



For her, he
would break
all the rules...

DANTE

Chicago Ruthless: Book 1

SADIE KINCAID

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CHICAGO RUTHLESS: BOOK 1

SADIE KINCAID

RED HOUSE PRESS

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Cover Design: Red House Press Ltd

Photographer: Xram Radge

Cover Model: Cezar Augusto

Editing: Hearts Full of Reads

Formatting: Red House Press Ltd

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For every reader who prefers their heroes to be of the morally gray variety.

*And for all of my readers, for you constant support and encouragement, I
wrote Dante just for you,*

Love, Sadie xxx

CONTENT WARNING

This book is intended for mature readers and contains scenes of graphic violence as well as those of a sexual nature. There is also flashbacks and discussion of past sexual assault.

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PROLOGUE

The tension in the room is thick and cloying, so much that I suck it in with each breath that fills my lungs.

“Papá!” my older brother implores. “Please?”

Our father, *il padre*, sits in his old leather wingback chair, a cigar in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other. Smoke furls around him, giving his already formidable appearance an even more sinister look. A cruel laugh escapes his lips, mocking us — the symphony of our childhoods.

Lorenzo stiffens, balling his hands into fists at his side. His biceps strain at the seams of his dinner jacket, and a thick vein bulges in his neck.

“Papá?” I plead now too, not only on my brother’s behalf but my own. Despite what Lorenzo might be thinking right now, I want no part of this either.

“*Silenzio!*” he barks, stubbing his cigar out in the large glass ashtray on his desk before pushing himself to his feet. “If you refuse to marry the woman I chose for you, then you will not...” He shakes his head and plants his hands on his desk. “You *cannot* be the head of this family.”

Lorenzo’s scowl deepens as he glares at the man who sired us. The man who has been priming him to take over his legacy from the second he was born. Lorenzo was born to be the head of this family. It’s his birthright. It’s the reason he endured the years of mental and physical torture at the hands of this man. It was all supposed to lead him to this.

“That was never part of the deal,” Lorenzo grinds out the words through clenched teeth. I know my older brother better than anyone, and right now, he’s torn between all he has been taught — to respect and fear our father, the great Salvatore Moretti, unchallenged and unyielding head of the Cosa Nostra

for three long decades — and all that he has learned. As powerful and as formidable as our father is, my older brother could squash him like a bug if he chose to. Lorenzo Moretti is the most feared man in the city. He can crush a man's skull with his bare hands.

“Deal?” The word echoes around the room, bouncing off the walls. “There is no deal, *ragazzo!*”

Boy! Lorenzo bristles at the term. He first took another man's life at the age of fifteen and even before that he was never allowed to be a boy. Neither of us were. Because while Lorenzo has been groomed to be the head of the Moretti empire, I was born to be his second. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Until today.

“You refuse to marry Nicole Santangelo? Even if it costs you what you've been working for your entire life?” our father snarls.

“I can't marry her,” Lorenzo replies.

“You're giving all of this up for some Russian —”

Lorenzo takes a step forward until his thighs are pressed against our father's desk. “Choose your next word carefully, Papá,” he warns. “Because she *will* be my wife.”

Our father narrows his eyes, glaring at Lorenzo. He doesn't like to be challenged in any way. He's unaccustomed to it, especially from his sons. But perhaps he feels the anger radiating from his first born as much as I do, because he doesn't finish his sentence and stops short of calling Anya a whore.

Anya Novikov is Lorenzo's fiancée. He met her six months ago and he has been hopelessly in love with her ever since. Papá has not taken kindly to their union. Their engagement last night has rocked our entire existence. Nobody expected it, least of all me. I wasn't even sure my brother was capable of love, but something about Anya has him in a chokehold. And whilst I admire that he is a man of principle, I can hardly believe he's giving up his birthright for a woman he barely knows.

“I am not saying you have to cut all ties with her,” our father says as he sits with a heavy sigh. “Marry Nicole and you can still keep seeing Anna —”

“Anya!” Lorenzo corrects him.

“Fine. But marrying the Santangelo girl does not mean you have to give up other women. You can have it all, *mio figlio,*” he says softly, switching tactics to gain my brother's compliance. But he has touched a very raw nerve now and has no doubt pushed Lorenzo further down the path he has chosen.

“Like you did?” Lorenzo snarls. “Even though Mama gave you three children. Gave you everything!”

Salvatore Moretti jumps from his chair and bangs his fists on the wooden desk with such force that papers scatter onto the floor. “Your mama and I are not your concern,” he growls.

Lorenzo snorts, shaking his head at the man standing before him, and I see it on my father’s face, the moment he realizes that he’s no longer the one pulling his son’s strings. It makes him falter. Just for a second.

Then he turns to me. “Congratulations, *mio figlio*, you just earned yourself a new bride along with your promotion,” he says with a cruel smile.

“I don’t want either of them,” I remind him. “Lorenzo is taking your place. The Santangelos will find a groom for Nicole easily enough, Papá.”

I’m far too young to get married. I don’t want a wife. I don’t want to be the head of the family. But I’m not as stubborn as my older brother — maybe not as stupid as he is, either. I would never allow my life to be controlled by a woman.

“This is about our family, Dante,” he says, his tone softer as he tries to win me over. This has always been a tactic of his when it comes to me and my brother. Divide and conquer. “*You* know this is the way it has to be. You, of all people, understand how our family, our community, thrives and lives on.”

Lorenzo turns and looks at me, his brow pulled into a deep scowl.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, knowing that the course of all of our lives is about to change forever.

CHAPTER I

KAT

SIX YEARS LATER

“Piece of junk,” I mumble, slamming the door of my beat-up Ford Focus with my foot. Juggling a bag of groceries in one hand and cleaning supplies in the other, I make my way across the front lawn and toward the front door which is slightly ajar.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I swallow a gulp of air. I definitely locked it this morning. I triple check it before I leave. As I scan the street behind me, I notice a beautiful Black Porsche SUV with the tinted windows.

My hands trembling, I place my bags on the ground, straining to hear any noise from inside the house. Placing my hand on the door, I edge it open a little further. If my asshole older brother has dragged his sorry ass back here looking for money, then I swear to God I will kick him straight in the nuts.

But at least if it's him, I know what to expect. I know how to handle him. I've been doing it since I was fifteen and our mom died. There's no way he'd be here in that fancy car though, so who the hell does it belong to? Somebody looking for him, perhaps? Yet another person he's screwed over.

My heart beats wildly as I stand on the porch. I knew I shouldn't have offered him a place to stay, but when he'd turned up at my doorstep four weeks earlier, standing in the pouring rain with no coat, what the hell else was I supposed to do? He had nowhere else to go and he's my brother after all. So I offered him my sofa, and for a few weeks, it was actually nice having him around. I wasn't surprised at all two mornings ago to wake up to find him gone with nothing but a note that said he'd be in touch when he's back on his feet. I was even less surprised to find all the money in my purse and my emergency fund gone too. *Asshole!*

If they're looking for Leo, then they've come to the wrong place.

Suddenly, I wish I'd taken my cousin's advice of carrying my gun in my purse. I push open the door and step into the house, leaving it open behind me in case I need to run. The sound of voices carries down the hallway from the kitchen. Men's voices and they don't sound happy. Passing the stairs, I reach for the baseball bat I keep tucked behind the coat stand and grip it tightly as I make my way to the back of the house.

Two men — large and bulky — are sitting at my kitchen table. Dressed in black tailored suits that probably cost more than my entire year's rent and black shirts open at the collar. Both have dark hair and beards. Are they brothers? They sure look similar.

Dark ink covers their hands and their necks. When they look up at me, my heart almost gives out. They don't move, but their presence is suffocating. It's visceral. These men... they don't listen to reason or logic.

"You must be Katerina?" one of them says, and his voice makes every hair on my body stand on end. It's deep and smooth like chocolate but dark and menacing. I bet he likes to talk to people while he kills them. Confuses their brain with his velvety rich voice while he pulls out their fingernails.

They stare at me while I remain frozen on the spot. I've experienced this before. Paralyzed into inaction by my own fear, and it led to...

No, I can't go there now. I need to think.

I react on instinct, launching the baseball bat I'm holding in their direction and distracting them while I make a run for it. My heart pounds as I race down the narrow hallway to my bedroom. The sound of the bat and my wooden chairs clattering to the floor behind me makes me pump my arms faster. Instead of escaping out of the open front door, I head for my room, where there's a bolt on the door and a handgun beneath my pillow.

My bedroom is my sanctuary. The only place I ever feel safe. If either of them steps foot in there, I will blow their goddamn heads off. I stumble inside, scrambling to get to safety, but footsteps thunder after me. My nails scratch the wood as I fumble to close the door, but I'm not fast enough, and it flies open, sending me hurtling across the room where I land on the edge of my bed.

When I look up, one of the bearded men is advancing on me, not the one with the velvet voice, but his colleague. His eyes are dark as he glares at me for daring to run.

"Get the hell out of my house," I shriek as I scoot back along the bed.

Reaching beneath my pillow, my hand curls around the handle of my Glock.

I point it at him as he gets closer and... his lips twitch. Rude, arrogant asshole actually smiles at me. "You sure you got the guts to use that thing?" he drawls and his voice is just as terrifying as the other guys. Do they teach that in bad guy school? How to distract your enemies, or in this case, your prey, with your voice alone?

"One step closer and you'll find out." My heart is racing faster than a Chevy at Daytona, and my hand is trembling as I aim the gun at his chest, but he's mistaken if he thinks I'm afraid to use this weapon.

He steps closer anyway, and I close my eyes as I squeeze. No gunshot sounds. Just a soft click of the trigger.

"Oh yeah, we found that," he snorts as if this is funny, enraging me further.

I pull the trigger again and nothing, so I throw the gun at his head, but he ducks. Still, it gives me long enough to spring from the bed and dart past him — and straight into the arms of his colleague.

"You are a feisty little kitten," he sneers.

I lash out, scratching his face as I try to escape his grip, but he catches my wrist in his giant hand and squeezes until pain shoots up my forearm. Then he twists me around so that my back is pressed against his chest and he has both of my arms pinned behind me. He rests his mouth close to my ear and his warm breath dusts over my neck, making me shiver involuntarily.

"I kind of like it when you struggle, kitten," he whispers.

"Then you'll love this." I throw my head back, but he dodges me.

"You really shouldn't warn people when you're about to headbutt them," he hisses as he pushes me toward the kitchen with my hands still pinned behind my back and his arm around my waist so I'm caged against his body.

