters. The outfit didn't do anything for me anymore. Maddox had turned me into a leather jacket, biker boots, and jeans lover, which made me even angrier, considering nobody in our circles dressed like that.

“Marci,” Giovanni said gently, tearing me from my thoughts.

I forced a smile and took the last step down but didn’t go closer to him. “Giovanni, you look good.”

It was the most inane thing I could have said and could only be topped if I started talking about the weather.

His smile broadened. “You do too.”

I shook my head. “I’m in gym clothes with no makeup. You don’t have to lie.”

“I’m not lying, Marci. I’m not a fan of your outfit but you are as beautiful as always.”

“Thanks,” I said, and smiled more honestly than I had all day. This remark about my outfit would have set me off in the past, but I didn’t care about Giovanni’s approval anymore. Being perfect in everyone’s eyes had been ripped from my hands, and in many ways, it made life easier.

“Can I come closer?” Giovanni asked.

“Why would you ask?” But then it dawned on me. The rumors had reached his ears and he thought I’d be scared of his closeness. Not that he’d been the touchy-feely type before, but I was certain his hesitance stemmed from a different place now.

“Sure. I’m fine, Giovanni. You don’t have to treat me like I’m breakable.”

Giovanni closed the distance between us and took my hands, something I hadn’t expected, but I didn’t pull away. Being close to someone other than family felt good after everything, but Giovanni wasn’t the man I wanted to be consoled by. Yet, that man had taken off like a goddamn coward. I shoved any thought of Maddox aside.

Giovanni met my gaze. His was infatuated and devoted as it had been before. He wouldn’t run off. No, he was here, asking me for a second chance.

“I want us to try again. This time everything can be different, Marci.”

“Different how?” I asked.

He lowered his voice as if he feared someone might be eavesdropping. That almost made me roll my eyes again. “I wouldn’t hold back anymore. I’d give you everything you need. I’d kiss you everywhere, touch you everywhere. I’d sleep with you.”

“You would?”

“Yes,” he said. “Nothing is holding us back anymore. We could be like a normal couple even without being married. People won’t expect bloody sheets anyway.”

It took me a moment to process his words and then to get over them. He sounded relieved that I’d slept with Maddox, because the rumors about me getting nasty with a biker meant he didn’t have to preserve my virginity anymore. It meant he didn’t have to fear my father anymore, because in comparison to Maddox, me sleeping with Giovanni was something Dad would probably applaud.

I pulled my hands out of his, once again angry. “You are wrong. Something is holding us back, my feelings for you. I don’t want to be with you anymore, not in the physical sense and not emotionally either. I’ve moved on, Giovanni, and so should you.”

“Marci, you don’t have to be ashamed of what happened. The rumors will die down eventually. Once we’re married, people will only see you as the woman at my side.”

It took impossible self-control not to scream at him from the top of my lungs. I’d been bottling up too many emotions anyway, but I didn’t want to alert Mom, or worse, Dad. They were already babysitting me 24/7, and a mental breakdown definitely wouldn’t help my case.

“Please leave now,” I pressed out. “I’m not interested in being the woman at someone’s side right now. I want to focus on work. Learning the ins and outs of the Famiglia will take time and dedication. I think you should look for another woman.”

I had to admit I was proud of myself for my moderately calm voice.

The hint of a sympathetic smile flitted across Giovanni’s face. “My father mentioned your plan to join the Famiglia.” He shook his head in a way that couldn’t be described as anything but condescending. “Listen, Marci, your dad’s humoring you because you were hurt, but people are starting to talk. It’s not fitting for a woman to want a place in our ranks.”

Women weren’t supposed to want anything. Not sex, not love, and definitely not a place in the world they were born into. “I only want what I deserve as a Vitiello. Amo and Valerio won’t have to justify their desire to be part of the Famiglia.”

“They are men,” Giovanni said, as if it was news to me. Had he always been this insufferable, or had I been more compliant in the past? I honestly couldn’t say.

“And I’m a woman who’s strong enough to demand the same.”

Giovanni sighed. “But you aren’t facing the same trials as every man who becomes part of the Famiglia. We have to swear an oath, get a tattoo. We have to bleed and suffer pain for the cause.”

I lost it. “I was tattooed, I bled and I suffered pain for a feud between the Famiglia and Tartarus, Giovanni.” I shoved my hair aside, revealing my missing earlobe. Then I opened the zipper of my sweater and tugged down the shirt beneath so my shoulder was bare, revealing the top of the tattoo. Giovanni’s eyes widened when he saw it. “What kind of pain have you suffered that’s worse? Hmm?”

“I’m sorry, Marci. You suffered, you are right. But you didn’t do it with the Famiglia in mind, you didn’t suffer for the cause. You were collateral damage. And if you’d known any secrets of value, you would have revealed them the second they threatened to cut off your ear.” Seeing my expression, he added, “Which is understandable. You are a woman with a different level of resilience to pain.”

“Come on, Giovanni,” Amo drawled, coming down the steps. “Last time you had to do practice fights, you almost bawled because someone twisted your fucking wrist. Marcella is tough as nails. If our father expected her to suffer pain for the cause, she’d do it *again* and she wouldn’t break, because she’s a Vitiello. And taking a tattoo doesn’t make you more loyal. Marcella lives and breathes for our family, and our family is the Famiglia.”

I could have hugged him right then. I could deal with Giovanni by myself, but Amo’s support and the casual way in which he confirmed that I had indeed suffered for the cause had a different kind of weight in Giovanni’s eyes. My brother’s and father’s word would probably always weigh more heavily than mine, but I’d make sure that my words were at least heard.

Amo stopped beside me, giving Giovanni a slightly unsettling smile. “Is there anything else you want?”

“I think Giovanni wants to leave now,” I said.

Giovanni took a step back, then another. He nodded. “I’m sorry you feel the way you do, Marcella. I hope this won’t shine a bad light on you and your family.”

“Goodbye,” Amo muttered, and Giovanni finally turned and rushed outside.

I let out a suppressed scream, balling my hands into fists. “I want to hit something really bad.”

“You can pummel my boxing sack to the ground if you want. I was heading down to the gym anyway.”

“All right,” I said. “I have no better place to be anyway.” Going outside or meeting with friends was still out of the question.

The door opened and Dad stepped into the foyer with Valerio by his side. Dad’s gaze immediately zoomed in on me. He must have run across Giovanni or at the very least seen his car. Though the bodyguards probably had informed him about our houseguest the very second he’d arrived anyway.

“Is everything all right?” Dad asked, looking from me to Amo.

“We were heading down to the gym so I could beat up Amo’s boxing sack.”

Concern filled Dad’s gray eyes. “What happened with Giovanni?”

“He’s a douche,” Valerio commented. “I never liked him and I’m glad Marci dumped him. She needs someone cooler at her side.”

“Thanks for the dating advice,” I said with a laugh. “Next time I’ll run my boyfriend by you first.”

“Amo?” Dad asked, a hint of impatience in his voice.

“Nothing happened,” I said firmly. “He wanted a second chance and I said no. Then he informed me that I shouldn’t join the Famiglia because I would never suffer pain for the cause like men do.” I shrugged. “No big deal.”

Anger twisted Dad’s face.

Valerio strolled over to me. “Some of my friends said the same, but I kicked their asses and told them you were really tough, now they believe me.”

I ruffled his blond mane. “I’m the luckiest girl in the world to have such loyal and brutal brothers.”

“I’ll handle Giovanni and the other men who badmouth you.”

“I’ll prove myself to them, Dad.”

Dad nodded distractedly, probably already making a list of people he’d punish. It wouldn’t make them respect me more.

“Can I talk to you after my workout?” I asked.

“I’m in the office, just come by.”

“Can I come with you?” Valerio asked when Amo and I headed into the basement.

“Sure, but we want to work out, so you should put on gym clothes,” I said.

“Be right back!” Valerio called, already whirling around and dashing upstairs.

“He’s like a squirrel on steroids. Where does he get all his energy from?” Amo muttered.

I grinned and followed Amo down to his gym.

Amo showed me how to hit the boxing sack, making it look effortless, and soon my knuckles burned. Valerio dashed inside, all lanky limbs and tousled hair. We soon all laughed as we took turns kicking and boxing the sack. Even Amo took his workout only semi-seriously for once.

When I headed back upstairs a little while later and headed for Dad’s office, I felt the happiest I had in a while. Today had shown me once again that I could survive anything as long as I had my family.

After a knock, I entered Dad’s office. He gave me a strained smile. “What do you want to talk about, princess?”

“I want to hear your honest opinion on how I can earn the respect of your soldiers and really become part of the Famiglia. Half-assing it won’t work, I realize that now.”

“They won’t see you as part of the Famiglia as long as we don’t officially make you part of the Famiglia.”

“Then let me take the oath.”

Dad shook his head. “You’d have to cut your palm and receive the tattoo.”

I raised my eyebrows. Dad’s eyes moved to my earlobe, turning scary for a moment before he released a harsh breath. “I wish I had killed Earl. Are you sure you don’t want me to kill the other Whites?”

Gray and... Maddox. The man who kept popping into my head uninvited. Killing him wouldn’t change that.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I said firmly. I walked over to Dad’s side and wrapped my arms around his neck. “Maybe your men need a gesture, one that shows I really want this and that you’ll demand certain things from me in turn as well. I don’t mind cutting my palm, Dad. Not after surviving Tartarus.”

“Because you suffered cuts by Tartarus’ hands because of me, I don’t want you to suffer them again.”

“This time it would be on my terms, my blade doing the cut.”

“It’ll be painful nonetheless.”

“I can handle it,” I said firmly.

“I know you can.” Dad touched my cheek. “But I won’t have you tattooed in front of a hall of leering men. You’ll always be treated differently, a tattoo won’t change it.”

I knew when to stop negotiating. “When can I take the oath?”

Dad shook his head with a chuckle. “There’s an initiation of four boys in a month, or if you want to be initiated by yourself, then—”

“No, I want to be initiated with the men.”

Dad nodded once. “You’ve chosen a very difficult path. I’m glad you won’t be burdened with White in addition.”

# Chapter *Three*



It took me two days and a few thousand dollars of bribe money to find out where Gray was. My old contacts had been leery of me, as expected, and hadn't been willing to hand over information as a favor. I'd barely left the last biker bar alive but at least with information about Gunnar's newest hiding place. Word about me becoming a traitor had made the rounds far quicker than I'd anticipated.

And not just that, people knew that I had killed Earl. That was information only very few people had, and one of them had obviously spilled the beans gladly, probably in the hopes to have me killed soon.

I had my suspicions. Luca might have let me go because Marcella asked him to, but he'd prefer it if I never returned to her. He wanted me dead. I had no doubt about it. I wouldn't have pegged him the sneaky type, but desperate times...

Of course, he wasn't the only one who knew about me killing Earl. Matteo, Amo, Marcella, and Grawl at least... maybe more of Luca's soldiers. Except for Marcella, each of them could have let the information slip to dispose of me.

The hut where Gunnar hid with a few other bikers wasn't surrounded by a fence like our last clubhouse had been but that didn't mean it was less protected. Gunnar had a penchant for booby traps. Something he'd learned in his time in the military and later refined as part of the prepper scene. I parked my bike down the dirt road that led up to the hut. There were three tire tracks, deep grooves that had been forced into the ground over time. It only made sense that people kept to the tracks if there was danger around them. The problem was I didn't trust all three tracks to be equally safe. I had a feeling one of them at least was a trap and hid several bombs waiting to tear me apart. I scanned the ground left and right of the dirt road, hoping for a sign that it was safe there. But the grass hid possible tracks and bombs from the eye. Not to mention that I had never been good at track work. That had been Gray's thing. My best bet was to choose one of the tracks on the dirt road and hope for the best.

I stood on my tiptoes to get a better view of the hut. After a few seconds, I spotted the roof of a truck. If Gunnar and his friends used the truck, they might use this track to get up there, then only the outer tracks would be safe. Unless they used a back road I didn't know anything about or didn't use the truck at all... from my vantage point, I couldn't even see if the thing was still in working condition.

Taking a deep breath, I started my bike again and was about to ride in the outer left track when a voice called, "I wouldn't pick that track if I were you."

My head shot up, my eyes going wide then my lips pulled into a smile as I spotted Gray. He didn't look happy in the slightest to see me. He was still in his Tartarus cut. Seeing it tightened my chest. Until recently, I'd gone nowhere without my cut, only taking it off for sleep, and occasionally sex, though most ladies loved to see me in it.

Behind him, Gunnar appeared too, looking even unhappier. Even from a distance, I could see the fat lump on his forehead, close to his temple, where I'd hit him. "What ya doing here, Maddox? You aren't welcome here."

"I come in peace. We need to talk."

Gray shook his head. I wasn't sure if he didn't believe that I came in peace or if he didn't want to talk to me.

"Word is you're one of Vitiello's henchmen now, Mad. Killing bikers is your new job. Not sure I want you anywhere near me and my friends," Gray shouted, crossing his arms over his chest.

“If I wanted to kill you, I could have done it in the clubhouse. I don’t want either of you dead, and I’m not one of Vitiello’s henchmen, all right?”

They didn’t need to know that my future job description entailed hunting down Earl supporters.

Gray shook his head again, muttering something to Gunnar. It was driving me crazy that he was too far away to hear what he was going on about.

“Can I come up to talk?”

Gunnar pointed a warning finger at me. “Drop your weapons, and don’t try to fuck us up, Mad. I used to like you but I won’t hesitate to kill you.”

“I’m dropping my guns now.” I removed the gun and the knife from my boot and my belt and put them down on the ground in a very obvious way. Despite what had happened, I still felt a certain amount of trust in these two. Maybe it was foolish nostalgia. “Done.”

“Our friends inside the hut have a very nervous trigger finger—”

“I get it,” I interrupted Gunnar. “I mess up and you kill me. I’ll behave, I swear.”

“What’s your swear even worth?” Gray shouted. “You’re a liar and a cheat.”

“You can pick the left track,” Gunnar said. “The middle’s a bad idea.”

I glanced to Gray who had warned me about the left track, then back to Gunnar.

“The kid’s a bit pissed at you for killing his old man,” Gunnar explained.

Gray turned around and stalked away, leaving me with the choice of whom to trust. Gunnar and I had been on many runs. I liked him, more than all the others. But Gray was my brother, and a hotheaded teenager who’d lost his dad and club.

“Fuck,” I muttered. Taking another deep breath, I picked the left track and started my bike. My heart galloped like a wild horse when my tire touched the track and I practically held my breath all the way up to the driveway where Gunnar waited for me with a gun in hand.

I let out a laugh when I came to a stop, overwhelmed with relief that I hadn’t been torn into tiny pieces.

“Turn off the engine,” Gunnar ordered, still the gun pointed at my head.

I did as he said and raised my hands over my head with a wry smile. “Come on, Gunnar. We aren’t enemies. I have nothing against you. I didn’t

kill you. And you didn't kill me. I call that even."

"You destroyed the club," Gunnar muttered, jabbing a finger at the Tartarus emblem over his chest. "Or have you forgotten?"

"I didn't destroy anything. Earl did when he started torturing Marcella. That was messed up. He got off track. You know it, and many of the Nomads know it too. It's why they left in the first place."

Gunnar eyed me. "I won't say you should have talked to Earl because we both know how that would have ended. But you could have put yourself up for vote as the new prez."

"Most of the men who remained in the club were loyal to Earl. It's why they stayed and didn't become Nomads. I wouldn't have won and Earl would have definitely killed me then. He wanted me dead in the end. He tried killing me first, so I'm not sad I killed him."

Gunnar shrugged. "The chapter's dead too."

"It doesn't have to be. You and the other Nomads could build it up again, with the ideals it used to have. Brotherhood, and freedom. Not money, revenge, and drugs."

A part of the original Tartarus chapter was still in Texas and a few smaller chapters were scattered all over the East Coast. But the heart of Tartarus had always been Earl's main chapter, which had followed him from Texas to Jersey.

"And who should become prez? Gray?" He scoffed. "He's a boy."

"He's too young," I agreed. "You could do the job until Gray's ready to take over."

Gunnar smiled. "I'm not a leader. I don't want to tell these guys what to do. I just want to ride my bike, drink a beer, and have a good time with my brothers. That's it."

"Then pick someone else. What about Roland? He's well-connected and everyone likes him."

Roland had been one of the last to become a Nomad. He and I had gotten along well.

"Everyone likes him, you said it. Ever seen a prez who earned the respect of a biker gang by being a nice guy?"

I nodded at the gun in Gunnar's hand. "How about you put that away? Like I said, I come in peace. You aren't the people I have a grudge against."

"So you're still on the hunt?"

“Not on the hunt but I’ll keep an eye out for Earl’s old crew. I don’t want trouble but I won’t wait for it to be brought to my doorstep.”

“You mean your girl’s doorstep?”

I didn’t confirm nor deny it, but Gunnar laughed. “Fuck, she’s got you by the balls.”

“Like Barb got you.”

Gunnar shrugged. “Barb knows her place in club life. Your girl doesn’t. You’ll have to give up the life you’re used to, the life you swore your life to. She won’t be an Old Lady.”

“She’s who she is, and I am who I am. We can remain who we are and still be together.”

“You sure? I can’t see you banging pass-arounds or riding your bike all night while being her old man’s lapdog.”

“I won’t be anyone’s lapdog, and it’s not like you’ve been banging anyone else but Barb in a while.”

Gunnar gave me a finger.

I knew he made valid points. My life was going to change drastically once Marcella and I were really together. It had already changed the moment I betrayed my club and killed Earl. I wasn’t sure yet how everything would work out, how our lives would look five years from now, but I knew I wanted it to be with Marcella. It was still a shocking thought, one I’d never considered myself ever having. But Marcella had changed everything, to a degree, even myself.

“You could lead the new Tartarus, you know?” Gunnar said quietly, shocking me.

“You said it yourself, I burned down most of what Tartarus was and killed not just Earl but other bikers. I doubt I’d get many votes if I put myself up for president. They’d hang me from the next tree.”

“They might or you convince them that you’re willing to create something better.”

I chuckled and got off my bike. “Gunnar, you were holding me at gunpoint because you didn’t trust me. These guys know me even less, and what they know about me are the rumors about my betrayal and Earl’s murder. They won’t listen, they’ll shoot me, and I can’t even blame them.”

Gunnar shrugged. “I would consider giving you my vote. I don’t like how you handled things, don’t like you having the hots for the Italian princess, but I think you could be a great prez.”

I shook my head again. I'd always wanted to be prez of Tartarus. For a long time, I'd pushed the thought aside because Gray was Earl's rightful heir, and now I had to push it aside again. Being prez of a motorcycle club, especially Tartarus with its backstory, and being the man at Marcella's side (and I sure as fuck wanted to be the man at her side) was impossible.

"Think about it. There are more pretty girls out there. Maybe even prettier than the Italian princess."

I gave him a doubtful look.

He shrugged. "Maybe not more beautiful. But they'd do."

I approached Gunnar and patted his shoulder. "Thanks. But it's not just her looks. Marcella is the queen I didn't know I needed in my life. There's no one else I'd like to be led around by the balls by." I glanced at the hut, spotting three heads watching us through dirt-covered windows. I bet each of those guys had a gun in their hand.

"Is Gray in there?"

"There's a small stream down the hill. He goes there when he needs to think." Gunnar stopped me with a hand on the shoulder. "The boy hasn't only lost his father, he also lost his brother."

"He didn't lose me."

"Until a few minutes ago, he didn't know that and maybe he still doesn't. You could be his enemy. Maybe I'm a fool for thinking you aren't mine too."

"I'm not your enemy, Gunnar, and definitely not Gray's."

"Then tell him. The kid's lost."

I stifled my guilt. My decisions hadn't only affected me. They'd affected Gray too. "Make sure these guys don't put a hole in my head, all right?"

I clambered down a rough pathway meandering through woods as I followed the sound of rushing water. Gray was sitting on a massive stone, smoking and glaring down at the stream.

Gray didn't look up even though he must have heard my steps. His shoulders stiffened though. From close up, he looked haggard, as if he'd lost considerable weight in the few days we hadn't seen each other.

I stopped beside him, not saying anything at first. I wanted him to start this conversation, to give me an easy in. For once I was being the coward, but guilt always made me uncomfortable.

Eventually I cleared my throat. Gray flicked away the cigarette. He looked older than I remembered him and a fresh cut marred his left cheek.

“Won’t you say something?” I asked.

Still nothing.

“Maybe explain why you wanted to kill me by sending me along the mined track?”

I had to admit it fucking hurt thinking that Gray wanted me dead, that he hated me enough to want to see me being ripped apart by a booby trap. Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised.

“Swear that you didn’t kill our father,” he whispered.

“He was your father and not a very good one.”

Gray’s eyes widened in realization. “You really killed him!”

He pushed to his feet and shoved my chest, making me stumble back a step. “You killed our father!”

I raised my hands. I had absolutely no intention of fighting with Gray. “He wasn’t the man we both wanted him to be.”

“So what? He took you in and raised you, and you betrayed and killed him.”

“Mom raised us, and Earl made us part of Tartarus. We were more his soldiers than his sons, you know that.”

“You had no right to kill him!” Gray turned away, wiping over his eyes angrily. He was still a boy in many regards. He didn’t have Earl’s or my toughness yet, he had a soft heart. That would probably change eventually, especially if he kept living the MC life but I didn’t want it to happen to him. For some reason, I imagined Gray living his life as a musician, touring small clubs with his guitar and singing corny love songs to sweet small-town girls.

“It was either me killing him, or Luca Vitiello. Would you have really preferred for Earl to die at the hands of that madman?”

I doubt I could have killed Earl as easily if the situation had been different. Despite the aversion between us in the end and him trying to have me eaten by dogs, he had been a father figure for most of my life.

“He wouldn’t have had to die if you hadn’t given Vitiello our location. You betrayed us and the club. You betrayed me.”

I realized for the first time that Gray wasn’t only pissed and sad, he was also hurt by my actions. His eyes brimmed with pain. I tried to touch his shoulder but he stepped out of reach and so I dropped my hand. “You know

why I did it. I explained it to you. And I never meant to betray you, Gray. You hated what we'd done as much as I did. You aren't someone who'd ever hurt an innocent woman. But Earl didn't want to listen to reason."

Gray sank back down on the stone and lit another cigarette.

"Have a smoke for me?" I asked. I had enough cigarettes in my back pocket but I wanted to see what Gray would say. He held out his packet to me without a word. I took a cigarette and Gray gave me fire.

"I didn't want you to be killed by booby traps," he muttered.

I cocked an eyebrow in doubt.

Gray shrugged. "I was certain you wouldn't listen to me. Nobody ever does."

"I would have listened if Gunnar hadn't interfered."

"I would have stopped you."

I decided to believe him. The situation between us was messed up enough. I didn't want to pour fuel into the fire. "What happened to your cheek?"

"I defended you. When the guys started saying you killed Earl, I got into a fight. I pulled a knife. They did too, and one of them cut my cheek."

"You're lucky they didn't kill you. Knife fights aren't your specialty, Gray."

Gray glared. "I shouldn't have defended you. That was my mistake. They were right after all. You killed him. I thought the Italians were spreading rumors to get you killed."

"Do you know who spread the rumors about me?" I asked.

Gray shook his head. "I stayed away from the mob. I wouldn't have listened to them anyway. And I didn't listen to Roland and the other guys either when they told me. They probably know names."

I'd have to talk to them then. I needed to find the mole who wanted me dead. Though the list was getting longer and longer by the day.

Gray met my gaze, a reproachful glint in his eyes. "What do you want? You aren't welcome here. Half of Tartarus wants your head. I doubt you're here to see me."

"I am. I was worried about you," I said.

Gray scoffed. "I escaped the Famiglia. I can survive on my own."

"I know." I finally took a pull from my cigarette which had burned down halfway by now. "What does the other half of Tartarus want?" I asked curiously.

Gray glowered. “They thought Earl needed to be reined in and think that’s what you did. They are wary of you because of the Italians though. Are you really working for them?”

“Not for them, but I’m working with them to find those who are still loyal to Earl and who intend to finish what he couldn’t. I’ll protect Marcella no matter the cost.”

Gray’s mouth twisted. “Everyone’s saying she’s leading you around by the balls because she wants to use you.”

“Marcella doesn’t have reason to use me. Once her father saved her, she could have dropped me like a hot potato, but she made sure I was safe.”

“You love her?”

I’d been pondering that question myself even after I told her. I’d never told a girl I loved her before, and I wasn’t sure how to really know when you crossed the line between having a crush and really loving someone but giving up the life you knew for someone seemed like a pretty good indicator.

“I do.”

Gray nodded.

“Does Gunnar know who spread the rumors about me?” I wanted to change the topic. Talking emotions, especially love, with Gray made me uncomfortable. I preferred to keep my emotions and thoughts to myself.

“Gunnar stayed away from the Italians like I did. He barely escaped alive.”

I had been surprised that Gunnar had made it out alive, I had to admit, but his obsession with survival training must have come in handy.

“You think it’s safe for me to talk to the guys in the hut to see if they can tell me more?”

Gray nodded. “Gunnar’s really pissed at you, in case you’re wondering. More than the others anyway. So if anyone kills you, it would be him.”

Gunnar didn’t seem overly hostile, at least not more than could be expected. If I had been in his stead, I would have been pissed too.

“Who are the guys with Gunnar? He said Roland was there.”

“Roland came back this morning after running a few errands. We needed money, The others are just a couple of guys who left in the early days of Earl’s revenge quest. Richie, Kurt, and Bean.”

I remembered all of the guys, but I hadn’t talked to them in forever. “And none of them are going to put a bullet in my head?”

“Like I said, if Gunnar didn’t kill you, they probably won’t either. The people who want you dead aren’t in our group. But Earl still has many supporters, especially down in Texas. They might try to kill you and Marcella. You can trust my word, I’d never betray you,” Gray muttered. “You can leave if you think I’m leading you into a trap.”

“I trust you, Gray,” I said, but I had to admit I felt a hint of wariness. Maybe it was just my general distrustful nature. “You should leave here and come with me. I can take you to Mom. She’s worried about you.”

“I won’t come with you. There’s nothing for me to return to. I’m too old to move in with Mom again.”

I didn’t point out that he was still seventeen and thus technically supposed to live with Mom. We both had hardly ever experienced a standard family life, so why start now?

“You could come with me...” I wasn’t even sure where I’d live. I didn’t have a place to stay. Living in one of Tartarus’ old hubs seemed like a bad idea. I had money now but finding an apartment in the city would still take time. And I doubted Luca would allow me to sleep in Marcella’s room. The thought almost made me smile but at the same time the realization that I actually considered living under the same roof with Marcella scared the living shit out of me. Fuck, this was getting serious in my brain. Could I really do that? Especially with the additional complication of Marcella’s family?

“I won’t get anywhere near the Italians,” Gray muttered.

“Stay out of trouble, all right?”

“I think you should listen to your own advice. More people want you dead than me.”

I grinned bitterly. “I intend to find out who they are and eliminate as many as possible.”

# Chapter *Four*



Gray and I headed back to the hut. Gray entered first and disappeared from view for a couple of minutes. The low rumble of mumbling carried over to me before Gray reappeared. When he gave me a nod, I followed him inside. Bean, Kurt, Richie, Roland, and Gunnar sat around a rustic wooden table, bottles of beer in front of them. All of their eyes followed me as I sank down on a vacant chair.

“You have balls coming here after what you did. And I thought the Vitiello princess has your balls in her hands,” Bean said, flashing me a grin, revealing his missing front tooth. Earl had smashed it in and forbidden Bean from having it replaced. He was supposed to keep the gap as a reminder. Shortly after, Bean had become a Nomad, maybe two years ago.

“She does on occasion,” I said with a shrug.

“You sure she hasn’t cut them off?” Richie asked.

I nodded at a full bottle. “Can I have one? Listening to bullshit talk makes me thirsty.”

Gunnar stifled a grin and handed me the bottle. “Go ahead. But we both know you aren’t here for pleasantries or rebuilding old connections, right, Mad?”

“I want to make one thing clear, I don’t have anything against anyone at this table. I’m not out for anyone’s head unless they are out for mine or Marcella’s. So if you don’t intend to hurt my woman or me, I won’t fuck you up.”

Richie put down his bottle with unnecessary force. “It’s six against one, Mad. You got a big mouth on you thinking you’d survive if you went against us. You aren’t even armed.”

“I could take you. Most of you have lived the lazy life these last few years.” I paused because I wasn’t arrogant enough to think I could really beat all of them at once. “And who says I’m alone. Remember, I work with the mob now.”

Roland chuckled. “Some of those Italians seem to want you dead too, Mad. Not sure you’ve chosen the right side.”

“And who are they? I hear you talked to the people who want me dead.”

“Not me personally. I don’t go anywhere near Vitiello’s men.”

Gunnar squinted down at his bottle. I narrowed my eyes. “You did?”

He sighed. “I ran across the giant boy a day or so after my escape. I was still not quite myself and was stupid enough to hide in one of our old warehouses. The hit on my head really messed me up.”

“Giant boy? You mean Amo?”

Gunnar nodded. “Yep. The boy caught up with me with another guy, and I was sure they’d end me right there, the little shits, but instead Amo told me about how you killed Earl and were out for more Tartarus heads.”

“And you didn’t have anything better to do than spread the word?”

Gunnar glared. “You don’t expect my loyalty, do you? I was royally pissed, especially in the first days when I had the headache of my life and didn’t know you’d made sure Gray got out alive. I only told one or two guys but it obviously spread from there. But I wouldn’t be surprised if the Vitiello boy told a few more bikers. He seems to hold a grudge against you.”

“He probably doesn’t like the idea of you sinking your ugly cock into his sister’s mouth and pussy,” Bean said with a laugh.

I punched him. He cried out and held his mouth. Several guns were pointed at me.

I raised my palms. “Don’t insult my woman.”

Roland shook his head. “You’re trying to make the impossible possible, Mad. Take my advice, leave the Vitiellos as long as you still can. It’s better

to live with the memory of a few nights with the spoiled princess than to die the moment she loses interest in you.”

Everyone nodded.

“Maybe she enjoyed the wild ride of being with a biker but eventually she’ll pick one of her people,” Gunnar said.

“I didn’t come here for relationship advice, especially from you guys. I wanted information and I got it, so thanks.” I got up. “Are you going to rebuild Tartarus?”

Roland and Gunnar exchanged a look. “Once we find a prez.”

Gray opened his mouth but closed it again and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Good luck then,” I said, getting up. “I should head back now.”

“Back to the Italians?” Bean asked with a scoff.

“Back to my woman.”

I squeezed Gray’s shoulder. “Call me if you need my help, all right?” Gray met my gaze then nodded. I hoped he’d really take me up on my offer. “And visit Mom now and then. She worries.”

Gunnar got up and followed me out of the hut. “You have more enemies than friends at this point, Mad. Make sure you know who’s who. You belong here. I hope it won’t take you too long to realize it. We could use a clever leader like you to build up what’s broken.”

I smiled tightly. “You’ll do fine without me.”

I turned and returned to my bike. I couldn’t deny it. I wasn’t sure if I wouldn’t miss this way of living. The sense of uninhibited freedom, the brotherhood as it used to be in the first years of me becoming a member of Tartarus. I didn’t know much about the life of the Famiglia and what I knew seemed filled with old-fashioned traditions and hypocritical rules. I wasn’t sure if I could fit in there but I would try for Marcella.

But first, before I could even think about working with the Famiglia, much less try to fit in with the Vitiellos, I needed to have a serious word with Amo fucking Vitiello.



To distract me from what had happened, Mom took me out on a girl's spa day. She'd made last minute appointments in our favorite hair salon, nail studio, and day spa.

"It'll be like before. You'll forget all your worries," Mom said with a kind smile.

But it wasn't, and I didn't. We didn't go into the front entrance like in the past, we sneaked in through the staff entrance at the back, with our hoodies up over our heads like criminals to avoid curious eyes.

By now the press had caught wind of my rescue and since Dad's lawyer had only released a very short, uneventful statement the speculations were skyrocketing. After the leaked video of me naked, everyone in the country had been talking about my kidnapping. Keeping it hush-hush had been impossible, even for Dad, and now everyone wanted to know as much about my return as possible.

One of our bodyguards chased off a paparazzi hiding behind the trash bins, smashing his no-doubt expensive camera and tossing it back at the man who scurried away. Dad's lawyer would probably have to handle this too.

Mom squeezed my hand and smiled when we finally took off our hoodies inside of the day spa. It smelled of lemongrass and mint inside the lobby, a familiar scent. I'd lost count of the times Mom and I had spent a girl's day here.

"Eventually the press and everyone else will forget what happened, Marci. They'll lose interest. We'll just have to lay low for a while."

"You mean hide."

Mom gave me an uncertain look.

May, one of the staff, came over to us. She was smiling like she always did, but I caught the curiosity in her eyes. She, too, knew what had happened.

Forgetting what happened proved difficult.

I'd started to relax when my hairdresser asked me to remove my earring so she could properly wash my hair for the intense hydration and gloss treatment.

"She can't," Mom interfered in a firm voice. "You'll just have to be more careful."

I swallowed my own reply, but I couldn't relax again.

The next incident occurred when May did my nails. They were partly broken off and my fingertips were bloody in parts. I could see the questions in her eyes even if she didn't ask any. Mom kept throwing worried glances our way, which didn't scream normalcy either.

The final straw was our massage appointment.

"Take off your clothes and make yourself comfortable," May said in her usual singsong voice.

I began to peel off the bathrobe I'd put on at the beginning of our spa day, but Mom touched my hand, stopping me, her eyes alarmed. "Maybe we'll skip the back massages today and only do our legs," she said to May.

It took me a moment to realize why. Because of the tattoo on my back.

May froze and so did I. I lowered my hand, leaving the bathrobe on. May did as Mom had said and only massaged our calves and feet, which was great as usual, but I couldn't enjoy a single moment.

I was silent on our way home and even when we entered the mansion. Dad was there, probably because Mom had messaged him.

He kissed my temple. "Maybe you should stay inside for a couple of weeks."

"I don't want to hide. I did nothing wrong," I snapped.

"Of course, you didn't," Mom said. "You know that's not why we protect you from the public. But you know how people are."

"They want gossip," Dad growled. "They need to go looking elsewhere."

"I won't hide," I said finally. "They'll make up their own stories if I don't tell them my version. The more I hide, the more they think I have something to hide, and hiding something suggests guilt. I won't hide!"

Dad smiled, a hint of pride in his eyes. “All right. What do you suggest?”

“The soirée at Mayor Stein’s in a couple of weeks, I want to attend it. And I won’t sneak into buildings through the back or wear hoodies to cover my face. If the paparazzi want a photo of me, they’ll get it—on my terms, like it used to be.”

“They’ll try to catch you unexpectedly and vulnerable. Maybe take a shot of your ear or tattoo,” Mom said gently. Always trying to protect me.

I shrugged. “I know the game. I’ve played it for years and they never got anything I didn’t want them to get. I have no intention of changing that now. They’ll get to see my tattoo once it’s altered the way I want it, and my ear...” I paused. The obvious blemish bothered me, I couldn’t deny it. For someone who’d always strived for perfection, and who had been praised for her perfect beauty, it was a challenge to be ripped of it. But I was also proud of the mark, because it showed what I’d survived. “I won’t hide the ear, not always. I’ll carry the mark like Made Men carry their scars, with pride and as a sign that there are things in life worth suffering for.”

“I’ve never been prouder of you than I am now,” Dad murmured.

Mom kissed my forehead.

I knew they both still worried about me becoming part of the Famiglia, about submitting myself to even more danger, but that they were proud of the woman I was becoming meant the world to me.

# Chapter *Five*



I spent my last night before returning to New York in a tent on the side of the road, staring up at the night sky, my head whirring with too many thoughts. Saying goodbye to Gray today had made me wistful. It felt like a real goodbye instead of a see ya. Even if he and I kept up our contact, meetings would be few and far between. Working with Vitiello and being a pariah in parts of the biker world would make regular family reunions difficult. I'd miss him and parts of the life I'd led before but none of those things called louder to me than my desire to hold Marcella in my arms again.

Instead of heading to the Sphere to have a word with Vitiello first the next morning, or to the Vitiello mansion to see Marcella—if they even let me see her without a fucking appointment—I headed to the animal shelter, hoping to run across Growl. I wasn't sure why I felt a connection to the not very talkative man, but I did, maybe because he, too, had been Vitiello's enemy and somehow managed to become part of the team.

When I pulled up the familiar driveway, I noticed the newly installed surveillance cameras attached to tall poles immediately. I'd have bet my balls that there were motion detectors as well, and I knew why these were

suddenly there. Because of me. And possibly the rest of Earl's fan club. But definitely me.

I smiled wryly as I pulled up in front of the house and waved, knowing someone would see me.

Pulling my helmet off, I got off my bike and immediately my eyes caught on long black hair. My heartbeat picked up with excitement. Fuck. I'd missed her.

Marcella squatted in front of the fenced-in area where Growl kept some of the Rottweilers. I hadn't expected to see her here, and it was impossible to describe the flood of emotions that rushed through my body. Marcella turned toward the sound of the engine and like the first time I saw her, I was in awe of her. I doubted that would ever change. Not just by her beauty, but by the way she moved, the way she held herself and the fire in her eyes. Damn it.

Growl who had been close by, pulled Marcella behind him as if I posed a danger, so I definitely hadn't been declared trustworthy yet. I couldn't tell if Growl was surprised to see me. Had he been in on spreading the information about Earl's murder?

Marcella, however, wouldn't have it. She tore away from Growl's hold and rushed toward me. I grinned at her enthusiasm until I realized that she didn't look happy to see me. She looked royally pissed. Her black hair blew in the wind, and she was dressed in dark blue jeans, a simple white T, and white sneakers, but even in those ordinary clothes, she knocked the breath out of me.

The flicker of doubt I'd felt last night over everything I'd given up and would still be giving up for Marcella evaporated at once. She was worth it.

She came to an abrupt halt right in front of me, her eyes flashing with fury. "Four days without a single word from you!"

I reached for her, wanting a kiss, a touch, anything, but she swatted my hand away like a bothersome fly, her rage becoming even more potent.

"You ran off. I thought you'd left for good. I thought you'd played with me."

"Fuck, Snow White," I muttered. "I fucking killed Earl for you. I betrayed my club for you. And you think I played with you? If that were the case, I'd be the worst player ever because you won in every regard that matters."

She searched my eyes, trying to gather my honesty obviously. She still had some work to do for absolute trust, but I guess we both had. “Then why did you run off?”

“I had to make sure Gray was all right. Last time I saw him he fled from your father and his soldiers shortly before I was knocked out.”

“Why couldn’t you tell me that you were going to see your brother? I don’t get why you had to run off without a word. You have to admit that looks suspicious.”

“I couldn’t tell you where I went because someone had released information about me killing my uncle and until I knew who that person was, I couldn’t risk news about me looking for my brother making the rounds. It would have made things more dangerous for him and me.”

She scoffed. “You could have told me. You can trust me. I wasn’t the person who leaked the information in case that’s what you’re worried about.”

The distance between us was driving me insane. I just wanted to pull her close and bury my nose in her throat.

“I know it wasn’t you, and I trust you.”

“Not enough obviously.” She looked away, back toward the kennels, her plump lips pressed together and dark brows pulled tight.

I gritted my teeth. She had a point. But she didn’t really trust me yet either. “We haven’t known each other for long yet, and most of the time we were enemies.”

It was strange how much I’d risked for this woman that I hardly knew, and yet I knew deep down that I’d do it again.

Marcella’s gaze could have frozen hell. She was seriously pissed. Though, I wasn’t sure if she was only pissed at me. “Who was it? Who leaked the information about you?”

I sighed. This was a conversation I hadn’t been looking forward to. Marcella was absolutely loyal to her family and attacking her brother wouldn’t win me any bonus points but I wouldn’t lie to her. “Your brother.”

Her spine stiffened and she shook her head immediately. “Amo wouldn’t go against Dad’s orders and Dad forbid the information to be leaked. Your information must be wrong. Amo couldn’t have done it.”

I raised my eyebrows. It was the reaction I had expected. Her trust in her father was simply too great. “You sure? I’m certain he has plenty of reason to do it. And it’s not like he has to fear repercussions. Your father

would never kill your brother for a transgression like he would his soldiers.”

“But why would he...” Marcella’s brows puckered in thought. I bet she found a hundred reasons why her brother and the rest of her family wanted my old biker buddies to know I killed Earl. They might as well have put a target on my forehead. We’d been enemies for years, were still enemies, and right now I feared we’d stay enemies for a while to come—no matter what Marcella wanted.

“I’ll talk to him,” she said resolutely.