"She actually tried to fucking shoot me," the other one says incredulously as he follows us. "And she threw the fucking gun at my head."

"Well, at least she's got a terrible aim," the one holding onto me replies. "Take a seat," he snaps, pushing me forward.

I stumble as he releases me from his grip and plant my hands on the table to stop myself from falling flat on my face. He picks up one of the chairs from the floor and stands it upright.

"Sit!" he barks.

In this moment, I realize they know way more about me than I'd like them to. They found my gun and they know my name. And with them

blocking my exit, I have no chance of escaping. So I reluctantly take a seat.

“Who the hell are you?”

“I think we’ll be asking the questions,” the one who just had his hands on me says. Something about his demeanor and the way he talks tells me he’s in charge. I mean, they’re both terrifying, but this one has that air of arrogant authority about him too. You know what I mean? Like the top jock in high school who dated the head cheerleader and could walk around the halls like he goddamn owned them.

“Where is Leo?” the other one asks me.

I snort and shake my head. I knew this was about him.

“Was that a fucking answer, D?” he says to Velvet Voice when I don’t reply.

“Didn’t sound like one to me, Max,” D says as he rights the other chair, taking a seat and watching me intently.

“Where. Is. Leo,” the one I now know is Max asks again. “And if you want to keep those pretty blue eyes of yours, I’d suggest you answer.”

“I don’t know where he is.”

“You know, that’s what they all say at first.” He laughs, then continues, “Until I start applying a little more pressure. You know what I mean?”

“Pretty sure a monkey could understand the threat you just made, asshole,” I snarl, “but that doesn’t change the fact that I have no idea where my brother is. In fact, when you find him, could you let me know? He hauled ass two days ago, taking all of my savings with him.”

Max looks at D, who has an arrogant smirk on his face as he watches the exchange between us. “Did she just call me an asshole?” he asks with a frown.

D nods, and his colleague turns back to me. Max steps closer, before crouching down on his heels. That brings us eye to eye because he is a goddamn giant.

“You think this is some kind of joke we’re playing here, sweetheart?” he hisses, and my blood turns to ice. “Your brother owes my boss money, and we will not be leaving this house until we have taken some kind of payment.”

“I-I don’t have any money.”

“So, tell us where he is.”

“I don’t know. I swear. He just disappears and then turns up when he’s in trouble again.”

“You know you’re covering for a lowlife piece of shit, right?” he

continues.

I scowl at him. Leo is a top-notch jackass who has brought me more trouble than anyone should endure in two lifetimes, but he's still my big brother, and this asshole doesn't get to talk about him like that.

"Says the man who breaks into people's homes and threatens women?" I snap.

"Fuck's sake!" he mutters. Closing his eyes, he sucks in a deep breath as though he's trying to keep a lid on his temper.

"Max, let me handle this," the one named D says. His voice is soft, calm and controlled, yet laced with so much menace it makes me shudder.

"She's all yours, boss," Max replies, then he throws me a sympathetic look. "You should have let me handle it, sweetheart."

I swallow as his boss stands and takes two steps until he's towering over me. He's about an inch taller than Max but not quite as broad. He fills out his suit like it was painted on his body, and he wears it like he was born in one.

"Katerina," he says as he pulls up the other chair and places it directly in front of me. He takes a seat and we are so close that his knees are almost touching mine. "My name is Dante Moretti."

Holy fuckballs, Leo. What have you done? Dante Moretti is Mafia. He is THE Mafia.

"Your brother owes my family a lot of money and I want it back."

"I told you I don't know where he is," I whisper.

He narrows his eyes at me. "Then I'll have to take something else of value to him."

"He doesn't have anything. This house is a rental, and it's mine. He doesn't even have a car."

"Hmm." Dante runs a hand over his jaw as he stares at me, and I can't help but think I'm missing something here.

"I'm sorry, I can't help you," I say.

For some reason, that makes Max laugh and I swear I want to kick that crazy asshole in the balls.

"I think you're overlooking his most important asset, Katerina," Dante says with the hint of a smile.

Leo has no assets. Zero. Whenever he makes even a little money, he gambles it away. He's never been able to hold on to anything he makes. "And what's that?"

"You," Dante says deadpan.

“Me?”

“That’s what I said.”

“B-but I... I don’t have anything. I mean, we could set up a payment plan, I guess, but I can only spare a few bucks a week.”

Suddenly, Max howls with laughter.

“Katerina,” Dante says quietly. “Your brother owes me over a quarter of a million dollars.”

I open my mouth and close it again. That’s not possible. Leo couldn’t owe that kind of money. It’s insane.

He shifts closer, edging his chair closer to mine so that our knees touch. “And when I say I’m taking payment, I do not mean a payment plan. I’m talking about you.”

My head spins because I don’t know what he’s saying and what the hell he means.

“Like, take me? You can’t do that.” I shake my head. “I’m a person.”

Dante sighs softly. “If I found your brother and he couldn’t pay, you know what I would do?”

I could take a pretty good guess, but I’m not going to verbalize it and give him any ideas, so I shake my head.

“I would kill him,” he says, so matter-of-fact, like it’s an everyday activity for him. No doubt it is. “And I would do it very slowly, so that he would feel every single cent that he stole from me.”

My heart is thundering in my ears, and I can’t breathe. The head of the Mafia is sitting in my kitchen, talking about torturing my brother as calmly as he would talk about what to buy for dinner. And somehow, I’m involved in this payment?

“But I haven’t found your brother,” he goes on. “Instead, I found you.”

“S-so you’re going to kill m-me instead?” I stammer as my eyes scan the kitchen, looking for a weapon or a way out.

But what chance do I have anyway? If their physical presence wasn’t enough, their names are. If this is Dante Moretti, that means Max is Maximo DiMarco — ruthless enforcer and unhinged psychopath. Dante slaughtered his fiancée and her entire family on the eve of his wedding. The things these men do to people make those twisted shock-value, horror movies that Leo used to make me watch seem like high school pranks.

Dante leans back in his chair as his eyes scan over my body. “I might be willing to come to another kind of arrangement.”

I pull my coat tighter around myself, as though it might shield me from him. At least it covers my huge boobs straining at the one size too small uniform. Pity my cheap-ass boss won't buy me a different one. *Focus, Kat!*

I stare at the devil sitting in front of me. "What kind of arrangement?"

"D?" Maximo says with a frown, earning him a stern look before Dante trains his eyes back on me.

"I think I'll just take you instead. I'm sure I'll find a use for you at my house. You can work off your brother's debt for him."

Take me? His house? "You can't do that. You can't just *take* a person like they're a goddamn car or something. You can't just walk in here and expect me to —"

He stands and looks at Maximo. "Start throwing some of her things into a bag."

I jump up from my chair. "I am not going anywhere with you," I shout, but Maximo is already walking out of the room.

"Do *not* touch my things," I yell, about to run after him, but Dante holds out his arm and stops me.

"Behave, little kitten," he warns, his eyes dark and unreadable. "You won't like me when I'm upset."

I screech in his face, "I hate you. You fucking monster! You can't do this. You can't..." I beat my fists against his chest, but he doesn't budge. I may as well be punching a steel wall. After a few seconds, he takes hold of my wrists and I'm left staring up into his face with tears running down my cheeks.

"If I let you go so you can help Maximo pack your things, do you promise not to throw anything else at his head?"

No. I'll throw my goddamn TV at his head if I get the chance. "Yes," I sniff instead.

He releases my wrists and steps aside to allow me out of the room, before he follows me down the hallway.

"You can't do this. People will miss me, you know? They'll wonder where I am."

"No, they won't," he replies in that calm, confident tone that also drips with arrogance and entitlement.

I die a little more inside as I realize he's right.

CHAPTER 2

DANTE

Katerina's arms and legs are crossed as she hugs her body and tries to make herself as small as possible, nestled against the corner of the car so she is as far from me as she can physically be. I had to accompany her in the back in case she tried to pull any shit to escape. She threw a baseball bat and a gun at Maximo's head, tried to shoot him, and then punched me in the chest all in the space of fifteen minutes, so I'm pretty sure we got ourselves a live wire.

I can sense Maximo's eyes on me in the rearview mirror every few minutes, probably wondering what the hell I'm even thinking of bringing her to my house instead of making an example of her.

I have no answer to that question though. No reasonable explanation as to why I'm taking her as a payment for her brother's debt instead of doing whatever necessary to make sure she doesn't have any information that might lead me to the slippery little fuck. There's something about her that intrigues me. I looked into her when we were trying to find Leo. She trained to be a nurse, and she worked as one in Northwestern Memorial for three years. She was good at it too. I read all of her performance reviews. Incredible with patients and respected by her colleagues.

Then two years ago, she quit, and nobody from the hospital ever heard from her again. She left her nice apartment block and moved to one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. She took a night shift, cleaning empty office blocks. Besides that, she rarely leaves the house.

She's a mystery. A puzzle I want to solve. I've always been good at reading people. Usually, within a few minutes, I can figure out their story, but not her. That's what intrigues me. It has nothing to do with her bright blue

eyes and the fire in them when she stood up to Maximo and me. Nothing to do with her perky tits straining against that cleaning uniform she has on beneath her coat, or her full pink lips and how good they would look if I was fucking her smart mouth. And absolutely nothing to do with the way her blatant defiance and disregard for who I am made me harder than I've ever been in my life.

No. Not that at all.



WHEN WE PULL up at my house, Katerina cranes her neck to get a full view of the place. It's huge, with two wings, one for me, and one for my brother and his wife. But he's not living here right now. No doubt, she's looking for ways to escape though. She won't find any.

Once Maximo has stopped the car, I climb out and walk around to her side. When I pull the door open, she scowls at me.

"You can walk into the house, or I will carry you in. And you can kick and scream for help and not one single person here will stop me or come to your rescue."

She glares at me as she weighs her options, and a few seconds later, she steps out of the car, her jaw set in defiance even as she follows me the few steps to the house, while Maximo grabs the small suitcase of personal belongings she gathered from her place. She didn't bring much, just a few clothes and toiletries and a photo album.

Maximo called ahead once we knew we were going to have a new houseguest. My housekeeper, Sophia, opens the door.

"Mr. Moretti," she says with a polite nod.

"Sophia, this is Katerina. Can you show her to her room?"

"Of course, sir," she replies, opening the door and ushering Katerina inside.

Katerina turns to me, her eyes wide and full of anxiety. I like the way she looks at me. I am the man with all the answers, and that makes her dependent on me. And I definitely like that.

"I'll bring your bag up in a moment," I tell her, and she nods, although her face is still clouded in confusion and uncertainty, which I guess is understandable.

She follows Sophia along the hallway and up the stairs. A few seconds later, Maximo joins me.

“You sure you know what you’re doing, D?” he asks, giving me a look that suggests he knows my motives aren’t entirely motivated by my need to recoup the money that Leo Evanson stole from us.

“Nope.”

“What exactly is she gonna be doing while she’s here?” he asks with a grin.

“I’ll think of something.”

“I’m sure you will.”

I ignore his innuendo. “She was a nurse, right?” I remind him. “Surely, she has skills that will be useful to us?”

“Sure,” he says, but he’s still looking at me like he knows I’m thinking about another set of skills she might have. “You haven’t forgotten your pop is coming for dinner later, have you?”

“Fuck!”

“You did forget?”

“I do my best to forget any things related to him.”

“Good thing one of us is on the ball though, eh?” He nudges me, and I roll my eyes at him.

Anyone else tried to ride my ass like he does and I’d put a bullet in them. But Maximo is like a brother to me. He’s a year older than I am and we grew up together. Our fathers were best friends until his was murdered when he was fourteen. He lived with us after that. There was no official adoption — it just was. I would die for him and he’d do the same for me in a heartbeat. Loyalty like that is hard to come by.

“Why do you think I keep you around here?” I say as I take Katerina’s bag from him and head to the stairs.

“Because you couldn’t fucking function without me.” He whistles, heading off to my study, while I prepare to welcome our guest.

SOPHIA IS LEAVING the room when I reach it, and when I walk inside, Katerina is staring out of the window, looking at the courtyard below. She’s taken off her coat at least, so I figure she’s accepted she won’t be leaving any time soon.

“Kind of a nice room for a prison cell,” she says, full of snark.

Goddamn it, I want to throw her on the bed and fuck that attitude out of her. *Perhaps, later.*

“It has a lock too,” I tell her. “Not that you’ll need it.”

“Won’t I?”

“Well, nobody lives here, except me. And Sophia of course, but she lives downstairs.”

She arches an eyebrow at me and how much I would love to fuck that look off her face.

“It would take more than a lock to keep me out if I wanted in here, kitten.”

She hugs her arms to her chest, shivering as she rubs her bare arms as though she’s cold despite the warm room. Is that from fear or something else? “What exactly do you want with me? You planning on just keeping me here forever, or am I only supposed to stay here until I pay off this debt?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what? You’re keeping me here forever or until I work off Leo’s debt?”

How about both? “You’ll work off your brother’s substantial debt and then you can leave,” I say instead.

“And just how do I do that? And how long will it take? What about my actual job? My house?” she fires off the questions, arms still crossed over her chest.

“Your employer will be informed of your new circumstances. Your house will be maintained until you’re ready to return to it. And as for how long that will take, that all depends on how good you are,” I say, crossing the room until I’m standing so close to her I can smell her scent. It’s not a perfume. It’s sweet like chocolate. The cocoa butter lotion she uses on her skin. I saw her throwing it into the bag earlier.

“Good at what?” she whispers, and her lip trembles slightly.

I don’t know what makes me harder — feisty Katerina or trembling-with-fear Katerina. I’m going to have plenty of fun with both of them. But not today. Not yet.

I could pin her down on this bed and fuck her senseless and there wouldn’t be a single thing she could do about it. No matter how hard she fought me or how loud she screamed, nobody would come to her aid.

“Whatever it is I tell you to do.”

She rolls her eyes at me and I step closer until I’m invading every inch of

her personal space. Her breath hitches, making those goddamn tits strain against the snappers on her uniform even more. One flick of my wrist and that damn tunic would be open and her chest would be completely exposed. I ram my hands into my pockets to stop myself from touching her. I can tell that she wants to step back and give herself a little space, but she's too stubborn to back down.

"I am not having sex with you," she snarls.

"I don't force women into having sex with me. I certainly don't have to pay them for the privilege."

Relief shines in her eyes momentarily. "My men, on the other hand... well, they are a different matter."

"I-I'm not having sex with anyone," she stammers, and tears well in her eyes as she steps away from me, pressing her back against the window. "I'd rather you kill me than keep me here like some paid whore to entertain your men."

There is a terror in her eyes that wasn't there a moment ago. She's hiding a secret and it's shimmering just beneath the surface now. I can almost feel it, but she keeps it well hidden. And I find myself doing something completely out of character. "You were a nurse, right? So I'm sure you have other talents that will come in useful instead, Katerina," I assure her.

I walk out of the room before I give her any further indication that I am anything but the monster she believes I am.

"My name is Kat. I hate Katerina," she calls after me.

Is this what *déjà vu* feels like? Because I've heard those words before. I turn around. And suddenly it's six years ago and I'm looking at someone else's face as we stand in this room. We stood here just like this and she said almost those exact same words. Except Nicole preferred Nicci, and she was never my prisoner. She was here through choice. Until she wasn't.

My chest tightens as six years of anger and the weight of all the secrecy and lies surges up from my gut, threatening to spill out until I push it all back down where it belongs.

"Are you okay?" Kat's voice snaps me from the past reminding me that that time in my life has long gone. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"Maybe," I mumble, and she blinks at me in confusion. "Anyway, make yourself at home until I figure out what to do with you."

Something unreadable flickers in Kat's expression.

"Except for my study, you're free to explore the house. But you try and

escape and I will hand you over to my men to do with as they please. You understand me?"

"Yes."

"Sophia makes dinner around eight. You can eat wherever you like, but my father is coming this evening, so I'd prefer you eat in your room."

"I'd rather eat in here anyway," she snipes.

"Of course you would. Not much of a people person, are you?"

"Well, you tell me since you seem to know a hell of a lot about me, Mr. Moretti," she snaps.

Whatever glimpse of vulnerability she allowed me to see a moment ago has vanished, and her armor is firmly back in place. Which is a good thing because she'll need that while she's living here. "I make it my business to know everything there is to know about my enemies, Ms. Evanson."

I walk out of the door and close it behind me. I need to do something to take my mind off the fiery wildcat because walking around here with a semi-permanent hard-on isn't my idea of a good time.

Maybe I should just fuck her and get it over with. Get her out of my head so I can focus. Except that I don't want to simply take Kat; I want to own every single part of her. And the worst of it is, I have absolutely no idea why.

CHAPTER 3

DANTE

He's late as usual. It's one of his many flaws that I despise. His tardiness is yet another one of his mind games.

"Would you like me to wait to serve dinner, sir?" Sophia asks.

I glance across the table at Maximo, who is chewing on a cocktail stick and drumming his fingers on the table. He's not a patient man, especially when it comes to food, and I feel the annoyance in him crackling through the room.

"We'll give him a few more minutes," I say with a sigh.

"As you wish," she says with a polite nod.

"Has our guest eaten yet?"

"I took her up some food at eight as you requested. She hasn't left her room since."

"Okay, good." I dismiss her with a wave as my thoughts drift to Kat.

I wonder what she's wearing and if she's finally changed out of her cleaning uniform that's too small for her curves. When she was packing her things at her house, I tried not to look at her underwear as she stuffed it into the bag, but there was definitely a pair of panties with tiny pink hearts all over them. She doesn't seem like a hearts-on-her-panties kind of woman, but then she doesn't seem like a woman who would quit her dream job to clean office blocks for twenty bucks an hour either.

Sophia comes hurrying back inside. "Your father is here, sir. Shall I put the steaks on now?"

"For the love of God, yes, please," Maximo groans, but Sophia ignores him and keeps her eyes trained on me.

“Yes, please,” I tell her.

She hurries out again, surprisingly nimble for a sixty-seven-year-old woman with an arthritic hip. She should really retire, but whenever I suggest that, she looks at me like I’ve broken her heart and tells me she has nowhere else to go. We had two housekeepers when my brother and his wife lived here too, but that seems so long ago now. Regret gnaws at the pit of my stomach, or perhaps it’s just hunger.

My father’s incredibly loud voice reverberates around the hallway outside, signaling his arrival. With an inward groan, I brace myself for an evening in his company. He insists on us meeting for dinner once a month, framing his visits as an opportunity to see his favorite son, but we both know neither of those things are true.

When he walks into the room, he opens his arms as he approaches me. “*mio figlio*.” He smiles widely.

I fake one too and accept his embrace. He pats me on the back. “You lost a little weight, son?” he asks as he steps back a little, his eyes full of mock concern.

He has done this all my life. Preys on what he thinks are my insecurities. I was a scrawny kid until I hit fifteen and he reminded me of it every goddamn day of my life. But I’m not that kid anymore. I’m six-foot-four and two hundred and forty pounds. I train in my gym almost every day. I can bench press one and a half times my own body weight, and I spar with a former heavyweight champion. My suits are custom-made and they still fit me exactly the way they always have, but I’ve lost weight. *Right?*

“Pretty sure my weight’s the same as the last time you were here, Pop,” I reply.

“Hmm.” He arches a brow as though he doesn’t believe me. “And, Maximo. I might have known you’d be here,” he says it with a smile on his face, but his tone drips with disdain.

“Well, I never could resist a good steak, Sal,” Maximo replies with a well-practiced smile.

My father’s eye twitches as Maximo uses his name informally. He prefers his full title — Salvatore or Mr. Moretti, especially from the orphan he brought into his home, and who he believes owes him a debt. But even my father knows better than to challenge the loose cannon that is my right hand.

“Shall we?” I pull out a chair for him and we all sit at the table.

Maximo pours us all a glass of Chianti.

“So, how is business?” my father finally asks — his usual opener.

“Good.” My standard reply.

“You dealt with the business at the warehouse last week?”

“Yes.” There’s always business at the warehouse.

“And what about Leo Evanson? You got that money he stole from me?”

My insides twist into a knot. Here we go. Leo Evanson really fucked me over when he decided to enter the most lucrative poker game in Chicago. Not only because he cheated and walked away with a quarter of a million dollars that he didn’t earn, but also because one of the men sitting at that table was my father’s old buddy, Constantine.

Now, Constantine Benetti has been a gambling man for as long as I’ve known him. He’s one of the best poker players there is, however, his penchant for women half his age with expensive tastes in shoes, handbags, and cocaine means he spends it faster than he can win it. So, when the big games happen once a month at one of our clubs, my father bankrolls Benetti and takes half of his winnings. So the money that he stole, really belongs to my father — and therein lies my problem.