I really wanted to settle things with Amo myself but I might end up putting a bullet in his head, so it was probably for the best if Marcella handled him. I didn’t want Amo fucking Vitiello to be the end of my relationship with Marcella. Growl had come closer during our conversation and his alert gaze told me he was ready to interfere if necessary. I gave him a wry smile, which he didn’t return of course. Smiling didn’t belong to his standard repertoire.

“Everyone thought you’d run off because you wanted your freedom,” Marcella said in a much softer voice.

“You too?”

Marcella didn’t react, only watched me closely. “Did that ever cross your mind?”

I stepped closer. Fuck. I really needed to touch her or I’d go crazy. “Even if it did, I’m here now, right? You’re in my head and heart, and I can’t be without you.”

Marcella shook her head. “If you think being with me means losing your freedom, it’s probably better that we don’t bother.”

Was she fucking serious? I grabbed her neck and jerked her against me, kissing her fiercely. For a moment she pressed herself against me, her lips softening against mine, parting, inviting me in, but then she shoved me away, glaring. “Do you want a goodbye fuck?”

“Bullshit, Marcella. I want you in my life, every day. I don’t need anything else. You really think a fuck would be worth getting that look?” I nodded toward Growl who watched me like a possible threat, making me feel really welcome in the Famiglia.

She still didn’t seem happy. If possible, she looked even angrier. “If we want a chance, you need to realize that being with me doesn’t mean you

aren't free. I don't want to be your shackle. And you have to tell me everything. I won't be lied to, not even by omission."

"I didn't fucking lie!" I growled.

Growl tensed. I gave him another wry smile at his twitchiness. As if I'd ever hurt Marcella. The only blood I'd spill would be his if he didn't stop grating on my nerves.

She jabbed a finger against my chest. "You left without telling me anything."

"I did. And I'm sorry for that, but it allowed me to settle things for good."

Growl was talking on his phone. I didn't need to be psychic to know it was Luca on the other end.

"With your brother?"

I nodded. "With him and a few of my biker brothers."

Marcella tilted her head curiously. "Don't they see you as their enemy?"

"They are wary of me, that's for sure, but these are Nomads. They left the club life exactly because they didn't like the way Earl handled things, so they didn't shed too many tears over his death."

Growl moved even closer. "I want a word with you."

He motioned toward my truck. Marcella stepped back and I followed Growl.

"You shouldn't have come here again. You have to report to Luca first, especially before seeing Marcella."

I chuckled. "I'm not one of Luca's men. I can do whatever the fuck I want." My eyes kept returning to Marcella. She squatted in front of the fence and talked to a Rottweiler that sat right before her. I wasn't sure which made it harder to look away, the way her jeans accentuated her round ass or the soft expression on her face whenever she talked to the dog.

"Women like her don't take bullshit from anyone and they deserve the best," Growl rasped, following my gaze.

"You don't have to tell me that she deserves better. Everyone in the Famiglia thinks that."

"My wife deserved better when we first met, but I worked until I was worthy of her."

"That's my plan," I said. "I'll help her and the Famiglia."

Growl regarded me with stoic calm. "You must report to Luca before coming here. If you want to be accepted, you have to follow the rules."

“Funny you say that, considering that some people within the Famiglia don’t seem to follow the rules either since information about Earl is making the rounds.”

Growl’s expression didn’t change. If he was surprised by the news, he hid it well. Or maybe he just didn’t give a shit. He seemed like a man who only cared for his dogs and his wife that he kept mentioning.

“I’ll go back to Marcella now. Report to Luca if you want.” He didn’t stop me but his gaze followed me as I went over to Marcella. Growl’s watchful eyes made me want to scratch my skin. Marcella briefly looked up and seeing her on her knees in front of me gave me a flood of images I definitely didn’t need right now.

I got down on my haunches beside her. “Is that Satan?”

The dog had familiar scars and watched me with intense brown eyes.

“She has a new name,” Marcella mused. “I hated calling her Satan.”

“Dogs get used to their names.”

Marcella shrugged. “She likes her new name. I chose Santana for her because it sounds similar to her old name but makes sure everyone knows she’s a girl.”

I chuckled. Of course. I doubted the dog cared if her name was for a boy or girl. Still, I was amazed by Marcella’s care for the beast. She met my gaze. “Why are you watching me like that?”

I could tell she was slowly warming up to me again, but she was still pissed and maybe confused because of her brother.

“Because I missed you, your beautiful face and even the pissed look in your eyes, but most of all, your lips on mine.”

I gave her a teasing grin but she cocked an eyebrow, blowing me off without blinking an eye. Damn it. This girl could be an ice queen.

“I’m thinking about adopting her. But Dad would never allow me to bring a dog home. That’s out of the question.”

I glanced between Marcella and the Rottweiler. I’d grown up with these dogs, but I didn’t really have much experience handling them. “You really want a dog like that?”

“Growl knows how to socialize them. I can’t explain it but I feel a strange connection to her. She was locked in that cage too, and at first we both really didn’t like the other.”

“Sounds like our love story.”

Marcella tossed me an indignant look, but at least she didn't deny the love story part. For a long time, we only looked at each other. "It's going to be strange, being out in the world together..."

I nodded, because it was exactly what I'd been thinking. I motioned at Santana. "If you really want to adopt her, I could take her in once I have a place to live. You could come visit us or even move in."

I startled at my own words. I couldn't believe I'd suggested for us to live together.

Marcella stifled a smile but then she became thoughtful. "That sounds great, about you taking her in. I think we should wait with the moving in part and all, give my family time to get used to you and us, and us time to get used to us as well." She paused. "We still have a long way to go. What happened... I worry it might affect a relationship. We don't trust each other fully yet, and there are still so many obstacles to overcome." She released a small breath, looking almost scared.

I cupped her face, leaning in. "I want to be with you, Marcella. I want nothing more. Fuck, I think about you every fucking second of the day. If you want to take things slow, then we'll do that. No matter what lies ahead of us, we'll handle it. Even your brother wanting to have me killed."

Marcella took a deep breath. "I hope you're wrong about him. Maybe your biker buddies lied to you to drive a wedge between us."

"They don't play around. If they had a problem with me, they would have handled it directly, probably with a bullet to the head. The people who have reason to get me killed through others are in your family, because they promised you to keep me alive."

Marcella narrowed her eyes. "Now it's not just Amo but my whole family wanting you dead?"

Growl appeared by our side. "Luca wants to talk to you in his office in the Sphere."

I wasn't surprised Growl had talked to Luca yet again and not about Luca wanting to see me either. I really didn't want to talk to Luca yet, especially not before I knew if he was involved with the information leak as well. "Do you have a place for this dog yet?" I asked, pointing at Santana.

Growl shook his head. "Too many dogs with too many issues. They never lived outside a kennel. They aren't broken in and aren't used to a family life."

"But she's still young, only two, she can learn, right?"

“With patience and time, she’ll learn.”

“Then I want to adopt her once I have a place to live...”

Marcella patted the dog through the fence with a small smile. Her hair had shifted to the side and the horrible tattoo Earl had given her peeked through the material of her white shirt. Last night after talking to Gray, I’d very briefly felt an ounce of guilt over having killed my uncle, but now the feeling vanished into thin air and was replaced by the same disappointment and anger I’d felt before his death.

My eyes darted to her ear that had been covered by her hair until now. It was covered by a Band-Aid. Marcella caught my gaze and her expression tightened before she focused on the dog once more.

Growl interrupted the tense silence. “There’s a great furnished apartment in the building I lived before.”

“Famiglia owned, I suppose?”

“One of Luca’s.”

“I’ll see if I can find a place of my own.”

Marcella rose to her feet. “I’m coming with you to the meeting with my father.”

“Luca asked me to bring you home,” Growl said.

“I’m going to the office,” Marcella said firmly.

It was obvious that Growl didn’t like it. “I’ll come with you.”

“All right,” Marcella said graciously. “But I’m driving with Maddox.”

“I can’t allow that. Your father’s orders were very clear. You’re not to be alone with him right now.”

Marcella’s eyes flashed with anger, and it was obvious she swallowed back a reply. She nodded once. I leaned in. “Soon we’ll have enough time to be alone. I’ll show your father that he can trust me with you. Maybe you can use the time for a chat with your brother? Find out more about the information leak.”

I had a feeling confronting Luca first wouldn’t lead to good results. Amo was still more boisterous and might let information slip more easily.

She smiled gratefully but I could tell that she was still pissed over her father’s orders. “If you live in one of our apartment buildings, I’ll probably have it easier to visit you later. My father won’t allow me to go to a place he can’t protect properly, especially after the kidnapping.”

She was probably right. I really didn’t want to live under Vitiello’s watchful eyes but for now, I’d just swallow my pride until he realized I

didn't mean his daughter any harm.

"Come on," Grawl said. "We should hurry. Luca won't appreciate waiting."

"We don't want to make him angry," I said sarcastically then winked at Marcella. She took my hand and stood on her tiptoes to whisper in my ear. "He'll try to make this as difficult for you as possible. He hoped that you'd run off, but now that you're back, he and the other men from my family are going to try to test you until you decide it's not worth it."

"They can put me through hell all they want. It's a place I'm very familiar with and I'll get burned gladly for you. But they should know I can give them hell as well."

"I don't doubt it," she said then pressed a fleeting kiss on my cheek before she followed Grawl to his car. Vitiello had no intention of handing his daughter over without a fight. He was doing this to appease her after everything she went through, probably hoping she'd grow tired of me once she was back in her old life. Part of me worried the same, but I'd fight tooth and nail to keep Snow White, against her father and everyone else who intended to get in the way.

# Chapter

## *Six*



I was patting Santana's soft head when a bike pulled up the driveway.

Growl immediately positioned himself in front of me and shouted at the lanky teen to get a shotgun. My pulse quickened from fear but then changed to excitement when I recognized Maddox. My heart beat so fast I felt almost dizzy. I'd sworn myself not to let my emotions run the show if I ever saw him again, but I realized I wouldn't be able to keep my promise.

Maddox looked horrible with bruises and cuts all over his face and arms. He seemed frozen as he watched me. My excitement quickly morphed to fury. Maybe he looked so surprised because he never meant to see me again and didn't expect me here. Growl held my arm when I was about to step forward and charge at him.

"Stay back. I don't trust him."

What was Maddox doing here of all places? If he'd really run off, his arrival at Growl's shelter didn't make the slightest sense. Our eyes met and his face pulled into a smile. My anger skyrocketed and my self-control slipped away. I shook Growl off and ran toward Maddox, glad I'd chosen sneakers for the trip. His smile quickly morphed to a look of confusion.

Part of me wanted to fling myself into Maddox's arms. Luckily my anger kept my silly heart at bay. But with every word from Maddox's mouth, my anger slipped away, at least toward Maddox, and my longing for him took its place. But I didn't give in, not yet. I needed to know the truth about everything before I could allow my feelings to lead the show.



Growl dropped me off at home but waited in the car in front of the house to give me a ride to the Sphere later. My conversation with Amo hopefully wouldn't take long and afterward I could head to the meeting between Dad and Maddox, and tell the latter that my brother hadn't been involved. His biker buddies had to be behind the information leak.

I found Amo in our basement gym where he was doing push-ups as I walked in. I never saw the appeal in working out underground. I preferred to see daylight while working out but he was always in a sort of zone that probably had him blank out his surroundings completely.

Like now, as he did push-ups with a pissed off look as if the floor had personally insulted him. I leaned in the doorway, amused and impressed by his focus equally. I loved my brother like I loved Mom and Dad and Valerio. I didn't want to believe that he wanted to kill the man who was slowly carving out another place in my heart. When he'd pulled up in the driveway of the shelter today, the furious throbbing of my heart had left no doubt about my feelings.

"It's kind of strange to admire your brother working out."

I rolled my eyes. "Yuck, Amo. You're not my type." I walked into the room, wrinkling my nose at the heavy odor. "I'm impressed you noticed me, considering your staring contest with the floor."

"I'm a Made Man, it's essential that I notice people sneaking up on me, in case they want to ram a knife into my back."

"Speaking of knife in the back," I said, narrowing my eyes. "I talked to Maddox."

"Lover boy's back, I heard," Amo muttered, not even trying to hide his disapproval. He pushed up on his feet and rubbed his hair with a towel.

"He's back, yes."

“And did you give him the ball-kicking you promised or did you wag your tail?”

“Maddox knows I’m furious, don’t worry, but the details of my conversation with him are between him and me. I won’t discuss my relationship with you.”

“Relationship?” Amo scoffed. “You really want to be with someone who disappears without a word for days at a time?”

“Maddox had his reasons.” Reasons that didn’t fully convince me but Amo didn’t need to know that. “He told me someone leaked the information about him killing his uncle.”

“His fan club isn’t really big,” Amo said, dropping the towel unceremoniously on the bench before looking me straight in the eye. His expression was neutral, not giving anything away. He hadn’t been a good liar, at least to me, before my kidnapping, but now I couldn’t look through this newly hardened mask he’d adopted ever since.

“I’m more concerned about his list of mortal enemies within our family.”

Amo still only stared at me.

It drove me crazy that I couldn’t read him. “Maddox’s biker buddies told him you ratted him out.”

“Ratting him out would require that he and I were on the same team, but we’re not.”

“Stop beating around the bush, Amo. You owe me the truth. Did you spread the news about Maddox killing his uncle?”

“I did,” he said simply. No regret, no apology, just the cold hard truth.

I shook my head, trying to find my words and not lose myself in my fury and disappointment. “You hoped that the other bikers would kill him if they found out.”

He smirked. “That was my hope, yes, but as usual the fucking bikers do nothing but disappoint.”

“Don’t you dare smile!” I seethed. “You promised me not to kill Maddox.”

“I didn’t promise you anything and technically I wouldn’t have killed him if his biker buds ended him. That would have been on them.”

“Because you—”

“...told them the truth,” Amo said with a shrug. “White should own up to his achievements.”

I slapped Amo's shoulder hard but he only looked surprised.

"Does Dad know you went behind his back?" I asked.

Amo tilted his head. "Why? Do you plan on ratting on me?"

"No. But you should tell him. If you don't, he might put the blame on someone else and they could get killed for it. You obviously won't."

Something in his expression set an alarm off in my head. "Don't tell me Dad knew?"

Amo reached for the bottle on the bench and took a long gulp, obviously buying time. That was all the answer I needed.

"I can't believe it!" I raged. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been this furious. "Who else? Matteo no doubt. Romero? Growl? Maybe everyone except the helpless stupid Vitiello princess?"

"Spoiled princess," Amo corrected in a miserable attempt at humor.

I turned my back on him or I would have punched him. I wanted to scream in anger, but at the same time, I felt like crying, because yet again things had been kept from me and decisions had been made without consulting with me. "You won't ever try to have Maddox killed again, understood?" My voice was ice cold, laced with fury and not as shaky as I felt inside.

I slanted Amo a warning look. He regarded me for a long time then he shook his head with a deep sigh. "Listen to me for once and drop White before he ruins everything you worked all your life for, or before he breaks our family."

"You aren't someone I'd go to for relationship advice on any day of the year, but definitely not today. And you can believe me when I say that nothing can destroy our family, except for ourselves, if we start lying to each other and losing our unwavering trust in each other. Because I did trust you absolutely Amo, until today."

Amo looked seriously taken aback by my words. "You can trust me absolutely, Marci. I'd die for you. When I walked into the biker's den, I was ready to die to save you from these bastards."

Unwanted tears pressed against my eyeballs. I had seen the truth of these words in Amo's eyes that day. "And Maddox was ready to die for me as well."

"That's his only redeeming quality."

I shook my head. "Please, try to overcome your hatred for him, for me."

I didn't wait for his reply, and instead turned on my heel and headed upstairs toward Grawl's car. I plopped down in the passenger seat. "Let's go to the Sphere."

Before Grawl could pull away from the curb, Amo appeared on the sidewalk, still only in gym shorts and a new shirt. He knocked at the back door and Grawl unlocked it so my brother could slip in. "I'm coming with you. We should figure this out as a family."

"Will Mom and Valerio be there as well?" I asked sarcastically.

"Mom didn't know, so don't be mad at her."

Of course, she didn't. Dad often kept things from Mom to protect her so she wouldn't get upset. Most of the time, Mom figured things out anyway but kept Dad in the belief that she was as clueless as he wanted her to be, but I didn't want to play that game. I didn't need protection from any truth. I could handle anything and today I'd finally make Dad realize it. Dad saw me as another version of Mom, another fragile female to protect, and while I loved Mom and was glad for the traits I'd inherited from her, many aspects of my personality were Dad. He didn't want to see it, but he needed to if I really wanted to have a chance living an autonomous life and becoming part of the business... and to be with Maddox, especially be with Maddox.



I parked in the back alley beside the Sphere and got off my bike. I wasn't sure what Luca's orders were but I felt a hint of wariness as I approached the bouncer at the entrance. His stance became alert the moment he spotted me.

I hoped Marcella's confrontation with her brother wouldn't take too long. For one, I wanted to see her again, and I really wasn't looking forward to a one-on-one with Luca Vitiello. Even if I hadn't mentioned anything to Marcella, I had my suspicions about her old man's involvement. He wanted me dead and was looking for ways to have me killed without pulling the trigger himself.

The bouncer said something in the direction of an earpiece at his ear, then nodded. "The boss is expecting you in his office."

"I'm good. I'll have a smoke while I wait for Marcella and Growl."

The man's face darkened. "The boss wants you now, so in you go."

I cocked an eyebrow. "You can try to drag me inside but I should tell you, I'm going to kick your ass."

Taken aback, the guy gaped at me. Then he actually lunged at me. I side-stepped him and kicked his ass like I'd promised. He stumbled against the wall of the other building, whirled around and prepared to attack again. This time with a pulled knife. I dropped my cigarette and stomped it with my boot.

"As nice as this is to watch, Luca's expecting you, so you better move your ass inside, Maddox," Matteo drawled where he leaned in the doorway with crossed arms.

Our eyes met and the cold calculation in them told me he wasn't too happy about my appearance. I shrugged and grinned challengingly at the bouncer. My body was grateful for the avoided fight. I really needed to get my ribs checked for possible fractures, but I needed my money for a new bike—the old Harley I'd bought recently was giving me too much trouble—and a place to live so I couldn't waste any on medical treatment.

"There was a scratch on my bike," Matteo muttered.

"Not from me, I know how to treat a motorcycle."

"Not a woman, obviously," Matteo said, motioning me inside.

I gritted my teeth. "I had business to attend to as you might have heard."

Matteo simply smirked. "Luca's waiting."

"Marcella and Growl were supposed to arrive soon as well," I said then laughed darkly. "But I suppose Growl will make sure Marcella stays home on Luca's orders."

Matteo gave me a shark-grin. "He gave clear orders that you weren't supposed to see Marcella without supervision. You should have come to him before talking to her."

“I won’t ask Luca for permission every time I want to see Marcella. I’m not his soldier and she isn’t a child.”

“You better learn to play by our rules quickly, White, or you should run off to find your escaped biker buddies.”

“I won’t do you the favor of me running off. Marcella is mine.”

“You ran off.”

“Sure. And I don’t suppose you and your brother had a hand in the reason for my longer disappearance.”

We arrived in the office where Luca waited with crossed arms beside the desk.

“So you’re back,” Luca said, sounding surprised but definitely not pleased.

“I’m back and I’ll stay as long as Marcella wants me.”

“We’ll see,” Matteo said, plopping down on the sofa with fake relaxation. I really wanted to put a bullet in his arrogant head.

I glanced at Luca with a hard smile. “I didn’t mean to be gone so long, but I needed to settle a few things after rumor about me killing Earl made the rounds. It’s made my life a whole lot more difficult. Many people want to see me dead. Present company included, I assume.”

Luca’s face remained blank, not giving anything away. “A few of my men followed you and saw you searching for something in old Tartarus drug hiding places.”

“I thought I noticed a few assholes on my trail,” I said with a shrug. “I was looking for Tartarus money if you must know. I don’t want to have to rely on your money. I now have enough to find a place and get a new bike, so I can start working with your Enforcers, or have you changed your mind about that?”

Luca narrowed his eyes. “If you have hints to possible hiding places of escaped Tartarus bikers then that’s still an option.”

“Not all Tartarus members are a danger. Many were against Earl’s plan, and some even became lone wolves to avoid involvement. These men could be useful assets. There’s no sense in going on unnecessary killing sprees when they can become allies instead.” I paused. “But first we need to discuss who leaked the information about Earl’s murder. Either you gave the order to spread the news or your control over your men is slipping.”

Luca looked ready to choke me, but Marcella stalked in, followed by a pissed looking Amo. The Luca-look-alike only sent me a brief scowl before

he exchanged a look with his father that I couldn't read.

Growl's face was apologetic. "She insisted I bring her."

"You can go," Luca said. Growl closed the door. The second he was gone, Marcella turned on her father.

"I can't believe you're still treating me like a stupid child. I'm not a child. But you keep deciding things behind my back and even keep lying to my face!"

"Marcella," Luca said in a low, imploring voice. "I want to protect you."

"Is that why you tried to have Maddox killed by his old biker friends by leaking the information about Earl's death?"

So I was right. Vitiello had played dirty. I wasn't really surprised.

"Did he tell you that?"

Marcella's face turned red, her eyes growing big. She stalked closer to her father. "You promised! I thought I could trust you." Her voice shook, not just with anger, and for the first time in my life, I saw a hint of a softer emotion on Vitiello's face but it was gone too quickly.

"This is a conversation between the two of us," Luca said before turning to the rest of us. "Outside now."

I raised my eyebrows at his order then turned to Marcella. "Do you want me to stay?"

Marcella actually considered it for a moment before she shook her head. Luca looked about ready to choke me to death for the mere question. I sent him a tight smile before I followed Matteo and Amo out of the room. Marcella could handle her old man like no one else. If someone could make him stop trying to kill me, it was her. But it definitely didn't sit well with me that I couldn't just retaliate like I would have in the past.

But for Marcella, I was willing to try, no matter how suicidal it was.

"I didn't think you'd bother to come back," Matteo said once we were upstairs in the still empty bar. "Didn't like the taste of freedom?"

"I liked it, but I like Marcella even more."

Amo scoffed. "For now. You don't know the first thing about our lifestyle. We're bound by rules you'll never understand."

Returning to New York and working with the Famiglia meant being bound in ways I wasn't used to, he was right. My heart had always called for freedom but now it longed for Marcella with every furious pump. Still, riding my bike and the freedom that came with it ran in my blood. I already

missed the feeling of riding side by side with others. “Is that why you wanted to have me killed, to give me back my freedom? A cowardly move to use others to do the dirty deed.”

Amo got in my face with a harsh expression. “I would kill you myself, right now, and I’d enjoy it, if I hadn’t given Marcella a promise.”

“You have a strange understanding of keeping a promise. I thought only bitches stab someone in the back.”

“Fuck you, White. You are and will always be a dirty biker and our fucking enemy. No matter what you tell Marcella and what she wants to believe, you’ll eventually lose interest in my sister and return to your biker whores.”

I stepped closer to him until the toes of our shoes bumped against each other. Though the kid was only fifteen or sixteen, he was my height, and I was already a tall fucker. “Your sister’s not a woman anyone could ever lose interest in. I’ll always thank the fucking Lord that she chose me.”

“You call kidnapping a choice?”

I tilted my head. “She didn’t choose the way we met but she sure as fuck chose to be with me.”

“And once she’s back among civilized people, she’ll realize her mistake and drop your ass.”

I smiled harshly. “You’re awfully interested in your sister’s choice in men. If there’s something like an Oedipus complex between siblings, you probably have it. You might want to get that checked.”

Matteo chuckled appreciatively, obviously enjoying the fight between Amo and me. The latter, however, lost his shit and lunged at me, his hands closing around my throat in an all too familiar way.

I gripped his fingers, trying to pry them off, but only succeeding marginally. “Trying to be like your old man, kid? Nobody ever told you that there can only be one OG, and it’s not you.”

“Fuck you, White,” Amo growled.

I grinned and head banded him. Pain pierced my skull but at least Amo’s hold loosened.

“You’re dead, White!”

# Chapter *Seven*



The moment Maddox, Matteo, and Amo had left the office, I moved toward Dad.

“Don’t give me that look, Marci. He doesn’t understand our values or our rules. Bikers live a life of promiscuity and unsteadiness. Family doesn’t mean anything to them, marriage close to nothing. I stand by my opinion. He’s not worthy of you.”

“Many Made Men cheat on their wives. Is that how they prove how much they care about their family? What kind of values do they have?”

Dad shook his head. “That’s not the point. I want a husband for you who treats you like a queen. I won’t allow anyone to disrespect you.”

“Neither would I,” I said firmly. “Do you really think I’d let Maddox cheat on me? Or treat me badly in any other way? I’d kick his ass.”

“He kidnapped you.”

“Dad,” I said, annoyed. “We discussed that. That’s the past, and Maddox paid for it, and he’ll prove himself over the next months and years. I don’t have a doubt in my body about it.”

“You’ll face plenty of backlash for being with someone like him. The press, the other women, our circle overall, they won’t take it kindly. I’ll try

my best to keep the rumors down, but even my power has its limits when it comes to a scandal of this enormity.”

“I can handle it. People will badmouth me either way. I know what people will say. Many will gloat when they see my ear and tattoo. I won’t allow them to make me feel bad.”

Dad’s expression was murderous. “If I catch anyone gloating, they won’t see the next day.”

“It’s time for me to protect myself. At the mayor’s party, I’ll show them all that I don’t care about their opinion.”

Dad touched my cheek. “You are so much stronger than I thought, but I’ll always try to protect you as long as I live.”

“I know, Dad, but you don’t have to protect me from Maddox.”

Dad still didn’t look convinced.

“You have to trust me in this. And promise you won’t ever do anything that could lead to Maddox’s death.”

“That’s a promise I can’t give. If he cooperates with us, every mission he goes on could pose a threat to his life.”

I gave him an annoyed look. “That’s not what I mean. Don’t try to have Maddox killed. You’re hurting me by doing this.”

Dad sighed. “I always wanted you to grow into a strong-willed woman. If I’d known this would be the end result, I might have reconsidered.”

“No, you wouldn’t. You called me Marcella for a reason.”

Dad kissed my forehead with another sigh. “You’re right, but no matter how strong of a woman you’ve become, you’ll always be my little girl and I’ll kill anyone who hurts you.”

I raised an eyebrow expectantly.

“But I promise not to have Maddox killed in any way again—unless he does anything to hurt you.”

I knew I wouldn’t get a better promise out of Dad and so I nodded.

“Maddox and I need to spend time together to get past what happened,” I began but Dad interrupted me.

“I don’t want you alone with him.”

“I was allowed to be alone with Giovanni, even though we weren’t married yet.”

“Because he was trustworthy.”

“You mean scared of you.”

“Maddox doesn’t care about our values.”

“You mean you’re worried he’ll ruin my chances of presenting bloody sheets,” I said bitterly.

Dad gave me a look. “You don’t have to lie to me. Maybe I try to ignore you growing up, but I’m not blind.”

I swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“You can’t be Capo without reading people. I see how you and he look at each other,” Dad said.

“Oh,” I whispered, my cheeks heating. “Are you disappointed?”

Dad sighed, sinking down on the edge of the desk to be eye level with me. “Princess, I overruled the bloody sheets tradition for you, but I can’t deny it, if it were up to me, you would have gone to a nunnery.”

I laughed. “Dad…”

His expression became solemn. “A father wants to protect his daughter from harm. I hoped you’d find a man who’d treat you right. Not your kidnapper.”

I really didn’t want to talk about sex with my father, but I didn’t want this burden to rest on his shoulders as well. “Maddox is that man. He never treated me badly, Dad. I’m not lying, all right?”

He nodded but I could tell he was still doubtful.

“Mom said you named me Marcella after your grandmother because you wanted me to be as strong as the goddess of war. You never wanted me to bow to a man, to be forced into a marriage. I chose Maddox. Let it be my choice whom I love. Let it be my choice whom I marry.”

“Your mother said the same to me. Why are you girls making my life so difficult?”

I leaned against him. “Allow me to see Maddox at his place and to visit me at home.”

“Not alone,” Dad said in a steely voice. “I want Amo or Matteo to accompany you. Once Maddox has proven himself, he can come over to our house and then later you might be allowed to visit him alone as well.”

I nodded grudgingly, knowing when to retreat—for the moment. Mom and I would eventually convince him anyway. If Maddox could win Mom’s heart.

“I really hope you find the happiness you deserve with Maddox. If he’s really willing to give up the freedom and lifestyle that comes with MC life for you, then I might one day accept him.”

“And stop wanting him dead,” I said. “Is there any chance you’re going to apologize to Maddox?”

Dad’s expression became stone.

“All right. It was worth a try.”

The voices outside grew in volume. Dad stalked toward the door and I followed him. Maddox and Amo were caught up in an argument and grappling.

“Enough!” I shouted.

Maddox and Amo glanced my way, then at Dad, and took a step away from each other. “What’s going on here?” I asked.

Amo rubbed his forehead with a furious look but didn’t say anything. I glanced at Maddox. “Just clearing up a few things.”

I let out a frustrated groan. “Can’t you just try to get along for me?”

“You’re asking a lot,” Matteo said. “That we’re even in the same room together with our bowels safely stowed inside our bodies shows you how much we care about you.”

One of Maddox’s head wounds had burst open again and was dripping blood down his forehead. I walked over to him. “Let me see.”

I pulled his head down and inspected the cut. It wasn’t very deep. “You should get stitches.”

“It’ll heal by itself. I don’t go to doctors.”

“I could do it,” Matteo said with a shrug.

Maddox grimaced. “Yeah, right. It’ll be a cold day in hell before I want any of you near my head with a needle.”

I gave him a look. I didn’t want them to start provoking each other again. “All right,” I said. “I think we need to discuss how Maddox and I can work together.”

“Maddox will work with Matteo or trusted soldiers, not with you. I want you to lay low for a while until you’ve really gotten over the kidnapping.”



Marcella's expression became frosty. Vitiello really couldn't stop coddling her.

"Dad," Marcella said impatiently. "I don't need to get over anything, and even if I did, it would help me if I could make sure the men who worked for Earl are eliminated. Hiding at home won't make me feel better in any way. And it won't improve my standing among our men if you treat me like I can't take care of myself. You have to trust me if you want your men to take me seriously."

"I trust you and my men will eventually see how clever you are, but it's crucial that they don't resent us for working with a White. That's why we have to introduce our cooperation slowly." Vitiello looked my way. "And first I need you to tell me everything about the men you talked to in the last few days. They're in my territory and thus pose a threat."

"The men my brother's with aren't a threat. They were never in favor of the kidnapping and turned Nomad before it went down."

"Not all of them," Matteo butted in. "Your brother and that Gunnar guy were part of our welcome party when we attacked your clubhouse and I assume you talked to both."

I gritted my teeth. "They aren't a danger. I think it would be good to consider recruiting them to help us. My standing among many bikers isn't the best right now, thanks to you leaking the information about Earl, but Gunnar and these other guys could talk to other clubs for us and gather new information. And once the dust has settled over the thing with Earl, I can start talking to other clubs and maybe look for new co-operations for you."

I was being selfish. I wanted the Famiglia to cooperate with MCs, so I could stay in touch with the lifestyle I loved.

“No,” Luca said firmly. “That’s out of the question. I don’t want any co-operations with other motorcycle clubs or with former Tartarus members. I’m not even sure I want you working for us, but I definitely won’t have more people around I don’t trust.”

I bit back an insult. I had half a mind to tell Vitiello to suck his dick. The only reason why I even considered helping him and the Famiglia was Marcella.

Marcella stepped between us as if she feared Luca and I would attack each other. “Maddox is an asset. Without him, you couldn’t have landed the hit on Tartarus. Maddox is right, we should let him bring together the Tartarus men who left before the kidnapping or were against it. We can use insiders if we want to eliminate the rest of our enemies within the biker scene.”

I stifled a smile at Marcella’s stubbornness. She fought for me and herself like a lioness.

“You really think he’s going to be faithful to you once he’s back to his biker lifestyle? That’s why he probably wants to recruit his old biker buddies,” Amo said.

“He’s present and I’m not a wild animal. Marcella is a woman that compels any man to be loyal.”

“Not that it is any of your business how Maddox and I handle our relationship, Amo. I don’t tell you how to treat your one-night-stands either.” She turned to Luca. “And you, Dad, should really consider Maddox’s suggestion. I think it’s a great idea.”

Silence in the room.

“Marcella, as everyone else, you are bound to my judgment, especially when you become part of the business. It’s my word that counts and you’ll have to abide by it.”

Marcella swallowed but gave a sharp nod.

“If I recruit bikers for some of your runs, that would get your soldiers out of the line of fire, right?” I said. “For now, I’ll help you track down possible dangers and while I’m at it, I’ll keep an eye open for possible allies. The Bratva has been cooperating with MCs before and it can help you as well.”

Luca ignored my comment. “Growl told me you didn’t want to take me up on my offer to live in one of my apartments?”

I didn’t miss the heavy note of suspicion in his voice.

“I changed my mind. But I want to pay rent. I don’t want any pittance. I’ll earn the money I spent with honest work.”

“If you want to earn money with honest work, you’re in the wrong place,” Matteo said with a chuckle.

I couldn’t help but laugh. The asshole was too crazy for my taste but his humor often was on point. He and Marcella fell in. Only Luca and Amo looked as if they had bitten into something sour.

Luca stepped forward and I tensed. Fuck, I doubted I’d ever feel at ease in his presence—unless I had a gun in my hand, which probably wouldn’t make Marcella happy.

His gaze could have frozen hell. “I’m not the forgiving type, White. The only reason why you’re here today is because Marcella begged me to spare you. If you mess with Marcella or me, nothing in this world or beyond can stop me from giving you an excruciating end, got it?”

“Dad,” Marcella whispered, her eyes going wide.

My initial reaction was to lash out but I held back for Marcella. “I’ll treat Marcella like a queen. And I’ll treat you with the same respect you show me. So far, you are the only one who’s tried to have me killed despite your word. I want us to work together for Marcella. I’m sick of revenge. What about you?”

Luca gritted his teeth but then he gave a sharp nod. Amo shook his head, giving his sister a doubtful look. A bruise was forming on his forehead, giving me a feeling of sick satisfaction.

“I’ll see what I can do about a place for you to live,” Luca said in a clipped voice, picking up his phone. He walked a few steps away so he could talk without us listening in. I couldn’t help but be wary of his secrecy. I could only hope Marcella’s words had gone through to him. I doubted I could overlook another attempt on my life even for Marcella.

Marcella gave me a small smile but she didn’t move closer like I wished she would. Not being able to touch her was making this even harder.

Luca turned back to us and pushed his cell back into his pocket. “Growl’s waiting outside to show you the apartment, if you want it.”

I nodded, even if I despised the idea of living in a mob-owned place.

“And rent’s two grand per month,” Matteo added with a grin.

“I hope the place is worth that much money.”

“You are in New York not in *Never* Jersey, White,” Amo muttered.

I flipped him the bird which actually made his lips twitch before his expression hardened.

“Living in one of your places, I suppose Marcella is allowed to spend the night?”

The look on Luca’s face might have made me shit my pants if I wasn’t hardened to his madness.

Marcella crossed the room and lightly touched my upper arm. “Why don’t you go ahead and grab a drink at the bar while I have another word with my father?”

The urgency in her voice made me nod. Would she always have to be the mediator between her family and me? That would get tiresome soon.

She quickly stepped back before I had the chance to kiss her, which I would have done right in front of her old man. I met his furious gaze before I turned on my heel and left.

Matteo and Amo followed me. I chanced a look at them over my shoulder. “Is my comment going to earn me a weighted dive in the Hudson or why are you creeping up on me?”

“If you’d take a weighted dive in the Hudson, Luca would want to be the one to dump you in, White, no worries,” Matteo said.

“That’s a consolation,” I muttered and took a seat at the bar on the ground floor.

Amo leaned against the bar beside me. “You realize you’ll have to marry my sister if you want to get in her pants?”

You mean, again? I almost asked but stifled the impulse in the last second, but Matteo had obviously caught on. He smiled harshly. “White, Luca might be willing to bend the rules a bit for Marcella, but don’t think we’ll abandon our traditions for you.”

Marriage had never really crossed my mind before. Most bikers in Tartarus lived with their old ladies without marrying. Of course, I knew of the strict traditions the Famiglia abided to. I’d never expected me to get involved with them. Maybe Marcella really wanted to wait until we were married to have sex again. Fuck, was I ready to marry? And would she even want to marry me?

I could only imagine the scandal that would cause. The princess of New York marrying a dirty biker. The odds seemed stacked up against us. I really needed to talk to her alone. For the first time I realized how little we knew

about each other. The only thing I was certain of was that being with Marcella felt right.

# Chapter *Eight*



After some arguing and eventually begging, Dad allowed me to be alone with Maddox in his office for a few minutes.

“We’ll be in the hallway,” Luca said loud enough so Maddox could hear him before he closed the door, leaving me alone with Maddox.

Maddox’ practically undressed me with his eyes. I shook my head, but my own body longed for his closeness as well. Yet I hadn’t forgotten the heartbreak of the last few days.

“Won’t you give me a little peck as a reward for behaving around your murderous family?” he asked with a wry smile.

He had a point. After everything that had happened, Maddox had every reason to be pissed. I walked over to him, and with every step I took, my pulse pounded faster. I’d never felt this physically drawn to a person. Maddox’s smile broadened when I arrived before him and my stomach exploded with butterflies. Maddox wrapped his arms around me and kissed me unexpectedly gently before he buried his nose in my throat. “You smell different than I remember.”

“You mean I don’t smell like dog and blood anymore?”

Maddox shook his head. “You never wore perfume, now you do.”

He was right. I'd put on my favorite perfume from Le Labo: Fleur d'Oranger. It had made me feel more like myself, which was strange considering it was only a scent. "You don't like it?" I asked quietly.

For some reason Maddox not liking my favorite scent equaled him not liking the person I used to be and in parts still was. He'd only met a small caged-in version of her, but never the full me.

He'd have to get to know her. We'd both have to get to know each other anew now that we were both free.

"No, it smells great, like a stronger version of your skin's natural scent."

"Really?" I asked, surprised and relieved.

Maddox simply nodded, his nose still pressed into my skin. His warm breath felt good, comforting.

I wanted to sink into him and let myself fall, maybe even allow myself to face all the worries of what lay ahead.

I tightened my hold around his waist. Maddox groaned briefly but didn't let me go when I was trying to pull back, remembering his injuries.

"Fuck, I missed you," Maddox murmured, lifting his head to scan my face as if he was trying to memorize every inch of it.

He bowed down his head and pressed his lips to mine. I wanted to lose myself in him, in the kiss, but after a brief moment, I caught myself. I stepped back with a smile.

Maddox gave me a questioning look.

"I think we should take it slow."

"Your body's saying something else," Maddox said with a teasing smile.

He was right. My body longed for more. Maybe it was good that Dad wouldn't allow me to spend time at Maddox's place because I wanted nothing more than to fall asleep by his side, but deep down I knew it was too early for it.

"I missed you too, but I want to take things slow. We have to get used to the new situation."

"You mean you want to see if you still want to be with me now that you're back in your fancy life."

I narrowed my eyes. "No. I know what I'm feeling, and you?"

Maddox wrapped his arms around my waist, his voice low. "Snow White, I betrayed my club for you, I killed for you, I got tortured for you, and I'll even make peace with your old man for you if that isn't proof of my feelings for you, I don't know what is."

His eyes were fierce, dispersing the doubt I felt.

I swallowed, wondering what he'd say if I told him I was supposed to get my period today but was scared I wouldn't. Maddox and I weren't ready to be parents, not individually and definitely not as a couple. Too much was uncertain between us. I considered saying something, but then Dad knocked and opened the door, his eyes measuring the distance between Maddox and me.

Maddox and I only got a brief moment to say goodbye before he headed out with Growl, who'd show him the apartment where he could live, and I headed home with Dad and Amo who were both quiet during the drive. I didn't speak either, longing for Maddox.



In the afternoon, the doc checked on my back and ear again, finally giving me the green light to make an appointment at a tattoo studio. I had already chosen the best studio in New York and got an appointment the next day. Usually, they were booked many months in advance but as usual the name Vitiello worked wonders. I wanted the ugly tattoo on my back covered up as quickly as possible and hopefully with it, the memories that haunted me at night. After the call, my phone beeped again with a text from an unknown number.

**Hey Snow White, I got a phone and your aunt gave me your number. How about you come over to my place tomorrow?**

I smiled. Of course, Aunt Gianna wasn't following the rules.

**I have an appointment at a tattoo studio tomorrow afternoon. Will you come with me as moral support?**

The moment I typed the words, I felt relief. I was scared of getting inked again. Not because of the pain. I could withstand it, but I worried about the memories linked to it

**Of course. Just tell me when and where, and I'll be there.**

**Pick me up at three pm at home.**

I considered adding a kiss smiley but this felt strange. Maddox and I weren't really in a relationship yet. We hadn't even discussed the parameter of our bond yet. So far there hadn't been time.