My father doesn’t need the money. It’s pocket change to him, but he doesn’t need his old friend thinking that he’s incapable of getting their money back from a street punk like Leo Evanson.

Their whole arrangement was under the table of course. Nobody knew about it and Benetti’s ego and my father’s paranoia ensured it stayed that way, until now. Now every fucker knows that Leo stole from the Morettis and he is running for his life.

“Leo took off. No one knows where he is.”

“What about the sister? You looked into her, right?”

I sense Maximo’s eyes on me.

“Yeah. He was staying with her, but he bailed. Took her savings too.”

“So, does she know where he is? Have any leads to chase?”

I shake my head and sip my wine. “She didn’t know anything.”

My father frowns at me. “She must have known something.”

“No,” I say firmly, trying to keep the annoyance from my tone.

“How hard did you push her to talk?” He looks at Maximo now because that’s his particular area of expertise.

“Enough,” I reply on his behalf.

“She dead?” he asks nonchalantly as he drinks his wine.

“No.”

“You get any money from her at least?” he asks with a sigh.

“She doesn’t have any.”

That seems to be the final straw, and he turns to face me. “So, you got nothing? That fuck steals a quarter of a million dollars from me and you got nothing? Are you losing your touch, *ragazzo*?”

My knuckles turn white as I clench my hands.

Maximo catches my eye across the table and gives a subtle shake of his head. My relationship with my father is complex and bound up in so much guilt and regret and anger that communicating with him in any way feels too damn difficult. So I keep it all locked away and deal with him as little as humanly possible, because if I were to ever lift that lid and let some of this rage out of me, I might just fucking kill him where he stands. And despite who I am, killing my own father — the great Salvatore Moretti — is not high on my list of priorities. I force my muscles to relax, curling my fingers around the delicate stem of my wineglass before I take a sip.

“Not nothing. I have his sister,” I say calmly.

He blinks at me, amused. “You *have* her?”

“Yes.”

“Where? Are you using her as bait?”

“I don’t think he’d take that bait. He doesn’t give a fuck about her,” I say, annoyance prickling beneath my skin again. But this time, it’s directed at Kat’s brother.

“So, what then? You taking your pound of flesh?” he asks with a sly grin, and my stomach churns as I think about the things this man has done. Nothing would make him happier than me telling him I had Kat chained in the basement downstairs where I could torture her or use her for whatever pleasure I wanted to take. That is the kind of man he’d be proud of.

“No. She’s working for me,” I grit out as I await the inevitable disdain that’s about to spew from his mouth.

“*Working* for you?” he snorts. “As what? Your personal whore? You’re Dante Moretti, you don’t pay women for that, *mio figlio*. It’s beneath men like us.”

“No, we just fuck them anyway, right? Regardless of who they are and whether they want it?”

“She’s a nurse,” Maximo interrupts our heated exchange, and my father’s gaze shifts to him instead.

“A what?”

“A nurse. She can remove bullets. Stitch wounds. Help a man live after he’s been tortured for days. Stop him bleeding out too soon,” Maximo says with a shrug.

“So, she’s your little pet?” my father asks with a scowl.

“Maybe I’ll train her to be my assistant?” Maximo laughs darkly, and that seems to appease my father a little.

“And what about my money? What about that piece of shit who stole it?”

“We’ll find him,” I assure him.

“Just make sure you do,” he hisses. “Because it makes you look weak when you bring home strays instead of putting them down.”

“Weak?” I snarl at him. “Who are you to call anyone weak? The man who let his wife die alone in agony because he was too busy fucking his whore?”

“Watch your goddamn mouth. I should have known you wouldn’t be able to handle this responsibility. I should have let Lorenzo...” He shakes his head, and a whisper of regret flickers over his face.

I think that must be the only thing in his whole life he feels any regret over. He made me head of the Cosa Nostra to punish my older brother and to drive a wedge between us that could never be healed. Lorenzo and I were unbreakable when we stood together, and he hated that. He thought the threat of losing his legacy would be enough to bring my older brother back to his side.

But his plan backfired in every possible way and Lorenzo has barely spoken to him ever since. While I never wanted this legacy, it’s mine now. For the first few years after he retired, I was so desperate to prove myself that I killed and tortured anyone who even dared to look at me the wrong way. Maximo and I tore through Chicago, leaving a trail of bodies in our wake that would rival the bubonic plague. And that was the side of me that my father admired. A part of me craved his approval until I realized I no longer needed it. And now time and experience have taught me there’s a better way to do business than the one he showed me.

“Whatever you wish you’d done, Papá, it’s too late now. You made me the head of this family, so you will hold your tongue before you ever dare to call me weak again.”

He narrows his eyes at me, and his face softens a little. “You are so much like your mother. She was a good woman. But you can’t be both — a good man and the head of this family. Those two things are mutually exclusive.

You cannot be one if you are the other.”

He has drilled this into me from the moment he handed over his mantel to me. “I am not trying to be a good man, Papá.”

“No, but it’s inside you anyway. You have to suppress that part of yourself to be the man you are. For Lorenzo, it comes easily to him. He got none of your mother’s compassion.”

I shake my head and sigh. “How can you be our father and yet know so little about either of us?”

He frowns like he has no idea what I’m talking about. And before the conversation can continue, Sophia walks into the room with dinner.



THE ATMOSPHERE REMAINED awkward and we made limited, stilted conversation throughout dinner. My father eventually left and now I feel like I can breathe again as Maximo and I nurse a glass of Scotch in my study.

“You need to stop letting him get to you, D,” he says as he takes a sip of his whisky. “He rattles your cage like no one else can.”

I scowl at him. “Is that really surprising, Max?”

“No. But unless you’re ever going to confront him about everything you know, you need to find a way to not want to rip his head off every time you see him. It’s been six years.”

“I can’t confront him. You know I can’t,” I snap at him.

“Yeah,” he adds with a nod of his head.

“Anyway, it’s more than just that. It’s everything else,” I say with a heavy sigh. “He’s... a lot.”

“I get it, D. He’s the great Salvatore Moretti.” He smirks at me, and it breaks the tension.

My shoulders relax, and I sink back into my chair, letting my head fall back to ease the dull ache between my shoulder blades.

“You seen your guest since this afternoon?” he asks.

“No. I don’t think she’s left that room all day.”

“Maybe she’s plotting your demise?” He chuckles darkly.

“Maybe,” I laugh too, thankful for the change of subject. Kat Evanson is a much less frustrating subject to talk about. She makes my blood pressure spike for an entirely different reason.

“Any thoughts on what she’s gonna do around here?”

“Not yet. I’m working on it.”

“Well, I’d work fast because if she has too much time on her hands, she’ll be able to think of really cool ways to kill you. You might wake up one morning, step out of bed and” — he signals his hand slicing across his throat — “straight into a booby trap that slices your head clean off.”

“You been watching Indiana Jones again?”

“It’s a classic,” he says with a shrug before he downs his whisky. “Anyway, I gotta go. I want to stop by and see Fred and make sure they’re not running into any more trouble.”

Alfredo Farina has worked for me for six years, and he runs the warehouses for me. We own enough legitimate businesses to justify the lifestyles we live and to keep the IRS off our backs. However, if anything illegal comes into this city, then it goes through me and I take a percentage. In addition, we take a cut from the casinos and the strip clubs in return for our protection. It’s a lucrative business, but one that people always want a piece of.

“They had more trouble?” I ask with a frown.

“Nothing serious.” Maximo shakes his head. “They dealt with it, but Fred thinks there’s something going on. The Russians have been a little too quiet like maybe they’re moving operations elsewhere to keep us out of the loop.”

I scrub a hand through my beard. I don’t trust my Russian counterpart. Never have. But he had an alliance with my father, so we have an uneasy truce.

“While things are quiet, I don’t want to start a war for no reason, Max. Tell Fred to keep his eyes open and keep us informed.”

“Will do, D,” he says before disappearing out of the door and leaving me alone to go over the events of the day.

My father’s reaction wasn’t entirely unexpected, even if it did seem a little over the top. Mostly I think about Kat and the fact that she is lying alone in one of my beds upstairs. I brought her here to work off her brother’s debt, right? So why can’t I get the image of me crawling over her and spreading her thighs wide open until I can sink inside her out of my head?

CHAPTER 4

KAT

This is all so surreal; I'm beginning to wonder if it's a dream. Surely, I'm going to wake up in my own bed, in my tiny bedroom at my place any minute now. I screw my eyes shut and then open them again.

Nope. Still here. Lying on a king-size bed in a beautiful bedroom that's almost bigger than my entire house, with huge sash windows and shelves stacked with old leather-bound books, not to mention a TV on the wall that is twice the size of my one at home. If I wasn't being held prisoner by a psychopath, it could almost be fun.

I settle back against the pillows and stare at the ceiling. I could try to pretend that I'm staying in some fancy hotel for the night. Maybe then I could get some sleep. This place is way nicer than any hotel I've ever stayed at, but at least I could get up and walk out of there whenever the hell I wanted. Not here though. I have visions of sniper rifles trained on my head as soon as I step out of the door.

I haven't seen Dante since this afternoon. Sophia brought me dinner, and I ate it because it was freaking delicious and also I was starving. I was about four bites into the most delicious fillet steak when I realized the food might have been drugged. But I figured the damage was already done so I cleared the plate.

Am I still awake? Yes. Am I still breathing? Also yes. So I guess it was okay after all. Besides, I'm pretty sure Dante has other, more unpleasant ways of disposing of people than poisoning them.

Sophia was kind to me. She showed me where the towels were in the bathroom and where I could find fresh linen if needed, as well as how to operate the fancy looking TV remote which has more buttons than a space

station. So, yeah, she seems nice, apart from working for the devil that is. I wonder if he kidnapped her too. Is his entire mansion staffed by people he's kidnapped and refuses to let leave.

My heart pounds, and I force myself to take some deep breaths and slow my thoughts. I have a tendency to ramble in my head when I'm anxious or nervous. I have every right to be nervous though, don't I? I locked that door as soon as Sophia took my dinner tray, but at any moment, Dante Moretti could come bursting through it, all rippling muscles and tattoos and do whatever the hell he wants with me.

I shudder at the thought. But he knows I was a nurse. Hopefully, that's what he wants me for, although I have no idea why. He's clearly in excellent physical health. I mean, he's tall and muscular, and he has perfect teeth.