**Sweet Dreams. I miss you.**

My heart rate picked up. **Miss you too.**  
Everything about this felt strange, scarily normal.



I was too nervous about the tattoo appointment the next day to sleep, so I went over to Amo's room. The door was open. I was still angry at Amo and Dad, but at the same time, I couldn't resent them for wanting to protect me.

I leaned in the doorway and watched Amo. He was changing the bandages around his arm and waist. He'd suffered several cuts and a couple of broken ribs during the fight, but this was the least of my concerns. The Amo I saw before me was a different brother than I'd left weeks ago. His face appeared older, harder. He'd been my teenage brother, now he seemed grown up, like a real man. During his confrontation with Maddox today, it had struck me again.

He looked up. "You want me to come with you to the tattoo studio?"

"Maddox agreed to come. But you could come too."

Amo shook his head. "I don't need to see him every day."

"Will you try to get along with him for me?"

"I didn't try to kill him today."

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks."

"People are already talking. Several of your friends messaged me to ask if the rumors about you escaping captivity because of an affair with a biker were true. Even the ones I dumped messaged me, Marci. This is going to get only worse. People will tear into you now that they see a weakness."

I looked away. I had ignored all messages from friends for that exact reason. Everyone only wanted to catch the newest tidbit of gossip. I'd only answered two messages from family like Sara or Isabella. When it came down to it, I could only trust family, not the people I called friends.

"You really must like him if you risk your reputation for him. Considering you worried about glassy scallops not too long ago."

"I think I love him," I whispered.

Amo grimaced. "You sure?"

"No." I sighed and walked over to Amo to sit on his desk. "The last few weeks were too confusing. I need to get to know him. Today was the first time he and I texted, or talked to each other alone without either of us being

a captive.” I shook my head. Saying it aloud made the absurdity of it sink in. “I wonder if Maddox and I can ever have a normal relationship considering everything.”

“I don’t want to burst your bubble, Marci, but nothing about our life is normal. Being a Vitiello and a normal life are at odds.”

I shook my head with a smile. “That’s not what I mean. I’m talking about the life I was used to.”

“Your version of a normal life probably isn’t White’s. If you really want things to work out, you and he have to figure out a new normal as a couple.”

My lips parted in shock. “Who are you and where’s my emotionally imbecile brother?”

“Just because I usually don’t bother doesn’t mean I don’t understand emotions.”

“You think Maddox and I can find a new normal?”

Amo gave me a look that made it clear he wouldn’t answer the question. “I won’t ever fall in love. It makes fools of people.”

“Don’t you want what Mom and Dad have?”

Amo shrugged. “Even Dad made bad decisions because of his love for Mom. The thing with Tartarus wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t been madly in love with Mom. I can’t see myself ever feeling something that strong for someone.”

“I never thought I could. I never did with Giovanni, but I think it could be like that with Maddox.”

“He betrayed his club and killed his uncle for you. That’s a good start for foolish love.”

I laughed. “Yeah.”

“I still don’t like him, so don’t expect any more relationship advice from me.”

“Can I—?” I asked, nodding at the bed. I still hadn’t managed to catch any sleep in my bedroom. The only times I got some sleep was in Amo’s room.

“Sure. I can’t sleep any time soon anyway.”

I glanced back down on my phone before I closed my eyes.



I followed Growl's pickup on my bike to an apartment complex about two blocks from the Sphere. It wasn't one of the luxury skyscrapers but it was much posher than anywhere I'd ever lived before. When Growl and I passed the lobby, the receptionist scanned me from head to toe, unable to hide her shock. I looked a mess, there was no question about it. The last few days had taken their toll on my body and my clothes had definitely seen better days. I tipped my imaginary hat in greeting and she quickly looked away and pretended to be busy with something on her computer.

I shook my head with a chuckle.

"The staff knows to keep their noses out of our business," Growl said as we entered the elevator. He looked at my hands. "Don't you have any clothes or other stuff?"

I cast my eyes up to the mirrored ceiling. Fuck. I really looked like shit. It was a miracle that the receptionist hadn't run away screaming upon seeing me but working in one of Vitiello's apartment buildings probably hardened you against bloody faces. "Most of my stuff went up in flames when the Vitiellos burned down the clubhouse. I always traveled light."

Growl made a non-committal noise. "Do you have money to buy clothes and everything else you need?"

I patted my jeans pocket, which still held several grand. But I needed a new bike, so that would rip a huge hole in my pocket. "I'm fine, and I won't borrow money from the Famiglia for sure. Even idiots know better than to owe the mob money."

"I would have given you cash, without interest," Growl said with a shrug and stepped out when the elevator arrived on the fifteenth floor.

I raised my eyebrows. "Really? Why would you do that? You don't know me, and as far as your boss is concerned, I'm still the enemy."

Growl motioned at the door at the end of the long hallway. "Because I once arrived in New York without anything to call my own as well."

I nodded. Growl unlocked the door and motioned for me to go in. I didn't like turning my back on him, no matter how semi-friendly he appeared but I forced myself to go ahead anyway. I froze in the loft that opened up before me. "Fuck."

The living room-slash-kitchen-slash-dining area was big enough to serve as a ballroom. The ceiling was twice the height of a standard room at least. "I don't need that much space," I said.

Growl shrugged. "It's the smallest apartment in the building, only two bedrooms."

I laughed in disbelief. The Vitiellos really didn't know what to do with the shitload of blood money they earned. I was poor like a church mouse in comparison. Did Marcella realize that? She'd be the one with the money. So far all the girls I'd been with had been in awe of me because of my status in the club and the not-too-shabby amount of money I earned as vice, but all of this meant nothing to Marcella. I was a nothing in her world, and especially in the eyes of her family. "I don't intend to have any guests except for Marcella and she'll sleep in my bed."

Growl's expression hardened. "Better watch out with those comments around other people. Luca won't appreciate it if people talk badly about his daughter."

"If she's with me, it can be expected that she'll sleep in my bed. But I suppose not in your old-fashioned world."

"It'll be your world if you want to be the man at Marcella's side."

I wanted nothing more, but belonging to this strange world with even stranger rules? Fuck. That would be almost as difficult as not ending up killing Luca Vitiello.

Growl held out the keys in one tattooed-scarred hand. I took it then motioned at his tattoo sleeves and tattooed throat. "Do people accept the way you look? Most of the mobsters like to look like businessmen in their expensive suits."

"I'm Enforcer and I used to be the enemy. People will always treat me different. I don't care." He moved to the door. "I should go now."

"Wait," I said. "Can you give me Marcella's number?"

Growl shook his head. "Not my place."

I almost rolled my eyes. “All right, then give me Matteo’s number. Or does he need protection from me as well?”

Growl ignored my sarcasm and took out his cell phone. I noted down Matteo’s number. From the three Vitiello men, he seemed my best option to get Marcella’s number. Maybe Luca would be pissed if I didn’t ask him, but I had absolutely no intention of crawling to him every time I wanted to contact Marcella. He could suck it up.

I walked over to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Manhattan. I’d never lived in the middle of the city, in an apartment high above the city. I wasn’t sure I liked being so high up above the ground. I preferred my bike closer to me. If I felt the need to take a ride, I didn’t want to have to walk ten minutes.

I leaned against the glass, stunned by the turn my life had taken. If someone had told me a few months ago, I would have called them crazy. Shaking my head, I took out the cheap phone I’d bought in a pawnshop and called Matteo.

He picked up after three rings. “Vitiello.”

His voice was cold and businesslike.

“Hey future uncle-in-law, can you give me Marcella’s number?” I couldn’t resist the provocation. Matteo seemed like someone who could deal with it, better than Luca or Amo anyway.

Matteo let out a sharp laugh. “Hey future-fish-food, trying to bypass my brother is a fucking bad idea. Even a pea-brained biker should grasp that.”

In the background, I could hear female voices, distant at first then closer. “Is that Marcella’s lover boy?” someone asked, and I couldn’t help but grin.

“Not now,” Matteo said, and his voice had a softer note I’d never heard.

“That’s kind of cool,” said a higher girl’s voice. “Can I ride his bike one day?”

“Sure as duck not,” Matteo said.

I snorted. “Sure as duck?”

“But Dad!”

“Your daughter can ride my bike if she wants.”

“Careful,” Matteo whispered in a deadly voice. “I don’t want you anywhere near my family anytime soon.”

“Of course not,” I gritted out.

“Matteo, we can decide who we want to meet or not, and if he’s the man Marcella chose then I sure as hell want to meet him, with or without your approval. You’re free to guard us of course.”

Ouch. Matteo’s wife had big balls.

“Sure, babe. But if biker boy looks the wrong way at you or Isa, I’ll ram my blade into his throat with or without your approval.”

“Eww, Dad! That’s disgusting.”

I heard rustling and then a door closing.

“I’d never thought that you Vitiellos allow women to talk up to you. Old Ladies know when to keep their mouths shut and show respect.”

“See, we Vitiellos might be brutal fuckers who carve our enemies open like a goddamn Halloween pumpkin but we treat our women right. If that’s not something you can do, you better ride your bike into the sunset ASAP.”

“Calm down. If I wanted a woman who worshipped the ground I walked on, I wouldn’t have picked Marcella. I like that we’re equals.”

Matteo made a noise that suggested we weren’t really. I chose not to comment. After all, I needed his cooperation. “What about Marcella’s number?”

“Call Luca.” He hung up on me.

“Fuck!” I stared out of the window. I wanted nothing more than to talk to Marcella, to be reminded why I was here in this place, why I chose to be surrounded by enemies.

I went to the marble bathroom and took a piss, still seething, when my phone beeped with a message with a number and the words:

**Marci can decide if she wants to talk to you. But if you hurt her, you’re dead. Gianna**

The name distantly rang a bell. I could only assume she was Matteo’s wife.

**Thanks**

I considered calling Marcella, desperate to hear her voice again, but I wasn’t sure if that would alert Vitiello. I wouldn’t put it past him to confiscate her phone just to stop us from talking.

Instead, I messaged her. She replied almost instantly and just like that, my doubts evaporated. The moments without her were the hard ones, where everything I’d lost loomed over me. The moments with her? Worth every ounce of pain.

# Chapter *Nine*



All through the night, I kept thinking about my reunion with Maddox. It had been overshadowed with so many conflicting emotions: anger toward Maddox and Dad and Amo, relief, joy, but also worry over what lay ahead. Almost everyone was against this bond.

I needed to talk to someone about Maddox, about my feelings and what had happened. I loved Mom and I talked about almost everything with her, but this was something I couldn't share with her, especially my worries over a possible pregnancy. I was still desperately waiting for my period, which I should have gotten yesterday.

I'd on occasion talked to my girlfriends from college about Giovanni, about meaningless couple things, but this was too personal, which was strange considering I wasn't even in a relationship with Maddox yet. I wasn't sure what we were at this point. I wanted us to be together, that was all I knew.

But our relationship was far more controversial and explosive than anything with Giovanni had ever been.

I messaged Aunt Gianna, asking if she had time for a one-on-one yoga session.

She replied within a minute. **I'm already in the studio. Come over.** After getting the okay from Dad, which he insisted I had to ask for every time I left the house now, I let one of my bodyguards take me to Gianna's gym.

Gianna waited for me at the staff door, dressed in yoga pants and a cutoff tank. None of the other mafia wives, especially if they were moms, dressed like that, which was one of the reasons why Gianna was perfect for the conversation I needed to have. She defied conventions and lived however she wanted to live, within certain restrictions of mob life.

Gianna gave me a smile and brief hug before she led me into her cozy yoga room. It smelled of vervain and was heated to a tank top temperature all year around. Gianna sank down on one of the blood-red poofs and I did the same right across from her. She searched my face but didn't say anything.

I wasn't really sure how much she knew, definitely whatever Matteo knew because he'd given up keeping things from her.

"Did biker boy contact you last night?"

"He did," I said. "Thanks for giving him my number. I hope you didn't get in trouble because of me."

Gianna grinned. "I can handle trouble, don't worry."

"I suppose you can," I said, brushing my hair back behind my ear out of habit, and regretting it when Gianna's eyes lingered on my injured ear. It was still too tender to wear ear jewelry for more than a very short amount of time.

"You should always wear it like that when you're meeting with Made Men. Maybe it'll remind them that women aren't weak. After all, we handle giving birth."

I laughed. "Maybe. They'll probably just pity me. I despise pity."

Gianna's lips curled. "Ditto. But I doubt anyone would ever pity you, Marci. Not if you don't give them reason to. Show them who's boss."

I nodded, but my mind drifted to Maddox once more. I was excited about seeing him again in the afternoon, something I hadn't mentioned to Dad yet.

"I assume there's a reason why you're here? And it's not fitness related."

I sighed. "It's probably no news, but Maddox and I got together while I was in the clubhouse." Together seemed like such a ridiculous description

of what had happened, but what we had defied a definition.

“Okay,” Gianna said slowly. “You don’t sound happy about it. Did he force you to do anything you didn’t want?”

“God no. I wanted it. I enjoyed it.” I gave an apologetic shrug. “I know people won’t understand, and even condemn me for it. But I don’t regret it.”

My belly bustled with butterflies just thinking about being with Maddox again. Maybe the odds were stacked against us, but I wanted him.

“There’s nothing wrong with enjoying yourself.”

“Have you lived in a different world these last few years?” I asked wryly.

“I know the unwritten rules. They haven’t changed since I was a teen, but I always had trouble following them. If you want to live by your own rules, you just have to make sure you can live with the backlash. There will be nasty rumors about you, and they probably won’t ever die down.”

I grimaced. Rumors about Gianna’s escape still made the rounds at social events. People had made up the most ridiculous stories. I had never asked Gianna about them because I hadn’t wanted to be someone who listened to rumors.

“Ask,” Gianna said.

“I know what Mom told me,” I said with a sheepish smile. “That you ran off after you got engaged to Matteo because you didn’t want to marry him, but he caught you after almost a year and forced you to marry him.”

“He’d say he saved me from being killed by my asshole of a father by giving me the chance to marry him,” Gianna said, rolling her eyes.

“It’s true, though, right?”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t have to play the knight-in-shining-armor. He only wanted me in his bed.”

I shook my head with a laugh. “That’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

“And it’s why your dad would prefer if you talked to someone else.”

I rolled my eyes. “So you weren’t a virgin either when you married.”

Gianna tilted her head. “I was, but that’s completely irrelevant.”

My eyes widened. “I thought you slept with a few European guys while you were on the run.”

“I wanted to, and I made out with a few, but I never went all the way. Your uncle insists it was because I secretly only desired him.”

I frowned.

“To be honest, if I could turn back time, I probably wouldn’t run, but I’d have sex with Matteo in every corner of my old home to pay my father back and present white sheets to him after the wedding night.”

“So the rumors about you are wrong and still people badmouth you. I don’t want to know what they’ll do with me, considering the rumors are right.”

“You slept with Maddox, so what. That’s your business.”

“I wanted to do it,” I defended myself. I wasn’t even sure why I felt the need to defend myself, especially in front of Gianna, but the rules of our world were deeply ingrained in me.

“Good for you,” Gianna said. “I’m guilty of having a thing for bad boys, as Matteo always points out, and a biker from Tartarus is as bad boy as you can get.”

I huffed out a laugh. “You make it sound as if I’m a randy teenager who just wanted to enjoy herself.”

“You should enjoy yourself before your responsibilities catch up with you. You chose the perfect guy. Nobody will expect you to marry Maddox, even if he was your first.”

“I want to be with Maddox. It’s more than physical.”

Gianna pursed her lips. “It’s your life, Marci. You only have this one go at it. Live the life you want. If you want to have fun with the biker boy then have fun and move on. If you want to have fun and get serious with him, then do that. But either way, the conservatives will burn you at the stake for it. Prepare for the fight of your life and be ready to win.”

“I will.”

“Good. I’ll be there for you whenever you need me.”

“Thanks, Gianna,” I said, then hesitated. “Can you do me a favor and get me a pregnancy test?”

Gianna froze. “Oh Marci, don’t tell me biker boy was too stupid to use a condom.”

“It just happened.” I grimaced at how stupid that sounded, but the situation had been extraordinary.

“How long are you overdue?”

“Just one day. It’s probably nothing.”

“You better hope that’s true because your father will kill Maddox if he got you pregnant and I doubt Aria will stop him.”

“I know.”

“What does biker boy say to his possible fatherhood?”

“I haven’t told him yet. I want to wait until I’m sure. He isn’t in the best state right now.”

“Neither are you. I don’t see why you should worry alone. He’s just as responsible as you are.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Can you get me a test?”

“Of course, but I don’t have any lying around so I’ll have to grab one in the pharmacy during my lunch break. I can pop over tonight and give it to you, all right? Or do you need it sooner?”

“No. A few hours more or less doesn’t really matter.”

“If you say so. I’d want certainty as soon as possible.”

“I have my tattoo appointment in the afternoon so I’ll be busy.”

Gianna nodded. “Don’t let anyone determine your worth, Marci. Promise me.”

I hugged Gianna before I got up.

“I won’t. I promise,” I said. I hadn’t cared what Earl thought about me, but his words inked into my back, could become words whispered among the Famiglia. And I couldn’t help but worry about it.



“I still don’t like the idea of him tagging along,” Amo muttered when Maddox pulled up in front of the mansion on a brand-new Harley. It looked remarkably like his old bike, but without the Tartarus hellhound. He wasn’t wearing his cut either, only black jeans, a black T, leather jacket, and biker boots. Not even a helmet.

I couldn’t help but smile despite my anxiety about the tattoo appointment.

“He couldn’t live without a new Harley for long,” Amo muttered. I loved seeing Maddox on a bike. It was where he belonged, but a part of me worried he really couldn’t live without the biker lifestyle. Two bodyguards were already waiting in front of the door, and one sat behind the steering wheel of the limousine with armored glass.

Dad had insisted I take three guards with me. He didn’t count Maddox as additional protection—quite the opposite.

Amo followed me outside. I wouldn't be surprised if he decided to tag along as well.

I headed toward the curb. Maddox got off his bike and made a step in my direction as if he was planning on greeting me with a kiss. I side-stepped him casually to check out his bike, worried that paparazzi were around. A photo of a kiss between Maddox and me would really fire up a scandal. I wasn't ready for that yet. Not before I felt more like my old self, and definitely not before Maddox and I had discussed us.

Maddox raised his eyebrows but didn't comment. Amo lifted his jacket to reveal two guns. "Do you need one to defend Marcella?"

I gave him a grateful smile. That was his way of making peace with Maddox. Maybe last night's conversation had really changed things in his mind. I hoped it had. If the outside world was against Maddox and me, I needed at least my family on my side.

"Thanks, but I'm equipped." He lifted his leather jacket in the back, revealing a gun. Then he turned to me. "I suppose you won't ride with me?"

I could see the disappointment in his face, but for one, Dad would throw a fit if I didn't drive in the safe limousine, and I didn't want photos like that yet. "I have to take the car."

Maddox nodded once. The distance between us, physically and emotionally, killed me, and judging from his expression, it killed him too. "I'll drive ahead to check if the road is safe, Snow White."

Snow White. I'd despised the name in the beginning, but not anymore.

He mounted his Harley again and gave me a look that made me regret not riding with him. I wanted to share this with him, wanted to understand what he felt when he rode his Harley. Instead, I got into the limousine and watched through the tinted windows as he drove ahead. I'd thought it would be easier for me to admit my feelings for Maddox in public, but this was still too fresh, too uncertain for me to be willing to make myself so vulnerable in front of others. Everyone was watching with bated breath, ready for the scandal to unfurl.



Maddox stopped at the curb in front of the tattoo parlor. He narrowed his eyes at something down the road. I got out as Maddox got off his bike and

headed for the front door of the tattoo studio, which had closed so I'd have privacy while getting my tattoo. This time he didn't try to touch or kiss me, and I resented my own cowardice. "What did you see?"

"I thought I saw a lens."

I looked in the direction he had, but I knew I wouldn't see anything. I rarely did. I'd know tomorrow if paparazzi had followed us.

"Do you want me to come inside with you?" Maddox asked, returning my attention to the parlor.

"Yes, please," I said softly. Whatever he saw on my face made protectiveness flare up in his eyes. One of my bodyguards checked the tattoo studio while Maddox and the other waited with me. Once inside, only Maddox stayed close by as the tattoo artist greeted us. He was covered from head to toe with tattoos, even his bald head and throat. Only his face was still untouched. The tattoos adorning his body were colorful and intricate, nothing like the horrid scribbling on my back.

It was obvious that he felt uncomfortable in our presence. I didn't really feel comfortable in this place either. I'd never wanted a tattoo, and I still wouldn't have chosen to get inked if it hadn't been forced upon me. He led us over to a lounge chair and I sat down on it, feeling reminded of a doctor's office. It didn't really settle my nerves.

The man, Constantine, cleared his throat. "Can I take a look at the tattoo you want to cover?"

"Oh, of course." Few people had seen it yet and I felt hesitant about having the bodyguards see it. Dad would make sure they didn't say anything, but on occasion tidbits of information reached a wife's ears and then all bets were off.

"Why don't you guard the doors with your backs to us?" Maddox said sharply. They ignored him. Maddox stalked toward one of them and got in his face. "Do I have to smash your ugly face in for you to turn around and give your boss's daughter some privacy?"

"Your word means nothing," my bodyguard spat out.

I sent him a scathing look. "Turn around."

Both men finally did, and Maddox stalked back to me, looking pissed. "I can't even ram my knife into their throats without risking to piss off your father."

"That wouldn't be a good start to your cooperation, no," I said. "They'll learn to respect you when they realize how brave you are."

Maddox leaned closer, meeting my gaze. “Fuck, I’d die for a kiss from you right now.”

Heat washed through me. “Later,” I promised.

I unbuttoned my blouse but kept my bra on, then turned my back to the tattoo artist. When he sat down on a stool behind me to inspect the tattoo, I cringed. Maddox watched with crossed arms. His expression reflected a myriad of emotions, anger and guilt at the forefront. He obviously blamed himself, and a tiny part of me did too.

I was glad I didn’t see the tattoo artist’s face when he read the words on my back. I hadn’t looked at them again after that first night. “Can you cover it up?” I whispered, terrified he might say no.

“It’ll take a few sessions, depending on what you want.”

“You need a crown, that’s for sure,” Maddox said.

I peered up at him, catching the tattoo artist nodding from the corner of my eye. “That could work. A crown could cover up both words if we choose one with a wide rim and deep coloring.”

“A crown,” I said with a smile. “That’ll annoy many people.”

“We wouldn’t want that, right?” Maddox grinned daringly.

“A crown it is,” I confirmed. “Maybe... maybe we can keep the word Vitiello? Weave it into the crown somehow?”

“That could work. But the original words would be covered up completely. This is horrid work. Even first year trainees do a better job on pig’s skin.”

I tensed. I knew he was angry because of the ugly tattoo and didn’t want to make me feel bad, but I was definitely not as thick-skinned about this as I wanted to be.

“Hey, how about you think before you talk?” Maddox growled.

Constantine’s eyes grew wide and he leaned back slightly, regarding Maddox warily. “I didn’t mean any offense.”

“It’s okay,” I said firmly, not wanting to make a bigger deal out of it than it was. “Can we start right away?”

“Sure, once you’ve chosen a design I can start contouring.”

I picked a crown with an intricate design around the rim so the words could disappear beneath it, a beautiful crown an empress would have worn for her coronation.

Fear washed through me when the tattoo artist grabbed the needle, remembering the helplessness and panic from last time. My hands became

sweaty and I sought Maddox's gaze. He motioned at the tattooist to wait and squatted before me where I lay on my belly on the couch. He took my hand and kissed my palm, his smile reassuring.

I gave a nod and Maddox gave the tattooist the sign. I winced when the needle pierced my skin but quickly realized that it didn't hurt nearly as much as Cody tattooing me. Maddox held my gaze the next two hours until the contouring was done. His gaze anchored and calmed me. With him by my side, I'd get through this and emerge stronger.

After I'd made my next appointment, we left the studio side by side, but no longer touching. I longed to reach for his hand but held back. I glanced toward Maddox's bike, desperately wanting to ride with him. And not just that, I wanted to go to his place with him, be alone with him, feel his body on top of mine, but I knew it was too soon.

He nodded with a wistful smile as if he could read my thoughts. "Call me when you need me again," he said, hovering close to me before he pressed a kiss to my cheek. I could see it in his face that he wanted to do far more than that but he held back, respecting the boundaries I'd set and was already starting to regret.

"Why don't you come over to meet my mom and little brother?" I asked when Maddox was about to turn back to his bike. I ignored the looks of consternation from the bodyguards. This was a decision I couldn't really make. Dad was the master of the house and uber protective. The tentative peace between him and Maddox was only a day old, but I was desperate for Mom and Valerio to meet him. They wouldn't judge Maddox by years of enmity.

Maddox gave me a sardonic smile. He'd probably noticed the guards' expressions too. "While I'd love to meet your mom, I'm not sure I want to piss off your old man so early on, even if pissing him off really gives me a kick."

I nodded, trying to mask my disappointment. I was feeling strangely lost and vulnerable at the moment. The raw feeling in my back brought back unwanted memories. Maddox stepped closer, tilting his head. His voice was low and full of concern, when he said, "If you need me, Marcella, I'm there, even if I have to knock your dad out, just say it."

I shook my head, not wanting to appear weak. "Next time."

Maddox frowned. "You sure?"

I nodded and took a step back, needing to pull out of the situation. “I should head back before my family worries.”

“I’m sure your guards keep your old man up to date,” Maddox muttered.

“Bye,” I said with a firm smile and got into the car.

Maddox didn’t stop watching me and I had half a mind to ask him to come after all. The car finally pulled away, taking the decision from me. My stomach flipped and my throat became tight. I wasn’t sure why I was feeling so anxious and vulnerable because of the tattoo. I had chosen the design. It would cover up the horrible words Earl had marked me with.

This was supposed to make things better.

# Chapter *Ten*



I managed to avoid my family when I came back by hurrying upstairs. Mom would console me, but she would also worry about me, and Dad would blame himself and then try to protect me even more, maybe even decide to keep me away from business after all. I didn't want either outcome.

For a long time, I stared at the wrapping covering my back, torn between curiosity and trepidation. The tattooist had warned me that it would take several sessions to cover up the words. I wasn't a patient person and this time patience seemed completely impossible. I glanced at the clock. It was almost six in the evening. Gianna would arrive with the pregnancy test soon. I wondered what kind of lie she'd tell my family for her visit.

"Marci!" Valerio shouted. He was the only one who shouted my name instead of just knocking at the door.

"Come in," I said, glad for the distraction. I reached for the cardigan to pull it over but wasn't quick enough.

Valerio barged in and immediately his gray eyes zeroed in on my back. They grew wide and he hurried over to me. "Can I see?"

I hesitated. I wasn't sure how much of the words were still visible. Valerio had probably heard worse words coming from the mouths of Dad's soldiers when they hadn't noticed his presence, but I didn't want to explain myself.

Seeing his pleading face, I caved. I nodded and sank down on the bed. "Can you help me remove it? But be careful, it's still tender."

Valerio leaped on the bed and kneeled behind me. I braced myself but he was surprisingly careful so I only felt the occasional tug. "Whoa," he said.

I got up and moved toward the mirror to catch a glimpse at it myself. The tattooist had focused on covering up "whore" in this session and not touched the scribbled Vitiello. The points of the crown pierced the name in places and the base of it covered the insult. Most of today had been spent contouring but he'd begun to color the lower part of the crown. I could still read "whore" but a fleeting glance wasn't enough anymore. Valerio climbed off the bed, his blond brows pulling together. I tensed as he scanned the tattoo closely.

"Why did they tattoo our name on your skin? Did they think you might forget you're a Vitiello?"

I shrugged, smiling. That's what I loved about Valerio. He always managed to surprise me with the way he was thinking. "They weren't the brightest candles on the cake. I suppose they needed to remind themselves."

Valerio nodded. "Yeah. Amo said they were stupid motherfuckers."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Make sure not to use that word when you're around Mom."

Valerio flashed me a grin. "I know." Then the smile died away as his eyes moved lower. My gaze followed his in the mirror to the word that always made me cringe. "I like the tattoo."

"It's not done yet."

Valerio rubbed his knuckles, still looking at my back. His knuckles were swollen. "What happened there?"

Valerio loved speed and action, so he was often bruised but only his knuckles was odd.

"I got into a fight with Mimo."

Mimo was one of Valerio's closest friends. "Why?" I asked but I had a sinking feeling this had something to do with me.

Valerio gave a shrug. I cocked an eyebrow expectantly.

“He said something about you.”

“What did he say?”

“He wanted to know if it’s true what people are saying.”

“Don’t let me pull everything out of your nose, Valerio. Just spit it out.”

“If the bikers tattooed that word on your back,” he mumbled, nodding at the tattoo. “And he asked how your ear looks...”

I swallowed. A small part of me had hoped that word wouldn’t get out, but even if Dad had told his men to shut their mouths, something like that always found a way out. They just needed to talk to their wives, who were all gossips. I hated how this made me feel, as if I had done something wrong, as if I had reason to be ashamed.

“I beat him up. His nose was bloody and his lip busted. I made him swear to never talk about it again,” Valerio said proudly. He touched my shoulder. “I’m going to beat up everyone who talks about you.”

I gave him a grateful smile. Valerio was easygoing, reminding me more of Uncle Matteo than Dad. Though Mom always said that Valerio was like her brother Fabiano when he was a boy. I only saw Fabiano once or twice per year and he definitely wasn’t easygoing or approachable anymore. That Valerio was getting into fights for me meant a lot. “Thanks. You’re the best littlest brother ever.”

Valerio scrunched up his nose. “I’m not that little. I’m taller than all my friends.”

I tousled his hair. “Of course.”

I put the cardigan on, tired of staring at the tattoo. Valerio hovered beside me. I could tell that there was more he wanted.

“What is it?”

He rubbed the back of his neck with a sheepish grin. “Can I see your ear?”

I froze, gingerly touching the diamond earpiece covering my missing earlobe right now. Valerio had an expression of childish curiosity that gave me the strength to open the ear clip. Valerio’s mouth forced an O when he saw my ear. The cut had begun to heal and once I started the laser treatment it would hopefully be even better, but right now it still wasn’t a nice sight.

“So cool!” Valerio said, moving closer so he could take a good look at it. I resisted the urge to cover it up.

“Why is that cool?” I asked, hoping he didn’t notice the slight tremor in my voice.

“My friends and I all compare our scars. They are battle wounds.”

“You think this is a battle wound?”

“Definitely. It’s like a medal for bravery. It shows you won a battle.”

I pursed my lips. “I don’t feel like I won,” I admitted. I wanted to slap myself. I shouldn’t unload my emotional bullshit on my little brother. He should worry about bike races and schoolwork, not my messed-up problems.

“Of course you did,” Valerio said aghast. “They are dead. And we Vitiellos showed them who’s boss.”

I nodded, but still felt emotional. I wasn’t sure why a tiny piece of ear and a soon-to-be-covered insult were taking such a toll on me. The men in my family had survived worse. Even Mom had already survived a bullet wound. I needed to be strong.

“Don’t you have homework to do?” I asked.

Valerio was clever enough to take the cue and left. The moment I was alone, a heavy feeling settled in my chest.

I felt alone in a sense I couldn’t explain. A loneliness only one person could disperse.

I picked up the phone but hesitated. I didn’t want to appear needy or weak. I had drawn certain boundaries for our relationship and I didn’t want to tear them down yet, but I needed someone who knew what had really gone down.

**I wish you were here**, I typed and sent the text off. Right afterward, I wished I could take it back.

I stared at my face in the mirror. I’d put on makeup for the tattoo appointment today, the first time since Earl’s death. Makeup always made me feel more like myself.

The sound of a bike engine made me perk up. I hurried toward the window in the guestroom across from mine just when Maddox pulled into the street with his Harley. My eyes grew wide. How could he be here already?

I hurried out of the room and downstairs where I came across Dad who was about to open the front door. His eyes cut to me, his expression hard. “What is he doing here? Did you ask him to come?”

I nodded, my throat too tight for words. Dad scanned my face and whatever he saw made him pause.

“Marci?”

“Can he please come in?” I got out.

Dad hesitated. I could see the battle in his eyes. Of course, Gianna picked this moment to arrive in her Mini Cooper, faster than allowed and coming to a halt with screeching tires.

“Great,” Dad muttered.

I could only agree. Gianna wasn’t always the most discreet person, especially when she thought someone should know something, and she definitely thought Maddox should know I was worried about being pregnant.



I’d been riding my bike in the blocks near Marcella’s home for about an hour, not even sure why except to feel closer to her when I got her message. I didn’t even pause to reply, instead I headed straight for her. I didn’t give a fuck if Vitiello wanted me there or not. Marcella needed me. That was all that mattered. If I had to ram a blade in his thigh again to see her, then I wouldn’t hesitate.

I got off my bike and glanced from Marcella’s old man to a woman with red hair getting out of a ridiculously small car. She was trying to usher her bodyguards away who tried to shield her from me. One of them had his gun drawn and looked ready to put a bullet in my head. I smiled grimly. I was feeling more and more welcome in the Famiglia every day...

“My God, stop hovering,” the woman thundered.

I wasn’t a hundred percent sure but I guessed she was Matteo’s wife. Earl had shown us a few photos from Vitiello family members once, but my main focus had always been on the men. I’d never had any interest in attacking the women. Until Earl decided to kidnap Marcella.

Luca said something to Marcella which made her take a step back, hovering inside the doorway. Her eyes darted to me, and in them, I could see the same longing that had made me drive around the area. Luca walked down the steps to meet Gianna halfway. He still had the slightest limp and I still felt sick satisfaction about it, especially after he spread the information about Earl's death by my hands.

Her bodyguards finally returned to the limousine they must have used to trail her. I decided to stay by my bike until the bodyguards were gone. I didn't trust them not to put a bullet in my head the second I turned my back on them.

The redhead glanced my way, more curious than hostile. Luca motioned for her to go inside but she waved him off. His face flashed with anger and finally she moved toward Marcella.

Luca headed for me. His expression left no doubt what he thought about my presence.

"You don't follow rules very well. In our world my word is law and you can't see my daughter when you see fit, White."

I smiled tightly. "She asked to see me, Vitiello, and Marcella's wellbeing will always matter more to me than your word."

Luca narrowed his eyes at me. "Why did she want to see you? If something is the matter, she should ask her family for help."

"You'll have to ask her why she didn't come to you. I won't discuss anything she entrusted me with."

Luca glanced back at Marcella who still hadn't moved from her spot in the doorway. Gianna was right beside her. With obvious disdain, Luca nodded. "You can come inside, but only in the living room. You won't go anywhere else and you definitely won't approach my wife or youngest son. Do you understand?"

"Understood."

Luca's eyes bored into me with warning. "My promise to Marcella doesn't extend to the possibility of you causing harm to anyone else from my family. Then I'll slaughter you without hesitation."

I gave him a grim smile. "I won't bother your wife or son."

Luca led the way and I followed a few steps behind him, casting the occasional glance at the bodyguards in the car and in a guardhouse next to the mansion. Marcella's face lit up when I ascended the steps.

Luca ushered her and the redhead into the house. I hesitated on the doorstep, overcome with a sense of surrealism that I was about to set foot inside Luca Vitiello's home. Not too long ago the only way this could have happened was through a home invasion. But even Earl had never been insane enough to consider attacking the Vitiello mansion. The street bustled with bodyguards and several of the surrounding houses were owned by Vitiello too.

I stepped into the brightly lit entrance hall of the mansion. Everything was modern and bright, a contrast to the old age of the building.

Gianna never took her eyes off me as I closed the door behind me.

I didn't know much about interior design but even I could tell that only the best material and furniture had been chosen for the place.

Marcella hovered beside the redhead, glancing at her father who still stood guard beside me. I had a feeling he had no intention of leaving any time soon.

"Can Maddox and I get privacy?"

"I don't want you alone with him, especially not here."

"I can play nanny and keep watch," the redhead suggested with a cheeky smile.

Luca scoffed. "I don't see how that's supposed to help."

"I can keep them from ripping their clothes off each other and getting it on your expensive leather couches."

My eyebrows shot up. Did she really just say that?

Marcella's cheeks turned red and fuck, the sight almost undid me. I'd never seen her this embarrassed. Talking sex in front of her old man was obviously a red flag.

"Dad," she said firmly. "You have to trust me. Maddox isn't a danger for me. Please let me have a word with him alone."

Luca searched her face and nodded eventually. "Gianna will be in the same room. And if I hear anything suspicious, I'll check on you."

I had to stifle the impulse to roll my eyes.

All that mattered was that I finally got to spend some time with Marcella.

# Chapter *Eleven*



I could tell Maddox wasn't feeling comfortable in our home, and I couldn't really blame him. But I was so glad to have him near. I was feeling terrifyingly frail today, as if a touch of air could break me apart. Dad's expression was warning but Maddox only briefly glanced his way before he turned to me. Seeing his worried face, I felt better. His concern for me was like balm on my worries. "Let's go into the living room."

Maddox followed me and Gianna trailed after us and closed the door to Dad's tense face. He probably wouldn't leave the foyer in case he needed to burst into the living room to save me.

Gianna let out a sigh, her eyes meeting mine. She rolled her eyes toward her purse. I mouthed 'later'.

She nodded then she stalked toward Maddox and held out her hand. "I'm Gianna, Marcella's aunt."

Surprise crossed Maddox's face before he shook Gianna's hand. I couldn't help but smile. This was a tiny step but I hoped Maddox could see that not everyone in my family was unwilling to give him a chance.

"I'm Maddox, pleasure to meet you," he drawled, the hint of his Texas accent coming through.

“You got yourself a biker cowboy,” Gianna said with a laugh. Then she narrowed her eyes at him. “I hope you know what kind of catch you made.”

Maddox looked straight at me and a small smile spread on his face, revealing his scar that looked like a dimple. “I sure do.”

“Good, now I’ll sneak out into the garden so you can have a few moments to yourself,” Gianna said and gave me a wink before she slipped out through the door and sat down on a chair on the patio with her back to us.

“I like her,” Maddox said. “She seems less stuck-up than the rest of your clan.”

“Gianna is cool.” My voice sounded off. My longing for Maddox’s touch was almost physically painful, but I didn’t want to be the one to rush into his arms like a damsel in distress.

His brows pulled together in obvious concern, and he immediately went over to me. He cupped my cheek, his calloused palm rough and yet perfect against my skin. “You okay?” he asked quietly.

I stared at him, wanting to nod yes but unable to do it. Maddox stepped closer until his warmth seeped into me like a comforting blanket. “Fuck, Snow White. Say something.”

“I just...” I trailed off, my eyes aching in a familiar way.

“You just?”

He waited patiently for me to find the words, but for the first time in my life I felt at a loss about what to say, how to describe the sensations overwhelming me.

Eventually, I settled for the most apparent thing. “I feel ashamed.”

Maddox bridged the remaining inches between us, his chest touching mine, and I sagged against him, burying my nose in the crook of his neck and released a shuddering breath. God, how I had missed him. How was it possible to feel the loss of someone’s touch this strongly after knowing them only such a short amount of time?

“Why the fuck would you feel ashamed?” He lowered his voice. “Not because you slept with me, right?”

That was definitely what many people would want me to feel ashamed about. My eyes darted up, seeing the trepidation in his face. “No,” I whispered. “For the tattoo and the ear...”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. That’s nothing you have to be ashamed for. If anyone should be ashamed, then it’s me because I was

unable to protect you. I'll forever hate myself for that."

He kissed the top of my head. Such a small gesture, but it radiated through my entire body, making me feel loved and validated.

"I know I shouldn't feel this way, but I just can't shake it. I feel like people finally have something they can use against me, something that'll hurt me."

"Only if you let them. Nobody can hurt you with thoughts or words if you don't let them. Channel your inner queen, Marcella, and make them bow."

I couldn't help but laugh against his skin. Maddox's familiar scent flooded my nose. That and his words lifted the weight off my heart. I pressed a soft kiss against his skin.

His hold on my neck tightened briefly. "Don't give me ideas. You don't know what your lips are doing to me," Maddox rumbled. Hearing his deep, sexy voice, my own body reacted with a wave of heat.

I tilted my head up to catch his mouth for a kiss, needing to feel him closer. My tongue teased his lips and Maddox immediately took me up on the invitation and deepened the kiss. We kissed like that for a long time, Maddox's warm hands stroking up and down my back, and soon the pulsing between my thighs became almost unbearable. I wanted to be with him, find comfort in his body. I didn't want to take it slow, even if that was what my brain told me to do. My heart and body had a mind of their own.

Our eyes met and Maddox pulled back with a groan. "You're giving me ideas, Snow White." I glanced at the growing bulge in his pants and smiled.

My eyes darted to the French doors where I could still see the back of Gianna's head. With a sigh, I took a step back from Maddox. "We can't."

"I definitely can," Maddox said, shifting his erection in his pants.

I laughed. "I don't doubt it."

Maddox leaned down, his voice dripping with desire. "What about you, Snow White? Are you as excited about our reunion as I am?"

I was. Embarrassingly so. I gave him a teasing smile instead of an answer. But Gianna caught my eyes in that moment, pointing at her watch and then at her purse.

The test.

I swallowed. "There's something else I have to discuss with you."

"Okay," Maddox said slowly. "Nothing good, I assume. Does your family want to kill me again?"

“Not today,” I said with a shrug. I worried my lower lip. “I asked Gianna to buy a pregnancy test for me.”

Maddox took a step back, his eyes growing huge. “Holy shit.” He glanced outside. “Holy shit.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“You’re dropping this on me as if this was nothing when it’s a huge ass deal,” he murmured.

“It’s probably nothing. I’m just being extra cautious because I didn’t get my period yesterday and we never used protection.”

“Fuck, I was such a stupid asshole.”

“We both should have known better.”

He shook his head. “I always used protection until you.” He groaned, running a hand through his hair, tousling it completely. “Fuck. You realize your old man is going to cut off my balls and stuff them in my mouth so I’ll choke on them.”

I couldn’t deny it. Dad would completely lose it if I was pregnant with Maddox’s child.

Maddox tilted his head, looking aghast. “How can this not be the thing that worries you most right now?”

I pursed my lips. “I want kids. Of course not now. But even if I got pregnant unplanned, I’d be fine. I’d love the baby and my family would support me.” I searched his eyes. “You wouldn’t have to worry about it.”

Maddox slid his arm around my waist. “Let me be clear. I sure as fuck would worry about it and take care of it and you. I never thought about having kids and definitely not now, but if I put a baby inside of you, then I’m going to be a father to it, and I’ll help you raise it.” He shook his head in shock again. “Holy shit. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope you’re not pregnant. I want us to figure us out first.”

“You’re right. I feel the same way.” I was glad that Maddox wanted to take care of the baby. If he had refused to even consider the possibility of taking care of it, he wouldn’t have been the right man for me. “I want my family to accept you before we grow our own family.”

I blushed. We were still too early in our relationship to consider kids but I wanted kids and I wanted to be with Maddox.

“I think we need to sit down and talk, really talk about how we can make this, make us, work,” I said quietly.

“We love each other. What else do we need?”

I had never said that I loved him. And I still didn't feel ready to say it aloud.

"I mean, *I love you*," Maddox said.

"Love doesn't exist in a void, it has to withstand outside influences, some of which won't be in its favor. Love isn't always enough."

"It took me twenty-five years to find a woman I love, and I sure as fuck won't let anyone take this love away from me."

"Do you think I want that? But we need to make sure we're on the same page, or at least in the same book."

"No book references, please. I don't even remember the last time I was forced to read."

"That was probably the problem, that people forced you to do something. Anyway, that's not the point. If I'm pregnant, we'll have to marry, and even if I'm not, people will expect us to seal the bond if we want to be together."

"Whoa, Snow White, one step after the other. Marriage is a big ass step for me, not sure I want to discuss it tonight."

Gianna knocked gently on the door and stepped inside. "Judging from the look of horror on biker boy's face, I guess you told him."

"I'm not horrified of a possible baby, only about losing my dick and balls to Luca's wrath."

Gianna nodded sagely. "I suppose that will be your fate if he finds out. But I should tell you that my sister Aria will probably assist him. I doubt she'll be happy if you get Marci pregnant out of wedlock and before she gets a degree."

Maddox let out a halfhearted laugh.

Gianna handed me the test. "Come on, take it and free biker boy from his panic."

"Or his balls," Maddox murmured.

"Okay," I said. I slipped out of the living room, the test safely hidden in my jeans, but Dad wasn't in the foyer. I doubted he was very far, so I quickly rushed into the bathroom to do the test.

When I walked back into the living room ten minutes later, Maddox was pacing the room. He froze when he spotted me.

"You get to keep your balls," I said with a shrug. I felt relieved. So far I hadn't allowed the idea of a possible pregnancy to take root in my mind, but now that I wasn't pregnant, I could allow my emotions out. Being pregnant

at this point would have made things infinitely more complicated, for me, for Maddox, for my family.

Maddox crossed the room and hugged me. "I'm relieved, but a tiny part of me is disappointed. We'd have made the prettiest babies."

I shrugged. "One day maybe."

"I'd never thought I'd say it, but one day maybe I'd like to knock you up and produce the prettiest babies on the planet. And if there's anyone I'd ever consider marrying, then it's you."

"As entertaining as this conversation is, I need to go back home, and you should probably emerge from this room before Luca loses his meager amount of patience."

I peered up at Maddox, reluctant to let him leave but Gianna was right. Dad would completely lose it if Maddox didn't leave soon.

Maddox tightened his hold on me. "Maybe I can sneak into your room through your window. Do you have a fire ladder or something like that?"

I laughed. "Even if we had, you'd end up with a bullet in your head before you could reveal yourself."

"And even if I revealed my identity," he said, then in a much lower voice. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yes," I said.

"When will I see you again?"

I should probably ask Dad, but I didn't want to have to ask permission every time I met Maddox. "I have my next tattoo appointment tomorrow?"

The tattooist had advised me to wait between appointments but I wanted to get the tattoo done as quickly as possible. Every day that Earl's words were still readable was one too many.

"I'll be there."

Gianna cleared her throat, her hand on the door handle.

I pulled myself away from Maddox but he tugged me against his chest once more and stole another kiss before I could finally bring distance between us. When Gianna opened the door, Dad was already in the foyer, looking grim.

Maddox was clever enough to keep a distance between us as he followed Gianna and me into the foyer.

"Next time, you better send me a message before you drop by," Dad said as a way of goodbye as he led Maddox outside.

Maddox gave him a sardonic smile before he sent me a wink. Then he disappeared from view and Dad closed the door. He turned around, searching my eyes. I wasn't sure what he was looking for.

"I should go," Gianna said.

"I suppose you kept your eyes on them the entire time," Dad muttered sarcastically.

Gianna rolled her eyes. "She was alone with him for weeks, Luca. I think she can handle a few minutes with him. Marcella isn't a little girl anymore. She had to grow up to survive, like we all do eventually."

Dad's expression twisted with anger but also with guilt. When Gianna was gone, I approached him and touched his arm. "I'm fine, Dad. You can't protect me from the fights lying ahead of me, but as your daughter, I'm well equipped to win them, so please don't worry. Let me handle my problems with my own weapons."

"I'd never thought watching you grow up would be so hard. I just want to lock you into a tower, far away from all the dangers of this world."

I pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I can handle danger."

Dad nodded, and I headed upstairs, back into my room.

Tonight, I wouldn't seek shelter in Amo's room. I had to make good on my words and find my figurative lady balls.



The next morning Maddox waited at the tattoo parlor as promised. The appointment took six hours, and he held my hand the entire time despite the disapproving looks from the bodyguards. We didn't talk much. There were too many curious ears around, but just having him there made things so much easier for me.

Once the tattooist was done, Maddox admired my back. "Snow White, that tattoo will piss off the haters so much."

I smiled but quickly shook my head when the tattoo artist wanted to hand me a mirror so I could check his work. "I'd rather wait until I'm home."

*Until I'm alone*, was what I didn't say.

Maddox's lips tightened with worry, but I gave him a firm smile.

"It's really amazing. Earl will turn in his grave, trust me," he said.

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For being here.”

Maddox shook his head, lowering his voice even further. “I’m responsible for this shit. I’ll always be there for you if you need me.”

I nodded. My bodyguards motioned at the watch. We were supposed to be home by three p.m. and needed to hurry.

“I wish I could see you tonight,” Maddox murmured shortly before I slipped into the limousine that would take me home.

“I know,” I said. I longed for him too, but another visit would probably send Dad over the edge. “I’m going to Grownl’s shelter in the morning to visit Santana again.”

“I’ll be there. Then I can check on the two dogs I saved from Cody’s junkyard.”

Maddox looked ready to kiss me goodbye but I gave a small shake of my head.

“Not in public, hmm?” he said. I didn’t miss the bitter note to his voice.

Maybe I was being a coward but I had enough on my plate and couldn’t deal with another public scandal right now.



I didn’t look at my tattoo until I was alone in my room that evening. After changing into my nightgown, I removed the cover and checked the tattoo in the mirror. I’d never considered getting a tattoo. I had seen the occasional piece of body art I’d admired for its artistic value, but I’d never understood the need to decorate my skin in such a permanent way. Earl White hadn’t given me a choice.

Mom always said women weren’t given many choices in our world, even today. Every choice was a duty in disguise with only one right decision, and endless options to fail.

But I had taken my choice back, had ripped it from the cold, dead hands of Earl White. The ugly words he’d forced into my skin were no longer visible. The tattoo artist Dad had paid extra had done a fabulous job. What once read “Vitiello Whore”, now simply stated Vitiello and where the whore had been below my name, I now had a gorgeous crown. It was

intricate with gemstones and red satin inlays. The contrast of the red against my pale skin was gorgeous. It really was a masterpiece.

People had called me spoiled princess for so long, I might as well ink a crown into my skin. Maddox was right. Many people would be annoyed by my choice of tattoo. But I'd rather they despise me for being a spoiled princess who crowned herself than that they pitied me for words forced into my skin.

My choice.

# Chapter *Twelve*



I rode through New York until the late hours. I preferred the hum of my bike to the deafening silence in my new apartment. I'd never lived alone. Most of my life I'd lived under the same roof with loud-mouthed bikers. Silence was foreign to me.

I had on occasion felt lonely in the past, especially when I was younger and trying to find my place in Earl's house and in the club. But afterward, I'd always had the company of my biker brothers or club girls. Now I didn't have anyone to turn to.

The people I'd once called brothers were far away and possibly the enemy, and the people I'd called the enemy? Still wanted me dead. My list of enemies was stacking up dangerously high. And the woman who was the reason for everything? I couldn't even see her to convince myself that it was worth it.

I was becoming a fucking pussy.

When I returned to my place shortly after midnight with a six pack of beer to keep me company, I realized that I'd missed three messages while on the road. One was from Luca, one was from Growl and the last was from Marcella.

I opened the latter first, worried she'd needed me and I hadn't seen her message in time.

But all it said was,

**You are right. They're going to be pissed because of the crown.**

**P.S. I miss you.**

I grinned and quickly typed a reply.

**I hope I'll get to see their stupid faces when you reveal the tattoo.**

**P.S. I miss you too.**

I shook my head. I'd never texted with a girl like this, telling her I missed her, any kind of emotional bullshit really.

After a gulp of my beer, I opened Luca's message.

**Be at Growl's at nine am.**

No greeting, no reason why, just a simple order.

I wrote and deleted several replies that would have given me plenty of satisfaction, but probably would have made Luca less inclined to let Marcella see me.

I emptied the rest of my bottle before I finally wrote,

**Yes, boss.**

He'd probably realize the hidden sarcasm but it was the best I could do.

Now the message from Growl wasn't all that surprising. I opened it.

**If you want, you can have breakfast with the shelter crew at 8.**

I smiled. Growl was really an okay guy.

**I'll be there. Should I bring anything?**

I'd actually never been invited to breakfast. It was such an ordinary thing to do, especially considering how Growl looked.

**Be hungry.**

That wouldn't be the problem. I'd spent the last few mornings eating stale gas station donuts and coffee that had a chicken-broth aftertaste.

When I pulled up in the driveway of the shelter, Growl's car was already parked in front of the house. Another car I had never seen before was parked right beside it.

I felt strangely nervous, which was completely ridiculous. But this felt like the first test of many to become part of Marcella's world, and while I'd never wanted to be part of it, I did now because of her. Even in my wildest dreams, I couldn't imagine Marcella as an old lady who spoke only when spoken to and accepted the wild lifestyle of a motorcycle club. Either I became part of her world, or our worlds would never merge.

The door to the house opened and Growl waved me in.

I was surprised to find a beautiful woman with brown hair in her late thirties inside preparing pancakes and hash browns. Two massively muscled pitbulls sat beside her. A tattoo peeked out under her high ponytail and it was obvious that she was very fit.

“Your wife?” I asked Growl.

Pride and adoration filled his harsh face. “Yes, my wife Cara.”

Cara turned, wiped her hands on a dishtowel and came toward me, followed by her two dogs. She held out her hand with a warm smile. “Nice to meet you. Growl told me a lot about you.”

I grimaced. “I doubt anything good.”

She shook her head with a smile at her husband. “Actually, most of it was good.”

I glanced at Growl, who looked mildly uncomfortable.

He went into the next room and gruffly ordered the shelter kids to come in for breakfast. Soon everyone was gathered around the old wooden table. Four shelter kids who looked as if they’d had it at least as rough as the dogs in the kennels outside, Cara, Growl, and me.

Conversations mostly revolved around the dogs, and for a while I forgot that there even existed something like the enmity between the Famiglia and what was left of Tartarus.

The sound of an engine made Growl get up from his place. Soon Cara and the guys disappeared.

“Luca arrived with a few other soldiers you’ll probably be working with soon.”

I followed Growl’s gaze out toward the black limousines that had pulled up. Luca got out of the first car. A part of me hoped Marcella would be with him but I wasn’t surprised when she didn’t get out. Luca probably didn’t want his men to see us together so soon—if ever.

Three men followed Luca into the kitchen, all of them around my age, I would guess.

I told them what I knew about former hiding places of Tartarus but stayed vague when it came to Gunnar and my brother. I might be working with Luca for Marcella but now that she was safe, I wouldn’t put my brother in more danger than he already was.

The three men by Luca’s side eyed me with suspicion but neither of them was particularly unfriendly. I didn’t trust them anyway. Maybe it was

habit. At this point it was difficult to say if I could trust my instincts. My enemy compass was completely out of whack.



After a two-hour meeting, the three soldiers left in one of the limousines but Luca stayed.

“I guess you’ll stay to watch Marcella?” I guessed, not bothering to hide my annoyance. Marcella was nineteen, not nine, a fact that Luca obviously preferred to ignore.

“Growl will keep an eye on her. I can trust my men. I’m only here to tell you that you’ll do a few missions with my men once your injuries have healed.”

“Thanks for your concern. I’m fit enough.”

Luca ignored my comment and got up. He was on his way down the driveway when another car arrived. This time Marcella got out of it.

Like last time I’d seen her at the shelter, she was in jeans and a simple tee, looking like an ordinary girl. If a girl like Marcella could ever really be called ordinary. She always stood out no matter what she did.

Luca and Marcella exchanged a few words before he finally, thankfully, took his leave. I headed out of the house and toward her, eager to meet her. Her face lit up when she spotted me, but a hint of tension remained.

Steps sounded behind me and I didn’t have to turn around to know that Growl was following me to keep watch.

I didn’t give a fuck. I was tired of keeping my distance to the woman that haunted my dreams.

I wrapped my arms around Marcella, lifted her off the ground and kissed her passionately. She made a sound of surprise against my lips but didn’t pull away. When we finally pulled apart, Growl was only a few steps away.

Growl glowered at me before he sent Marcella a questioning look. “Is he allowed to be so close to you?”

I really liked him most of the time but in moments like this I wanted to kick his tattooed ass.

“I want him close,” Marcella said, her expression taking on a stubborn gleam. As if to get her point across, she pressed up to my side, daring

Growl to argue with her. He didn't, but I could tell he didn't like it. For him, only her father's ruling mattered.

"Relax, Growl. Marcella and I have been alone before, and I can protect her. Nobody will hurt her as long as she's with me." I wrapped my arm around Marcella's narrow waist and winked at her.

"Maddox and I want to talk alone. We'll be over at the kennels, you won't have to follow us," Marcella said.

"You know Luca gave me clear orders," Growl muttered, not necessarily hostile.

"Dad trusts me."

"I come in peace, Growl. How about you show us where the dogs that I saved are? I'd like to say hi to them."

Growl's suspicion was replaced by interest immediately. "They're doing better, but the one with the infected gash on its side is still struggling, and both are malnourished but are slowly gaining weight."

Marcella gave me a knowing look. She was clever enough to realize I'd mentioned the dogs to get on Growl's good side. He was too big of an animal lover to pass up on the chance to talk about the two saved beasts.

"Follow me. I'm keeping them away from the other dogs for now. They got riled up when they saw the others," Growl said.

Growl obviously was willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, but I wasn't sure if the rest of Luca's men and especially Marcella's family would do the same. Still, I saw today as a step in the right direction.

I linked hands with Marcella, and for once she allowed the public display of affection, though it wasn't really all that public.

The bigger Rottweiler rested on a huge dog cushion, its side bandaged. The other dog trotted over to us and regarded us curiously. Neither of them looked aggressive in the slightest. I patted it through the bars before Marcella and I moved to another cage where Growl kept Santana. She jumped up against the cage when she spotted Marcella.

"She missed you."

Marcella smiled and opened the cage, allowing Santana out. The dog briefly sniffed at me but then danced around Marcella's legs again. Marcella grabbed a leash and put Santana on it. "How about we take a short walk with her? She needs to get used to the leash," Marcella said.

Santana shook her head and bit into the leash, obviously not too keen on it.

“In the past, being put on the leash always meant that she was taken to the dog fights. I guess that’s why she hates it so much,” I said.

Marcella’s face softened with pity. “I never thought about it but I’m sure you’re right.”

We followed a narrow trail into the woods behind the shelter. To my relief, Growl didn’t follow us.

“Finally,” I said.

Marcella glanced behind us then up at me. “I know it’s annoying that my father always has people watch us, but eventually he’ll see that you can be trusted.”

We eventually came to a clearing where Marcella released the dog from the leash so it could run around a bit.

I pulled her against me again and kissed her. Not bothering to waste any time, I dipped my tongue into her, tasting her. Marcella sighed against my mouth, her body softening against mine. My hands cupped her ass, squeezing, and enjoying the moan she let out. I wasn’t the only one who was horny obviously. I allowed my lips to trail down her throat to her clavicles while I kept massaging her ass cheeks. I traced one of my hands to her front and slid it below her t-shirt, my fingers finding her bra before dipping below. When I touched her nipple, it puckered under the pad of my finger. Both Marcella and I groaned.

Marcella pulled back and was about to kiss me again but then her eyes darted to something behind me.

“She’s watching us,” Marcella mumbled.

I followed her gaze. The Rottweiler sat on its haunches and watched us, panting. “She won’t tell on us, don’t worry.”

Marcella rolled her eyes. “That’s not what I mean, but it’s kind of strange to have her watch us, don’t you think?”

“Snow White, I’m horny as fuck. An angry bear could be watching us and I’d still eat you out like my last treat.”

Marcella raised one dark eyebrow. “You aren’t eating me out yet.”

“Oh, but I’ll be doing it in a few minutes from now.” I kissed her again, my fingers teasing her nipple, twisting and tugging the little nub until Marcella was writhing against me. She tore her lips away from mine, looking up at me with hooded eyes. “Don’t you remember that I said I want to take things slow.”

“Does that mean you don’t want me to take care of you?” I said in a low voice.

The conflict shone in her eyes. If I were a better person, I would have stopped teasing her nipple and squeezing her perky ass cheek to make the decision easier for her. But I’d never in my life desired a woman more than I did Marcella. And not just that. “I just want to be close to you after the shitshow of the last few days. I want to remind myself why it’s worth it.”

“Do you need reminding?”

“When I look at you, that’s reminder enough, but whenever I see you, I just want to be as close to you as possible.”

Marcella stood on her tiptoes and captured my lips for another kiss. “I know what you mean. I feel the same way. I promised myself to take things slow because it seemed like the reasonable thing to do considering how our relationship had started.”

Surprise washed through me hearing her say that she considered what we had a relationship.



Maddox looked stunned by my comment.

“You don’t think we’re in a relationship?”

Maddox let out a disbelieving laugh. “Girl, I want you to be my woman. I want everyone to know. Of course, I want us to be in a relationship so I can tell everyone that you’re mine and that they need to stay the fuck away from you. But so far you’ve kept me at arm’s length especially in public. I wasn’t sure you knew what you wanted. Maybe you only wanted a bit of fun with me.”

Maddox was right. I hadn't owned up to my feelings for Maddox in public. "I'm being a coward. I know. But I just need a little more time to make us public but that doesn't mean I don't want us to be together behind closed doors. Is that enough for you for now?"

"I take whatever you're willing and ready to give me."

I pushed up on my tiptoes and kissed Maddox even harder. He didn't need any encouragement though. His fingers slipped back inside my bra and tugged at my nipple in the most delicious way. The sensations spread all the way to my pulsating center.

"I need you," I whispered.

"I'm here," Maddox murmured.

"I need your touch, your mouth."

Maddox fell to his knees before me without warning and shoved my shirt up, leaving hot, open-mouthed kisses on my naked belly while his fingers unbuttoned my jeans. When the last button popped open, he tugged my jeans and panties down impatiently.

My eyes darted to Santana once more. She'd stretched out on the grass and was watching us through half closed eyes. I wished she would just sleep. I wasn't sure if I could let loose with her watching us like that.

Maddox tugged at the legs of my jeans until I stepped out of them, standing in the middle of the woods completely naked from my belly down. I was about to voice my uncertainty, but then Maddox pressed a firm kiss to my mount, right against my clit. I gasped and held on to his head.

Any protest died on my mouth as Maddox dove between my folds, teasing my clit with his piercing. I threw my head back, staring up at the cloudy sky as Maddox circled my nub.

"Part your legs for me, Snow White, so I can really taste you."

I widened my stance, feeling the cool autumn air touch my heated flesh before Maddox's mouth covered it once more. I moaned when his tongue pushed into me. My hips rocked back and force driving him deeper.

I rode Maddox's tongue with abandon, sliding back and forth, almost delirious from the feel of it against my clit. Maddox allowed me to chase my own pleasure, to take it. He watched me and eventually I returned his gaze, ignoring my hesitation and embarrassment, and enjoying to see how Maddox gave me pleasure with his lips and tongue. He smirked against my pussy and cupped my clit with his lips. My entire being seemed to bundle in

this small spot until the sensations radiated outward and through my entire body.

I tensed and gasped as the wave of pleasure overcame me. My legs nearly gave in but Maddox's strong hands on my hips kept me steady. As I allowed the waves of my orgasm to claim my body, I was unable to move, but Maddox kept up the gentle ministrations of his tongue, and every stroke of it along my sensitive flesh sent another shockwave of pleasure through me. I fought against the louder sounds wanting to burst out of me.

My lips parted. I let my head fall back, breathing heavily as I stared up at the sky. Maddox's lips closed around my clit, and at first the sensations were too much and I wanted to push him away, but he softened his approach and only lightly teased me with his lips until I began to rock against him again. I was drunk on this feeling, on Maddox' touch, on him, drunk on the way he made me feel, not just with his fingers and mouth and cock, but also with his smile, his words, his closeness, especially how I felt like I was enough when I was with him, allowed to be imperfect.

A twig snapped and I froze. Maddox pulled away, wiping his mouth before he stood. He looked around.

"Was I too loud? Do you think someone saw us? Maybe Growl?"

Maddox gave me a wry smile and pulled me against him once more. "You weren't loud enough, if you ask me. Next time I want you to scream out my name."

I nudged his shoulder, glancing around once more. "I don't want Growl to tell Dad he caught us having sex in the middle of the woods."

"We weren't having sex, but I'm up for it." Seeing my annoyed expression, he added, "I doubt it was Growl. He seems like a guy who knows how to stalk someone without making his presence known. I bet it was one of the horny teenage boys."

My cheeks flamed. "You really think someone saw us?" I'd hoped it had been my imagination.

Another twig snapped and this time Maddox tore away from me and raced into the line of trees. More twigs broke and steps thundered away. Then someone cried out and a dull thud sounded.

I scrambled for my underwear and jeans and quickly got dressed. Two minutes later, Maddox appeared again, dragging one of the shelter boys behind him by his collar. Maddox held a phone in his hand. "Caught this one trying to send a video of us off to his friends."

The color drained from my face. “Did he send it off?” I asked, not able to hide my panic. Dad would freak out, and after my striptease video, this one would make even bigger waves. I’d definitely never have to worry about my reputation again.

“I got to him in time. But we need to tell Growl. He needs to know that this kid planned to release material of the Capo’s daughter.”

“Don’t tell him!” the kid begged, but Maddox shoved him to the ground, looking furious. “Shut up. You’re lucky I didn’t ram my knife into your heart.”

I put Santana back on the leash and Maddox, the boy and I made our way back to the house.

This showed me again that Maddox and I would always have to be careful what we did in public, even when we thought we were alone outside of our homes. People were eager to get more information about me, especially if it was something as scandalous as public intercourse.

Growl immediately headed our way when he spotted Maddox dragging the kid behind him.

“What happened?” he asked, scanning me from head to toe. I’d checked twice if I was dressed properly and my hair wasn’t disheveled, but I still felt as if he could see in my face that I’d allowed Maddox to go down on me in the woods.

“The kid recorded Marcella and me and was about to send the video to some friends when I confiscated the thing.”

The look that Growl gave the boy would have terrified even hardened men. “Is that true?”

The boy nodded. “You know I’m low on money. There are people who would pay good money for something about her.”

Growl stalked toward Maddox and took the kid from him, grabbing him by the throat, but he looked at me. “What kind of video?”

My cheeks heated. “A very private moment.”

Maddox gave me a dirty smile and I sent him my best death glare.

“Give me the phone,” Growl ordered. Maddox handed it to him.

“Don’t watch it,” I said firmly. “As I said, it’s private.”

“I just wanted to check if he really didn’t send it off.”

“He didn’t,” Maddox muttered. “I checked. I know how to operate a phone.”

Growl nodded. He seemed almost relieved. He probably didn't want to risk seeing more of me by accident. He respected Dad too much.

"What now?" I asked with a nod toward the kid.

"I'll have to call your father and give him a report."

"The kid isn't a member of the Famiglia, so he isn't Dad's concern but yours."

"The kid tried to mess with you so he's your father's concern," Growl rasped.

"Do you really want to be responsible for the death of one of your shelter kids?" It was a low blow but I really didn't want Dad to get involved. He'd only get angry at Maddox again, when it had been both our decision to get it on in the woods.

Growl peered down at the kid who'd started sniffing, looking absolutely miserable and scared shitless since my father had been mentioned.

Growl finally gave a terse nod. "All right. This one time." He grabbed the kid again. "If you ever do anything like this again, I'll kill you myself. Got it? It'll be an act of mercy."

The kid nodded rapidly.

Maddox and I went over to his bike.

"When will you ride with me?" he asked when he mounted his Harley. Growl was getting his car ready to take me home.

"Give my dad a few more weeks to get used to you, okay? He told me you'll be working with a few of his men in the next few weeks to search Tartarus warehouses and hiding places."

"I doubt we'll find anything of interest. Even the stupidest asshole won't come anywhere near the city now that Earl's dead and rumor has it that I'm working with the Famiglia."

"What about your brother? Is he safe?"

"For now. But living the life he does, safety really isn't a top priority."

"Dad won't go after him, right?"

"I won't lead him to my brother and if Gray's half as clever as I think he'll make sure to stay far away from your father and his men."

"Good," I said then I wrapped my arms around Maddox's neck. "Maybe you can accompany me to the mayor's part in a few weeks."

His eyebrows shot up. "You sure?"

“Not as my official date,” I amended. “But as my bodyguard? So people get used to you as part of the Famiglia and won’t be too shocked once we reveal we’re together.”

“From what I hear, people are talking about it anyway.”

“I know, but I want to reveal this part of my life on my own terms and not bow to the force of speculations.”

Maddox nodded with a small, tense smile. “Then I’ll be your bodyguard.”

I kissed him. “Be patient with me. This is all new to me. I used to be a complete control freak when it came to my public appearances. So many things are now out of my control since the kidnapping, I at least want to decide when to make our relationship official.”

Maddox took my hand and kissed my palm. “I’ll be patient as long as you need me to. After how badly I fucked up, I’m just happy that you want me in your life at all and didn’t let your old man kill me like he wants to do.”

“Thanks, Maddox.”

# Chapter *Thirteen*



In the weeks between our make-out session in the woods and the party of the mayor, Maddox and I only met at the dog shelter to walk Santana—without any more make-out sessions, except for a few kisses—and during a few meetings with Grawl and his enforcer team. Dad slowly introduced me to more and more of his soldiers, even though I hadn't been inducted to the Famiglia yet. I had a feeling he was trying to push it back as much as possible, but I was determined to get it over with before the end of the year.

First, I needed to survive my first public appearance since the kidnapping. I hadn't met with friends or gone to college in the last few weeks. Dad wanted me out of the public eye and I was glad for a few weeks of quiet to come to terms with what had happened too.

Unfortunately, that meant I was unreasonably tense before the party. People had always watched me at parties, but tonight I'd be the center of attention. Everyone wanted to know how I'd fared, if I was a shadow of my former self.

Rumors of how the MC had disfigured me were still making the rounds. Speculations about my first social appearance were exploding. So far my family hadn't confirmed any public appearances, not even the mayor's party

tonight. Only he and his family, as well as the security team had been informed. But I knew the information was probably already leaked and spreading like wildfire. Everyone at the party would be dying to see my new blemishes, especially the invited press. The few photos of me hidden in oversized hoodies definitely hadn't satisfied their hunger for a good story. They wanted scandalous, bloody deeds.

I slipped into the smooth purple fabric of my dress. Skin-tight silk, hugging my body and leaving my back bare, allowing everyone to see the tattoo between my shoulder blades. I'd considered hiding it under a layer of cloth, but it wouldn't make people talk less. Everyone who'd come to see my fall would see me rising from the goddamn ashes. I was my father's daughter.

I brushed my fingers across the selection of earrings Dad, Matteo and Mom had bought for me over the last few weeks. My ear had completely healed by now and wearing jewelry wasn't uncomfortable anymore. I chose an eye-catching white gold piece that ended in a diamond-studded teardrop and snaked all the way up my ear. I put on a matching necklace and wore my hair up so the earring as well as the tattoo would be prominently displayed.

A soft knock sounded and Mom poked her head in. She too was already dressed for the party, looking angelic in a pearlescent dress with her blonde hair framing her face. The contrast between us couldn't have been bigger than in this moment. Me with the tattoo and dark eyes, purple lipstick, and nail polish.

"Femme fatale," said Mom with a look of awe.

"You really like it?" I asked, turning around so Mom could see the back and my tattoo. Of course, she'd seen it before but I'd never displayed it for the public eye.

"A crown for New York's princess," Mom said and came in to touch my cheek. "You are you, Marcella. You aren't me and you definitely aren't what people want you to be. Be you, unapologetically, all right? Your father and I have your back."

"Thanks, Mom," I said quietly, trying not to get emotional and ruin my makeup.

"Oh, and a bike just pulled up. I assume it's your Maddox."

My Maddox. Mom still hadn't met him yet. Dad had refused to let him near her or Valerio. "I asked him to accompany me as my bodyguard."

“Your dad mentioned it.”

“But he doesn’t approve.”

Mom gave me a knowing smile. “You know your father. I’d like to meet him.”

My eyes widened. “You mean now?”

“Yes, why not? Or don’t you want me to meet your boyfriend, that’s what he is?”

“Yes, he is. Not officially, but I want him to be...”

“I’ll ask him in so he and I can get to know each other.”

“You sure Dad will approve?” I asked, smiling ironically.

“I know how to handle your father,” Mom said before she slipped out of my room.

As if I hadn’t been nervous enough about my first social appearance, now Maddox would meet my mother for the first time. I wanted Mom to like Maddox, and Maddox to like her. I wanted my family to accept Maddox one day and for us all to gather around the dining table and celebrate family festivities together like one happy family.

I took a deep breath, gathering my courage for what lay ahead.



I pulled up in front of the Vitiello mansion, ready to wait until Marcella emerged with her bodyguards. I’d gotten many curious looks as I’d rode my bike through New York in a business suit, tie, and cufflinks and all. I had never worn a business suit in my life, but for Marcella, I’d walked into one of those fancy Italian designer stores and bought a slim-fit tailored two-piece, according to the vendor. For Marcella, I would have worn a fucking clown costume if it would have made her happy.

That she took me to this party meant a lot to me.

The door opened but instead of Marcella with her entourage, Luca stood in the doorway. At once worry overcame me. Had something happened to Marcella? Wouldn't she attend the party? Or maybe she'd decided not to take a simple biker with her after all. Even if I only paraded as her bodyguard, people would think what they wanted and probably come closer to the truth than Marcella wanted.

Luca surprised me again when he motioned me in. I got off my bike and hurried toward him. "What's wrong?" I asked as I entered the mansion.

Luca's expression was so tense it only increased my concern.

Then my eyes landed on Aria Vitiello, in all her blonde glory, smiling at me. No wonder that Marcella was too beautiful for words. "Now I know where Marcella got her beauty."

Luca's eyes sharpened in warning. "My wife wants to meet you."

I could hear that he definitely didn't approve of the meeting.

Aria strode toward me, her long dress letting it look as if she was gliding over the floor without actually touching it. She extended a hand, and I didn't miss how Luca took a step closer to us. What the hell did he think? That I'd attack Marcella's mother right in his mansion? There were more pleasant ways to commit suicide.

"It's nice to meet you, Maddox. Marcella told me a lot about you."

I shook her slender hand and gave her my best son-in-law smile. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Vitiello."

Her eyes seemed to see all the way into my soul. She wanted to see for herself who I was and if I deserved her daughter. And fuck it made me more nervous than Luca's murderous glare ever had. I never cared for Luca's approval. But I wanted Marcella's mother to like me.

"Are you nervous about tonight?" Aria asked pleasantly. She was definitely warmer than Luca—which really didn't say much—but she, too, was still wary of me.

"Not really, ma'am," I said. "Everyone's focus will be on Marcella, and mine too. All that matters for me is to make tonight a success for Marcella."

"Everyone will be looking at you and her. It won't go unnoticed that Marcella chose a former Tartarus biker as her company."

Former Tartarus biker. It still sounded strange to my ears. Part of me was still a Tartarus biker and would always be.

I shook my head. "I'm not her company. She asked me to join her as a bodyguard."

Aria gave me a look that suggested I couldn't really believe that. "Luca's bodyguards would have sufficed. She wants you by her side."

"That may be, but as long as she isn't comfortable to call me her company, I'm her bodyguard. Marcella makes the rules and I'll follow her, if necessary, to the gates of Hades."

Aria's smile became warmer and she squeezed my forearm.

"Where is he?" a boy called, thundering down the steps like an avalanche.

"Valerio," Luca growled.

But the boy didn't seem to hear him as he stumbled to a halt beside his mother. He was tall and lanky, with blonde slightly curly hair and big gray eyes. "You are the biker who kidnapped Marci."

"That's a rude greeting," Aria scolded him.

"But he's right. I should own up to my sins," I said. "And you are Marcella's youngest brother."

"When can I ride your bike?"

"Whenever you want," I said but amended when Aria's scolding glare hit me. "After you get your mother's permission of course."

Heavy steps sounded and Amo appeared up on the landing in a dark three-piece suit. He groaned when he spotted me before he sauntered down the staircase. "Now I have to see him in my own home too?"

"As long as I live, it's my house," Luca said.

"If you keep inviting enemies, that's not going to be long."

"Amo!" Aria shouted.

Valerio's wide eyes slanted to his father whose face was stone. "Let that be my concern," he said.

"What is your concern?" Marcella asked.

My head whirled around so fast I was surprised my neck didn't break. Marcella stood on the top of the staircase, an apparition right out of my wildest dreams.

My breath lodged in my chest. She was dressed in a plum-colored silk dress that hugged her curves. Just thinking about how the soft material touched her smooth skin in all the places I burned to touch made me jealous of a piece of clothing. The silky material bundled in front of her chest in soft folds, creating an enticing dip between her breasts.

A diamond-studded earpiece covered her missing earlobe. She looked like a million dollars. She looked like all the money in the world wasn't enough and would never be. I'd been looking for an earpiece for her as a gift for Christmas, but then I'd decided to give it to her today.

Nothing and no one had ever made me want to be a better man more than seeing this otherworldly woman. Every sinner would become a saint just to be granted absolution from her.

Marcella Vitiello was a woman who knew her worth, and fuck, she was worth so much more than I could ever afford. I had nothing to offer to her, except for my love, my devotion and my fucking life. I'd never considered telling a woman I love you but I had told Marcella and right then I wanted to scream it from the rooftops. Maybe it was hopeless infatuation, or mad obsession. Most definitely both. Fuck, but if this wasn't love, I didn't know what else could be.

When I finally blinked again after what felt like forever, I realized the entire Vitiello clan was watching me. I wasn't easily embarrassed but even I felt caught, especially when Luca and Aria exchanged a meaningful look I couldn't read and Amo shook his head with a disgusted look. Only Valerio seemed as clueless as I often felt these days.

Marcella met her mother's gaze and something only women understand seemed to pass between them because Aria touched Luca's arm and after a few whispered words, they all disappeared into the living room, giving Marcella and me privacy.

Marcella began to descend the stairs, her eyes locked on mine.

I shook my head as if trying to wake from a dream, and her smile widened as if she knew exactly what she was doing to me.

I walked toward her when she reached the last step, impatient to be close to her.

"They won't know what hit them when they see you," I told her, kissing her, not caring if I got lipstick all over my mouth. "You are absolutely breathtaking, Snow White. Sometimes I still wait for the moment I wake from this dream and you turn out to be a figment of my imagination."

"I'm very real, now more than ever."

"You are still perfect in every sense that matters. The marks don't change you."

"Oh, but they have," she said.

"They only made you stronger."

“I guess we’ll see today, right?”

“Today won’t be easy for you, I know. People will watch your every step and your decision to take me with you only makes things harder for you.” I’d seen the headlines from the tabloids in the last few days. All of them had speculated about Marcella’s first appearance and her mental state, some even speculating that she was suicidal or had a social phobia from trauma.

She smiled grimly. “They want to see me cower. They want me ashamed because of the video, ashamed for my ear and tattoo. They have been waiting too long for that moment to come.”

She was her father’s daughter, with a backbone of steel and endless pride. She was a queen who didn’t need a crown to rule, but it was all the more fitting that she’d crowned herself by destroying the last sign of my uncle that remained.

“And they’ll have to wait another lifetime,” I growled.

Marcella nodded. She was trying to hide the hint of anxiety in her eyes. Social events had been her territory, a place she felt perfectly at home, her turf over which she’d ruled for years. Now she needed to prove herself again and maybe for the first time in her life, she feared she wouldn’t prevail.

I cleared my throat and pulled out the earpiece I’d bought for Marcella. I hadn’t even thought of wrapping it up nicely, instead I now had to present the piece of jewelry in my palm. “I know this probably isn’t worth half as much as the earpiece you’re wearing right now, but when I saw it, I had to buy it for you because like this phoenix you’ll rise from the ashes and burn all the haters.”

Marcella’s eyes widened as she regarded the phoenix ear cuff. She removed the diamond piece from her ear and put my present on. The tail of the phoenix curled over the place where her earlobe should have been and the rest of the creature snaked along her ear and it reared its head at the top. The tail and the wings were adorned with red gemstones while the rest of the creature had jade, topaz, and onyx gemstones all over its body and head. It had cost me most of what had been left of the money I’d found but seeing the look of awe on Marcella’s face as she admired herself in the mirror above the fireplace in the foyer was worth so much more than all the money in the world.

She swallowed as she met my gaze in the mirror. “Thank you.”

I nodded, overcome with unwelcome emotions. “Let’s go burn some haters.”

# Chapter *Fourteen*



“Will you ride with me?” she asked. I usually took my bike and rode ahead to make sure the roads were safe. I’d never sat in the car beside her.

“Of course,” I said, squeezing her hand. “I’m at your side. And if you need me to kick some fancy lady’s fat ass, I’ll do it too.”

A grin flitted across her face, banishing her anxiety for a moment. “I wish you could. I wish it worked that way, but this is a fight that can’t be won with violence.”

“I’m fairly sure you’re wrong. There isn’t a fight that can’t be won with violence.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s why you should get along with Amo, Matteo, and Dad. You all love violence too much.”

She was right, but unfortunately, we’d spent years being violent to each other. That made the bonding experience a bit difficult. Luca fucking Vitiello and I grudgingly got along right now. Whenever he and I ran across each other at meetings of the Enforcers, he treated me like he didn’t hate me quite as much as he used to, which was a step in the right direction I supposed.