Stop it, Kat!

Nursing had always been my dream job. My mom was a nurse too, and it was all I ever wanted to do. I always wanted to work in pediatrics because I love kids, but when my mom was killed in a car wreck when I was fifteen, I decided I wanted to work in the ER instead. Maybe I was looking to help save people just like my mom so that their kids wouldn't have to open the front door one night to a police officer, who struggled to hold it together when they told them their mom was gone.

And I did it too. I worked at Northwestern Memorial for three years and they were some of the happiest of my life. But that was before.

A tear races down my cheek. I swat it away and pick up the complicated TV remote. I need something to distract me so I switch it on and flick through the channels until I find some old reruns of *Friends*. My mom loved this show, and we used to watch it with her all the time. It's like chicken soup TV and despite my circumstances, I smile as Chandler and Joey ride into Monica and Rachel's apartment on that hideous white dog.



I WAKE up with the TV still on and my face glued to the pillow with drool.

I didn't close the curtains because just being able to see the outside world made me feel like less of a prisoner. Sunlight dapples the wooden floor, bathing the room in a soft yellow glow. I must have slept all night even though I rarely sleep for more than five or six hours. I guess being kidnapped

by the Mafia takes it out of a girl. And this bed is so damn comfy, it's like sleeping on a cloud.

After I take a quick shower and freshen up, I dress in my jeans and a sweater and unlock the door. The hallway is quiet. I wonder what time Mafia dons get out of bed in the morning. Or do they mostly sleep all day and work at night like vampires? Dante did say I could go anywhere in the house and my growling stomach is telling me I need to find the kitchen in this huge-ass place. I tiptoe out of the room, careful not to wake anyone just in case nobody is awake yet and I might have a chance to escape.

Walking down the hallway and making my way to the stairs, I groan inwardly as I spot the armed guards by the front door. There goes my escape attempt.

I head downstairs anyway in search of a kitchen. I bet Mafia man has a whole team of servants to cater for his every need, but I would prefer to make my own breakfast. I pad along the marble floors, which are surprisingly warm, until I hear the faint sound of a radio and detect the smell of fresh coffee.

Smiling, I walk into the huge, bright kitchen. It's so homely, and unlike the marble and sleek decor of the hallways, this is rustic and charming. Vases of sunflowers are perched on the windowsills and copper pans hang from a rack on the ceiling. A wooden table with long benches either side dominates the center of the room. It's so warm and inviting, I guess this must be the servants' quarters or something. I doubt the psychopath prince ever comes in here.

"Good morning, Kat," Sophia says with a smile. "Sit. I'll fix you some breakfast. What do you want? Bacon? Eggs? Pancakes? Cereal?"

"I can fix something, thank you," I tell her.

She eyes me skeptically. "Not when I am in my kitchen."

"Okay." I hold my hands up in surrender as I sit on one of the wooden benches. "I would love some eggs if it's not too much trouble."

She smiles widely before she starts preparing my breakfast. She hums along to the radio and seems so at peace here it makes me feel a little less uneasy. I mean, Dante can't be a complete monster if he treats his staff well, can he? Unless she's not like this when he's around? Maybe he's a raging tyrant who barks orders at her all day and makes her cower in fear. And this time of the morning, before he gets out of bed, is the only time she feels any happiness.

“Morning.” Dante’s deep, gravelly voice fills the room, and I swallow as I realize I’m about to learn which of my theories are true.

I don’t dare turn my head and look at him. Sophia is cheery when she turns to face him. “Good morning, sir. You want your usual?”

He clears his throat. “Please, and some coffee.”

“Of course,” she says with a polite nod. I mean she doesn’t look afraid of him, but what do I know? Maybe she’s a good actress. And what’s he even doing in here?

“Did you sleep well?” he asks as he walks toward the table and stands next to me.

I brace myself to turn and look at him and... holy mother of God, he’s wearing only black sweatpants, and I come face to face with his golden, tattooed abs. A bead of sweat trickles down his abdomen, and for the tiniest fleeting moment, I wonder what it would be like to lick it off.

I cast my eyes up and over the rest of his body, which is as perfectly chiseled as his stomach until my eyes rest on his face. His eyes are so dark they’re almost black. His hair is wet too, sweaty, like he just worked out.

“Yes. The room was perfectly adequate for a prison cell,” I say, and my voice sounds surprisingly calm given how much my insides are quivering.

“I’m glad to hear it,” he replies, ignoring my barb as he sits at the table opposite me.

He rests his tattooed arms on the table, and when he clenches his fists, the thick muscles in his forearms flex, and I have to drag my eyes away from them. But the rest of him is no easier to look at. His chest and biceps are covered in tattoos too. He is literally ink and muscle. All of him. Not an ounce of fat anywhere.

“I don’t usually have guests for breakfast,” he says, and I realize I’m staring at him.

Heat flushes across my cheeks. “I-I, uh, you’re just kind of sweaty is all,” I stammer. “I mean, it’s not very hygienic to sit at the dining table like that.”

“This isn’t the dining table though. This is the breakfast table. *My* breakfast table. I always eat straight after my workout. If you’d like to eat at the dining table, then it’s two doors down.”

I summon the courage to look into his eyes and immediately regret it because he’s glaring at me, but I don’t see anger there. His pupils are blown wide and I suddenly feel like if I don’t stop looking at his chiseled muscles, then I might end up being his breakfast.

“Here is fine,” I reply, keeping my eyes fixed on his. I like being in here with Sophia humming along to the radio because it feels like a little slice of normalcy in this fucked up version of reality I am in.

“Fine,” he says with an arrogant smirk.

I cannot believe he just caught me staring at his muscles.

“Now that you’re here anyway —” I clear my throat because my voice is suddenly way more high-pitched and croaky than it normally is. “Can we discuss exactly what happens now?”

He frowns at me. “What happens?”

“Yes. What happens. What the hell am I supposed to be doing here? When can I leave? What are the rules of the game?”

“This is no game, Kat.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I hiss, glaring at him. “It’s just a phrase. This is my life, asshole! You just picked me up out of it and dropped me here. I have no way of contacting the outside world. No money.” I never had a cell phone, preferring to use my landline to call my cousin, Mia, once a week. But other than that, I chose to stay off grid. How ironic that I’m now so off grid, nobody will ever find me even if they bothered to look.

“You won’t need either of those things.”

“Can I leave? To go to the store or take a walk?”

“No.”

“But what if I need to go buy tampons or pads or something?”

He doesn’t bat an eye at the reference to my period. My ex-boyfriend used to shudder at the mere mention of the word *tampon*. “Put them on the grocery list,” he says coolly.

Sophia places two mugs of fresh coffee on the table in front of us and then goes back to fixing breakfast.

“I need to speak with my cousin. She’ll wonder where I am if I don’t check in.”

“Mia?” he asks.

I blink at him. “You know Mia?”

“I know she’s your only other living relative and she lives in Boston.”

“Wow! You really did do your homework.”

“I told you, I learn all there is to know about my enemies, Kat.”

“She’s not your enemy. I’m not your enemy,” I snap.

“No?”

My brain catches up with my feelings to find the right response. “Well, I

guess you're mine now after you kidnapped me."

"I guess." He shrugs before he takes a sip of his coffee.

"You're an asshole, you know that?"

He eyes me over the rim of his coffee mug. "I've been called worse."

"I hate you."

"I'd expect nothing less."

I realize this is pointless. He doesn't care how I feel about him. "So, Mia..." I say.

"What about her?"

"Can I call her?"

"If you behave yourself, you can call her once a week in my office."

"If I *behave*?" I snap.

"Yes."

"And what would that look like? Me behaving?"

"Doing as you're told," he says as though it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"But what is it I'm going to be told to do, Dante?" I hear the desperation in my voice even as I try to keep calm and rational.

He puts his mug on the table and sighs. "I don't know yet."

"You must have some idea. Not knowing what you want from me is torture. Is that the idea though? Is this all part of the plan?"

He narrows his eyes as he stares at me and it makes me feel too vulnerable with him. "Tell me what it is you're worried I will ask you to do."

I swallow hard as my eyes fill with tears. "I can't..."

"Kat?" he says, and the deep, commanding tone of his voice makes my body prickle with nervous energy.

I don't want to be raped or assaulted! That's what I want to scream at him, but they are words I still struggle to say out loud. "I don't want to be used for anyone's entertainment, or their pleasure," I whisper instead.

"You won't be."

My eyes snap up to his again to find he's still staring at me. "Promise?" I ask.

He licks his lower lip, his eyes not leaving mine. "Yes."

"Thank you," I reply instinctively before I remember that this man kidnapped me. I shouldn't be thanking him for agreeing not to let his men rape me, but I'm still grateful anyway.

"I meant what I said yesterday. You have free rein of the west wing of the

house except my study. Most of the east wing is locked because those rooms belong to my brother and his wife.”

I don't miss the subtle change in his tone when he mentions his brother. I've heard the rumors about their epic falling out years earlier, when Dante stole his brother's birthright. Lorenzo Moretti is the eldest son and was supposed to take over the family business. I suspect nobody outside of their family knows the truth of why he didn't. There was adequate rumor and gossip and conjecture about it. Kind of like an urban legend. Much the same as the rumors about Dante murdering his fiancée and her family the night before their wedding.

That reminder of the man he truly is makes me shudder.

“I'll send for you when I find you something useful to do,” he goes on, and I nod, wondering just what the hell that might be.

CHAPTER 5

KAT

It's been five whole days since I was kidnapped by Dante Moretti, and during that time, I've not been asked to do anything at all. In fact, I just sit around this house all day, watching TV, reading, and eating delicious food. The den is my favorite spot. It has huge armchairs and sofas that are so comfortable I've fallen asleep on them more than once. It's a good thing nobody else comes in here.

I barely see my captor, except at breakfast when he insists on eating shirtless and covered in sweat. But otherwise, it's like I'm on vacation in a beautiful hotel or spa that I'm not allowed to leave. Believe me, I've triple-checked all exits and entrances. The place is locked up tighter than Fort Knox. I am not leaving unless he allows it. There's even a swimming pool and a sauna, but I don't have a swimsuit, so I haven't been able to make use of those facilities.

I have a few hundred dollars savings in the bank though. Maybe I could ask him about ordering one online? Or would that be completely crazy?

"Kat?" Dante's voice snaps me from my daydream, and I look up to see him at the door of the den.

"Yeah?"

"I need your help."

I stare at him, open-mouthed.