My own feelings toward the man were still far from gentle either, but I didn't always feel murderous around him anymore, so that was good. He didn't trust me yet, nor did I trust him, but we worked together and we tolerated each other because of Marcella. Did she even realize how much power she held in her perfectly manicured fingers?

"We should go now," she said. "I don't want to miss the grand entry. The furies will only think I'm slinking in because I'm afraid."

The ride to the apartment building where the mayor celebrated his party took only fifteen minutes. Marcella and I didn't talk, but she clutched my hand and I was trying to get past my feeling of discomfort riding in a limousine. I'd never been a good co-driver. I preferred to be in control.

When we parked in the underground garage of the building, Marcella remained seated.

I leaned over to her, meeting her focused gaze. Deep in her blue eyes, I saw the fear she battled like a warrior. "If you want to leave, you give me a sign and I'll whisk you away. Okay?"

She smiled and gave a sharp nod. I got out and opened the door for her, helping her to get out then I released her hand even if it was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted to show the world that Marcella was mine but not before she was ready. Her family had already driven ahead. Their presence would hopefully lessen the impact of Marcella's appearance.

In the elevator that took us up to the roof terrace where the party was taking place, Marcella clutched my hand in a death grip. I loosened my hold when we arrived on the top floor. We weren't officially an item and I wouldn't be the one to make it public. That was Marcella's decision.

After a moment of hesitation, she released me and straightened even more. The doors glided open and I stepped out, checking the perimeter. The penthouse was bustling with people. I recognized a few faces, politicians, local socialites, billionaires and Famiglia members. Everyone's eyes zoomed in on me, the black sheep among all of these fake white lambs. I gave Marcella a nod, pretending to be the perfect bodyguard.

I could see it in the faces of so many of the women gathered in the room that they had hoped to bear witness to the dethroning of Marcella Vitiello today. The eagerness and schadenfreude in their expressions said more about their horrible characters than they probably realized. Maybe they'd hoped to find a broken, ashamed and submissive Marcella after what had happened. But when Marcella entered the room with her head held high,

looking like a fucking apparition in her plum dress and her matching Louboutins, she humbled them all. Marcella hadn't come to cower or hide, she'd come to fucking rule. Those cold blue eyes that had frozen my blood in the beginning and later set it aflame, now coldly regarded all the spectators ready to gloat.

I smiled grimly as the faces of some of the women fell, transforming to shock. Marcella glided through the room, nodding greetings at the mayor and whoever else had the guts to meet her gaze. Her phoenix ear cuff was on display as was her tattoo.

I walked a couple of steps behind her, keeping a close eye on the people around. I felt a sickening satisfaction when some people backed away fearfully. I was like a wild beast to them, untamed, not bound by their rules. They feared Luca Vitiello because of what they knew he was capable of. They feared me because they didn't know what I was capable of. Fear of the unknown was something beautiful if used right.

Marcella took a glass of champagne from a tray one of the waiters offered to her but I shook my head, not a fan of the bubbly drink. I really wanted a beer. The moment Marcella came to a stop, a couple in their fiftieth approached her. Marcella tensed considerably but I doubted anyone but me noticed. She kept up her pleasant expression and nodded a greeting at the two.

"Marcella, it's so good to see you healthy in body and mind after the horrors of the last few months," the woman said, sounding insincere. Marcella must have heard it too, but she kept up the chitchat professionally.

"Giovanni has been very worried about you," the man said, and my attention intensified. So they were the parents of Marcella's ex. I did a quick scan of the room, trying to ignore all the curious and hostile looks I was getting from the guests. Finally, I spotted the guy I'd only seen on photos so far. He stood beside the buffet, talking to another man, but his eyes were focused on me. He narrowed his eyes when he caught my gaze.

I raised my eyebrows. Did he think his glower would intimidate me?

"I'll grab a plate of food. Should I bring something for you?"

Marcella shook her head. "I'll eat later."

I nodded and crossed the room toward the buffet and Giovanni. He froze when he realized I was heading his way. His companion, too, looked ready to draw a gun on me. Of course, we now had Luca's attention as well,

and soon probably that of the rest of the room. Everyone was waiting for a scene that would make the headlines. I definitely wouldn't cause it.

I grabbed a plate and loaded it with tiny pieces of food that were decorated in a way that made me almost sad to devour them. I gave Giovanni a smile. "You chose the right place." I toasted him with a piece of prawn.

It took him a moment to gather himself. "And you didn't," he said, straightening and looking more confident now that the attention of half of the room was on us. Did he think that would protect him? I'd kicked people's asses in more awkward situations before.

"Oh, I have a penchant for the wrong choices," I said, my voice harder than before. "But I made one perfect decision." I looked pointedly at Marcella who glanced my way. I could see her confusion and worry over my conversation with her ex.

"Marcella will realize soon enough that you are the wrong choice, White. She wants a man with manners at her side, someone who won't embarrass her in public."

"Most of all she wants a man who isn't too scared to show her how much he appreciates her even if it means pissing off Luca Vitiello."

The hint of embarrassment crossed Giovanni's face. "If people find out she's with you, she'll be ruined."

"You don't know anything about Marcella if you think anything or anyone could ruin this woman." I ate another prawn before I put my plate down. "Oh and one more thing, don't go near Marcella if you know what's good for you. She's no longer your woman."

She's mine. My eyes said what I couldn't—yet.

I nodded at him and at Luca across the room before I sauntered back over to Marcella, who looked like she needed saving from Giovanni's parents.

"Please excuse us. We have matters to discuss," she said and motioned for me to lead the way to the bar before anyone could protest.

We settled at the bar and Marcella ordered a Cosmopolitan for herself, obviously needing something stronger than bubbly wine. I got a whiskey neat for myself which teased a quick grin out of her which she masked quickly, lest someone realized she wasn't as emotionless as she liked to pretend.

"What?" I asked after I'd taken a sip from my drink.

“None of my other bodyguards would ever drink on the job.”

“I’m not really your bodyguard,” I said quietly. The meeting with Giovanni made me resent this charade even more. I wanted to claim Marcella as mine in front of everyone.

“What are you then?” She stepped closer, an almost challenging gleam in her eyes. I could feel the eyes of half the people in the room settling on us, even the few that hadn’t paid us any attention before.

“Your noble servant, Snow White,” I said with a wry smile and took another nip from my drink. I had only eyes for the woman in front of me now and the way she looked at me, like she considered me hers as much as I considered her mine.

She shook her head, taking another step closer. “More.”

“I’m more, or you want more?” I asked.

“Both,” she said quietly, stopping right in front of me. Now we had the attention of pretty much the entire room.

“Kiss me,” she said, taking me by surprise. Not that I hadn’t been thinking about doing it.

“You sure? Some of these old ladies look as if that’s more action than they got in years. They’ll talk shit about you.”

“I don’t care what they say. You are my man and we’ve hidden it for too long. I’m sick of bowing to their whims, of being a slave to their rules, of hiding. If my family can accept us, then they better do.”

“Snow White, if we do this, I won’t ever let you go. I’ll be yours till I die. You can have my heart, my soul, my life, and everything else you want from me.”

“I’ll take them all,” she said haughtily before her face softened and those luscious lips pulled into a smile.

I set the glass down, wrapped one arm around Marcella’s slim waist and kissed her, and not a chaste kiss either. I laid my claim on the princess of New York before all of their judgmental eyes, hoping they’d choke on their shock.

The kiss lasted only for a couple of heartbeats, a fleeting moment in time, but with consequences for the rest of our lives.

Marcella had made a choice that would earn her many people’s condemnation.

She showed the world that I was the man at her side, no matter what anyone else said.

And their expressions left no doubt to what they thought. I was beneath them, and certainly beneath the princess of New York. I gave them a cold smile. As long as Marcella wanted me by her side, I sure as hell would be at her side. Fuck. I'd probably still stay even if she didn't want me anymore. That woman had me wrapped around her perfectly manicured fingers and she certainly knew it.



I never did things on the spur of the moment, especially not in public. I planned every move, every word, every smile.

Tonight, for the first time in my life, I acted on impulse, simply because I wanted to, and kissed Maddox.

I could hear the unison intake of breath and the shocked murmurs that followed, and when I pulled back from Maddox, I could see the open-mouthed shock on many faces.

"I make the rules," I whispered.

"A queen always does," Maddox said, and the adoration in his eyes gave me the strength I'd need today and many days to come.

After a moment to gather my courage, I risked a glance toward my family. Dad's face had become stone, but the look in his eyes was murderous. Mom lightly touched his arm. I knew the gesture. She was trying to keep him in check. Amo was gone, probably disgusted by our kiss.

These were the people whose opinions mattered. I needed them on my side to brave the rough waters of our world. Mom caught my gaze and gave me a small nod.

I could have cried and hugged her from gratefulness but I kept up my public mask and acted as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“You okay?” Maddox murmured.

“Better than okay,” I said firmly. “I should talk to my parents.” But just in that moment, Mom and Dad headed out onto the roof terrace.

“Maybe you should give your old man a few more minutes to calm himself.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I’ll need to freshen up in the bathroom anyway.”

“Do you want me to accompany you?”

“I know this place, don’t worry.” I gave him a teasing smile. “Don’t let the old ladies scare you away.”

He chuckled but he was still tense, just like me. I strode through the room, making sure I walked slowly lest it looked as if I was fleeing from the scene. Instead, I even forced myself to have a quick chat with the oldest daughter of one of New York’s richest men. She was a party girl and had gone to the same school as me. We weren’t friends, but we weren’t enemies either. The conversation with her was satisfyingly uneventful and she only congratulated me on such a piece of eye candy.

Afterward, I excused myself to the bathroom, glad for a few minutes to myself. When I emerged from the bathroom, two girls waited in front of it. Both of them from our circle, daughters of Captains, and classmates of Amo.

I only remembered Cressida’s name. Her father was responsible for the illegal goods that arrived in shipping containers from all over the world. I gave both girls a pleasant smile, but their faces meant trouble.

Cressida shook her head, her lips pinching. “You dishonored yourself and your family. That was so disgusting. I’d never kiss a dirty biker.”

“Or anyone but my future husband,” the other girl added.

“Yes,” Cressida agreed. “I pity Amo for having such a slut as a sister.”

My eyebrows climbed my forehead. That girl had always blown candy up my ass. Apparently, she now saw her moment to rise above me. Wrong move, little girl. “If you don’t want your father to spend the rest of his life scrubbing the dirt from container floors, you better watch your mouth, Cressida. Maybe you’ll one day be brave enough to be the master of your own life, and not let other people be your master.”

“You are still a sl—”

Maddox stepped into the hallway, causing Cressida to pale and snap her mouth shut. “Don’t let me interrupt you,” he said, in a voice that made Cressida take a step back.

“We should go...”

“Already?” Maddox asked. “Maybe you want to share your opinion about me with me face to face.”

She shook her head then her expression morphed into relief. “Oh Amo,” she crooned, when Amo appeared in the hallway.

Amo barely glanced her way. “What’s going on here?”

“Nothing,” Cressida said quickly. “Do you want to join me on the roof terrace? I need fresh air.”

“The girls just informed Marcella that she’s a slut in their eyes,” Maddox said.

I gave him a look to shut him up. Amo had a tendency to get overprotective and do stupid shit in his little-brother-but-acting-like-a-big-brother-mode.

Amo looked at me for confirmation. I gave a small shrug. “The girls are entitled to their opinion as long as they keep it to themselves in the future, right, Cressida?”

Cressida pressed her lips together and glanced at Amo. I could see how pissed Amo was even if he’d learned to mask his emotions over the years.

“How about we have a word on the terrace?” Amo said to Cressida. She nodded uncertainly, obviously unsure if she was in trouble. Before they left, I grabbed Amo’s arm. “She’s not worth it. Don’t do something stupid.”

“You know me,” Amo said.

“Indeed.”

Amo shook my grip off. “I’ll just make sure people respect our family.” He disappeared.

I sighed. “He’ll do something stupid.”

“He’s a teen, they’re supposed to do stupid things.”

“There is stupid, and then there is Amo’s kind of stupid, and the latter is always bad news.”

Maddox chuckled. “I like your big sister mode.” He wrapped an arm around my waist and I tensed. His brows pulled together and he began to pull away, but I stopped him. “Stay. I was just surprised. This public togetherness is still new for me, and we shouldn’t overdo it in front of my parents before I could clear things with my dad.”

“Good luck with that. Your parents still haven’t returned to the party.”

My heart sank. I’d have to talk to Dad. I hated if he was mad at me, but eventually he’d have to allow me to live my own life and make my own

choices, even if he considered them a mistake.

# Chapter *Fifteen*

*Aria*

As a mother, I'd always wanted what's best for my daughter. I'd tried to protect her to the best of my abilities. Of course, Luca had taken control of the details of her protection. When Luca had told me about the kidnapping, my heart had shattered. Our world wasn't kind on women. But I'd thought Marcella would never be touched by the vile sides of our life. She was supposed to be safe from harm, even in a marriage.

I'd noticed that things between her and Giovanni had been off, but I'd hoped they'd miraculously find what Luca and I had. Maybe I'd turned a blind eye to the reality of the situation because my wish for Marcella's safety had been too strong. She would have been safe in a marriage with Giovanni, not happy though.

Now as I watched Marcella kiss Maddox in front of everyone, I realized she was now old enough to fight her own battles, and she fought them in her own way. Marcella was too strong to hide or back down. She was like Luca. She only knew one form of reaction and that was attack. This kiss was a declaration of war to all the people who waited for her to cower or to bow to their rules.

Luca and I had wanted Marcella to be as strong as the Goddess we named her after, and she was. Only it was hard for Luca to accept.

One glance at his face told me he was about to explode. I quickly touched his forearm to calm him down. His furious gaze darted to me and some of the anger disappeared but not all of it. To people who didn't know him like I did, his anger would be well hidden beneath his cold public mask.

Amo muttered something under his breath and walked off.

“Let’s go outside for a bit of fresh air,” I said to Luca.

He didn’t move, still watching Maddox and Marcella as if he considered to kill the former right here before everyone’s eyes.

Luca had a good grip on his monster—most of the time, but when I or our children were involved, his protectiveness sometimes made him lose control. One of these moments had led to the feud with Tartarus and ultimately to Marcella’s kidnapping. I’d never truly blamed Luca for it, except for brief moments of utter despair, because he and I were both part of this ruthless world, had chosen to stay in it even with our children. If anyone was to blame, then we both.

Now was one of those dangerous instances again.

“Luca,” I said firmly, my fingers digging into his arm through the thick fabric of his suit. “Let’s go outside.”

He finally allowed me to take his hand and lead him through the vast French doors to a secluded part of the huge rooftop terrace. He propped his forearms up on the banister and glared at the city below us. “I knew he was trouble. I should have killed him when I had the chance.”

“Marcella would have never forgiven you.”

“She would have gotten over it. She would have found someone else, someone better.”

“After seeing them together, do you really believe that?” I asked softly, linking our fingers. Luca was good at reading people. It was what made him such a good and respected Capo but with Marcella he sometimes preferred to block out certain things. But Marcella’s feelings for Maddox were unmistakable.

He made a low sound deep in his throat. “Maybe it would have been better to have her hate me for the rest of her life than to allow her to destroy her life by being with White.”

“Marcella didn’t destroy her life. You ruled over the bloody sheets tradition for her. You wanted her to have choices, and today she made a brave choice. It’s our duty as parents to support her and protect her from the people who want to condemn her for her choice.”

“Oh, I’ll protect her against everyone. My personal thoughts about what just happened are just that, for a discussion behind closed doors. Marcella will have our full support.”

I leaned against Luca’s strong arm. “You remember our first few years together in our penthouse? Places like this always remind me of that time.”

“I’ll never forget a single moment with you, Aria,” Luca said quietly.

“Marcella seems to think she found in Maddox what we two have, and shouldn’t we be happy for her?”

“White is a biker. His lifestyle is at odds with ours.”

“When we first met, you didn’t think you could be a good husband or father, and now you are. Give Maddox the chance to prove himself. Do it for Marcella.”

“I worry that allowing her to pursue this bond will cause more harm for her in the long run than do good.”

“If you give her a choice but don’t accept what she chose, you might as well not have given her any choice at all.”

“So you can see the two marrying? You can see White as part of our family, sitting at our dining table? You can see him belonging to our world, and not always be apart?”

I wanted to see Marcella marry one day, wanted to see Luca leading her down the aisle to the man she loved and wanted to spend the rest of her life with. I wanted her to be happy. Could I tell if she’d be happy with Maddox? No. I was worried too. I couldn’t deny it.

Love was unpredictable. Would a bond to Maddox harm Marcella eventually? I didn’t think so, but I couldn’t be sure. Not because I thought Maddox would hurt her on purpose, but he wasn’t familiar with our world as Luca had pointed out. He’d have to try to grow used to our traditions, but they were alien to him. He’d managed to work with Luca’s soldiers in the last few weeks but he’d never be one of them.

Was love enough if he never really belonged? If living in our world kept him adrift?

If he was willing to give up the lifestyle he was used to for Marcella, he really must love her, and that was enough for me. The rest was out of my hands. “It’s not our choice, Luca.”

“The tabloids and many people in our world will tear into Marcella for the kiss, and it’ll get only worse if we confirm the relationship, or God forbid, announce an engagement.”

“Marcella is an intelligent woman. She knew the consequences when she kissed Maddox and she’s willing to brave them for him and herself.”

If Marcella accepted the backlash her relationship with Maddox had already caused and would still cause in the months and years to come then

she too must love him. I would have risked everything for Luca, would have followed him to the end of the world, and beyond.

I, more than Luca, followed my gut instinct. It had gotten me in trouble in the past, but over the years I'd learned to use it in a more careful manner. The happiness on Marcella's face in the private moments she and Maddox shared had given me one of my infamous gut feelings too. Marcella had chosen Maddox and though they'd found each other in the most impossible moment, they seemed perfect for each other. They were different, came from vastly different backgrounds, but if anything could conquer seemingly insurmountable differences then it was love.

On my wedding day, I would have laughed about this statement. Though I only felt like crying on the most important and, for many brides, the happiest day of their lives. I hadn't been happy that day and only in retrospect could I find joy thinking of that day, knowing love had followed our yes to each other.

Marcella and Maddox would one day hopefully affirm their love with a yes. She wouldn't feel trepidation or fear on her wedding day, and that made me even happier.

One wasn't better than the other. Marcella wasn't me. She'd grown up knowing her worth.

Her choice wasn't mine to judge, but I'd do my best to make sure she'd never come to regret her choice.

I squeezed Luca's hand. "Luca, you must talk to Maddox, maybe even invite him over for a drink so you two can really smooth things out between you. He won't ever belong if you as Capo and head of our family won't allow him to belong."

Luca stared up at the night sky and sighed. "You and Marcella will be the death of me."

# Chapter *Sixteen*



I was glad when the party was finally over. Schmoozing all these rich, narcissistic people really wasn't my thing. Marcella? She was a master at it. As the man at her side, I'd probably have to get better at it as well. Or maybe I'd always be the closet lover.

I smiled wryly.

"Why are you smiling?" Marcella asked in a drowsy voice. Her head rested on my shoulder so I wasn't sure how she could have seen. Then I caught my reflection in the black high gloss privacy glass between the back of the limousine and the driver.

"Just wondering if I'll ever be as skilled at socializing as you are. Now that we're official, I guess I'll have to attend more parties."

Marcella lifted her head. She looked tired but still indescribably gorgeous. I burned to touch her. The few chaste and not-so-chaste kisses we'd shared since I'd eaten her pussy hadn't sated my hunger for her. I wanted more.

I stroked her thigh through the silk of her dress.

"A kiss doesn't make us official. My father will have to release an official statement with the state of our bond. That usually happens shortly

before or after an engagement.”

I almost choked on my spit. Engagement? I knew marriage was a big deal in the mafia world, but for some reason, stupidly, I’d never considered it to come up so soon. Did our kiss mean we’d have to get engaged right away?

“Regretting the kiss?” Marcella asked teasingly, but her eyes were boring into mine.

“Hell no.” I grabbed her neck and pulled her in for another kiss. “I’ll never regret kissing you, not that very first time and not any time that followed and all the times that will still come. I’m just a bit out of my element, Snow White. My life’s taking a drastic turn. Suddenly, I’m a mafia supporter who considers marriage and needs to become best buddies with his former archenemy. That’s a lot to take in.”

“It is,” Marcella said. “And we can take it one step at a time. We both have a lot to figure out. I don’t see us getting engaged or married any time soon either.”

Ouch. Hearing her dismiss the possibility like this, made me wonder if maybe Marcella didn’t really want me at her side infinitely. My hold on her neck tightened, my eyes burning into hers. “You are mine, Marcella. I want to be the man by your side. One day I’ll call you mine officially.”

Marcella pressed a kiss against my lips and I pulled her half on top of me, needing to feel every inch of her. My fingers tangled in her long hair, tilting her head so I could deepen our kiss. Our soft pants soon filled the narrow space. My palm slid over her back, enjoying the way her skin pimpled under my touch. I dipped lower, kissing her throat.

The car slowed and Marcella gripped my shoulders, pushing me away. “We can’t do this here. We’re home.”

I groaned when the car came to a stop a moment later and the engine was turned off.

I rubbed my thumb over her swollen lips. “How about you ride on my bike with me tonight?”

Marcella bit her lip. “That would be amazing. I could really use the distraction, but—”

“But your old man needs to give his okay?”

I didn’t bother hiding my annoyance. Not so much with Marcella as with the situation. “Fuck, I want to be with you whenever I want and not have to ask your daddy for permission as if you’re fifteen.”

“You’re right,” Marcella said firmly. “I’ll ride with you. I’m grown up and Dad will have to accept it.”

I grinned and kissed her passionately. We pulled apart when the door opened. Marcella got out and I followed, giving the grim looking bodyguard a sharp smile.

Luca and Aria were already inside the house.

“Maddox and I will do a quick ride on his bike around the city,” Marcella informed the bodyguard.

“That’s not our order.”

“It’s now,” I said. “Marcella told you.”

I led her toward my bike but the bodyguard followed me and actually grabbed my shoulder. I reacted without thinking and smashed my fist into his face. He sagged to his knees.

“Enough,” Marcella hissed when another bodyguard pulled his gun. “Call my father if you must but I’m going on a ride now.”

I handed her a helmet.

Of course, Luca stepped out and headed for us. I stifled the impulse to punch him too.

“What’s going on here?” he asked, sending me a death glare.

“Maddox is taking me for a ride,” Marcella said with a shrug.

Luca shook his head. Marcella stepped up to him and after a moment he gave a curt nod. “Your bodyguards will trail you in a car to make sure you’re safe.”

I got out of the uncomfortable suit jacket and put on my leather jacket even if it looked strange with the slacks and dress shirt I mounted my bike and Marcella bunched up her dress and climbed up behind me. Luca’s gaze could have frozen hell.

“Ready for a ride?” I asked.

Marcella smiled in a way that sent blood straight down to my cock. “Ready.”

I started the engine and pulled away before Luca could change his mind, and of course, the black limousine trailed us.

“How about we escape our guards?” I shouted.

Marcella laughed. “Let’s do it.”

I hit the gas and weaved through traffic so the car couldn’t follow us. After ten minutes, I was sure we’d lost them.

I focused on what had been bugging me from the very start: The hem of the dress kept fluttering up.

It would get entangled in the tires eventually. I pulled up at the curb. My eyes slid along her exposed leg. “Your dress is a problem.”

“You’re right,” she said, looking around. The sidewalk here in Greenwich was deserted, and paparazzi had definitely not followed us. She slid down the zipper slowly and the dress pooled at her feet. Marcella stood before me in nothing but heels and a tiny thong.

Bunching up her dress, she stalked toward me. “It’s getting cold. Can I have your leather jacket?”

I would have given her everything she asked in that moment. Seeing her put on my jacket, I was overflowed with a strong sense of possession and protectiveness. Even if Marcella deserved better than me, I would never let her go again. I wanted to be with her, wanted to be the first to kiss those luscious lips in the morning and the last to kiss them in the evening.

With my jacket thrown over her delicate shoulders, Marcella mounted my bike behind me. Her bare legs pressed against mine and maybe it was my imagination, but her pussy was scorching my backside through the fabric of our clothes. “I’d have never thought that the spoiled princess would one day become my old lady.”

“Maddox,” she said in a dangerously sweet voice. “If you call me old lady again, I’ll suffocate you with a pillow in your sleep.”

I grinned.

“Hold on tight,” I said. I suddenly knew where I wanted to take her. It was a place I’d visited on several nights in the last few weeks. Five minutes later we pulled up at the pier that led to Little Island. It was a man-built island on tulip-shaped pillars with a beautiful view of New York and the Hudson River. At this time at night, it was already closed so we would be alone.

I stopped right before the closed gates and got off my bike.

“Wait a sec.” I’d broken into the park before so it didn’t take me long to climb over the fence, trick the security system and open the gates.

Marcella had opened the visor and was smiling appreciatively. Fuck. Seeing her with spread legs on my bike, my leather jacket barely covering her tits and her enticing flat belly and the tiny thong, I almost lost it. I hurried back to her and we rode up the ramp onto Little Island.

It was mostly dark only lamps attached to the banister cast a soft glow on the area. During the opening hours after nightfall, the pathways and several trees were illuminated as well. Now the lights of the city around us were our main light source. I meandered up the pathway that led to the highest spot of the small island. It offered the best views over the city and river and was secluded from the occasional bustle down at the pier.

I pulled to a stop and Marcella dismounted the bike, depriving me of her warmth. She looked around curiously while I got off as well. Her skin appeared almost translucent in the silvery moonlight. Her nipples hardened, dusky red pebbles I wanted to touch and suck. She smiled at me. "I've never been here before. How can you know this place when you've lived in the city so much shorter than me?"

"I've had a lot of time on my hands at night these last few weeks. Discovering the city was a better option than sitting alone in my apartment."

Marcella regarded me thoughtfully. "You miss your biker family?"

"I miss the company, the laughter and the noise. Silence is not my thing."

"You'll find friends in the Famiglia. You and Growl get along well already, and my family will come around too."

I hadn't come here to discuss my lonely ass. I wanted to be with Marcella. "I'm not alone now," I said in a low voice, walking up to her. I slid my hands under the jacket, my calloused palms worshipping Marcella's silk-like skin. She was a goddess. As fierce as Hera and as beautiful as Aphrodite. I would follow her into Hades if she asked me. I was already halfway there anyway after I'd killed my uncle for her.

She didn't stop me as my hands cupped her breasts. I stifled a groan as her nipples pebbled even more against my palms. Marcella's eyes fluttered and her body imperceptibly shifted into my touch. I could feel a shiver race through her body and was confident it wasn't from the cold. I rubbed my thumbs across her sensitive nipples then lowered my head to capture one of them between my lips. Marcella released a soft moan, all the encouragement I needed.

My tongue circled her nub as my hands traveled down her sides to cup her firm ass. Her muscles constricted under my palm. "Fuck. I missed your taste."

Marcella grabbed my head and hummed her approval. The sound of the water below the pier and distant voices carried over to us.

“Do you have anything we can lie on?” Marcella asked in a breathless voice.

“Only my jacket, but I think you won’t need it. I’ll keep you warm.”

Marcella grinned knowingly when I helped her out of my jacket and spread it on the ground then lowered Marcella and myself on it. The lawn was soft enough so my jacket was all we needed. Our lips met with less urgency than ever before. The kiss wasn’t rushed. We really discovered each other’s mouths.

I stretched out between Marcella’s legs and resumed my teasing of her breasts. When she became restless, I allowed my lips to discover her ribs then her belly button. The heady scent of her arousal reached my nose and what little blood had remained in my brain now descended into my pants as well. I moved lower and teased Marcella’s pussy lips apart with the tip of my tongue before I caressed along her seam. She was slick with her need for me. Knowing I wasn’t the only one who’d gone almost insane with desire in the last few weeks set me at ease.

“Oh Maddox,” Marcella said thickly as stroked her sensitive folds with the tip of my tongue before I used my piercing to tease her clit. She responded with a low moan and a new flood of arousal. I took my time. I didn’t want to rush this. The gentle thrusting of her hips and the way her fingers kneaded my scalp were good indicators I was doing it right.

Time lost its meaning. Watching Marcella lose herself completely to my touch, forgetting everything around us, even the small possibility of being caught, was rewarding in itself.

I needed to be inside of her. I needed to remind myself that Marcella Vitiello was really mine from her perfectly painted toes to her coal-black crown. I tongued her faster, growing impatient. Her moans picked up, her nails digging into my skin as she gripped my biceps almost desperately.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered thickly.

As I circled her clit, I slipped two fingers into her, stifling a groan at how tightly her walls gripped me. Everything faded to the background as I buried my head in Marcella’s lap and lost myself in her heat and taste. Her fingers raked through my hair and she moaned in the most beautiful way. She arched up and I gave her clit a sharp tug, sending her over the edge.

She cried out, not holding back for the first time. That throaty, lust-filled scream almost made me come in my pants. I watched her, mesmerized by her wanton expression. But even in passion, Marcella looked elegant, as if that invisible crown was still firmly in place.

Eventually I stopped and Marcella's breathing slowed. My own need was almost unbearable now but I loathed to break the moment. Luckily, Marcella did. She sat up and pushed me down instead. She made quick work of my pants and soon my briefs joined them on the grass. My cock already had a heartbeat of its own. Marcella kneeled beside me and curled her hand around the base of my shaft. She gave me a coy look as she tossed her long hair over one elegant shoulder.

I hadn't expected it and nearly burst as she bent down and took me into her mouth. Considering how often I'd imagined that moment, it was bound to disappoint but somehow she managed to beat my horny mind. I couldn't take my eyes off her as she sucked my cock. Her silky tresses fell forward, curtaining her face. I quickly brushed them back then held them up when they threatened to fall again. I needed to see her to believe it.

Sometimes her teeth grazed my cock or she had trouble coordinating her hand-mouth-movement. It reminded me that this was the first time she did it. I was the first guy she did it with, and that made every sloppiness so much sexier than I ever thought it could be.

"Stop," I growled and gripped her shoulders, gently pushing her back. "I need to be inside of you, Snow White. I can't wait another second."

I gripped her hips and helped her straddle me. My eyes took in her dusty pink nipples against the paleness of her skin, the shiny black silk of her hair against my skin. My eyes dipped lower to where our bodies joined. I teased her clit with my piercing until she panted softly once more. Then I positioned my fat tip at her entrance and lifted my hips. Her lips opened wider, her tongue sliding along her upper lip. She exhaled as she took more of me in.

This was the moment I would have gladly died. If Vitiello wanted me dead, he could kill me and I'd die a happy man, especially knowing he'd be sick knowing I banged his beautiful daughter. Marcella lowered herself until her ass cheeks touched my balls. Her lips parted for a soft moan, her walls clenching around me.

I cupped those firm cheeks. "If you lean forward, my piercing will rub your clit."

Marcella grabbed onto my shoulders and tipped forward. I guided her ass in a slow forward rotation. “Oh,” she breathed, her eyelids drooping in obvious pleasure. “This feels amazing. I missed this so much.”

I pulled her down for another kiss. “Fuck, how I missed this.” Our eyes locked, the skyline reflecting in hers. Soon Marcella was overwhelmed by her orgasm and I followed soon after her. She collapsed on top of me, her breath hot against my throat.

“I love you, Snow White. I should have said it more often. But I never thought I’d say it to someone, and I don’t care if I said it too soon, or in the wrong moments, I fucking love you and I don’t need years to figure it out.”

She raised her head, surprise twisting her features. She didn’t say anything, only looked at me in a way that made me feel naked on a whole new level.

“What do you love about me?” she asked softly, catching me completely off guard. It was so difficult to put love into words, especially for me. I’d never liked to talk about emotions but Marcella left me no choice.

“You’re being cruel,” I said with a choked laugh.

Marcella propped herself up on my chest, running her fingernails over my skin.

“I love that you surprised me and that you didn’t bow down or beg when we kidnapped you. I love how you befriended a messed-up fight dog and still visit her. I love how you smile at me. I love how loyal you are to your family even if it makes my life so much harder. I love that you don’t try to hide your scars but transform them into a statement.”

I paused. My thoughts were tumbling over each other in my head. Marcella leaned forward and kissed me. “Thank you,” she said simply.

“You forgave me the unforgivable,” I said. She needed to know that I knew how much I’d fucked up. She merely nodded, as if it went without saying. “I never considered the Vitiellos the forgiving type.”

“We aren’t, except to those we love.”

I’d admitted my love to Marcella and after I’d killed my uncle for her, she’d probably believed that I really loved her but she had held back any declaration of affection. I got it, had accepted her need for time and space without hesitation, but now I needed more. I stepped closer, touched her hips. “You forgave me.”

Marcella sighed. “Because I love you.”

I kissed her again and again. I wanted to stay like this forever, only the two of us. “Nobody’s going to be happy about our love,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter as long as we are.”



I glanced at my watch and my face fell. “It’s almost one. We should probably go back before Dad sends out a search party. The bodyguards will have told him about our escape by now.”

Maddox’s grin became teasing and he cupped my ass cheeks. “I don’t feel like getting up or returning you to your family—ever.” He dipped his fingers between my thighs, feeling my lingering arousal.

I closed her eyes, my teeth digging into my lower lip, as I enjoyed Maddox teasing me. I wanted nothing more than to spend all night with him and make love and talk, especially after we’d just voiced our feelings for each other. I sighed again. “Don’t tempt me. I’m in enough trouble as it is.”

He clapped my ass. “All right, then let’s face our judgment.”

I laughed. Dad had probably already made his verdict and it wouldn’t be good for either of us. I straightened, completely naked. Maddox’s gaze raked over me in a way that sent a pleasant shiver down my back. I too allowed myself a moment to admire Maddox’s muscled and inked upper body. I loved running my fingers along the firm ridges of his sixpack and follow the soft skin down his Adonis’ belt.

“If you keep looking at me like that, we won’t return any time soon,” Maddox warned in a low voice, his cock already half erect.

I shrugged. “Ditto, Mad.” He reached for me but I jumped back with a giggle and sauntered over to where I’d dropped my thong, making sure to bend over provocatively to pick it up and put it on.

Maddox jumped to his feet, grabbed the leather jacket and put it over my shoulders. “You really need to put this on or I’m going to fuck you bend over my bike.”

“I’d like that,” I said with a teasing grin. Maddox shook his head with a groan and got dressed.

I took out my dress from Maddox’s saddlebag and put it back on, even if it was wrinkled. If I returned home in only Maddox’s leather jacket, Dad would put a bullet in Maddox’s head, no questions asked. The state of my dress wouldn’t really win Maddox any bonus points either.



I held on to him even tighter as we rode back to the mansion, not because I was scared of the bike, but because I wanted to be as close to him as possible.

The moment we pulled up in front of the mansion, the door opened and Dad stepped out, looking royally pissed.

I dismounted the bike. “You better leave, I’ll handle him.”

Maddox shook his head and got off as well. “I’m not a coward. I’ll bring you to the door like any good gentleman would.”

“Since when are you a gentleman?” I asked.

Dad waited for us with crossed arms. I really wished Maddox would have listened to me.

Maddox nodded. “I hope we didn’t break Marcella’s curfew,” he said.

Of course he couldn’t refrain from provoking Dad, which was the equivalent of poking an angry bear.

I quickly pressed up to Dad and wrapped my arms around his right arm—his gun and knife hand, even if he could fight with both hands—to stop him from attacking Maddox.

“This was stupid,” he snarled. “There’s a reason why I keep several bodyguards around Marcella. You should know best how easy it is to kidnap a person.”

Maddox smiled tightly. “I was by her side the entire time. I would have protected her, and attackers would have had a hard time following us on my Harley.”

“They could have rammed you with their car. We don’t know how many of your biker friends are still out there thirsting for revenge and you endanger my daughter!”

“It was my choice. I wanted to be alone with Maddox, Dad. I don’t want to live in fear of a possible attack all my life. I want to *live*.”

“If you’re dead, that definitely won’t happen,” Dad growled.

I dug my nails into his arm. “I’m an adult, so if you want to blame someone, blame me.”

“I’ll always protect Marcella with my life, you can count on that,” Maddox said fiercely.

“Why don’t you talk another time? It’s already late and you’re mad because of the party anyway,” I said.

Dad gave a terse nod but kept glaring daggers at Maddox. I gave Maddox a smile. “Good night,” I said but didn’t kiss him. Maddox gave me a smile and nodded at my father before he walked back to his bike. I watched him drive away then I followed Dad back inside.

Mom came down the stairs, already in her nightgown and without makeup. “Marci! We worried about you.”

“Mom, I’m fine. Maddox and I can handle it. I bet it’s less dangerous for me to ride through the city unrecognized on Maddox’s bike than in a black limousine that everyone recognizes as Famiglia owned. And you went to Chicago on your own when you were only a few years older than me and nothing happened.”

“I was captured by the enemy and could have been killed.”

“But nothing happened,” I insisted.

Dad shook his head. “This event comes to bite me in the ass twice.”

“Eventually I’ll be alone with Maddox all the time. You often go out with mom alone, without any bodyguards, and she’s as much a target as I am.”

“She’s with me then and I’d kill anyone who’d dare to attack us.”

“Maddox would do the same.”

I could see that Dad doubted it. “Maddox loves me,” I said firmly. “He’d die for me.”

“I don’t doubt that he thinks he loves you but I doubt his abilities to fight off an attack by himself. He’s used to fight in a group. He doesn’t have the same training like me or our men do. If the Bratva attacked you and not just a group of hillbilly bikers, he wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Maybe I should get a gun then as well. If I’ll become part of the business, that would be best, right?”

I’d never really felt the desire to handle weapons myself, but it seemed only logical for me to know how to use them if the need ever arose.

“This is not what I wanted for you,” Dad said.

I knew he didn’t just mean me becoming part of the business or handling guns. “But it’s what I want, Dad.”

# Chapter *Seventeen*



Luca called me in for a meeting the next day. I was sure this was about what had happened last night, so I was surprised when Growl and three other enforcers of lower rank, whose names I had trouble remembering, were also in Luca's office in the Sphere.

Luca nodded when I came in, his face emotionless. Only his eyes showed that he was still pissed at me. Fifteen minutes later my suspicion was confirmed when Luca announced that he'd send me on a mission with the three enforcers to search for a group of Earl supporters who were sighted in the area. Information about their whereabouts were vague and we were supposed to trail them and eliminate them. We'd probably be gone for at least a week. The hiding places that were still options for them were at least fifty miles up north of New York.

When Luca had dismissed us, I followed Growl outside. "Why can't you be on the mission? I don't know these guys."

"You don't know me either," Growl said, puzzled.

"But I feel like I do. I can tell that you are a decent guy. But this Peppone guy and the others." I shrugged. "Not sure I want to close my eyes at night beside them."

“Luca gave them an order and they obey. You aren’t their concern.”

“If you say so,” I said, mounting my bike which was parked beside Growl’s pickup in the back alley behind the Sphere. “I’m tagging along. Marcella is heading for the shelter now and I want to meet her there to say goodbye. And yes, Luca knows about it.”

Growl nodded and got into his pickup.



When I pulled up in front of the shelter, Marcella was just getting out of the limousine. She was back in sneakers, jeans, and a simple white shirt, but damn, I wanted to devour her again.

She came over to me with a smile and wrapped her arms around me, gone the hesitation and secrecy of the last few weeks. I kissed her, not caring who saw.

“Did you hear?” I asked when I pulled back.

“Hear what?”

“Your dad’s sending me out on a weeklong mission to track down Earl supporters.”

“Alone?”

“No, with three guys. Peppone and two others.”

Marcella pressed her lips together. “He wants you away from me for a while.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe him.”

“Distance makes the heart all the fonder, right?” I joked, even if I didn’t like it either. “He probably hopes you’ll change your mind about me if I’m far enough away to break the spell I have on you.”

“If anyone has a spell on someone, it’s me,” she said with a teasing smile.

“So right, Snow White, so right,” I said. “I’ll be back before you know it, and we can chat and call.”

Marcella sighed. “Be careful, all right? Don’t be the hero.”

“I’ve never been the hero. I’m the bad guy.”

She laughed and pressed even closer. “That means at least a week without...”

I leaned down, kissed her ear. “Let’s go on a walk with Santana so we can properly say goodbye.”

Marcella looked eager when she pulled me toward the kennels to pick up Santana. I couldn't help but grin.



Neither of my companions was very chatty as we set out to the first spot where a group of Nomads had been spotted not too long ago. Peppone was in charge of the operation—of course—even if I had the knowledge and contacts. Luca probably would let a chimp lead an operation before he'd ever entrust me with responsibility.

I sat in the back of the van beside Drooping-Eye, which wasn't his name but I didn't like the guy enough to bother remembering his name, especially because it was complicated and old-fashioned.