"Now," he barks, and I jump to my feet.

I follow him along the hallway and down a corridor of the east wing which I haven't explored much because he told me that this side of the house belongs to his brother.

"Is something wrong?" I ask as I stare at the back of his head.

“One of my men has been stabbed, and I could do without taking him to the ER,” he says nonchalantly.

“Oh God. Is he okay?”

“Well, that all depends on you now, kitten, doesn’t it?”

Oh, no! His man is going to die, and he’ll blame me. “I’m not a surgeon, Dante,” I insist.

“Relax. I just need you to stitch him up.” He laughs darkly. “But he gets kind of antsy about the sight of blood, especially his own.”

“Oh, right.”

He stops outside a door before turning to me. “At least it wasn’t a bullet,” he says with a wink before pushing open the door and stepping inside.

I follow him into the brightly lit room. It looks like a mix of a doctor’s office and an operating theater. I scan the room and note the equipment, the locked glass medicine cabinet, which makes me smirk at the irony. Pretty sure anyone in this house could get their hands on whatever is in that cabinet and more.

But my attention is quickly drawn to the man on the bed in the center of the room, who’s bleeding profusely and howling in pain.

“I’m bleeding to death,” he wails.

“You’re not, Lenny. It’s just a fucking scratch, man,” Maximo insists as he holds him down. “Now stop fucking wriggling.”

“The doc is here to fix you up now,” Dante says as he reaches the bed. “Stop your fucking hollering.”

“I’m not a doctor,” I remind him in a whisper.

He shakes his head at me and frowns so I keep quiet. I can stitch a wound, no problem. If Lenny feels better thinking I’m a doctor, then I suppose that’s fine.

“D-Dante,” Lenny whimpers. “How bad is it?”

“It’s a fucking scratch like Max said. Now quit your whining and let Kat fix you up.”

Lenny looks up at me, his eyes wet with tears and blood seeping from the gash in his chest. “Please, doc,” he says, his lip trembling.

“You should find everything you need in here,” Dante says with a roll of his eyes.

“Great.” I eye the needle and medical thread on the tray beside the bed. “Can you grab me some morphine from the cabinet too? You have some, right?”

“He doesn’t need any morphine. Just stitch him up,” Dante snaps.

“I do, doc.” Lenny grabs onto my tank top, staining it with his blood. “Please.”

I look at the deep gash on his chest as I start preparing to clean the wound and stem the blood flow. “I’m going to sew his skin, and this is a deep cut. Surely you can spare him some drugs to help with the pain,” I snap at Dante.

“Fine,” he sighs before he walks over to the cabinet, and a second later, I hear the smashing of glass.

I turn and glare at him. “Why did you do that?”

“Only the doc has the key,” he says with a shrug.

I shake my head and turn back to Lenny. He winces and shouts in pain as I examine his wound, so I tell him exactly what I’m doing and everything I’m about to do. Assuring him that he is safe and he’s going to be just fine. He nods his understanding, whimpering softly as I tend to him. When I give him the shot of morphine, he relaxes, and a few minutes later, he rambles how pretty I am as I’m stitching up his wound.

“Enough, Lenny,” Dante snarls.

“It’s just the drugs talking,” I assure him. “I gave him a lot.”

“Pussy,” Maximo mutters under his breath, earning him a scowl from me.

But then I tune both him and his boss out while I sew careful stitches to try and leave as neat a scar as possible. There’s something quite cathartic about helping to heal others, at least for me. A smile stretches my lips as Lenny stares at me with a goofy grin on his face.

“You doing okay there, champ?” I ask him.

“Sure, doc,” he replies. “Never been better.”



AFTER I FIXED LENNY UP, I went to my room to shower and change out of my bloodstained clothes. It’s late anyway so I pull on my oversized t-shirt that I wear as pajamas sometimes. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I feel a sense of something I haven’t experienced in a long time. Usefulness, perhaps? The sense of purpose that I always used to feel when I was nursing.

My stomach growls loudly, reminding me I’m also hungry. Ravenous, in fact. I was so engrossed in my book downstairs earlier that I didn’t have dinner. Pushing myself up, I look for some sweats or jeans to throw on with

my t-shirt, but they're all in the laundry hamper now beneath my bloody clothes. If I'm going to be here for a while, I definitely need to get myself more things to wear.

My t-shirt resembles a short dress. Hopefully, nobody would catch me at this hour if I make a quick dash for the kitchen. *Right?*

CHAPTER 6

DANTE

Maximo is waiting to drive Lenny home as soon as I can find the little fuck. He wandered off in his morphine-induced haze while I was debriefing what happened tonight with Maximo. A routine pickup doesn't usually end up in my second-in-command getting involved in a knife fight. With Lenny around, I suppose anything can happen. The guy finds trouble wherever he goes. Last month he made a move on someone's wife and almost ended up thrown out of the window of a hotel room. From the twelfth floor. If he wasn't my second cousin, I would have cut him loose a long time ago.

I can't get that look on Kat's face when she was fixing him up out of my head. She was smiling the whole time. He is a whiny little bitch when he's hurt, but she calmed him right down. The way she spoke to him, it was like her voice completely changed. I've never seen anyone have that effect on someone before. She could have told him she was about to saw his cock off and I'm sure he'd have just nodded and smiled at her.

She must have been an incredible nurse, and it obviously still makes her happy. So, why the hell hasn't she done it for two years?

The sound of hushed voices drifts out of the open kitchen doorway as I approach, and when I step inside, I see Kat standing beside the counter with her back to me. She's wearing nothing but an oversized t-shirt, which leaves far too much of her beautiful pale skin on display for my liking, especially when Lenny is standing right next to her. He leans down and whispers something in her ear, and the rage that burns through my veins at the sight of them together is unexpected and vicious.

She leans back, trying to create a little distance, and that simple act fills

me with relief. But Lenny is a charmer who's used to getting almost any woman he wants. He places his hand on her back, sliding it down toward her ass, and she flinches like she's been burned by a hot poker.

"Lenny!" I bark as I stride across the kitchen.

He spins on his heel and looks at me, a goofy smirk on his face. "Yes, Boss?"

"Keep your fucking hands off her."

He blinks at me, full of confusion and still buzzed from the whiskey he had in my study and the morphine Kat gave him when she stitched him up earlier. "Boss?"

I'm standing directly in front of him now. Instinctively, my hand reaches for his throat, and I squeeze until he gasps for air. "I said, *keep your fucking hands off her.*"

His face pales as he stares at me, his pupils wide with fear as he realizes he has crossed a line. Because he knows I will make him pay.

I push him away from me. "Go wait outside with Maximo."

He rubs at his raw throat and hurries out of the kitchen, leaving me alone with Kat. She looks up at me, traces of fear lingering in her deep blue eyes. "Thank you," she whispers.

"I didn't do that for you," I lie because I'm not her fucking knight-in-shining-armor here. "My men are too busy to be distracted, and you, kitten, are a distraction."

"I-I..." she stammers, her pretty pink lips open and begging to be wrapped around my cock.

"And if you wander around here half-naked, is it any wonder my men see you as an easy target?"

Fire flashes in her eyes. There she is. The wildcat. I don't know why but pushing her buttons makes me hard as fucking iron. "I'm not half-naked!" she insists.

I arch an eyebrow at her, and we both assess her shirt. "No?"

"Well... but that doesn't mean... I was about to go to bed. I needed something to eat. I didn't realize anyone would be here."

Her cheeks turn pink as she babbles at me, but my eyes are drawn down the length of her body. That t-shirt. It's too big to belong to her. "Whose shirt is that?"

"Mine," she whispers.

I take a deep breath, my nostrils flaring with suppressed rage. "Whose

was it then?”

Her forehead creases into a frown. “An ex-boyfriend’s. I like it because it’s soft. Nothing to do with him.”

“So, you’re walking around *my* house wearing another man’s clothes?” I’m aware that I sound crazy. I mean, she should be able to wear what she wants, right? So why does it make my blood boil to think of her wearing her ex-boyfriend’s clothes? Not just wearing them though, sleeping in them. Having it the only thing on her soft skin. The only thing between me and her right now as I edge closer.

“What? It’s just a t-shirt,” she protests.

“Take it off!” I command.

She tilts her head up, jaw set in rebellious defiance that makes my aching cock even more desperate to be inside her.

“No.”

I clench my hands into fists at my sides, about five seconds away from tearing the goddamn thing off her myself. “Take it off, or I will do it for you.”

“And walk back to my room completely naked?” she says with a scowl.

“I’ll carry you back to your room naked if you don’t stop with the smart mouth,” I growl as I start unbuttoning my own shirt. “Now take it the fuck off, Kat. I won’t tell you again.”

“Can you at least turn around, then?” she asks, her tone dripping with snark that I would love to fuck out of her.

“No,” I say with a shake of my head.

“You’re a goddamn asshole, Dante,” she mutters as she peels the t-shirt off over her head and holds it in front of her body.

I try not to make it obvious that I’m looking at her, but I’m only a man, not a fucking saint, and her incredible tits and pebbled nipples are kind of hard not to stare at. She’s wearing a pair of black cotton panties with a tiny white daisy print. It’s an effort not to think about the sweet distraction that lies beneath them.

I take off my shirt and hand it to her, taking the one she was just wearing and tossing it into the trashcan nearby. She shrugs it on, the white cotton gliding over her arms and then her breasts as she begins to fasten it. Her hard nipples protrude through the fabric, and all I can think about is sucking one into my mouth. She is going to be the fucking ruin of me.

“There. Happy now?” she snaps as she fastens the last button, leaving just

a small glimpse of her soft skin at the base of her neck visible.

“Not entirely. Now go back to bed before you get yourself into some more trouble, kitten.”

She rolls her eyes at me and then stalks off out of the kitchen wearing my shirt and looking far too fuckable for her own good.

AFTER KAT LEAVES, I take the pair of secateurs from the cupboard and slip them into my pocket before heading out onto the driveway where I find Maximo standing watch over Lenny, who is sucking on a vape like his life depends on it and pacing up and down. Upon seeing me heading toward him, Lenny pockets his vape and holds his hands out wide.

“I didn’t know she meant anything to you, Boss. If I had...” he says.

“Did you have my permission to touch her?”

“N-no,” he stammers. “But I thought she was...”

I narrow my eyes as I approach him. “She was what?”

“Fair game, you know?” he says with a shrug.

Maximo is at my side a second later. He arches an eyebrow at me. “He touched Katerina?”