Peppone and Dimo sat in the front. Peppone threw me the occasional look through the rearview mirror. He obviously wasn't too excited about working with me, but he like Luca's other soldiers knew better than to disobey.

Usually I preferred to sleep during long drives but I would sure as hell not close my eyes around these guys, not before I knew them better.

"Quite the social rise you're pulling off by becoming Marcella Vitiello's man." He paused. "If this was your plan all along, I'd applaud you."

I cocked one eyebrow. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He narrowed his eyes. "Just a lucky coincidence then, I guess, finding love with the Capo's daughter while she's being held captive by you."

He was really starting to piss me off, but I wanted to prove to Luca that I could work with his men.

"I've always been a lucky guy," I muttered sarcastically.

Luckily we chose a motel that night, and I paid to have a separate room, despite Peppone's protest.

The next morning, he seemed to have gotten over his sour mood from the previous day. It took us two more days to finally find a group of Earl supporters, all of them Nomads. They were hiding in a long abandoned safehouse of Tartarus out in the woods. Earl always liked to have our safehouses and clubhouses to be in the midst of the woods. Maybe that was why Gray had a penchant for trails and nature in general.

“I need to collect your phone,” Peppone said as we parked a good distance away from the house.

“Why?”

“Just to be safe. This mission is too important to risk anything. And your loyalties are still a risk.”

“If Luca sends me on a mission, he must think I can be trusted.” That was of course not true. I knew that Luca didn’t trust me, and of course Peppone didn’t either, which was why he asked me for my phone in the first place.

“This is my mission and I need to make sure it’s a success. So either you give me your phone or I can’t let you join the attack.”

I didn’t point out that I could betray them even easier if left behind. I shrugged. “If it stops you from shitting your pants, then here you go.” I handed him the phone. I’d messaged Marcella in the morning so she wouldn’t expect me to write again until evening.

“Good,” Peppone said. “What’s your plan?”

I cocked an eyebrow. Wasn’t he the boss of the mission? “I’d scout the area for possible traps and take a closer look at the safehouse. The gas station clerk was only sure he’d seen two bikers but he didn’t sound certain. It could very well be that more Nomads have joined the group by now.”

Peppone nodded and exchanged a look with the two others. “Then let’s go.”

We spent the next hour creeping closer to the house. I didn’t spot any obvious traps. Not everyone could build them. Gray and Gunnar had always been the specialists.

Eventually, the four of us had found a spot on a small hill that had a good view of the house. We counted three men walking past the windows or leaving the house, but that still didn’t mean there were only four, but without going in we couldn’t say.

I recognized all three men. I’d never had much to do with them. Nomads rarely visited our clubhouse, but Earl on occasion met up with them to make sure they gave the club a percentage of their income.

The door opened again, and a fourth man emerged.

“Another one,” I said. “Definitely one of Earl’s supporters.”

Peppone, Dimo, and Drooping-Eye exchanged a look I didn’t like one bit. I kept talking, pointing at the fat guy, whose name I didn’t remember because Earl had actually always called him Fatguy. He’d always been a fan

of Earl. The only reason why he had mostly been a Nomad was because he was an intolerable asshole who got into fights with everyone, which was poison for the mood in a club.

“So we’re up against four?” Peppone asked me.

“Well, we’ve been watching the area for two hours and those are the guys we saw, but we won’t know for sure unless we go in, which is risky, or wait this out for a few more hours or maybe even a night to see if anyone else comes by.”

“What would you suggest?” Peppone asked.

“I’d risk it. Even if one or two more are inside, we can handle them. Most of these guys haven’t fought in a battle in a while. Nomads are rarely called in to support a chapter in a fight.” I just wanted to return to Marcella as quickly as possible and leave these guys behind.

“We’ll attack,” Peppone said.

And that’s what we did. We attacked, guns drawn, and one more biker we hadn’t expected, stumbled out of a shed that served as a garage for the bikes. Peppone shot him in the head without hesitation.

“Keep the fat one alive. He’s probably the leader of the pack,” I called. “We need someone for questioning!”

Shots were being fired from a window on the first floor of the house but they missed us. Then another head appeared in a window on the ground floor and fired as well. His first shot missed my head by maybe an inch from the feel of it. I aimed my gun at him and fired. He disappeared from view. I was fairly sure I’d hit him in the head.

“We should go in now,” I called as we crept along the shed beside the house.

As if on cue, the front door flung open and Fatguy stumbled out with blazing guns, firing at us.

Peppone raised his gun, sending a bullet straight through fat guy’s head. He obviously had no intention to question anyone.

“We need to keep one of them alive to find out if there are more Nomads in the area out for Marcella’s blood!”

Peppone smiled strangely and pointed his gun at me.

“Fuck.”

I dashed away, head ducked as bullets flew by, and flung myself behind a tractor wheel, but my calf burned fiercely. I allowed myself a brief glance

—only a graze shot, thank fuck—before I raised my own gun. “What the fuck are you doing?” I roared.

Another shot tore through the top of the wheel. It was coming from the direction of the house.

Fuck! Now I was caught between two fronts, the Italians and the Nomads, and both of them were shooting at me. Was this Vitiello’s plan all along? To have me killed on a mission? It was a devious plan but could actually work.

“Come out, White, and die like a man and not like a dirty mouse hiding in her dirty hole,” Peppone called, sounding already like he’d won. He didn’t know me if he thought this would be an easy win. I’d fought too many battles in my life. I’d kick his fucking ass back to New York.

“Why don’t you shove your gun up your dirty hole and pull the trigger, asshole? I’m not the coward shooting at an ally!” I shouted back.

He scoffed. “You won’t ever be our ally, White. You and every other dirty biker are only good for one thing: to bleed out at our feet.”

“You really love the word dirty, don’t you?” I tried to get a good shot at him, but whenever I tried to peer past the wheel, a bullet flew at me from both directions.

“You should have never touched an Italian woman. Any man who does dies. You won’t be the Famiglia’s ruin.”

Before I could retort anything, a shadow fell over me. Dimo pointed a gun at me, his lips pulled into an ugly smile. I jerked my feet up, ramming the heel of my boot into his balls, feeling sick satisfaction at the look of agony on Dimo’s face. He cried out and the shot buried itself in the wheel above my head. He sank to his knees with a bright red head, gasping for breath and clutching his balls with one hand. The other still clutched his gun but he was in no state to aim at anything.

I wanted nothing more than to kill the asshole, but I couldn’t do it. I needed answers about who wanted me dead. Mostly, if Amo or Luca were behind it. I had a feeling they were. Marcella kissing me at the party had been the last straw, and now Luca wanted me out of the way as fast as possible. Or why would he send me on a dangerous mission right after the party?

“You’re lucky I need answers,” I growled as I shot Dimo’s arm holding the gun and he dropped it. I kicked him in the face, and he toppled

backward, unconscious. Blood was dripping from his nose and his fingers still clutched his balls.

A gunshot rang out.

I got down on my knees, peering out from behind the wheel again.

Peppone had used the time to get in a better position. A bullet missed my head by an inch. I pushed to my feet and started running, trying to duck behind old farm utensils. A sharp pain shot through the back of my head and I ducked further until I half fell into the shed. My hand flew up to the back of my head, coming away covered with blood. This must have been Peppone if I estimated the direction of the bullet right.

Now I was trapped in this fucking shed.

# Chapter *Eighteen*



I crept closer to the door and risked a peek. A bullet smashed into the old wood of the shed. I fell backward with a string of curses and landed in old hay. Dust rose up, covering my eyes and my mouth, making breathing and seeing difficult. Damn it!

I rubbed my eyes and spit out the dust. Now I got why the bastard Peppone had insisted that I handed my phone over to him. He wanted to prevent me from calling for help. But who could I have called? I wasn't sure whom to trust in the Famiglia. And I would have cut my own throat before calling Marcella and putting her in danger. Though she might have reasoned with her old man to save me.

I didn't have any allies.

The people I'd once called brothers either wanted me dead, were dead, or wouldn't risk their lives for me—not after what I'd done.

Maybe Gray would help me if I called him, but he was too far away and even if he weren't... I'd risked his life once, I wouldn't do it again.

And Luca or any other Vitiello?

Thinking of Luca only posed the risk of sending me into a blind rage, so I pushed any thought of him aside. I'd find out who wanted me dead later.

First, I needed to survive, and that would be hard enough.

For a crazy second, I considered calling Grawl, but he was Luca's man through and through, and would probably only finish the job if Luca was behind this.

But sitting in this shed like a turkey before Thanksgiving waiting for the slaughtering to happen? No chance.

If they wanted me dead, they'd have to fight me for my life. I sure as hell wouldn't make it easy for them. I'd return to Marcella like promised and fuck her sweet pussy all night.

I let my gaze wander around the shed, finding the shape of a bike under a yellowish-white cover. I removed the dusty cover and found an old bike beneath. It even had a sidecar. This was my chance to get out of this shed without a bullet in my head—if the thing still ran. It didn't have any obvious damages, apart from being old. I mounted the bike which creaked as if it might fall apart. This baby hadn't been moved in a while. "Come on, be a good girl," I murmured. It took me an awful while to short-circuit the damn thing. The last time I'd done something like that was as a young teen when Earl hadn't allowed me to ride one of the club's bikes.

I'd crashed the bike, broken my wrist, and Earl had broken a couple of my ribs in the beating I got as punishment.

It took me five attempts to get the engine to pour, then the bike vibrated promisingly under me. The fuel level was dangerously low, but I had no intention of making miles with this thing. I only needed to get out of here alive. Even though I hated helmets, I grabbed the dirty thing from the sidecar and put it on. I doubted it would hold back a bullet, but it might protect me from more graze shots. It smelled of old sweat and the dust that had gathered inside made my nose itch like crazy. Maybe I'd crash the thing during a sneeze attack and die that way.

I shook my head with a sardonic chuckle. Fuck, Marcella, what have you done to me?

And then I hit the gas and the bike shot forward. It stuttered and shook as if it was trying to buck me off, but as I rammed through the shed doors, flinging them open and almost losing balance, I couldn't help but grin. This reminded me of my wild teenage days. Mad indeed.

My smile died the moment bullets flew my way again.

I bowed low over the handlebars and sped up even more, charging right at a Nomad hiding behind a wheelbarrow who was pointing his gun straight

at me. Seeing me charge at him, he made the fatal decision to whirl around and run, instead of fire. As expected, he was too slow and thus the easiest target. The sidecar collided with his shins. I almost toppled over at the impact but managed to get control over the bike quickly.

The Nomad rolled around on the ground with broken legs. Several shots hit his head and upper body before I could decide if I would keep him alive for questioning—if I survived this shitshow. The Italian traitors did quick work of him. One enemy less to worry about. I couldn't do anything about the bikers hiding inside the house, shooting out of the windows. They weren't my most pressing problem right now.

I did a U-turn and charged in the direction where Peppone and Drooping-Eye were still hiding. I soon began a neck-breaking zig-zag course to avoid the bullets barreling my way. I really didn't want to die at the hands of these idiots.

Drooping-Eye shot to his feet and dashed out from behind the oak. I chased him and quickly caught up with him, running him over with my sidecar as well. He yelped and fell to the ground but didn't move. Maybe he hit his head. Not as satisfying as killing him with a bullet, but I'd just have to take it.

I turned again, heading for Peppone, but he was no longer where I'd last seen him. From the corner of my eye, movement caught my attention.

I tried to jerk the handlebars around. Too late. Peppone lunged at me, grabbing hold of my jacket and ripping me off the bike. I slammed to the ground, the air leaving my lungs and my ribs ringing with pain. Probably broken again.

A blade flashed in the corner of my eye. I rolled over, bringing my legs up in defense when Peppone attacked me with a knife. I wasn't sure what had happened to his gun, but he was good with the knife too. I aimed a desperate kick at his knife hand but he jumped back, eyeing me like a cockroach that he wanted to squash under his boot.

I pushed to my feet and faced him, without a weapon. I'd lost my gun and knife when I'd fallen from the bike.

Peppone lunged at me again, slashing along my forearm, sending burning pain through me. I gritted my teeth against the pain, and clamped my hand around his wrist, then jerked him against me and gave him a head-bang.

Pain slammed through my temples, but Peppone actually began to sway. I used his moment of disorientation and kicked him in the balls too. He sagged down on his knees and I rammed my knee against his chin, knocking him out.

Panting hard and bleeding profusely from my head and arm wound, I cursed the Famiglia, and my stupid heart which had led me into the midst of the enemy. All for a woman.

But what a woman, damn it!

A bullet ripped a hole into the tree beside me, sending bark flying everywhere and cutting my moment of anger short. I ducked and hid behind the trunk. I felt my face for injuries from the bark, but it was covered in blood, dust, and hay, so it was impossible to detect possible cuts.

Peppone was safe from the bullets where he lay on the ground. Not that I would have cared if they'd riddled him like a fucking swiss cheese but I needed answers. Afterward, I could still kill the bastard.

I searched the ground for my gun, got even down on my knees, and when I finally found it, I could have screamed in triumph. I grabbed it and crept closer to the building. It was two against one now if I'd counted the Nomads correctly. Now that my Italian "friends" were dead or unconscious, I was up against the bikers on my own. Though I pretty much had been on my own from the very start.

I couldn't believe I had been stupid enough to trust these assholes. Though trust was the wrong word. I hadn't exactly trusted them. I had trusted in their fear of their Capo. Of course, I'd thought said Capo had accepted me. Maybe he hadn't. Maybe this had been his ploy but now wasn't the time to wreck my brain about it. I had to deal with my opponents first.

I crept closer to the house but I'd be without protection the last few steps from the shed to the door. My only other option was to drag Peppone to the car and return to New York without eliminating the two Nomads.

That wasn't really an option. They posed a danger for Marcella and I wouldn't allow it, even if I got killed protecting her.

I ran faster than I ever had in my life and threw myself against the door with full force. Once inside, I began firing right away until I was out of ammunition and hidden in the narrow bathroom. Luckily, it only took a couple more minutes for the gunshots from the Nomads to cease. They were either out of bullets or simply reloading. Only one way to find out.

With a battle cry, I jumped up and charged into the kitchen where one of my opponents was hiding. He attacked me with a shard from the broken window, but I no longer felt pain.

Thirty minutes later, I came out of the house victorious, having killed both my opponents, but with a cut in my arm.

Exhausted, in pain and seething, I went back to where I'd left my Italian friends. One was definitely still dead but Peppone was stirring. I leaned over him, pointing the gun I'd collected from one of the bikers at his head. His eyes fluttered and finally opened, then immediately went cross-eyed as he focused on the barrel.

"Hello sunshine," I growled with a cold smile. "I think we need to talk."

"Fuck off," he seethed. I pressed my foot down on his sternum, stealing his breath.

"What was that?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"I won't talk to you, dirty biker."

I rolled my eyes. "Dirty biker, is that the only insult your tiny brain can come with? Do you want me to get creative to extract information out of you?"

"Nothing you can do will make me talk."

In general, such a daring statement wouldn't have worried me, but considering that this was one of Luca's men, the chances of him being prepared to withstand torture weren't small. Earl had been the creative one and usually taken care of questioning.

"If you're so adamant about keeping your mouth shut, I'll have to assume talking would get you in trouble, and that means you're protecting your Capo, am I right?"

"Luca had nothing to do with this. We did this for him and the Famiglia."

I wasn't sure if I really believed him. A groan came from from beside the oak. Drooping-Eye was awakening slowly, unlike Dimo who looked surprisingly dead.

After I'd found rope in the car, I tied them up and put them on the truck bed before I returned to New York. I was seething. Now that the adrenaline had settled only anger remained. I didn't want to have to live my life looking over my shoulder for Famiglia soldiers to attack me again. The closer I got to New York, the angrier I got. When I finally pulled up in front of the Sphere I was fuming. I was out for blood.

If Luca was behind this assassination, I'd end him. I'd no longer try to play nice. If Marcella really loved me, she'd be on my side and be glad that I'd killed the man who didn't want us to be together.



I couldn't focus on the pages before me, hadn't really been able to focus all afternoon and evening. I'd sent Maddox two messages and even called him but his phone was dead. I was starting to get nervous.

"You still haven't heard word about the mission?" I asked Matteo for the hundredth time. I knew that they'd discovered a Nomad hiding place and would attack today.

"No. But maybe your dad has news when he returns from the restrooms." Matteo chuckled when he saw my sour face. "Don't look so worried. He'll come back in one piece."

I really didn't know what he found funny. His kind of humor wasn't my thing today. "I can't help it. I'm still not a hundred percent sure Dad wouldn't prefer Maddox to have an accident so I'd be with someone else."

"Your father certainly isn't Maddox's biggest fan, but he wants you happy," Matteo said. He was calmly checking drug sales numbers on his laptop while I was reading the same passage about our debtors and interest rates for the fourth time. My brain seemed foggy.

The door opened and Dad came back from the toilet.

"Anything?"

Dad raised his eyebrows.

"She's worried because of White," Matteo said.

Dad shook his head.

“What if something went wrong?” I asked for the hundredth time, even if I sounded like a broken record. I couldn’t focus on anything but my worry for Maddox. This was his first official mission, maybe that was why I was so nervous. I’d have to ask Mom, Gianna, and Aunt Lily how they managed to stay calm when their husbands were on a dangerous mission.

“During a mission, he won’t always have time to check his phone,” Matteo said with a hint of amusement, but Dad’s gaze reflected a hint of concern, which in turn, multiplied my own trepidation.

The roar of an engine made me perk up. I shoved up from the sofa, dropping the folder, and hurried outside, not waiting for anyone to catch up. My eyes widened when I spotted Maddox in the alley getting out of the van, covered in blood and dust and soil. He looked as if he’d dug himself out of his own grave.

I hurried over to him, trying not to appear like an over-worried girlfriend. I wasn’t sure how Mom could do this for decades, especially now that she had to worry about Dad and Amo. Maybe it got easier with time but right now I dreaded being left at home while Maddox risked his life again.

“The bikers got you bad,” I said worriedly.

Maddox kissed me fiercely before he shook his head, looking absolutely furious. “This wasn’t only the bikers. Your dad’s men tried to kill me and make it look as if it was the enemy.”

I tensed and withdrew a few inches from his embrace, hoping I’d heard him wrong. “What? Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure, unless it’s a secret Italian sign of love to shoot bullets at your allies.”

I swallowed hard. “Did you question them?”

“I did, at least the ones who survived. One’s dead. They say it was their plan and no one else was involved.”

“But you don’t believe them?”

Maddox’s face made it clear that he suspected someone else to be involved and I had a feeling he suspected my family.

“You and my family have been getting along better, right?”

“Your father tolerated me, and Amo and Matteo were okay to deal with...”

Maddox fell silent when Dad and Matteo joined us in the alley, his expression hardening.

“See, he’s in one piece,” Matteo said with a chuckle, motioning at Maddox. I grabbed Maddox’s arms and his lips twitched from pain but his eyes were only focused on Dad and Matteo.

“I guess that wasn’t the outcome you’d hoped for, right?” Maddox growled.

“What are you talking about?” Dad asked coldly. “And what happened to my men?”

“Two of them are tied up in the back of the van and one is dead.”

Dad stalked toward Maddox, looking murderous, and Maddox looked only too eager to get into a fight with him.

# Chapter *Nineteen*



I wouldn't allow those two hotheads to kill each other. If they couldn't act like adults and actually talk to each other before attacking then I'd just have to be the one mediating between them.

I stepped between Maddox and my dad, my palms against either of their chests. They barely glanced my way, too busy killing each other with their eyes.

Matteo, too, had his hand on his gun, ready to intervene, and definitely not in Maddox's favor.

"Was it you who killed one of my men?"

Maddox gave Dad a scary grin. He reminded me of a Rottweiler baring its teeth. "I did, and I would do it again if it was my life against theirs. Your men tried to put a fucking bullet in my head!"

Dad picked up his phone but didn't cease the staring contest with Maddox. "I need you to pick up something for me. Right now."

"Show me my men," he then ordered Maddox.

"I want to be there when you talk to them. I won't let you create lies behind my back."

"You don't order me around, White."

“Dad,” I said firmly. “I need to talk to you alone. Now. Please.”

Dad began to shake his head, but I kept staring at him imploringly. The two bouncers of the Sphere appeared in the alley and Dad motioned at the car. “Pick up the load and bring them into one of the holding cells.”

Maddox clicked the car shut with the keys. “Nobody takes anyone away until I know if these three acted on your orders.”

I turned to him, touching his arm. “Let me talk to my father, all right?”

Maddox gave a reluctant nod. I turned to Dad. “Dad, please.”

“Five minutes,” he said with a scathing look at Maddox. He led me inside while Matteo and the bouncers remained outside with Maddox.

My belly was flipping from anxiety. If Dad had really tried to have Maddox killed, I wasn’t sure what I’d do. This was worse than leaking information about Earl and that had been bad enough. If Dad had ordered his soldiers to pull the trigger, the blood was on his hands.

I felt sick just thinking about it. I loved my family and I didn’t want to destroy it, but I also loved Maddox...

The moment Dad and I entered his office, I could feel the entire load of worries crash down on me in one all-consuming tidal wave.

“Swear that it wasn’t you!” I screamed, completely losing it. If Dad had ordered his soldiers to kill Maddox and make it look like an accident, then I wasn’t sure I could forgive him. Even if he did it to protect me. There was a limit to what I could accept.

“Watch your tone,” Dad said firmly, crossing the room to his desk.

My eyes widened in fury. “I won’t be quiet, not when you might have tried to kill the man I love.”

Dad sank down on his desk chair, looking exhausted and angry. I didn’t care if my tone pissed him off. Not after what I’d just found out.

Dad regarded me quietly for almost a minute. “Love?”

I couldn’t believe he was trying to discuss my emotional state in a moment like this.

“Dad,” I said firmly.

He sighed, looking down at his wedding ring. I’d never seen him without it. “I wasn’t in on it.”

I gave him a doubtful look. “Your soldiers respect and fear you. They follow your orders because they fear the consequences, and you really want me to believe you didn’t know anything?”

“What I know is that some of my soldiers aren’t happy with my choice to let Maddox White live, and even less to let him dishonor my daughter.”

“Dishonor,” I repeated in a shaky voice.

“Their words, not mine.”

“But it’s what you think as well.”

“I want you to be happy Marcella.”

“And Maddox is the one who makes me happy!”

“I know.”

I hesitated. “If you know, then why did you try to kill him?”

Dad sighed and got up before he rounded the desk and gripped my shoulders. “I didn’t.” He pressed my palm on his heart then covered it with his hand. “I swear on my honor and my life that I didn’t know of their plan to kill Maddox.”

“Swear it on Mom’s life,” I demanded.

A smile flitted across Dad’s face. “You’ll make a great addition to the Famiglia.”

“Dad,” I warned, not wanting to be distracted with compliments, no matter how flattering. Nothing in this world meant more to Dad than Mom. His love for her was infinite.

“I swear it on your mother’s life. I didn’t know anything about the attempted killing, nor would I have approved of it. If anyone kills Maddox White, it’s going to be me.”

“That’s not funny,” I muttered.

“I was dead serious.”

I shook my head. “What about Amo or Matteo?”

“Matteo wouldn’t go behind my back. And Amo has come to terms with Maddox. I think they get along.”

They did, at least better than in the beginning, but Dad and Amo going behind my back before, still stung. I shook my head, feeling overwhelmed by despair. I didn’t want to distrust my family. Tears stung in my eyes. Dad touched my cheek. “Princess, what is it?”

I peered up at him. “I want our family to stick together. I want to be able to trust you and Amo and Matteo, I don’t want to have to be afraid for Maddox’s life when he’s with you, I don’t want to be caught between two fronts.”

Dad kissed my forehead. “You won’t be, Marci. I’m slowly coming to terms with you and Maddox, but it’s not easy. It’s never easy for a father to

see his daughter with a man but for someone like me seeing you with someone who was my enemy, that's a major challenge, but I'm willing to tackle it for you and your mother."

"Mom?"

"She wants me to make peace with Maddox."

I wished Mom were here right now so I could hug her. "I'd really appreciate it if you'd talk to Maddox."

Dad nodded.

"Do you think there are more of your soldiers who want to kill Maddox?"

"I have no doubt. The feud between us has been going on too long. It's ingrained in their brains, but now that I know about the immediate danger I'll put an end to it, don't worry."



"Luca didn't order anyone to kill you, White," Matteo said.

"I have two loyal soldiers tied up in the back of the van who tried to kill me so excuse me when I don't take your word for it."

"You'll have to take Luca and my word for it. We're almost family after all."

I gave him the finger. "I'm not in the mood for your jokes."

Matteo smirked. "I'm not joking. After the kiss at the party, the tabloids and everyone in our world is waiting for the official engagement announcement."

Like it always did when someone mentioned engagement or marriage my heart beat faster.

Matteo chuckled but I didn't get the chance to ask him what was so funny again.

Marcella and Luca returned after ten minutes. Marcella looked as if she'd cried, which sent my protectiveness into overdrive. "What's wrong?" I asked, heading for her and touching her cheek. She gave me a small but encouraging smile. "Nothing. I talked to Dad and he really didn't have anything to do with the attempted murder."

"And you think your father would tell you the truth?"

"Yes," she said without a doubt. Fuck, how could she be this trusting in a person like Luca. If I'd ever have kids, I could only hope that they'd look up to me like Vitiello's kids did to him. "Dad swore it on Mom's life. I believe him. Trust me."

Her eyes begged me. I pressed my forehead against hers. "Snow White, my trusting in you will be my death one day."

She smiled. "Talk to him."

I cocked an eyebrow. Then looked at Luca. He looked a little less hostile than before, which could hardly be considered an improvement.

"Like Marcella said, I'd like to have a word in private with you."

Shoving my suspicions aside, I followed him down the alley until we were out of earshot even if not out of sight from the others.

"I can't deny that I've been entertaining the idea of getting rid of you from the moment Marcella admitted her bond to you."

"Trust me, I've entertained the same fantasies in regard to you. We're both not each other's biggest fans."

Luca smirked. "No, we're not, and I'm not naïve enough to believe that this will change quickly. But I think we can overcome our resentments for Marcella. I don't want trouble within my family. For me and my wife, family is everything."

"Marcella mentioned it. To be honest, it's still hard to believe but it's one thing that I admire about you."

It cost more than a little effort to admit this, but it was the truth.

Luca looked surprised for a moment before his usual cold mask took over. "I respect you for killing your uncle for Marcella. I would have done the same if my wife had asked me to kill my own father."

"I guess we have messed up father figures in common then," I muttered.

Luca nodded. "Next time before you assume I'm behind an attack on your life, talk to me first."

“You have to admit it’s not completely ridiculous of me to think you might be behind your men’s attack on my life. After all, it wouldn’t be the first time, right? Not even the second. I don’t think I have enough fingers to count off the attempts on my life in the last decade.”

“You tried to kill me just as many times and that’s old history. Now you’re with Marcella.”

“I was with Marcella when you hoped to get me killed by spreading information about Earl.”

Luca’s face darkened. He was pissed? Maybe he needed to try being in my shoes for a bit.

“I told you after that incident that I wouldn’t do it again. I didn’t order my men to kill you. I explicitly told them to regard you as one of us, and protect you like they would each other.”

“Strange way to protect me.”

“I’ll make sure it won’t happen again, you can count on it,” he said firmly, and I actually believed him. Maybe Marcella had rubbed off on me.

“What are you going to do with Peppone and Drooping-Eye?”

Luca gave me a mildly amused look. “Gaetano.”

“I won’t bother to remember his name now considering he’ll be dead soon like his friend Dimo.”

“And you intend to be the one to kill them like you killed Dimo?”

“Don’t give me shit for killing one of your soldiers, all right? It was my life against his, and I really like being alive. And the other two acted against your orders so I assumed they’ll be punished accordingly. Isn’t death the punishment for such a transgression?”

“Not always. I don’t kill every soldier who disobeys me, it depends on the severity of the transgression.”

I nodded. “Then I guess they won’t have to fear death considering they only tried to kill a White.”

Luca glanced back at Marcella and Matteo who were watching us from their spot by the van, which was shaking by now.

“Someone must be awake,” I said.

“Then let me have a word with them.”

I pulled the keys from my jeans and tossed them at Luca, who caught them then nodded. He stalked to the van and I followed a few steps behind him. I felt exhausted and my entire body ached. This was the second time in weeks that my body suffered several injuries. I really needed a vacation.

Marcella came toward me with a puzzled look. “Why are you smiling? Did you and Dad clear things up?”

“We did, sort of, and I’m smiling because I’m thinking of taking a vacation.”

“Only if you take me with you.”

I touched her waist. “For sure.”

Luca unlocked the van and swung open the door. Peppone almost toppled out. He must have been the one banging against the door. When he spotted Luca, his face briefly lit up before he spotted me.

“Take them both down into the cell,” Luca ordered.

“Capo!” Peppone called but Luca ignored him as the two bouncers grabbed Peppone and a still unconscious Drooping-Eye and dragged them inside the Sphere.

Marcella took my hand and began to pull me inside as well. “I want to hear what they say.”



Peppone didn’t look as arrogant when he stood in the center of the cell. Luca circled him like a lion regarding its prey.

“Sit,” he ordered.

Peppone sank down on the creaking wooden chair without hesitation. Drooping-Eye groaned briefly but didn’t move apart from that.

Luca glowered down at his surviving men. “You tried to kill Maddox?”

Peppone pressed his palms together as if he was about to pray, not to a God but Luca. I leaned against the doorway, curious to see where Luca would be going with this.

“We did it for the Famiglia, Capo. He’s the enemy, having him in our rows is a risk. He’ll eventually betray us. They don’t have a loyal bone in their bodies. He’s not like us and he won’t ever be.”

His words were feverish in their conviction. I gritted my teeth, wanting to defend myself but holding back because this was Luca’s interrogation. The words Peppone said were the exact words Luca had voiced in the beginning and probably still thought.

I was sick of it. Marcella linked our hands discretely behind our backs. She still mostly avoided physical contact when her father was around.

Peppone didn't even try to deny anything. He admitted to everything without Luca having to resort to the barest hint of torture—what a shame. I really would have loved to see Peppone suffer.

“Don't you see that he's our downfall? We have to get rid of him before he dishonors the Famiglia as well.”

“I hope you're not hinting to me being dishonored, because I don't feel the slightest bit less honorable,” Marcella said in an icy tone that did her Vitiello genes proud.

Peppone only briefly glanced her way before he faced Luca again. “Capo, we did it for you and the Famiglia.”

“My word is law. You went against a direct order from me and attacked one of ours. Maddox isn't the enemy and I won't allow him to be treated like one.”

I almost choked at his words. Hearing them from Luca's lips I briefly doubted my sanity.

Luca turned to his brother. “Call the soldiers in for a meeting in the Yonkers power plant.”

Matteo nodded and went off with a twisted smile that still sent a cold shiver down my spine no matter how often I saw it. He was a crazy fucker.

Peppone shook his head frantically. “You'll lose the support of the majority of your men if you do this!”

Luca didn't look impressed. “The majority of my men trust my judgment, Peppone, and those who don't will be reminded of the consequences.”

I had no clue what all of this meant.

“What's this supposed to mean? Why a meeting in a power plant?” I asked Marcella when we walked out.

“That was where the last bloodbath in the history of the Famiglia happened. Most people are calling it Gateway to Hell because of it, and because it's rumored to be the place where Dad likes to make his bloody statements.”

“Bloody statement, huh?”

“Yeah, he ripped the tongue of somebody out who dared to insult Mom. Tonight, he'll publicly punish your attackers.”

Marcella gave me a small, tense smile. “Dad will make sure that this won't happen again.” I took her hand and kissed her palm then bent down

to whisper. “Maybe you know of a way to make me forget the shock and pain until then?”

Marcella rolled her eyes, but I didn’t miss the flicker of excitement in them. “Maybe.”

# Chapter *Twenty*



To my utter surprise, Luca allowed Marcella to accompany me to my apartment so I could change clothes and treat my wounds before the meeting in the Yonkers Powerplant. Luca needed to set everything up in the meantime, but he sent Matteo to take us there and probably make sure that we didn't get up to anything naughty.

Matteo pulled into the underground garage and got out of the car.

"Come on, Matteo, you don't have to follow us upstairs. Maddox isn't a danger for me."

"Oh I know. Your dad probably worries more about his wandering hands."

Marcella blushed. "That's ridiculous."

"Not from the way he looks at you," Matteo said simply.

"It's our private matter," Marcella said.

Matteo looked me in the eye. If he wanted me to swear that I didn't touch Marcella he could go fuck himself. The second I was alone with Snow White, I'd touch and kiss and lick every inch of her body.

Matteo smiled wryly. "Your dad would disagree, but I have better things to do than to play babysitter. You are old enough."

“Thank you,” Marcella said.

“But you only got thirty minutes, so hurry.”

Marcella and I stepped into the elevator, not needing to be told twice.

I half dragged her into the apartment, eager to be alone with me. Marcella glanced around curiously. “It’s nice.”

“It’ll be better once you move in,” I said but then I kissed her, my lips moving over hers.

Marcella pulled away. “We need to clean your wounds first.”

“We only have thirty minutes. I won’t waste them on treating my wounds.”

Marcella gave me a scolding look that had me hurry into the bathroom and take the fastest and one of the most painful showers of my life.

I didn’t bother getting dressed, instead I emerged from the bathroom completely naked and still damp.

Marcella’s eyes traveled along my body, drinking in the parts she loved, like my sixpack, my thighs, and my cock, before she assessed my wounds.

One or two of them would need a couple of stitches, but I could do that later tonight. I sank down on my sofa and spread my arms on the backrest. “I’m ready for my treatment, Nurse.”

Marcella shook her head with played disapproval and huffed when my cock slowly began to fill with blood. She stunned me when she sank down on her knees before me and licked a wayward drop of water off my sixpack. My cock stood to full attention at her proximity.

Her hot breath fanned over my tip and then she took me into her mouth. “Fuck, yes.” I tangled my hand in her hair as she took more and more of my cock into her mouth. The feeling of her heat and her tongue sliding along the underside of my cock almost made me explode.

My eyelids drooped but I didn’t close them completely, not wanting to deprive me of the sight of Marcella on her knees. When I’d first seen her, I’d entertained many fantasies like that, but in all of them, I’d felt triumphant, as if I’d brought a Vitiello to her knees, as if I’d gotten part of my revenge by doing so. But right this moment, I was the one on my knees because this woman before me, she ruled over my heart with an unshakable grip. Nothing mattered except her.

Marcella sunk her nails into my thighs, making me groan in pleasure. She took me even deeper but gagged when I hit the back of her throat. “Come on, Snow White, you can do this,” I teased in a raspy voice.

She nipped me playfully with her teeth but then she actually tried again and took me almost all the way into her mouth. My head fell back and I moaned, almost delirious on the feel. I could have stayed like this forever, but the clock was ticking and I still needed to devour pussy.

“As much as I enjoy the lazy life, watching you devour my cock like candy, I really want your pussy on my mouth. So swing your leg over my head, take a seat and buckle up for the lick of your life.”

Marcella sent me the same look she’d sent me shortly before I’d first devoured her. She let my cock slide out of her lips in a way that made her teeth graze the underside. I groaned, half tempted to push her head back down and come down her throat. I watched with the usual stunned awe as she presented her beauty to me.

“You need to lie down if you want me on your face.”

I swung my legs onto the sofa and stretched out. “Ready.”

Marcella licked her lips as she kneeled on the sofa. When she finally swung her leg over my head, placing her pink pussy right before my face, I was even hornier than before, which seemed impossible.

Before Marcella even got the chance to get comfortable and reacquaint herself with my cock, I raised my head and sucked her pussy lips into my mouth.

She threw her head back with a deep moan. I didn’t go slow, for lack of time and lack of patience. My tongue mercilessly teased her folds and sensitive entrance until she was writhing on top of me almost desperately. Then I reined myself in and established a slow rhythm. She basked in the sensation with sensually closed eyes I could see in the mirror on the wall. I released her dripping pussy with a cocky smile. “You ready to dive back down?” I asked in a teasing voice. “Or do you want to be served first?” I accentuated the question with a flick of my tongue.

With a smile, she lowered her head and the welcoming heat of her mouth surrounded my cock once again. I wanted this to last forever. The give and take of pleasure, enjoying both equally, was something I’d never experienced to this degree.

“I’m close,” Marcella gasped.

“I know,” I rasped then proceeded to suck her clit. Marcella’s blow job became sloppier, her teeth gracing my tip, as she breathed more heavily.

When she pulled back and her hand tightened around my base, I knew she was about to explode. I slid my thumb into her pussy as my lips cupped

her clit. She cried out, fingers squeezing the life out of my dick as her walls spasmed around my thumb. She trembled, her hips twitching as if touched by electricity.

I rotated my thumb, enjoying the sight of it inside of her as my tongue soothed her swollen button. She was still shaking and dripping arousal. I slid my glistening thumb out of her and allowed my tongue to dip inside and taste her. She moaned softly and finally the heat of her mouth surrounded my cock again.

She sucked me deep into her mouth and massaged my balls while I teased her walls with my tongue piercing. She pressed back to drive my tongue even deeper into her pussy, desperate for cock. Fuck. The need to let loose in her warm mouth was impossibly strong. I jerked my hips up, driving my cock even deeper into her heat. Her tongue and lips drove me near insane. I wanted to come but at the same time I wanted to prolong the sensation for as long as possible.

Fuck, and time was running out.

As if on cue, Marcella's phone on the coffee table began ringing and Matteo's name flashed on the screen. The fucker had given us exactly thirty minutes. I'd kill him for this more than anything else.

Marcella pulled away and I almost shoved her back down.

"Don't do this to me," I groaned.

She grinned. Whoever said women couldn't be cruel? She reached for the phone and switched it off.

"This will buy us the time it takes Matteo to take the elevator up and find your apartment."

"Then don't waste any time."

Marcella smiled seductively as she took my cock into her mouth. I cupped the back of her head as she bobbed up and down, taking me deeper every time.

My balls became tight. I didn't take my eyes off Marcella's lips around my fat cock. Her eyes were half closed and she breathed through her nose. I began to push upward, driving harder and deeper into her.

"Can I?" I pressed out, remembering in the last moment that Marcella might not want to swallow.

She blinked once and gave the tiniest nod, and that was all it took for me to let loose. I groaned as my body convulsed under a wave of pleasure. Marcella swallowed awkwardly around my cock and some of my cum

dripped out of her mouth, and that sight would have made me come again if that were possible.

She pulled back, wiped her mouth then smiled triumphantly.

Of course, having a knack for the perfect timing, Matteo knocked then.

“Time’s up. You better make sure I don’t see anything I don’t want to see when I kick in this fucking door in exactly two minutes.”

Marcella scrambled to her feet and rushed into the bathroom, to clean her face I supposed. I stayed where I was, still too drunk on pleasure to move a muscle, not to mention that every inch of my body ached and I finally felt it.

When Marcella returned shortly after, her eyes widened in indignation. “Hurry up!”

I stood and with a dirty grin in her direction, I went in search of clean clothes.

A second before Matteo would have kicked in the door, I opened it for him. “Sorry for the delay,” I said without sincerity.

Matteo shook his head. “Don’t tell me anything I don’t want to know or Luca shouldn’t know.”



I’d heard all the stories of “The Gateway to Hell”, how the press called the Yonkers power plant because of the bloody statements of the past, but I’d never been allowed to set foot inside, much less attend a gathering. Women weren’t welcome at these meetings and up until recently—and maybe still—Dad wanted to keep me away from the business. Today I’d be the first woman to finally break the tradition.

Maddox and I got out of the back of the car. It was drizzling lightly and uncomfortably cold, so I had to pull my coat tighter around my body as we made our way over to where Dad and Romero waited for us. The building with its reddish-brown brick front loomed near the Hudson River, ripe with history and today I'd be the first woman to become part of it.

Pride and anxiety swelled in my chest. It was nothing big, attending a meeting, but everyone would see me and know that change was on its way.

"Now I know why they call it Gateway to Hell. This place screams last stop," Maddox muttered.

I nodded but was distracted by Dad's tight expression.

"Hey Romero," I said. I hadn't seen him in a while—last time actually a few days after I'd been saved from the clubhouse. Things had been too stressful for a family gathering or a long weekend getaway in the Hamptons.

"I need a word with you," Dad said to me.

We walked a few steps to the side. "I want to use today to induct you," Dad said, stunning me completely. I hadn't expected it.

My eyes widened. "Won't it be too much for your men to stomach? You punishing soldiers for trying to kill a biker and inducting a woman into the Famiglia."

"It's exactly why I'm doing it. Are you ready?"

I nodded. I wanted this. I wanted to be part of the Famiglia, wanted to grow our business and not just stand on the sideline all my life.

Dad gave me a tense smile.

"Does Mom know?"