“He did.”

“Ouch,” he laughs darkly, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Hold his arm for me,” I say, nodding toward Lenny before I take the secateurs from my pocket.

“B-boss,” Lenny babbles as he starts to take a few steps backward. “I’m your cousin.”

“No, you’re my father’s cousin, Lenny. This man is my brother.” I nod toward Maximo. “And even he wouldn’t touch what belongs to me.”

Lenny stands frozen to the spot now, eyeing Maximo and me like a frightened deer in the path of two wolves.

“Don’t make me fucking chase you down, Lenny,” Maximo snarls.

Lenny’s eyes continue darting between the two of us as his face turns a strange shade of pale. He’s aware that if he runs, Maximo will take great joy in taking him down, and then any punishment I’m about to mete out will be doubled for Maximo’s efforts. He holds out his trembling arm and Maximo grabs it in his large hand, squeezing his forearm until he’s restricting his blood flow back through his arm and causing his fingers to turn a deep red.

I open the secateurs and press the blades against the base of his pointer

finger. “Why the fuck did you think you could touch what belongs to me?”

He stares at me, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. “I-I didn’t think she was with you, Boss.”

“She is in my fucking house, *stronzo*, that means she belongs to me.”

He stares into my eyes, his pupils blown wide with fear and his lip trembling. I snap the shears closed, chopping off his finger, and his face contorts in twisted agony, and a strangled cry escapes his mouth.

“Hold him still,” I order Maximo, and he tightens his grip on Lenny’s arm who looks about to pass out from the pain whilst looking at his missing digit sitting on the floor next to his feet.

I grip the base of his middle finger with the blades. “Touch her again and I will bury you, Lenny. You ever even speak to her again without my permission and I will cut out your fucking tongue. You understand me?”

“Y-yes, Boss,” he snivels as tears run down his face.

I clip off his middle finger too, and he howls as he stares at his second finger bouncing onto the ground between us.

I close the secateurs, and Maximo takes it as his cue to release his grip on Lenny’s arm. As soon as he’s free from the iron-clad grasp, a shaking, crying Lenny pulls his injured hand toward his body. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he wraps it around his bleeding stumps before bending down as his body tries to deal with the pain.

“Get him the fuck out of here,” I say to Maximo before turning and walking back into the warmth of my house, while my best friend and most trusted soldier takes care of the aftermath of the message I’ve just delivered.

Kat is mine.

CHAPTER 7

KAT

If someone had told me this morning that I'd be ending the day wearing Dante Moretti's shirt, I'd have told them they were high. If they'd told me I would have chosen to keep the damn thing on after he forced me to wear it, then I'd have told them they were batshit crazy.

Staring at the ceiling, I press my cheek against the soft collar and remember slipping it on a short while earlier, and how easily the expensive material glided over my skin. A shiver runs along my spine as I recall the cotton still infused with his body heat and how the warmth and the scent of him blanketing my bare skin sent unexpected shivers of comfort and pleasure rippling through my body.

It smells of him still, of fresh air and cool mint and his cologne. I can't believe he took my favorite t-shirt and tossed it into the trash. Forced me to take it off in front of him too. It should have been embarrassing, so why did it feel empowering? I saw the way his eyes drifted over my body and the steely look on his face when he's trying to control his emotions.

But why the hell am I still wearing his clothes? True, I didn't bring much with me from my house and that t-shirt was one of the few things I have to sleep in. My pajamas are dirty and in the laundry hamper, but I could find something else. Except that his shirt feels so nice. Obviously because it's so incredibly expensive and not because it still smells and feels like him.

And I'm too tired and comfortable right now to leave this bed and change. Tomorrow, I will do the laundry and give the devil his super luxurious and comfortable shirt back. But tonight, I will sleep in the warmth of it and try not to think about how the smell of him and the thought of wearing his clothes is anything but abhorrent to me.



TO MY RELIEF, I barely saw Dante today. I know he was in the house because I saw a fleeting glimpse of him in the hallway when he was heading to his gym this morning, and I heard him talking to Maximo as I passed the kitchen, but I didn't have to spend any time in his company at all. Having spent the night in his shirt and after he saw my boobs, I'm not sure I could have looked him in the eye without blushing.

Last night, none of what happened seemed so bad, but in the daylight, it feels like what it was. Dante Moretti saw me almost naked. I need a few hours for my brain to process this information and find a way to be around him without melting into puddle of shame.

In an attempt to avoid him for the rest of the evening too, I make myself some noodles for dinner and head to my room. As soon as I'm inside, I notice the small pile of neatly folded white material on the end of the bed. Assuming Sophia has left some new linen or towels, I place my noodles onto the dresser and walk to the bed to put whatever it is away. It's only as I get closer that I see they are white t-shirts, with a folded piece of paper sitting on top. Frowning in confusion, I pick it up and open it.

As you're so fond of wandering around the house in men's t-shirts, you might be needing these.

I drop the note and pick up the shirt. It's a plain white cotton tee with tags still on — tags that tell me this is the most expensive piece of clothing I've ever owned. They must be from Dante. He bought me t-shirts to wear for bed? I don't know if I'm pissed at him or grateful. But neither of those things account for the butterflies currently swirling in my stomach.

Looking down, I count another four in the pile.

He bought me t-shirts to wander around the house in? To sleep in?

I shake my head in frustration. One small act of kindness does not erase the fact that he is a devil.

He kidnapped me, for God's sake!

I need to stop thinking he is anything other than the ruthless criminal he is.



IT'S BEEN two hours since I ate my noodles and I'm beginning to regret not eating any of the delicious dinner that Sophia was preparing because I'm still hungry. I guess, I could go to the kitchen and grab a snack. I glance at the clock. Dante won't be in there at this time. He'll be in his study with Maximo or out cutting off heads or something.

I glance at the new white t-shirt I put on earlier and frown. Maybe taking his gift was a mistake. But they are new and so comfortable.

Jumping up off the bed, I look down at my attire. I'm covered up to my mid thigh. I'm not wearing a bra but the material is thick enough that nothing is visible. This is perfectly acceptable clothing to walk around the house in, even if I bump into a guard – or God forbid, lecherous Lenny. Not that I think he would try anything after the look Dante gave him when he found us in the kitchen together yesterday.

I make my way to the kitchen, relieved to see it empty when I pop my head inside. The light is on though. It always is. For some reason, that soothes me. My mom always told me that the kitchen is the heart of any home.

I sigh as I step inside. When did my life become so small and dark and meaningless that I take comfort in the most trivial things? I open the refrigerator and peer inside, hoping for some leftovers.

"I see you got my gift?" His voice sends a shudder up my spine.

Closing the refrigerator door, I turn to face him. He's dressed in black suit pants and a crisp white shirt. It's open at the collar, and his shirt sleeves are rolled up, displaying a few dark tattoos on his skin.

"Well, seeing as you threw away my other t-shirt, it seems like more of a replacement than a gift," I say, refusing to thank him or show any gratitude at all. Because he doesn't deserve it.

He laughs softly as he makes his way across the room in a few long strides. And before I can think about getting out of his way, he's towering over me.

"You're a difficult woman to please, Katerina," he says, his voice so deep and smooth it washes over me and settles in my bones.

"Not really." I force a smile. "All I want is to go home. Then I would be the happiest woman in the world." *Liar!*

He narrows his eyes at me and scrubs a hand through his thick beard. "Hmm?"

"Hmm what?" I snap.

“I don’t think you were happy in that little house of yours. I don’t think you were anything close to happy.”

“And you think I am here?” I scoff even as my skin bristles with energy at being so close to him.

“I don’t think you’re miserable here, even though you’re trying your best to be.”

“I hate it here.”

“Maybe sometimes. But last night when you were fixing Lenny’s wound, I saw...” He narrows his eyes again, searching mine as though he wants to see the truths I hide deep inside me.

“Saw what?” I ask with a scowl.

“The light in you. You were happy doing that.”

I was happy. I love nursing. *Loved* nursing. But I can never go back to it. “I like helping people,” I whisper.

He licks his lower lip, and my insides contract as unbidden thoughts of the things I’d like him to do with that mouth force a fleeting path through my consciousness. My otherwise rational, logical brain is being corrupted by my entire groin area.

He inches closer. We’re not touching, but I still feel him all over me. My body tingles with electric anticipation. He is fire, and my skin burns with the heat. “So you don’t hate it here at all?”

My breathing is ragged, and my heart is racing, making my blood pound in my ears. I squeeze my thighs together to stem the throbbing that is building between them, but it does nothing. It has been so long since anyone has elicited this kind of reaction from my body, and the sensations are overwhelming. I have to take some control back before I lose it all.

I stare into Dante’s eyes. “No, but I do hate you.”

I don’t know why I expected those words to have any impact on him at all, but I thought they might make him back off a little. Not Dante Moretti. Instead, he smirks and edges a little closer until there is only a sliver of light between us. Then he bends his head, his mouth so close to my ear that his warm breath skates over my skin and makes me shiver.

“You might hate me, Kat, but I bet if I slide my hand into your panties, you’d be wet for me,” he growls, and the sound resonates through my body and heads straight to my needy pussy.

Well, damn! “I would not.”

“Really?” His lips dust the shell of my ear now, and the briefest contact

between us makes my breath catch in my throat.

“You’ll never know,” I say, a smile of triumph on my face as he lifts his head and stares into my eyes.

But my triumph is short-lived.

Without any warning, he slides his huge hand into my panties until I’m pressed back against the refrigerator. I should try to run or scratch his face, but his fingers slip between my thighs, rubbing over the sensitive flesh and making me feel things that I don’t want to stop feeling.

“What the hell are you doing?” I moan the words even though I meant to yell them.

“Fuck, you’re not just wet, kitten, you’re soaking,” he says in a deep, husky groan as he goes on staring into my eyes. “Is this all for me?”

He rubs the pads of his fingers over my clit, and shockwaves of pleasure pulse through my core. “F-fuck you,” I stammer.

“Soon, kitten,” he laughs darkly, his eyes blazing with fire as they hold mine captive.

Meanwhile, all I can do is press my back and my palms flat against the fridge door as I try to keep myself from crumpling into a heap on the floor.

Dante stares at me while he massages his fingers between my folds. Even though I’m thinking about telling him to stop, I can’t bring myself to find the words. I thought a man would never make me feel like this again.

“You might hate me, Kat,” he growls, “but your sweet cunt?” He pushes one thick finger inside me, and I whimper desperately. “You hear how she weeps for me?”