"She does and she told me to tell you that she's proud of you."

Trying to control my emotions—I needed to be focused and strong once I set foot inside the building. Everyone would be watching.

Maddox gave me a questioning look.

"Dad will induct me today after he's done with the bloody statement."

Maddox grinned. "You'll kick ass. These old-fashioned idiots won't know what hit them."

"You should reconsider your word choices," Matteo said.

Romero gave Maddox a curt nod, eyeing him warily.

"That's my aunt Lily's husband, Romero. He's Captain," I introduced him to Maddox, hoping to break the ice.

Romero extended a hand and shook hands with Maddox.

“It’s time,” Dad said.

The gates creaked loudly when we entered the building. I’d only seen a couple of photos in old newspapers but the place looked more decrepit than in any of them. The main hall, where everyone had gathered, dozens of men, was several stories high. Plaster had broken off in many places and most of the pipes were half rotten away by rust. The stench of old water and something metallic lay in the air.

Maddox, Matteo, Romero, and I followed Dad inside, who had to go ahead as the Capo, and the crowd parted for him reverently. I could feel dozens of eyes on me, demanding why I was here. I didn’t miss the distrustful or even hateful looks a few of them sent Maddox.

Dad headed straight toward a low concrete platform and climbed on top of it while we gathered in the first row where Amo and Growl were already waiting.

“I feel a tad uncomfortable, like a lamb surrounded by a pack of wolves. Fuck, how many mobsters are here?” Maddox muttered under his breath.

I had to stifle a smile. Keeping up an emotionless front today was crucial. “Those are only men from New York and the area. If Dad calls all his men in, it’s a much bigger gathering.”

Amo had described it to me once and I got goose bumps thinking about it.

“This is enough if you ask me,” Maddox said but then a hush fell over the crowd and he too fell silent.

Dad had raised his arms to silence the crowd. Many of them had been eyeing us warily but were now focused on Dad.

“My word is law. It’s always been law and will be law until my son takes over and his word becomes law.”

Amo grew even taller, his expression filled with pride.

“When you swear loyalty to me, you’re bound to follow my orders, even if you don’t agree with them. As Capo, I have to keep the big picture in mind.”

Growl and Amo disappeared and returned with the two men who’d tried to kill Maddox.

When he explained what they had done, I could see that several men couldn’t see fault in what had happened.

“Bottom-line is that you went against my direct orders. You considered yourself above the law. You decided you knew what was the best choice for

the Famiglia and not I. But I'm Capo." The word echoed in the hall and Dad paused to really emphasize the effect.

"I declared Maddox White our ally. He might not be one of us but he's working with us and we respect allies."

Dad continued talking but I was distracted by people glancing between Maddox and me. Of course, everyone knew of our bond by now. I held my head high and returned their gazes.

"The Famiglia has built its power by making allies and trying new co-operations over the years. While we have to honor our past and traditions, we also have to prepare for the future if we want to be successful."

Dad made both men kneel in front of him and they admitted to their crimes again.

"You disobeyed a direct order. You tried to kill an ally and endangered not only the mission but by doing so my daughter's life. Maddox White is helping us find supporters of Earl White who might be after her. There's only one punishment for this crime: death."

A hush fell over the crowd. I held my breath, worried people might revolt, but except for a few disapproving faces most people accepted the verdict.

I braced myself when Dad raised his gun and shot first one then the other man. I barely flinched. The kidnapping and watching Earl's death had hardened me to a certain amount of brutality. I guessed I had him to thank for finally having the guts to join the Famiglia.

Maddox's face reflected surprise. "I didn't think your old man would really go through with it."

"Maybe you shouldn't call him that here," I said, amused.

Maddox gave me a quick grin but Dad caught his gaze and they nodded at each other, which was probably a sort of peace treaty in secret male code.

Then it was my turn. Dad motioned for me to join him on the platform. My heart beat wildly in my chest as I climbed up to stand by his side.

The crowd looked even bigger from this vantage point, and I couldn't deny it, I was nervous.

"Change is inevitable," Dad said in a booming voice. "The future doesn't wait for us to catch up. It'll run us over if we let it, and I have no intention to let anyone steer this boat except for me." He pointed at me. "Like I told several of you during meetings, my daughter Marcella will join the business."

Everyone stared at me and their doubt made me only more determined to prove myself to each of them. Dad handed me one of his daggers. It glittered under the flickering floodlights blasting light down on us from the corners.

I looked Dad in the eye and slid the blade along the tender flesh of my palm. My insides briefly turned but I bit the inside of my cheek to stay focused.

“Born in Blood,  
Sworn in Blood,  
I enter alive and

“I leave dead,” I said firmly, and any doubt I’d felt evaporated in that moment. This was my destiny. The Famiglia ran in my blood like it ran in Amo’s.

I pulled the blade away and faced the crowd, presenting my cut and letting blood drip down on the platform.

The entire hall intoned the words I’d just spoken. Goose bumps erupted all over my body. My gaze caught Maddox and the pride in his gave me a sense of belonging.

I was finally an official part of the Famiglia. Of course, this was only the beginning. I’d spent the rest of my life proving myself to all the men who thought a woman’s only job was to warm her husband’s bed.

I didn’t want to be that woman and thanks to the freedoms Dad allowed me I’d never have to be.

# Chapter *Twenty-One*



Marriage had never been the plan. I always imagined having an old lady at some point, a woman I'd temporarily tolerate at my side until she, like the ones before her, would annoy the shit out of me and I'd dump her. Love until death do us part had seemed like something out of a chick flick I'd never watch.

A life without Marcella was a torture I didn't even want to consider. Eternity with her? My only desire. If there were a closer bond than marriage, then I would have chosen it. I wanted Marcella to belong to me forever, and I wanted to belong to her. I wanted every fucker who wrinkled their noses at our bond, and particularly at me, to know that Marcella and I belonged together, that nothing in this world could part us. Even Luca Vitiello hadn't been able to do it.

I'd tried to prove myself to him over the last six months, helping him strike down several rogue Earl supporters and protecting Marcella as well as I could. But he and I still never talked anything but business and despite Marcella's and Aria's insistence, I'd never been invited to a family dinner.

I couldn't really blame him. If I had a daughter like Marcella, I'd make anyone's life hell who dared to think he was worthy of her. Maybe today

would finally tip the scale in my favor, or maybe it would make him lose his shit.

The bouncer only nodded as I stepped into the Sphere. To think that the day would come that I could come and go in a Famiglia club still was hard to believe. Today it wasn't business that brought me here. I headed into the back where the office was and knocked.

"Come in," sounded Luca's deep voice.

I had to admit I was a bit nervous. Marcella loved her father and undoubtedly wanted his approval.

I walked inside. Luca sat behind his desk, typing something on his laptop. He sat back in his chair and pointed at the chair across from him. I sat down and briefly felt like my young self during one of my many visits to the headmaster's office.

"What brings you here?" he asked neutrally. He and I had mastered being civil to each other.

"I need to talk to you. It's about Marcella."

At once, his expression became alert and wary. "What about her?"

I reached inside the pocket of my leather jacket, noting the subtle tensing of Luca's body. Yeah, trust would take time if we ever reached that level at all. I opened my palm, where my grandmother's engagement ring rested.

During my last visit to my mother, four weeks ago, which had been only the second time I saw her since she sent me to find Gray, she'd given it to me. I remembered mother's words about how her relationship with neither my father nor my uncle had been true enough for her to want to use the ring. Not that either of them had ever asked her for her hand. She'd always only been their old lady. She'd given it to me because she could see that Marcella was more. I'd been shocked back then because I hadn't been ready to admit that I wanted to marry Marcella.

His gaze flicked down to the ring and surprise flashed in his eyes before he hid it.

"I want to marry your daughter and I know how much your approval would mean to Marcella. That's why I'm here to ask for her hand in marriage."

Luca stared at me as if he saw me for the first time. "Does she know you're here?"

“That would defy the purpose, right? From what I understand your traditions, I have to ask you first before I ask Marcella. I don’t think she expects me to pop the question any time soon.”

“But you’re sure she’ll say yes?”

Was I sure? Fuck, no. With a woman like Marcella, no man should be too sure of himself, but I hoped she’d say yes. We’d braved so many negative influences these last few months and it had brought us only closer.

“Do you think she’ll say yes?” I shot his question back.

Luca nodded. “I think she’ll do.”

His words caught me by surprise. “So what do you say? Will you give me her hand in marriage?”

To be honest, even if he said no, I’d ask Marcella to marry me. He’d just have to get used to the idea like he had to get used to us being together. I wanted to be with Marcella and nothing and no one would stop me.

“Would it change anything if I said no?” he asked.

Fuck, sometimes he really freaked me out with his ability to see through me.

“No,” I said truthfully.

“Good. Marcella deserves a man who’ll fight against all odds to be with her. You have my blessing.”

I nodded and shoved my ring back into my pocket. I’d expected more resistance and was now faced with my nerves over how to pop the question to Marcella.

“I’ll ask her today,” I said, following an impulse.

The hint of a wry smile teased Luca’s mouth. “I won’t change my mind, no need to rush.”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“Marcella’s probably going to be annoyed that you asked me first.”

“It’s what she would have wanted.”

“Yes, but she also wants to be an independent woman who decides for herself.”

“She can’t have both,” I muttered.

“She’s a woman. She’ll want both, setting you like every other man up for failure.”

I chuckled. “You sound like you have experience with this.”

“I’m married.” He chuckled briefly and I fell in. It was a strange bonding moment that quickly had us both uncomfortable, so I left.



Marcella and I had a date in the afternoon to pick up Santana for a walk. Her training had progressed enough so she could move into a real home and I'd asked Growl to give her to me. Marcella didn't know it yet, and I'd planned to tell her today, and I still would but afterward I'd ask her for her hand.

Santana wagged her tail wildly when I headed for her cage. Marcella wasn't there yet, which was a good thing so I could get a grip on my nerves. I wasn't sure why I was even nervous.

The black limousine pulled up and Marcella got out in her usual shelter attire of jeans and a simple sweater. Maybe it would have been more traditional to ask her in a fancy restaurant, dressed up, but it would have felt wrong. Marcella and I could only ever really be ourselves when we were out of the public eye.

She kissed me in greeting and was about to pull back to greet Santana but I held her against me a moment longer. She peered up at me and slowly her brows puckered. "Is anything the matter?"

I shook my head. "I asked Growl if I could adopt Santana and he gave me the okay."

Marcella's face lit up. "Really?" She squatted down and scratched Santana's ears the way she liked it. "You'll get your forever home."

I wasn't sure what propelled me to do it, maybe the caring way Marcella patted Santana but I pulled out the ring.

"Will you marry me?" I asked. Marcella's head shot up, her eyes widening. I held out the ring. It wasn't a modern piece and certainly not as expensive as most of Marcella's jewelry, not even close, but I couldn't imagine giving her anything else. Then I realized what a fucking idiot I was.

Marcella was still kneeling beside Santana, and before me, when it should have been me on my knees.

"Stupid idiot," I muttered.

"What?" she asked, half amused, half confused. I got down on my knees beside her.

"I know this isn't how it's supposed to be done, but will you marry me?"

Marcella eyed the ring.

“Your grandmother’s?” she asked, instead of answering my question.

“Yes. I wanted to buy a new ring but none of them would have meant as much as this one does.” I felt like a fucking pussy admitting this, especially as I was still kneeling beside Marcella.

She didn’t say anything only regarded the ring and I was beginning to feel nervous. I had never considered that she might say no. Not because I was certain she couldn’t have a better husband, because she probably could. “I’ll be the best husband for you. I’ll have your back when you need it, and I’ll be at your side when you need a partner. And if you need a protector, I’ll make up your front. I’ll be your knight in dirty armor, your lover, your confidant. I’ll kill your enemies and hold your crown. I’ll give my blood, my life and anything else you want.”

Marcella shook her head, tears in her eyes, and my heart sank, but then a smile spread on her face. “You don’t have to convince me. I know you are the right man for me. So yes!”

“Yes?” I asked like an idiot.

“Yes.”

I put the ring on her finger and pulled her against me, kissing her deeply. Santana tiptoed around us, her wagging tail hitting us on occasion. She obviously thought this was a fun game. I shoved to my feet and pulled Marcella with me only to lift her off the ground and kiss her again. She wrapped her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist.

“We have to tell my parents. Dad will be furious if we don’t tell him right away.”

I pulled back. “He already knows.”

Marcella’s brows puckered.

“I asked him for your hand in marriage because I figured he was the traditional type and I knew how much your father’s approval meant to you.”

Marcella’s face morphed into a smile but then she pursed her lips. “It’s my decision whom I marry. Men making these kinds of decisions behind my back is archaic.”

I smirked. I had expected that reaction. “Your dad predicted you’d say something along the line. We both had a good laugh about it.”

“You and Dad laughed together?”

“He smirked a little. I count that as full-blown laughter where your father is concerned.”

Marcella shook her head but she looked slightly mollified. “It’s my decision,” she insisted.

“It is. Only your decision. Your father only said that he’d give his approval if you want to marry me. And you said yes.”

“I did,” she whispered, softening once more.

I couldn’t believe it.

When I returned home later with Santana, and she rolled up in the basket at the window that I’d bought for her, I felt like I was slowly arriving in this new life.



The same evening, I was invited over to dinner at the Vitiello mansion.

It still was the fucking strangest feeling in the world to set foot inside Luca Vitiello’s home. In my mind it had always seemed like the devil’s den, but this place, of course luxurious as fuck, had a homely feeling and was slowly starting to feel familiar.

It still felt surreal to be under the same roof with Luca Vitiello, a man I’d spent so many years killing in my fantasies that our sudden truce still hadn’t sunk in. Only someone like Marcella had the power to bring men like us together. For a girl like her a man would do anything. I would definitely. My father had died by her father’s hand, and my uncle had died through mine by her bidding. It spoke of my love for this woman that I didn’t regret anything. The murder of my uncle had proven my love to Marcella and I’d kill him over and over again if she asked me.

Their housekeeper opened the door. Usually, Marcella was the one to do it, probably to keep me away from her father and brother.

“I’m here for dinner,” I said simply.

The housekeeper eyed me critically. My decision to wear black jeans and a black shirt with rolled-up sleeves obviously didn’t pass her approval.

“The Masters are expecting you in the fireplace room.”

I stifled the need to roll my eyes. Of course, the house had a fireplace room. Even though I’d dated Marcella for more than six months, I’d never gotten farther into the house than the foyer and that one time in the living room. Up on the staircase stood Valerio, grinning. Not surprising, he was the Vitiello man I got along with the best. “You’re in big trouble.”

I cocked an eyebrow, but he didn't elaborate. I followed the housekeeper through the foyer and down the corridor to a wooden door. She knocked. Amo opened the door a couple of seconds later, looking so glum, you could think we were commemorating someone's passing and not my engagement to his sister.

He gave me a curt nod in greeting before he opened the door so I could enter. Inside seated on the wide leather armchairs, were Luca and Matteo. Their expressions were slightly less hostile. Matteo got up and handed me a dark amber drink. "You're a lucky bastard."

"I know," I said, taking a sniff at the liquid. "Is this your way of getting rid of me?"

"Poison is not my style," Luca said dryly.

"He prefers to choke people with his bare hands," Matteo commented. Then he winked and nodded. "Go ahead, drink up."

"I know what he can do with his hands," I said, then emptied the glass in one gulp. This tasted worse than the moonshine Gunnar used to make for club celebrations. The brief moment of wistfulness passed quickly, then I fought the urge to cough at the burning feeling making its way down my esophagus.

Luca nodded as if I'd passed a test by drinking. The guy was in his fucking forties but still looked as if he could beat the shit out of most guys, or choke them with his bare hands as Matteo liked to point out.

"Sit," Luca said, motioning at the empty chair across from him.

I sank down. Amo watched me with narrowed eyes but Matteo's eyes still gleamed with a hint of amusement.

"So," I began, scanning the three Vitiello men. "Why am I here?"

"You're going to marry Marcella, sooner or later."

"Sooner. We want to tie the bond next year."

"A year to organize a wedding of this proportion will freak everyone out," Matteo said with a grin.

"What kind of proportions?"

"Marcella is my only daughter. She's a Vitiello, so of course she'll have a grand feast with hundreds of guests."

"Okay," I said. To be honest, I'd never thought about the actual feast.

"But first, we need to make the engagement official. Release a statement and so on," Luca said.

"Fuck, you make it sound like it's some kind of business endeavor."

“Marriage is a sort of business endeavor in our circles. It’s used to strengthen families and make peace.”

“The press will probably spin their own tales anyway like they have been doing these last six months.”

“Probably,” Matteo agreed.

“Did you discuss the matter of your last name?” Luca asked.

“What matter? It’s tradition to take the name of the man.” Judging from their expressions, that wasn’t what they wanted. “But you don’t want Marcella to take my name.”

“Marcella White doesn’t have the same ring as Marcella Vitiello, don’t you think?” Matteo said with a crooked grin.

Fuck. Did they expect me to take on their name? Hell would freeze over before that happened. “Did you talk to Marcella?”

“I elaborated my concerns to her, yes,” Luca said.

“It’ll be a fucking shame if she gives up a name that holds so much power for your name,” Amo muttered.

Maybe they were right but I wouldn’t take on the name Vitiello and I didn’t want to have a different name from my wife.

“Marcella and I will discuss it. After all, it’s our marriage,” I said firmly. If I allowed it, Luca would probably control every aspect of my life with Marcella and that sure as fuck wouldn’t happen.

“Do that,” Luca said graciously.

“Now let’s move on to the fun part,” Matteo said, his smile becoming broader, which was never a good sign and could only be for one reason.

I raised my eyebrows. “Threatening to cut my balls off and stuff them into my mouth if I ever hurt Marcella?”

Amo chuckled and even Luca briefly cracked the hint of a smile before his expression darkened with warning. “It would be the beginning of very agonizing hours for you.”

A knock sounded. When the door opened without waiting for Luca’s approval, I knew only three people who had the audacity to do it. One of them, Aria, stepped in, her gaze quickly settling on me as if to check that I was still in one piece before it moved on to Luca. “I thought we were meant to have dinner together?”

A hint of indignation lay in her voice.

“We just had a quick talk with Maddox,” Luca said.

“We needed to make sure your future son-in-law got a fitting welcome.”

Aria sighed. She met my gaze. “I hope they weren’t too rude.”

“I survived,” I said with a smile.

Luca rose to his feet and went over to his wife. “If he ever hurt Marcella, you’d be the first to ask me to kill him, admit it.”

Aria’s face remained kind as she said, “Yes, but that’s beside the point. Maddox has no intention to hurt Marcella, right?”

Despite her kind face, her question almost terrified me more than Luca. “I’m not even dreaming of it.”

“Good.” She made an inviting gesture. “Why don’t you join me in the dining room while I set up the table? Marcella still needs a couple of minutes to get ready.”

Luca frowned, obviously not liking the idea of me alone with his wife. I rolled my eyes skywards. I was practically his son-in-law, at some point he’d have to tone down the distrust.

“Of course,” I said, pretty sure there wasn’t another acceptable answer to Aria’s invitation and absolutely certain that this was another test I had to pass: talking to the matriarch of the Vitiello clan alone. Maybe she didn’t show it as openly as Luca but Aria wasn’t any less protective of her daughter.

# Chapter *Twenty-Two*



I followed Aria into the dining room. The table looked pretty set in my eyes, but I had never been the guy for fancy dinners.

Aria opened a cupboard and took out silver cutlery. She handed me the forks and spoons but kept the steak knives to herself. I didn't doubt she'd use them if I fucked with her little girl, even if she wasn't as experienced at handling weapons. Women were the more creative sex when it came to weapons.

"Ready to stab me if I mess up?" I asked, smirking.

Aria glanced down at the knife she'd just put down beside a plate then at the ones in her hand. She smiled. "I'm not really the violent type."

"I would have been surprised if you'd have ever used a knife."

"Oh, I did. I once stabbed a Bratva soldier who'd attacked our house in the Hamptons," she said it so lightly that I was sure she was joking but her expression didn't show any humor.

I shook my head. "I can't see it, sorry."

She smiled. "There's more below the surface you can't see."

"What's below Marcella's surface?" I asked curiously. I was fairly confident that I knew Marcella as well as one could ever know another

person. The way we'd met and the beginning of our relationship just revealed her most vulnerable but also her fiercest sides. Few people ever got to see those.

Aria tilted her head to the side. "I think you can see more than most and what you haven't seen yet, I'm sure you'll discover soon enough, if she wants it."

I nodded. I cleared my throat, not sure how to say what I'd wanted to say for a long time. "I never apologized to you for the pain I caused you."

Aria put the knives down, fully turning to me, waiting for me to elaborate. I'd hoped she wouldn't.

"I never meant to cause you pain when I kidnapped Marcella."

"Any mother would feel pain if her child was kidnapped."

"I know. I see that now but back then I was so focused on revenge, anything else faded into the background."

"You wanted to hurt my husband and ultimately kill him."

I cringed. "Yeah. I'm not earning any early son-in-law bonus points here, am I?"

Aria smiled. "We've all made mistakes that hurt others, it comes with the world we live in. We can only make sure that we don't hurt the people we love."

"I swear I won't ever hurt Marcella. For one, she wouldn't let me, because she's the fiercest woman I know, and I could never live with myself if I did."

"Not to mention that the men of my family would kill you in a very unpleasant way."

"Yeah, that's certainly another deterrent, but not the main one."

My eyes registered movement from the corner of my eye. Marcella had just entered the room, as usual taking center stage of my attention. She wore a forest green jumpsuit that accentuated her curves in all the right places and satin high heels of the same color. Her outfit made me want to take her to a secluded spot for a little one on one time.

I met her halfway, impatient for her to reach me. Being separated from her during most nights and even some time during the day felt wrong after having her around pretty much 24/7 during her captivity. If it weren't for the Famiglia's old-fashioned traditions, we would have lived under the same roof already. I couldn't wait to share an apartment with her even if I'd

never lived with a woman before and would have to get used to her level of cleanliness.

She met her mother's gaze. "Thank you for saving him from Amo, Matteo, and Dad."

"I think your mom only wanted to grill me herself, no saving whatsoever," I said with a wink.

Aria gave me a secretive smile in turn, but Marcella rolled her eyes. "Not you too, Mom. I'm not a little kid anymore. I survived captivity with a horde of wild bikers. I'll survive being married to one."

"Hey," I said indignantly, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her against me for a kiss. "I'm not that wild and if anyone's in danger of not surviving this marriage, then it's me."

"I'll check if Lora's done with dinner," Aria said and glided away in that elegant way that Marcella had undoubtedly inherited from her.

"She wants to give us some privacy," Marcella said with a naughty smile, standing on her tiptoes and catching my lower lip between her teeth.

I stifled a grin. "Don't give me any ideas, Snow White. I'm having a hard time not thinking of all the places in this palace where I could have my way with you."

"I dare you to try them all," she said, her eyes twinkling in challenge.

"Easy for you to say. Your Dad and brother won't castrate you if they catch us getting it on."

"They know we already had sex."

"Trust me, knowing and seeing are two very different things. Your dad definitely pretends you're still his innocent daughter, untouched by my sullied paws."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me you're scared."

I lifted her off the ground by her ass and pressed a kiss to the valley between her breasts. "Fuck, no. If anyone's worth becoming an eunuch for, then it's you. I'll die a happy man, knowing my last moments were with you and your father won't ever be able to unsee us doing the nasty."

Marcella looked mildly mollified by my words. Steps rang out, definitely heavier than Aria's soft footfall.

I could feel Marcella preparing to be set down. Did she really think I wasn't going to make good on my words? I'd lived my life preparing for a showdown with her father—of course not in the way that would happen now but annoying him in small ways was better than nothing.

I captured her mouth for a searing kiss and after a moment of surprised stiffness, Marcella relaxed against me, her arms tightening around my neck. Kissing her never got boring. I'd lost count of the number of kisses we'd shared so far, but every kiss still felt like our first.

A man cleared his throat. Just from the low warning rumble, I couldn't say if it was Luca or Amo, and with my back turned to the door I couldn't see who it was. I tried to set Marcella down but her grip around my neck became stronger. I kissed her once more, then I gently pried her off. She gave me a coy smile then she headed back to the dining table, leaving me to the wolves. I turned to find Matteo and Amo in the doorway.

"You're lucky it's just us," Amo muttered. But he too looked as if he'd love nothing more than to test the sharpness of his knife on me.

"I think he might become lucky later thanks to this act of bravery," Matteo said with a wink.

I gave him a sly smile. When Marcella had mentioned that her uncle was relaxed and funny in the very beginning, I hadn't believed it considering I'd only known his threatening, brutal side. But over the last six months, he was the Vitiello who'd been the easiest to get along with apart from Valerio.

"It's difficult to resist Marcella," I said simply, neither confirming nor denying his words. I certainly hoped that I'd get lucky later.

I went over to Marcella and touched her waist, loving how happy she looked that I dared to show my affection for her openly. After what had happened with her ex, no wonder. Of course, I was fucking glad that the idiot had been a pussy. That way Marcella was all mine.

Luca and Aria came in followed by Lora and a serving trolley. Luca's eyes darted to my hand on Marcella's waist, his expression tightening immediately.

If this already pissed him off, my next move would really set him off. I pulled back Marcella's chair for her—even a wild biker could have manners—but before she sank down, I kissed her lips. It was a chaste thing, certainly nothing compared to the show Matteo and Amo had witnessed.

When I pulled back, Marcella's eyes were alight with surprise and love, then she lowered herself into the chair. I risked a glance toward Luca. Aria was holding his hand, though I wasn't sure if it was to restrain him or because she was amazed by our love. Luca's expression was tight but he didn't try to pummel me to death with his bear-like fists, which I also took

as a good sign. Making progress on all fronts. Who would have ever thought I'd be accepted—or in Luca's case, tolerated—in the Vitiello family?

Lora loaded the table with all kinds of Italian delicacies. Since I'd been with Marcella, I'd discovered a whole new world of Italian food. My experiences with Italian dishes had been restricted to Olive Garden in the past, and that was, as I found out, far from traditional Italian cuisine. I still remembered Lora's appalled expression when I'd asked why her Spaghetti Carbonara didn't have cream in it. Her lecture about the traditional recipe with only eggs and parmesan had been memorable.

Marcella leaned over to me. "I love that you don't even hesitate to risk your life for me," she said, her lips brushing my ear shell, sending a pleasant shiver down my back. It took me a moment to realize she meant kissing her in front of her father. She lowered her voice further. "It's incredibly sexy."

She touched my thigh under the table and squeezed it hard once, which could only mean I'd really get lucky later. Unfortunately, it also gave my cock a little jump start I really couldn't use at the table with the Vitiello clan.



I kept touching Maddox's thigh under the table, teasing touches to drive him crazy. Maddox and I had never slept together in our house. He had never even been allowed to join me in my room. But I had been longing for his touch all day and wanted to make him as horny as I felt.

When I brushed his crotch, I got proof that he was indeed as hungry for alone time as I was. I had to stifle a smile and Maddox sent me a

challenging smile that made me a bit worried.

He reached for my leg under the table, his fingers clutching my thigh close to my pussy and squeezing.

“Have you discussed the matter of your last name yet?” Dad asked. It was a topic I wasn’t looking forward to discussing with Maddox and had no intention of bringing up today. Maddox slanted me a curious look.

“Not yet.”

“Maybe we can do it after dinner,” Maddox suggested. I wasn’t sure if he wanted to get me alone or if he really wanted to discuss the topic as soon as possible.



After dinner, I convinced Dad to allow Maddox up in my room. Maddox looked around curiously. “I can’t believe this is the first time I’m in your room.”

“You’re lucky Dad didn’t insist on Amo as our chaperone.”

Maddox snorted. “He can’t really believe we haven’t had sex in the last few months.”

“Oh, he definitely doesn’t believe it, but he won’t make it easier for you than absolutely necessary.”

Maddox tilted his head. “That sounds about right.”

I smiled seductively. “But now we’re alone...”

Maddox chuckled as he wrapped his arms around my waist. “As much as I want to fuck you right this second, I think we should get the name thing out of the way. Your father suggested that you keep the name Vitiello.”

I could hear that he considered the idea ridiculous and expected me to deny Dad’s suggestion. I sighed and Maddox loosened his hold on me, his brows pulling together. “Don’t tell me you’re really considering keeping your name.”

“I’m not considering it,” I said carefully. “I already made up my mind. I’ll keep my name. I’m sorry, Maddox.”

Maddox pulled away and began pacing the room. “One of the main things about marriage is to adopt the same name to show you and I belong together.”

“I don’t think we need to share the same name to belong together, and everyone will know about our marriage. It’ll be all over the press, so no need to rub it in even more by using the same name.”

He gave me a disbelieving look. “Rub it in even more? I want every single fucker on this planet to know that we’re together.”

“I want that as well,” I said, touching his chest.

“If we don’t use the same name, people will only speculate that you don’t really mean this marriage, that you have doubts.”

“I thought you don’t care what other people think?” I asked teasingly but Maddox only glowered.

“And I don’t have doubts. If I had doubts about you, I wouldn’t have fought Dad for so long to accept you and I definitely wouldn’t have risked the social backlash I’ve been getting. You are my man, a name won’t change that.”

Maddox smiled bitterly. “So we won’t have the same name.”

I bit my lip. “You could—”

Maddox’s eyes flashed with anger. “Don’t say it. Don’t fucking suggest I could adopt the name Vitiello. Do you want me to cut off my balls and hand them to your father on a silver platter as well?”

I rolled my eyes. “Adopting my name doesn’t have anything to do with my father or your manliness. Why would you be less of a man if you adopted your wife’s name, especially if that would make her life in the Famiglia much easier?”

He gripped my shoulders and pressed me against the wall, glaring down at me.

“I want everyone to know that you’re mine, Snow White,” he growled, looking furious but at the same time incredibly sexy. This less controlled side of Maddox turned me on. “I want every fucker to know that those lips are mine.” He nipped my lower lip hard before plunging his tongue into my mouth and kissing me harshly, his grip on my neck almost painful. My core tightened. “That those tits are mine.” He jerked my straps down, revealing my breasts. He squeezed one breast and sucked my nipple into his mouth so hard I winced, only to have wetness pool between my legs.

“Say it,” he ordered, sucking harder. “Say that those tits are mine.”

“My tits are yours,” I murmured.

He tugged at my jumpsuit, ignoring the ripping sounds, until it finally slid down to my knees, leaving me only my thong. He hooked his index

finger in the soaked material and jerked it to the side, revealing my swollen pussy lips.

“I want them to know,” he rasped against my lips. “That this pussy is mine.” He shoved his knee between my legs and pressed his palm against me. “...and mine alone.” He pushed two fingers into me and began to thrust into me, the heel of his hand slamming against my clit every time. “Mine alone.”

“My pussy is yours,” I pressed out. I clung to his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin. My entire body was on fire, every muscle tightened to the max, and my lust covered Maddox’s hand.

Maddox’s mouth swallowed my cry of release as I desperately rode his fingers, wanting them even deeper and faster. Maddox suddenly removed his hand. I gripped his wrist, wanting to keep him in place. “I wasn’t done,” I protested.

“I know,” he said with a hard smile. “You always get your will, don’t you? Not today, princess.” I shuddered as a new wave of arousal hit me.

Maddox’s eyes flared with hunger. “Get down on your knees. I’m going to fuck your mouth.”

“Are you?” I challenged, almost going crazy from the friction of my thong against my uber-sensitive clit.

Maddox cupped my chin, his thumb stroking along my lower lip before it plunged into my mouth. His finger tasted of me. “Down on your knees, Snow White. That mouth is mine, remember?”

With a challenging smile, I sank down on my knees before Maddox. He opened his jeans and it sank down to his knees, revealing his swollen, glistening cock. A droplet of precum had gathered on his piercing. My tongue darted out, flicking the metal piece and licking it off. Maddox tangled his fingers in my hair, fixing my head so I couldn’t move.

Maddox looked down at me with pure desire. “Squat on your heels and spread your legs.”

I pushed down my jumpsuit and stepped out of it before I squatted so low my ass cheeks almost touched my heels. Then I opened my knees wide and looked up to Maddox. His cock looked ready to burst. My own need was pulsing madly between my legs.

Maddox guided my head toward his cock and I parted my lips for him as he claimed my mouth inch by inch. I gagged, my eyes tearing up when he was sheathed almost completely in me, his tip pressing to the back of my

throat and his shaft pressing down on my tongue. Maddox held me in place, neither moving back nor forth. “Your mouth is mine, Snow White. Only my cock will ever claim it, and my cum is the only one you’re ever going to swallow.”

He slid out slowly only to thrust into me hard and then he slammed into my mouth so fast and hard, I almost lost my balance. I grabbed his ass for balance, clinging desperately to him as he took my mouth. I breathed heavily through my nose as I watched Maddox. His eyes were on me, his lips parted as he panted and groaned. My own arousal was slowly dripping down my thighs.

I’d never been more turned on, which said a lot, considering every sexual encounter with Maddox made me come several times.

Maddox glared. “You are mine Marcella, with or without my name.” He tensed and released into my mouth with a suppressed moan. He kept pumping slowly, still not allowing me to pull back, even if it was difficult to swallow with him inside of me.

When he finally stilled, I was close to release just from giving him pleasure. Maddox stepped back, slowly sliding out of my mouth. I stayed on my heels with spread knees. His gaze dipped down to my dripping center.

“Fuck,” he muttered, his voice raw. “Stand up right this fucking moment.”

I stood on shaking legs. Maddox dropped to his knees, gripped my thigh in a painful grip and swung my leg over his shoulder, parting me wide before he plunged his tongue into me. I bit down on my lower lip to stifle my cry as I came hard, my pussy pulsating around Maddox’s tongue. He didn’t ease his ministrations even when my orgasm waned, instead he made me come with his tongue two more times. My head rested against the wall, my leg hung limply on Maddox’s strong shoulder and I stroked his head as his lips gently took care of me after my third release.

“We’ve been up in my room for too long already,” I said in a rough voice.

“We have a lot to discuss,” Maddox murmured, “And I’m not done.”

“Maddox,” I said but he pushed to his feet and silenced me with a hard kiss.

“Lie down on your bed.”

I did as he asked despite my worry over someone interrupting us. I stretched out naked as Maddox stalked closer. He kneeled on the bed between my legs, and sat up on his heels, admiring my body. He grabbed my ankles and raised my legs as he moved closer until my butt rested on his upper thighs. His cock slid along my slit but didn't enter me. With his hands on my ankles, he spread my legs in a wide V. Finally, and with a perfect view, he pushed his cock into me slowly. With every inch of him deeper in me, I could feel him claim me more. He kept up the slow movements, and I could feel every inch of him stroking my inner walls and his piercing teasing my G-spot. But the angle didn't give my clit any friction.

Still, I was getting closer and closer from the deep penetration and from watching Maddox's cock enter my pussy.

"My clit," I whispered thickly when I was close again.

"Not yet," Maddox said.

"Maddox," I muttered.

"Not yet."

I was starting to lose my mind, writhing to get some friction but Maddox parted my legs even wider which made him slide deeper but deprived me of any clit action.

I raked my fingernails along his thighs but he only smirked.

A knock sounded. "Marcella, Dad's getting impatient. You better stop whatever the fuck you're doing and come downstairs before he comes up and kicks in the door."

Maddox grinned and I parted my lips to warn him but he pressed his thumb over my clit and slammed deep into me, hitting my G-spot, and I couldn't hold back. Pleasure raced through me, unstoppable. All I could do was jerk my head to the side and stifle my cry of release in the pillow.

"I'm downstairs," Amo muttered and his steps faded.

Maddox came soon after, looking way too smug.

He released my ankles and lowered himself on top of me.

"Just because I'm not adopting your name doesn't mean I'm any less your woman," I said. "It's a business decision."

Maddox smiled strangely. "It's not just business. I know you, Snow White. This is first of all, a very personal decision."

He'd caught me. I sighed. "I'm proud of my family. Proud of what the name Vitiello stands for. I'll always be a Vitiello in my mind even if I changed my name to yours..." I fell silent because the next part was even

harder to say. “And to be honest, whenever I hear the name White, I’m reminded of your uncle and I won’t ever give him that power over me.”

Maddox kissed my temple. “It’s okay. But don’t expect me to take your family’s name. The name Vitiello holds the same negative association for me.”

“We are each other’s, no matter what names we choose,” I said firmly. Maddox’s arms around me tightened.

# Chapter *Twenty-Three*



I was excited about my bridal shower. Many had expected a small affair, just like the wedding, as if I had reason to hide my love for Maddox and everything associated with it. For a while I had been worried about people's reactions, caught in old habits, still hungry for validation. That was over. I didn't need someone's validation who didn't care about me or know more about me than general gossip.

Maddox showed up on the morning of my bridal shower, looking sexy as sin in his leather jacket and rugged beard. I was still in my nightgown and a bathrobe. Maddox's expression told me he appreciated the sight greatly even if he couldn't show it with my mother and Lora around.

"Thank you for picking up the cake samples," Mom said with a genuine smile. She and Maddox got along really well. He could be a real gentleman if he wanted. "I need to head to the appointment with the florist. Or do you need my help with the cake?"

"We're going to be fine. Maddox and I are going to eat the cake and choose the best flavor."

"The guy loves string cheese and tootsie rolls," Amo muttered as he came down the staircase to accompany Mom to her appointment. "If he gets

to choose the flavor, we'll get popcorn and bacon grease."

"Sounds amazing if you ask me," Maddox said with a grin.

Valerio, who'd followed close behind Amo to accompany Mom and get a haircut afterward—his hair almost touched his shoulders by now—said, "I'd vote for popcorn and bacon grease too."

"No bacon anything. Remember we have a few vegetarians on the guest list."

"Let them eat the napkins. They are fully compostable. I'm sure that makes them edible," Maddox said. Amo chuckled and actually high-fived him.

I sent them both a glare then turned to Mom. "Have you heard back from the vegan bakery regarding the cupcake tower?"

"Yes, they'll send a sample tomorrow."

"Good," I said then narrowed my eyes at the three guys. "Don't get started. I want to make every guest feel welcome and offer them food that reflects their allergic needs or ethical choices."

"I'm a bacon fetishist, who caters to my whims?" Maddox asked.

"If you ask me, vegans have lost their fucking mind," Amo muttered. "Most of them are stuck-up know-it-alls who try to play the guilt card on any meateater they meet. It's fucking annoying."

"Language," Mom admonished, having let slip the first time.

"Any vegan ever tried to make you feel guilty for eating pig?" Maddox asked.

"Yeah, one chick I dated briefly wanted to make me feel guilty and told me I would stop eating if I had to kill them myself."

Maddox and Valerio both laughed.

"You even kill people. Of course, you'd kill a pig if you were hungry," Valerio spluttered.

"That's what I told her."

I shook my head. "How about you all stay far away from the vegan and vegetarian guests?"

"We should head out now," Mom said. I gave her a grateful smile. My perfectionism was rearing its annoying head and I wanted to get the wedding planning down. We were already late considering the wedding was in two weeks. My past self would have completely lost it.

After I'd grabbed forks, Maddox carried the cakebox into the living room and we settled on the sofa in front of the roaring fireplace. The

weather outside was forbidding, no sign of spring. Maddox put the cakebox down on the coffee table and sank back against the sofa backrest. He looked irresistible and his eyes told me he felt the same way.

I hadn't come in two weeks—I had been busy with wedding planning and Maddox had gone on a mission—and was desperate for touch. I grabbed the sheep's wool blanket and settled on the sofa beside Maddox. Resting my back against the armrest, I put my feet on Maddox's lap and covered myself with the blanket.

Maddox put the cake box on my shins and opened it. Inside were petit fours with different cake flavors, but I was distracted by Maddox' warmth and the feel of his cock under my heel.

Maddox grabbed a fork, stabbed a piece of chocolate cake with it and held it before my lips. I tasted it and smiled. "Mhhh," I purred.

Maddox shook his head and slid one of his hands below the blanket. He stroked his palm along my calf. Soon I was so distracted by the caress I hardly noticed the cake flavors anymore.

"Have you done what I told you?" Maddox rumbled.

I smiled secretively. "Yes."

"If that's the case, then this must really turn you on," he rasped as his hand slid higher, his fingers sliding between my thighs. He stroked the sensitive skin there, smiling hungrily. He had asked me not to touch myself in the six days we hadn't seen each other.

I rubbed his cock with the heel of my foot. "What about you?"

"Chaste like a monk." As if to prove his point, his cock slowly became erect under my ministrations. His fingers trailed higher, brushing over my panties on occasion. I was growing increasingly aroused and knew Maddox could feel it through the flimsy material. His pointer finger pushed my panties aside and teased the ridge between my pussy lips lightly but never touched my clit.

His eyes were on me as he fed me another bite of cake. The moment the mango-passionfruit flavor exploded on my tongue, the pad of his finger brushed my clit and I moaned.

Steps sounded and Amo appeared in the doorway. I jerked upright and swallowed the cake.

Amo glanced between Maddox and me with a look of pure suspicion. Maddox's finger still drew tiny circles on my clit and I couldn't tell him to stop with Amo present. Luckily, the tented blanket covered up everything,

but the knowledge of what was currently happening beneath it, still made my cheeks heat.

“You okay?” Amo asked.

“I choked on a piece of cake,” I lied quickly.

Amo rolled his eyes. “Mom asked me if you want us to drive by the vegan cupcake shop and pick up samples today.”

“Yes,” I said through gritted teeth.

When he was out of sight, Maddox resumed his very distracting circling of my clit with even more fervor, making me pant.

“How am I supposed to focus on cake if you keep doing that?” I muttered. Maddox seemed completely unperturbed except for his very hard cock under my foot.

He tasted a piece of a yellow cake.

“I like this one, it reminds me of your pussy.”

I glanced around but we were alone.

Maddox chuckled and I sent him a glare.

“Don’t be ridiculous, how can cake taste like me?”

“There’s a subtle tartness that surprises you but is quickly followed by a sweet finish that makes you want to keep eating and lick your fingers afterward.”

I flushed, remembering Maddox’s talented tongue. He stroked lower and dipped a finger into me, followed by a second. “I see you’re thinking about the same thing I am.”

“And what would that be?” I asked matter-of-factly as I delicately put a bite of the black forest cake into my mouth, trying not to moan again as Maddox fucked me with two fingers, twisting them in a way that made my toes curl.

He moved quick as lightning as he dropped to the floor and moved under the blanket. Pushing one of my legs to the side, and then my panties, he licked my pussy. “Oh shit,” I gasped. I looked around in panic as Maddox buried his tongue even deeper between my pussy lips, really tasting me.

“Better than any cake,” he growled against my throbbing flesh. I wanted him to continue but at the same time, I was terrified of someone walking in on us. I’d never be able to face my family again if one of them caught us in the act. With sheer force of will, I pushed his head away, but he managed another lick that almost made me weep. When he reappeared from under

the blanket his hair was disheveled and face flushed. Worst was the shininess of his lips.

I was so horny by then, I almost shoved him back under the blanket to finish what he started. I could live with the consequences.

Maddox leaned up, bringing our faces very close. "Let a starving man eat his favorite treat, Snow White."

I got up and quickly smoothed my bathrobe, glad it covered my satin nightgown which was probably soaked by now as well.

"Come on," I muttered.

Maddox pushed to his feet, raising his eyebrows. I grabbed his hand and he grabbed the vanilla cupcake before I dragged him out of the living room, and into the guest bathroom. I locked it behind us. Maddox's smile became wolfish. He tugged open my bathrobe and hoisted me on the massive marble washing table before he dipped his finger in the vanilla frosting and spread it over my pussy lips.

"You're making a mess," I protested but then I closed my eyes and just enjoyed Maddox's capable tongue as it licked the vanilla cream off my pussy.

"This is my favorite," he groaned against my flesh. I tightened my hold on his hair, and he took the clue and buried his tongue back inside of me. Maddox really took his time, bringing me to the brink only to pull back and kiss the inside of my thighs. He probably wanted us to get caught, but I was beyond a point where I could care. I tugged harder at his hair. "Maddox," I hissed.

Maddox chuckled. "What do you want?"

"I want to come."

Maddox kissed me lightly. "You want to cream in my dirty biker mouth."

I nodded.

"Say it, Snow White."

I glared. "I want to cream in your dirty biker mouth."

He closed his lips around my clit and sucked. I exploded within seconds, rocking my hips desperately.

When Maddox straightened, he looked smug. I hopped off the counter. Fixing him with a hard look, I tugged down his zipper and freed his erection. Then I grabbed the remaining vanilla cream and brushed it across his tip. Not wasting time thinking about it, I got down on my knees and

licked the cream off his cock. “Holy shit,” he groaned, his fingers tangling in my hair. I circled my tongue around his tip until it was clean then straightened.

“We need to decide on flavors, no time for this.”

“Snow White, don’t be cruel.”

I smiled. “It runs in my blood.” I unlocked the door. “No sex before the wedding night.”

“Fuck,” he groaned as I sauntered outside.



Aunt Gianna had organized the bridal shower, guaranteeing that it wouldn’t be a bore like these kinds of things tended to be in our circle. After all, women weren’t supposed to have fun before their wedding or without their husband.

In addition to many women from my extended family, my two friends from college whom I had seen only a few times since the kidnapping were invited. Since their fathers were businessmen who ran in the same circle as we did, they weren’t a safety risk.

After getting manicures and pedicures, we got drunk in a party limousine on Times Square before we parked in the alley behind one of Dad’s clubs. It was one of the strip clubs that had a level with female dancers and one with male dancers. Two of said male dancers strolled toward our car and did an amazing striptease on the roof and hood of the car. I guessed Gianna wasn’t done pissing Dad off yet, and I had a talent for it as well.

Some of my guests even closed their eyes when the dancers ripped away their pants to the tiny thong beneath, probably worried about their husband’s reactions.

When I told Maddox on the phone about this the next morning, he only laughed. The right man for me.



“You could invite your brother. It is your day after all,” Marcella said when we went over the guest list one last time.

I shook my head. I existed in two worlds. One was rooted in the past, by memories. The other was my present and future. If Marcella had made me choose, I would have chosen her, my future, but she didn’t.

Still, allowing those two worlds to cross was bound to end in tragedy, and I had enough tragedy to last me a lifetime. “And your mom, she won’t come either?”

I had told Mom she was invited but she had said no, which wasn’t really a surprise. Mom was already dating another biker from Tartarus again and had moved back to Texas where the club’s following was still the strongest. I had a feeling Gray had gone with her to rebuild Tartarus to old strength and hopefully stay out of any Italian mob family’s business.

“Maybe we could visit her. I never met her.”

I linked our fingers. “Listen, Marcella, my mom lives for the biker lifestyle. She won’t ever want anything to do with this world. And I sure as hell won’t take you into enemy territory.”

“The Camorra isn’t our enemy. The peace is still holding up.”

I shook my head. “That’s going to burst eventually but what I mean is Tartarus. They might not be strong right now and they officially don’t have any interest in you or your family, but most members, unlike me, haven’t made peace with your father. I won’t tempt them to give revenge another try. You know I’d kill them to protect you, but I fear Gray is in the new main chapter in Texas.”

She searched my eyes. “Won’t it be hard if you don’t have anyone from your family at the wedding?”

Mom had missed many important points in my life. And Gray? It would be selfish of me to have him attend considering the danger that could bring him in. Him in a room with hundreds of Famiglia and Camorra soldiers would only end in a catastrophe. I sure as fuck didn't want a bloody wedding. "The only person I need at my wedding is you. Trust me," I said firmly.

"Okay," she said slowly. "But what about a stag night. Matteo suggested he could organize one. Are you sure you won't regret it if you don't have a huge stag night?"

I grinned. "Snow White, I've spent most of my teenage years and even the start of my twenties either drunk or recovering from a hangover. I've partied more than most people do their entire life. I don't need one last hurrah to feel better about marriage. Marrying you is the fucking best thing that's happened to me so far."

Not to mention that the idea of Matteo organizing a stag night set my alarm bells off. I'd probably end up with my balls waxed, my dick tattooed with a cartoon figure, and half of my bones broken.

"But you're going on that trip with Matteo and Amo?" she asked. I could tell she wanted this. She wanted me to get along with the men in her family, become part of the Vitiello clan, and I had to admit, Matteo asking me to ride our bikes together had made me feel one step closer to fitting in. I was still wary of his plans for the trip because of how eager he had been to have a stag night for me, but I had made it clear that wouldn't happen, and Marcella had him swear it too.

"Do I have a choice?" I asked, chuckling. "Won't your family be mortally offended if I say no?"

"You're impossible. You'll have fun, believe me. Matteo is one of the funniest people I know, and Amo has his moments too."

"I guess I'm lucky your old man didn't decide to join in on the fun as well."

"He doesn't ride bikes, but you should consider doing something with him."

"What? I don't think we have anything in common."

"You both like to beat people up."

"Usually each other," I said. "And your old man and I having a fight against each other probably wouldn't be clever before the wedding."

Marcella rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you go to a big cage fight together? There’s one happening in Vegas next week, three days before our wedding. That would be a great opportunity to bond.”

“Bonding with your dad in Vegas, alone, sounds like a splendid idea,” I said sarcastically.

“Do it for me,” Marcella said quietly.

“Killing my uncle, working with the Famiglia, being civil to your dad and brother isn’t enough?”

She simply smiled.

I shook my head. “You’ll be the death of me.”

# Chapter *Twenty-Four*



I pulled up in front of the Vitiello mansion where I was picking up Matteo and Amo. They were already waiting for me. Amo on his orange and black motocross bike, which really wasn't the best choice for a road trip like we had planned but it wasn't my butt and balls being shaken like a good Martini. Matteo's super fast Kawasaki Ninja wasn't really as comfortable as my Harley either but it was a whole lot of fun on the road.

Matteo held up a small backpack to me. "Can you put that into your trunk?"

I gave him an incredulous look. "My Harley might have more storage room than your dick compensation but it doesn't have a trunk."

Matteo's grin widened. "My dick's fine, ask my wife. Now what about my backpack. I need my beauty products. This face doesn't stay as pretty as it is without some work."

I shook my head and ripped the backpack from his grasp. "If you wear a facemask at any point in our trip, I'll cut your fuel supply and take off to go looking for some real men to go camping with."

Amo snorted. "Good luck finding someone who doesn't want to kill you for bounty."

“No reason to feel threatened in your manliness only because I take care of my beauty,” Matteo said with a smirk. “You aren’t my type, so even if I was gay you wouldn’t become my bottom.”

“Geez, my heart’s broken.”

Amo straddled his bike. “You’re both old gossips. If anyone cuts your fuel supplies and takes off, then it’s me.”

“What about your beauty product? Do you have a bag for my trunk as well?”

Amo motioned at a sleek black backpack strapped to his back. “I’m all set. I don’t need beauty products. I’m a natural.”

Matteo patted his shoulder. “Says the chick who just got his pubic hair. Wait twenty years then we’ll talk again.”

I rammed my foot down on the gas, letting my engine roar, drowning out Amo’s comeback. When silence settled once more, I muttered, “How about we get going? This weekend will be a long one anyway.”

Matteo raced ahead on occasion, only to allow us to catch up again. Amo too did the occasional detour off the road to fly across some dips. I didn’t let their stunts distract me from the feeling of my bike gliding over the road. This was the first time I wasn’t riding alone and even though it wasn’t the same as flying across the street in a group of Harleys, it felt good being with others for once.

Of course, neither Matteo nor Amo were real bikers.

Shortly before sunset, Matteo pulled over at a public campsite with a view over a small lake. We were the only campers there. When the sound of our engines settled down and we got off our bikes, I looked around. This was the perfect place to get rid of someone. I cocked an eyebrow. “Be honest, will you drown me in the lake with a rock at my feet?”

“Why use a rock? We could just tie you to your bike and throw you in the water. That way you’d die with the thing you love so much.”

“I’m glad you gave it plenty of thought already,” I muttered, glad I’d packed a knife and gun.

“I’m a professional killer. I don’t have to give it much thought, it comes naturally.”

Amo gave me a hard smile. “I suppose you won’t sleep much tonight.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, starting to unpack the saddlebags.

I hadn’t packed a tent. I preferred to sleep in my sleeping bag under the open sky and watch the stars.

Matteo didn't have a tent either, because he didn't have room in his beauty bag for one.

Without my saddlebags, we would have gone hungry and thirsty. "You don't often camp, right?"

Matteo leaned back with a grin. "First time for me."

I shook my head. "Let me guess, only five-star resorts so far."

Amo began setting up a small tent he'd somehow crammed into his backpack. "I'm the only person in the family who even owns a tent and that's only because of the motocross races. There aren't always decent places to stay nearby."

"I don't suppose either of you can set up a fire or cook?"

Matteo took out a lighter. "I have experience burning things down, or on occasion, people."

"Let me handle the fire," Amo said and surprised me by creating a decent bonfire within a few minutes.

Matteo hadn't moved a muscle.

I grabbed the bottle of bourbon and threw two cans with Texas chili in his direction. "Why don't you start dinner?"

"You should have brought a Scottish Single Malt."

I took a big gulp. "We're going camping, so lower your expectations."

"You mean like my sister did?" Amo butted in.

"Here we go," I muttered. "Is this your attempt to talk me into bailing before the marriage?"

"Would you bail if we gave you the right incentive?" Matteo asked, suddenly keen.

I gave them a condescending look. "Nothing in this world could make me bail. If you want to stop this wedding from happening, you'll have to try drowning me with my bike, otherwise I'll accept Marcella's hand from Luca, and thank God that a woman like her chose me."

Matteo handed me a can. "Where are the bowls?"

"No bowls. We'll have to eat straight out of the can."

"Great, if I'd known spit exchange was included in the trip I would have stayed home," Amo joked.

I took a bite and shrugged. "More for me."

"I never said I'd go without dinner," Amo said and took the can from my hand. He shoveled at least half of the can into his mouth before he

passed the can to Matteo. At least, the latter only took a few bites before he handed the can back to me.

Of course, it started raining. Amo ducked inside his tent. Matteo crammed inside as well. Cursing, I sought shelter in the way too small tent for three men of above-average stature as well.

“No way in hell am I sharing my tent with you two,” Amo said.

“You can sleep outside if you want, or I could order you to do it as the Consigliere who’s clearly above you in rank.”

“This is a family vacation, not a Famiglia job,” Amo said indignantly.

Sometimes his young age shone through, like in instances like this. We were still trying to figure out a way to fit all three of us inside when an engine sounded. A pickup with a group of obviously drunk college-aged guys pulled up, looking for trouble.

Amo peered out as well.

The guys jumped out of the car and hollered. “Did we catch you fags in the act?”

One of them pointed his finger at Amo. “That guy isn’t even old enough. Probably fucking his teacher.”

Amo reached into the halter at his back and pulled a knife.

“I knew this trip was going to be fun,” Matteo said, his knife brandished as well.

I crawled out of the tent. The guys scanned my tattoos, scars, and muscles and some of their bravado disappeared. Amo unfolded his tall frame from the tent after me, and now the guys started to look increasingly unsure. It didn’t help that the rain plastered Amo’s white shirt to his hulk-muscled body and revealed the tattoo beneath.

When Matteo finally got out with a scary smile even I still had to get used to, and with that long knife in his hand, the guys looked about ready to shit their pants.

“I didn’t quite catch what you said inside the tent,” Matteo said.

“Fuck, they’re from some motorcycle gang!” one of the guys shouted and rushed back to the car.

Matteo’s lips curled, and so did mine, though for different reasons.

“What MC rides a fucking dirt bike?” I snarled while Matteo muttered. “Do I look like a goddamn biker to you?”

“Come on, don’t be pussies. It’s you six against us three, and one of us doesn’t even count as a full adult yet. Give this fight a chance!” Matteo

shouted, looking even more like a manic serial killer, which of course, he was.

The guys almost stumbled over each other in their haste to get back in the car. Before they could race away, Matteo flung a smaller knife at one of their spinning tires. The thing exploded but the car still took off in a mad zig-zag course.

“Slicing these assholes into tiny pieces could have been such a wonderful bonding experience,” Matteo said in a regretful tone.

“Sharing a tent with you will do, thanks,” I muttered.

Luckily for all of us, the rain stopped after a while, and I decided to sleep in my damp sleeping bag outside instead of a narrow tent with two Vitiellos.

I was woken by birdsong around sunrise and soon after Amo joined me on the log in front of the dead fire.

“You still think Marcella chose wrong?” I asked.

“She chose you. Marcella knows what she wants. I wouldn’t want someone to tell me my choice was wrong if I were in her stead.”

I nodded, surprised by his reasonable demeanor. “What about you? Do you have your eyes set on a girl?”

Amo gave me a bored look. “I don’t have time to crush on girls. I’m the no-strings-attached type.”

“You’re too young to be the no-strings-attached type.”

Amo chuckled. “Yeah, sure.”

“I never thought I’d fall in love either, even when I was way older than you, then Marcella happened. You never know.”

“I’ll have an arranged marriage. The Famiglia can’t afford another love marriage. We need to make sure my wedding strengthens our family.”

“Come on, I’m a resourceful addition to the family.”

“That’s not what I mean, but the Famiglia is based on traditions. Many people long for a traditional bond and as the future Capo I should satisfy their wishes.”

I shook my head. “Man, you sound way too sensible for your age. Loosen up.”

“Becoming a good Capo for the Famiglia is my only goal in life. And don’t worry, Marcella always calls me loose.”

I chuckled. “She mentioned your luck with the girls, especially some of her friends.”

Amo shrugged. He looked up at the sky. “Only a few more days of freedom, you should enjoy every second. Are you nervous?”

“I’m not losing my freedom. And the only thing I’m nervous about is the trip with your father.”

Amo smirked. “Yeah, good luck with that.”



To my surprise, Luca and I didn’t try to kill each other once during our trip to Vegas. We actually found topics to talk about, mainly fight tactics. And I realized that the mob families in other territories were even more messed up than the Famiglia.

When Luca and I returned from our one-day trip, both Aria and Marcella were already waiting in the foyer of the Vitiello mansion.

“And?” Marcella whispered as she hugged me.

“We’re both alive and unscathed, that should answer your question.”

Marcella rolled her eyes. “But did you get along?”

“Let’s put it this way. We dislike each other a little less than before.”

“I guess that’s the best I could hope for.”

“Snow White, you’re trying to move two very stubborn mountains but it takes time.”

“I can be terribly impatient.”

“I would have never guessed.”

Marcella touched my heart. “And are you still ready to say yes?”

“Oh yes.”

# Chapter *Twenty-Five*



When I'd imagined my wedding day in the past, every little detail had been planned to perfection, everything steered toward one goal: maximum effect. I'd always felt the pressure of being the Capo's daughter, bound by countless rules and weighed down by even more expectations. I hadn't been scared to fail because I wouldn't have allowed that option. I would have worked my ass off to make sure failure was impossible.

I still didn't fear failure, even though now the possibility of actually failing in the eyes of society was likely. I had already failed in so many eyes, had broken eternal rules and failed expectations by following my heart, by daring to ask for a place in a world that was as much my own as it was Amo's, Valerio's or any man's. I'd bled like men did, had endured torture and pain. All for the Famiglia, my Capo—that he was my father first hardly mattered.

In the past, I hadn't taken love into account because love was difficult to come by in our world, especially one as boundless and powerful as my parents' love for each other. I had been certain I could never have something similar and chosen not to risk trying. I'd settled for a bond of

convenience, of mild affection. I had been scared back then. But since Maddox, I had found my bravery.

A knock sounded. Smiling, I called, "Come in!"

Dad stepped inside but froze the moment his eyes landed on me in my wedding gown. Dad looked at me as if he had never seen me before.

"Maddox doesn't deserve you," he murmured. Before I could get angry, he continued, "No one does, Princess. But you think he's deserving, you chose him, and so I have to accept it."

"That's true," I agreed. "It's my choice, and I don't have doubt in my body that it's the right choice. I'm happy Dad, and I know Maddox will do everything he can to make me happy in the future as well."

"He better do," Dad growled.

I rolled my eyes but couldn't help but smile.

"I'll always want to protect you, Marcella. Even after you're married, even when you're a parent yourself, even when I'm old and gray."

"You are old and there are a few gray streaks in your hair," I teased. Dad didn't look old at all, but he deserved the jab for his overprotectiveness.

"Not too old to kick your husband's ass."

"I don't want you to fight with Maddox to prove a point, all right?"

Maddox and Dad were both stubborn and loved to fight, but I wanted them to focus their brutality on others and not each other.

Dad took my hand and kissed my palm. "We should head out now."

"Okay," I said softly.

Dad never took his hand from my back as he led me through the endless corridors of the hotel. Outside several cars waited on us. Dad had issued the highest security protocol for today, but I didn't want to think about the dangers. Nothing and no one would ruin today.

Dad and I slipped into the back seat of an armored limousine.

"Were you nervous on your wedding day?" I asked quietly as we set off toward the church.

Dad considered that. "If I'd known then what I know today, that I'd love your mother beyond measure, I would have been nervous. Nervous about ruining everything, but I hardly knew your mother and didn't care about her the way I do now, not even close. She was a means to an end."

"I can't imagine you and Mom not loving each other."

Dad chuckled, and as usual, his eyes softened. "Neither can I."

“I think it’s sad that you and Mom never celebrated your love like Maddox and I do today. You should consider renewing your vows.”

Dad frowned then he shook his head. “Today is your day, princess. Today you choose love against all odds. That’s what you should think about.”

As if on cue, we pulled up in front of the church.

Suddenly I felt nervous. I wasn’t even sure why.

“I get it now,” Dad said suddenly.

I couldn’t follow his train of thought. “Why you chose him. Maddox is going to spend every day of your life together trying to be the man you deserve. He’ll try to make you happy. Any man in our world would have tried to please me, to make me happy. With Maddox, you won’t have to worry about it, and I guess that’s good. As your husband, he should always think of you first when he makes a decision, not about his Capo or his chances of rising in rank.”

I smiled. “Thanks, Dad.”

Taking a deep breath, I got out of the car.



This was going to be the wedding of the year. Everyone was talking about it. Many in not very favorable terms. Most of them were clever enough to keep the rumors down.

I looked like a different version of myself in the tuxedo, all of my tattoos covered. As the man at Marcella’s side, I’d occasionally have to play a role, but it was something I did gladly. These people meant nothing.

The old doors of the church creaked, the sound reverberating in the nave.

The entire wedding party seemed to suck in a breath when Marcella entered the church at Luca's side. She was so beautiful, they should have her face plastered on paintings instead of angels, and I didn't give a damn how blasphemous that might be.

I kept my eyes only on her, forgetting everyone around us, even Luca who led her to the altar.

I didn't know much about wedding dresses, nor about wedding traditions. The moment I saw Marcella, nothing else mattered. Not the critical or judgmental looks from some of the guests, or even the hostile expressions from some of the Made Men. To win the trust of the Famiglia, I still had a long way to go. But I'd finally arrived where I needed to be, at the side of a good woman.

Marcella wore a tight, floor-length dress. The upper part was lace with a high neck that even covered part of her throat, letting her neck appear even more elegant. Pieces of lace adorned her wrists and sheer fabric covered her arms up until the short sleeves. It was an elegant dress, but still managed to appear almost conservative. Of course, Marcella wouldn't be Marcella if she didn't give her critics the finger in a subtle way. The lace in the back had a hole right over the tattoo of her crown. Her hair was up so every guest who watched the ceremony had to stare at her crown. A queen through and through.

I could only imagine what some of the stuck-up folk in the Famiglia thought of that. Maybe they had thought Marcella would have a small wedding, everything hush-hush because of who she married, or that she would hide the marks of her captivity, but Marcella wasn't someone who hid or ducked away, and fuck that's what I loved about her. She could be tough as nails but beneath it she was soft as molten butter.

I tore my eyes away from her with ginormous difficulty when Luca looked at me, ready to give her to me.

I held out my hand.

Luca took a step forward. "I'm giving you my daughter today. I hope you realize what kind of gift that is. Don't make me regret this, or I'll make you regret it."

I inclined my head. I'd expected nothing less than a threat from Luca on this day, anything else would have been a huge disappointment.

When he finally handed her over to me and her warm palm touched mine, my sole focus turned to her.

“You’re missing a real crown,” I murmured. “Because you are a fucking queen, Snow White.”

She smiled. “One crown is enough and it’s the only one everyone’s paying attention to anyway.”

“Forget all of them, everything but us.”

She nodded and with linked hands we turned to the pastor.

When I said ‘I do’, I remembered Amo’s words about losing my freedom, but like before, I didn’t feel any less free. I was looking forward to a life at Marcella’s side.



Before we braved the congratulations, Marcella seemed lost, her gaze distant as we waited outside for the rest of the guests to file out of church.

I leaned down. “What are you thinking? You look miles away.”

“That I’m glad I was brave enough for our love.”

I cocked a brow. “Am I such a risky bet?”

“As if you don’t know it.”

I shrugged with a grin, squeezing her hand, loving the feel of my ring around her finger. My woman.

With her by my side, I’d be strong enough to ignore the fake congratulations and sugary-sweet-smiles of people who saw our bond as an affront to what they believed in. I’d spend the rest of my life pissing them off by flaunting our love in front of their faces. And maybe I’d kill one or two by accident. I was sure Matteo would help me dispose of the bodies.

Marcella sent me a look that said she knew what I was thinking, and I doubted she’d have any qualms about me ridding the world of one or two of her extended family.

# Chapter *Twenty-Six*



“I knew she’d avoid the bloody sheets tradition.”

“Of course, she gave it away before marriage.”

“Slut.”

My blood pumped wildly in my veins. I’d expected rumors and even badmouthing, but hearing it first hand was a different matter. Most of my life I’d worked hard to appear perfect in everyone’s eyes.

Now the scale had tipped in people’s eyes. My failures weighed more heavily than my successes. I was no longer untouchable.

I braced myself and took a deep breath. Their thoughts didn’t matter. What they judged me for wasn’t something I should be ashamed for. And I wouldn’t let anyone ruin my wedding, definitely not someone like Cressida. That girl proved to be the thorn in my foot. The moment I stepped out their faces twisted with shock, but also a hint of curiosity, probably soaking up my reaction like a sponge. Cressida was with her friend from last time again, but this time a third girl was with them.

I gave them my coldest smile. “You should be grateful that my father abolished the Bloody Sheets tradition. It means you can choose to keep your dignity by keeping the most private moments between a husband and

wife actually private. Of course, it's up to you to diminish the night's importance and with it the bond itself by sharing bloody details for curious eyes."

The girls' mouths were open. Without another word, I left the room with a swoosh of my dress. Outside, I took another deep breath. My hands were actually shaking. I knew my words would change nothing. People would keep speculating about my sexual activities and badmouth me for it. But my words had given me strength. This was only the first of many battles I'd have to fight against prejudices and malice because of the man I loved, but I'd always fight them gladly.

Maddox was waiting for me with a glass of champagne for me and a bottle of beer for himself.

I took the champagne and emptied half the glass, even if it was a shame to waste champagne on anger drinking.

"What's up?" Maddox asked quietly.

Most people used the after-dinner satisfaction for business discussions or to chat.

My eyes caught on Cressida once more. She stood by her parents. They, too, belonged to those who judged me as openly as their survival instinct allowed. I hadn't told Dad about her, she wasn't worth it, and I doubted Amo had done it either.

"Some girls called me a slut for avoiding the bloody sheets tradition."

Maddox's lips curled. "That tradition is vile, and girls should be glad it's gone. Why would anyone want to bleed during sex? Don't tell me you regret not being a virgin, because I would have died of blue balls if you'd insisted on keeping your cherry until your wedding night."

I nudged his shoulder. "You would have survived. And no, I don't regret it. Not at all. If I was a virgin and intended to deliver bloody sheets, I couldn't have sex with you on our wedding party."

His brows rose slowly and a playful smile pulled at his lips, making his dimple-scar pop up. Maddox grabbed my hand. "I hope you were serious because I'm going to fuck you now."

His hold on my hand was almost painful as he dragged me into the male restroom. He shoved an armchair that had been in the corner against the door, jamming the handle. Toilet sex was becoming a tradition. Lucky that this was the best hotel in town and each toilet a separate, luxurious room of its own.

“Since you licked the cream off my cock, I have been dying. Fuck, Snow White. I’m so horny, if you don’t want me to sport an erection during our dance you let me fuck you now.”

His mouth collided with mine almost desperately. My own body was desperate for his touch. “Fuck me, we don’t have much time.”

Maddox turned me around so I held on to the sink, then he began to lift the layers of my skirt. “Fuck, where’s your pretty pussy. This dress is killing me.”

I laughed but it turned into a moan when he clapped my ass hard. I cocked an eyebrow, then parted my lips for a low moan when Maddox slid two fingers over my slit. I was sopping wet, so Maddox didn’t meet any resistance when he pushed two fingers into me. “Bend lower.”

I braced myself on my elbows. Maddox’s palm slapped against my ass cheek as his fingers thrust into me at blinding speed. Then he pulled out without warning, making me mewl in protest. God, what a sound. He smirked and lowered the fly of his tux. His tip was already glistening but he didn’t give me much time to admire him. He gripped my hips and thrust into me, and then he fucked me. It was fast and hard, and we both came within a few minutes. And this felt like giving the finger to Cressida and girls like her. I enjoyed myself with the guy I loved before my wedding night, so what?

When we walked out of the bathroom twenty minutes later, we held hands and were much more relaxed. “Good thing that my dad abolished the bloody sheets tradition. This would have ruined it.” I felt almost lightheaded with happiness.

Maddox shook his head. “You will cream, not bleed, many times on our wedding night. This was only the beginning.”

Maddox’s dirty mouth was the biggest turn-on I could have ever imagined, but I’d spend the rest of eternity stopping him from saying the horrible “C” word.

When we came into the hall, our guests were already crowding around the dance floor for our first dance of the night.

“Ready for a dance?” Maddox asked, holding out his hand. I took it and allowed him to lead me into the center of the dance floor.

His eyes scanned the crowd around us that watched our first dance as a married couple. They waited with bated breath for every misstep. But every misstep they saw was our choice. Maddox and I stared into each other’s

eyes. Their judgment didn't mean anything because I wouldn't allow it to. I didn't need their blessing. The only people who could have hurt me with their words were the people who wouldn't do it because I was as important to them as they were to me. Many gazes lingered on my crown tattoo, some were almost offended, and it was a reaction that pleased me more than it should.

"Ready?" I asked with a grin.

"Ready when you are."

I gave the band a sign. Our waltz stopped abruptly and without warning the band began playing "I Write Sins Not Tragedies" by Panic! At the Disco. The song would only land a punch for those who actually knew the song and the lyrics since the band was only acoustic. But the scandal would certainly happen afterward once word spread.

I grabbed Maddox's tux jacket and ripped it. The fabric gave away at the predetermined tear line, leaving Maddox in only a black vest and shirt. He shoved up his sleeves, revealing his tattooed forearms. He reached for the hem of my wedding dress and pulled sharply. The lower part of the skirt tore away like the tailor had promised, leaving me in a skirt that ended above my knees.

An engine roared and Amo drove through the parting crowd on Maddox's Harley. Dad had to convince the hotel director personally before we were given the okay to drive a motorcycle through the ballroom. He got off the bike as Maddox led me toward it with a hand on my lower back. For Maddox to allow anyone to ride his bike was a major thing. Maybe that was why Amo had started to like him.

Amo and Maddox clapped hands.

"Take good care of her or your uncle's death will look like a piece of cake in comparison to what I'll do to you," Amo said with a smile that was mildly threatening.

"Amo," I growled, trying to keep my expression happy.

"No, he's right. If I fail, I deserve everything he and your dad have planned for me. But I won't fail."

Amo nodded and stepped back. In the past, he would have winked at me now or said something offensive and funny, but this new version of my brother wasn't the easygoing teen anymore. He was on the best way to become exactly who he needed to be to follow in Dad's footsteps.

Maddox mounted his bike then held out a helmet for me. I put it on before I straddled the bike sideways and wrapped my arms around Maddox's middle. With a roar of the engine, we left the gawking crowd behind. I waved at Mom and Dad, who had his arm wrapped around her. Gianna gave me a thumbs up. That she was all for the scene we'd just caused was a given.

Mom waved with a beaming smile. I had talked to Dad and her about our plans. Even if I didn't care about what people thought, my parents' opinion mattered a lot to me. Luckily, neither Mom nor Dad had a problem with our show. Dad had accepted that whatever he'd planned for me, had fallen apart the moment I'd been kidnapped. Now he just wanted to see me happy.

I wrapped my arms even tighter around Maddox's middle and rested my chin on his shoulder. The sun was setting over the horizon. I smiled to myself. We would be traveling along the coast up to Canada in the next two weeks for our honeymoon and spend the nights in cozy bed & breakfasts along the way. That part of our unconventional wedding plans had actually been what had worried Dad the most. But I was safe with Maddox. I didn't need and want more bodyguards. This was our time as husband and wife. Once we were back in New York, we'd both find our way back into the strict limits of a life in the mob, especially if you were at the top. Growl was taking care of Santana while we were away. I was incredibly glad that he and Maddox had built a tentative friendship. I wanted Maddox to find people he liked to spend time with.

Maddox and I had a lot to prove still. People didn't trust me to do a good job as the first woman in the Famiglia, especially as the new coordinator of the Enforcers, and they trusted Maddox even less as one of my Enforcers. He wasn't part of the Famiglia and he was a White. But as long as we had my family's support, I could deal. We'd eventually convince the rest by doing a good job.

After about two hours on the bike, Maddox pulled over near a cliff where we'd rented a small Airbnb in a former light tower. Our bedroom was at the top where the lighthouse keeper used to watch over the ocean and passing ships.

We had 360-degree windows that allowed a beautiful view over the ocean and the countryside. By now it was completely dark outside, except

for the full moon and the stars. Maddox carried our small bag up the steep staircase and I shook my heels off before I followed him.

“I’ve never traveled this lightly. In the past, a bag that size only held my makeup.”

Maddox gave me a disbelieving look. He touched my waist as I looked around in fascination. But he soon captured my attention with a searing kiss. His lips discovered every inch of my body, lingering on my breasts and between my legs, coaxing moan after moan from my lips.

“Let’s make love outside,” he said.

Maddox led me onto the narrow balcony that surrounded the entire bedroom. The wind was fresh, raising goose bumps all over my body. I shivered against Maddox.

“Back inside?” he murmured, trailing warm lips over my pulse point.

“No,” I whispered, then sighed when he reached a particularly sensitive point above my collarbone. “You’ll keep me warm.”

“I’ll do more than that,” he growled into my ear.

I turned.

Our lips met for a gentle kiss that quickly turned heated. This time I took the incentive and got down on my knees before Maddox.

“I still remember you saying, Vitiellos don’t kneel.”

I smiled coyly. “I make an exemption to suck my husband’s cock.” My tongue darted out, flicking his piercing playfully. Maddox looked ready to explode as he watched me pleasure him.

“Fuck,” he rumbled. Soon he pulled me back up to him and made me turn around, making love to me while he wrapped his arms around me from behind, overlooking the ocean.

# Epilogue



*Maddox*

Two hearts beat in my chest. One of them would always long for my bike and the biker lifestyle, but the other had found a place among the people I'd once considered the enemy. Not everyone had welcomed me into their rows, some would always see me as a problem. But I didn't care. I had a group of men I trusted and a family who really was a family, and what was the most important: I had a wonderful wife.

Marcella was the woman I'd given up everything for that I had considered important, only to get so much more in return.

And today, today I'd do something I'd never considered an option. I was swearing loyalty to a man I'd tried to kill several times and who had tried to kill me just as often. I was becoming an official part of the Famiglia, instead of lurking in the shadows.

Marcella smiled at me, standing tall and proud, looking like the queen that she was. I did this for her but even more than that, I did it for our son growing in her belly. My eyes settled on her bump.

Only two more months before we'd be parents, before I'd be a father and do better than my old man and Earl had. Two months. I wasn't scared shitless like I'd thought I would be about becoming a father, about the

weight of the responsibility. I was looking forward to meeting our son, about proving that the father figures of my childhood didn't determine what kind of father I would be.

That Marcella would be a fantastic mother was out of the question, not only because she was like Aria in many regards, but also because she'd proven her caring side around Santana and every dog that followed.

"Are you ready to take your oath, Maddox Vitiello?"

As always, my body tensed briefly when I heard my name. I wasn't sure if it would sink in any time soon. I'd been so insistent about keeping my name for a long time but once Marcella became pregnant, I knew I wanted to change my name. For our son, who had to be a Vitiello to be accepted.

If he ever wanted to become Capo of the Famiglia, he couldn't be a White. And if I was being honest, I didn't want to continue the line of Whites. Neither my father nor Earl had been men whose name I wanted to have carried on and remembered. Luca and I had had our differences, and we still argued on occasion, but I admired his family sense and his devotion to the people he cared about.

I thrived to be the same way with our family.

I stepped up to the man who'd soon be my Capo. "I am."

My voice was firm, no hint of a doubt, and I realized it reflected my true feelings.

"Born in Blood,  
Sworn in Blood,  
I enter alive,  
and I leave dead."

I cut my palm, presenting the wound to the gathered crowd. The tattooist dipped the tattoo needle into the blood before he touched the needle to my chest. The oath couldn't be placed over my heart as was tradition because I had other covers there. When the needle pierced my skin, my eyes found Marcella once more as she cradled her belly. She smiled in the dignified way she had in public. I'd learned to see past this official mask and see the emotions hiding beneath.

Marcella's eyes brimmed with love.

Once the tattoo was done, I put my shirt back on and headed to her. She touched the skin over my heart and kissed me briefly, her eyes becoming softer.

We didn't have time to talk as other Made Men were already crowding in to congratulate me and welcome me in the Famiglia. I could see that this small gesture changed a lot in many of their eyes.

Overcoming the enmity from the past hadn't happened in an instant, not even in months or a few years. I had been with Marcella for almost a decade and now finally seemed to have fully arrived in the Famiglia.

Later, Marcella and I sat on our comfy couch in front of our fireplace in the townhouse right beside her parents' mansion, both in sweatpants and hoodies, snuggled against each other.

Marcella lifted her head off my shoulder. "I never told you how much it means to me that you sacrificed so much for me over the years." I raised my eyebrows and she elaborated. "Your biker family and lifestyle, your name and now you even became part of the Famiglia."

I ran my nose along her throat, drawing in her scent. "It's not a sacrifice if you are gifted with something in return, especially if said gift is worth so much more than what you had to begin with." I drew back to look into Marcella's beautiful eyes. "I chose you and I'd do it again. And I'm not the only one who had to sacrifice something. You risked a lot by marrying a dirty biker, by standing up to your family and your people for me."

"I'd do it again. And you're not that dirty." Her lips twitched. "Except for your mouth."

I chuckled, then turned serious again. "I love that you can be soft and caring, but that you can also be tough and strong if necessary. And what I love the most is that I'm one of the very few who get to see your mushy, emotional side."

Marcella rolled her eyes, but she did it with a small, pleased smile. "And I love that you think my imperfections make me perfect." Her voice became very gentle. "I love that you showed me that the infinite love my parents share isn't an unattainable dream."

The End

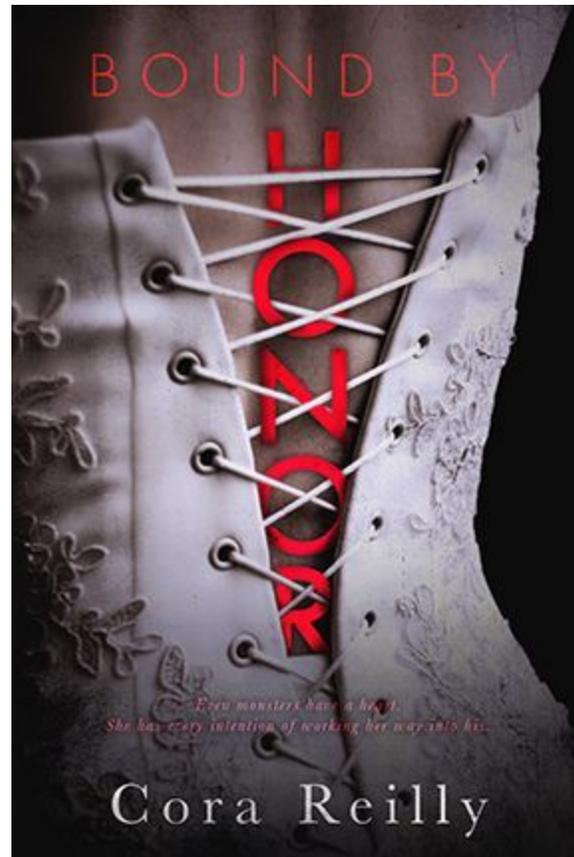
***Please consider leaving a review. Readers like you help other readers discover new books!***

*If you want to be among the first to get updates on books, please join my  
Facebook group: [Cora's Flamingo Squad](#)*



Read Luca's and Aria's love story in

[Bound By Honor](#)



# About the *Author*

Cora is the *USA Today* Bestselling author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. She likes her men like her martinis—dirty and strong.

Cora lives in Germany with her baby daughter, a cute but crazy Bearded Collie, as well as the cute but crazy man at her side. When she doesn't spend her days dreaming up sexy books, she plans her next travel adventure or cooks too spicy dishes from all over the world.