Of course I do, because the sound of my arousal coating him as he drives slowly in and out of me is so loud it’s inescapable. More wetness rushes between my thighs as he pushes a little deeper.

Then just as quickly as he started, he pulls his hand from my panties and I’m left needy and wanting and gasping for breath as I stare up at him. He has a wicked grin on his face. *Bastard!*

Placing his pointer and middle fingers into his mouth, he sucks them clean while maintaining a level of eye contact that feels too intimate for whatever this is between us. When he releases them with a wet pop, I almost pass out. “Such a sweet little kitten,” he says with a wink before he turns around and walks out of the kitchen.

I remain with my back pressed against the cool refrigerator door. Panting for breath. My head spinning and my pussy aching for some more of what he

just offered while my brain is screaming at me for being such a slut for tattoos and muscles.

Dante Moretti is an asshole. I mean I knew that already, but now I am one hundred percent sure that man has no redeeming qualities whatsoever. I'm hornier than a mountain goat and still hungry too. My stomach growls. My poor neglected pussy throbs.

Which one do I satisfy first? Getting myself off would require me to walk back through the house and to my bedroom, and if Dante saw me, he would know exactly what I was going to do. Arrogant asshole would love that. And I wouldn't even be thinking about him while I do either. I'd picture Henry Cavill or Chris Hemsworth. I would most definitely not picture Dante's hard chest or chiseled abs, all covered in that beautiful dark ink as he holds himself over me and fucks me. Definitely not think of those thick forearms as he finishes what he started a few minutes earlier.

Nope. No way.

My stomach growls loudly and I turn back to the refrigerator with a heavy sigh.

CHAPTER 8

DANTE

I shouldn't have touched her. I shouldn't have slid my fingers into her tight wet cunt when she was pressed up against the fridge. But I definitely shouldn't have tasted her. Because now my cock is hard as iron and I have her scent in my nose and her sweet taste on my tongue and nothing to do but fuck my own hand. It's not like it would be the first time I've jerked off thinking about her these past few weeks, but it would be the first time when I know how fucking good the real thing would feel.

And I could have fucked her in my kitchen just now. She didn't tell me to stop. Her nipples were hard. Her pupils were blown wide. Her breathing kicked up several notches while her skin flushed. She wanted me as much as I wanted her. But I won't take her until she's desperate for me. I want her juices running down my fingers before I sink my cock into her silky wet heat. I want Katerina Evanson to beg me to fuck her.



IT HAS BEEN twenty-four torturous hours since I had Kat pinned against the fridge in my kitchen. A single minute hasn't gone by where I haven't thought about how good she tastes. She's avoided me all day, and I know that because she didn't come for dinner even though Sophia made her favorite lasagna.

So, when I wander into the kitchen at ten again, I'm surprised to see her making tea. She's wearing one of the t-shirts I bought for her, which shows off her long legs and that little rose tattoo she has on her left ankle.

She turns her head when I walk in, a half-smile playing on her lips before she nurses her tea again. She knew I'd come in here. She wanted me to.

Even through the t-shirt, I can see the curve of her ass and the faint love heart pattern on her panties. Seems like the time for playing is over. If she wants to tease me, then she will learn the consequences.

CHAPTER 9

KAT

I feel the heat and the energy from Dante even before he speaks. My body is hyper aware of his, and whenever he is in the same room, there is a crackling of energy between us. I have thought about him all day. When I woke up needy and wet this morning, it was because I'd been dreaming about his hands on me.

But I won't give in to him. It's fun to tease him, but that's all this can be. I refuse to be used and tossed aside by him. So when he plants his hands on the counter either side of me a few seconds later, I absolutely do not buckle.

"You want some tea?" I ask, my voice a mere whisper because I'm struggling to hold it together.

"No."

"So what can I do for you, Mr. Moretti?"

He dips his head low until his lips are brushing the shell of my ear. "I want to stop playing games, Kat," he whispers, making me shiver.

"W-what do you mean?"

He presses his body closer, until my back is touching his chest. I am caged in by him. He's everywhere, his scent, his touch, but I don't feel trapped at all. It's all I can do to stop myself from moaning his name and begging him to take me right here on the kitchen counter.

"You have any idea how hard I've been since I slid my fingers inside you last night? How I can't get the taste of your wet cunt out of my head."

Sweet mother of God! I press my ass back against him and feel his huge, hard cock against my lower back.

"I want you, Kat. I want to fuck you so bad it hurts. I want to finish what I started and finger fuck your cunt until you scream my goddamn name. I

want you to ride my face until you come all over my tongue.”

“But I hate you,” I pant the words, and I’m pretty sure neither of us believes that anymore.

“It’s okay to want someone you don’t like, Kat,” he growls, and the deep cadence of his voice rolls into my core. “It’s just a physical reaction. You don’t have to like me, but I know you want me. You know how good we would be together.”

He pulls my hair back, his fingertips brushing over the soft skin of my neck and making goosebumps prickle out all over my body and wet heat sear between my thighs.

He runs his nose over my throat, inhaling deeply. “You smell so fucking good.” Then he clears his throat, as though he got distracted and lost his train of thought. “I would fuck you better than you’ve ever been fucked before in your life, kitten. We know it’s only a matter of time.”

“Dante,” I say his name in a stuttered breath. This is too much. He is too much. If I let him, he would consume me. Just like fire feeds on oxygen, he would take everything I have left and leave me a broken shell. Regardless, I am drawn to him anyway. I feel him in every part of me, reaching for my very soul.

Then he is gone again. The loss of his warmth and the solid feel of his body pressed against mine leaves me feeling lacking and bereft.

I sigh with relief and frustration once he’s left the room. *No more games, Kat!* This is the last time I go wandering around the house at night, hoping to bump into the devil, because the next time it happens, I might just let him drag me into hell.

CHAPTER 10

KAT

My fingers twitch and my skin itches as I pull the covers up over my shoulders and focus on the TV. It's a little after ten, but I am not going downstairs to the kitchen. I am not playing into Dante's hands. So what if he told me he wants to fuck me. It would probably be incredible given how skilled those fingers of his are, but unlike him, I'm not driven by my baser desires. I've gone over two years without sex. I don't need it. I certainly don't need it with a man I can barely stand. My kidnapper at that.

So why am I still thinking about whether he is downstairs wondering if I'm going to show? I groan out loud and pick up the TV remote before flicking through the channels until I find a romantic comedy. I settle back against the pillows and smile. This is the only kind of romance I need in my life, right?

THE MOVIE IS ALMOST over when there is a loud knocking at my bedroom door. My heart rate kicks up a few gears, and I instinctively pull the covers up to my neck. But it's not Dante.

"Kat?" Maximo shouts. "Are you awake? We need your help. Someone has been shot."

Throwing the covers back, I jump out of bed. "I'll be right there," I say as I rummage through my dresser drawer and pull out a pair of sweatpants. Tugging them on as fast as I can, I run to the door and open it to see Maximo waiting for me.

"Is it Dante? Is he okay?" I ask.

“Dante’s fine. He’s on his way back now,” he says as he starts to head down the hallway with me on his heels. “But Mitch took a bullet to the shoulder. Doesn’t look like it hit anything important, but the bullet didn’t pass right through. I’d dig it out myself, but you’d do a better job.”

“You’ve done that before?” I ask with a grimace, imagining Maximo literally digging around in someone’s bullet hole cavity with his giant hands.

“Plenty,” he says with a shrug. “The doc’s not always available and we have to act quickly. And now that he’s dead, we have you instead.”

“The doctor whose things are in the room downstairs? He’s dead?” I gasp.

“Relax, it was a heart attack. And it’s not really his stuff. Dante bought it for him, so that we wouldn’t have to take our guys to the hospital, but yeah, it was supposed to be his room. I guess it’s yours now,” he says, turning his head and smiling at me.

“I guess it is.”

In the room, Mitch is sitting up on the hospital bed, clutching his shoulder. Blood oozes through his fingers and trickles down his bare chest. I notice his shirt hanging from his arm because someone has already cut it from him. He’s grimacing at the pain, but he is stoic and he doesn’t make a sound when Maximo and I enter the room.

“Hey, Mitch, how are you doing?” I ask as I pull on a pair of latex gloves and remove his fingers from his wound so I can examine him.

“Like I got run over by a truck, doc,” he grits out the words.

“I’m a nurse, not a doctor,” I tell him. “But I can take care of this for you, I promise.”

“I gave him some whiskey for the pain, doc,” a voice says from behind me. I notice there’s another man with a bloodstained shirt in the corner of the room. “Sorry, nurse,” he quickly corrects himself.

“Here you go, doc,” Maximo says with a grin as he hands me a pair of metal forceps.

I open my mouth to remind him that I’m not a doctor, but he says, “Nurse just doesn’t have the same ring to it. It’s like a term of affection rather than a title.”

“Or we could call you Nurse Ratched.” Mitch laughs and then groans with the pain of his effort, his face turning purple.

“How about you just stay still and let me find this bullet, huh?” I say to him.

“Whatever you say, doc.”

“Can you get me some morphine for the pain, Maximo?” I ask my new assistant.

“No. Don’t want none,” Mitch insists. “Just get it out and stitch me up.”

“But it would be easier for you if I just give you a quick shot.”

“I fucking hate needles.”

I roll my eyes. “Let me know if you change your mind, okay?”

“Okay,” he grunts.

“Are you hurt?” I look at the guy in the corner with the crimson stains all over his shirt.

“No, doc. It’s all Mitch’s blood.”

“And I want it all back too, Bud. Every last drop,” Mitch hisses as I slide the forceps into the hole in his shoulder.

“You’re a mean old bastard.” Bud laughs loudly, and even Maximo chuckles beside me. Then both of them go on teasing Mitch good-naturedly while I remove the bullet from his shoulder. Working keeps me focused, so that I’m almost too busy to worry about where Dante is and why one of his men was shot tonight.

I’M JUST FINISHING PATCHING Mitch up while he’s drinking a glass of whiskey by the time Dante returns. He walks into the room wearing just his suit pants and one of his crisp white shirts, except that it’s no longer white but a deep crimson color. He also has a small cut above his eye.

“Are you hurt?” I ask, my voice a little higher than normal as my heart starts to race a little faster.

“I’m fine, kitten,” he says with a smug smile. “None of it belongs to me. I do need something for this though,” he says, pointing to his eye as he blinks away a trickle of blood.

“There’s some alcohol in the cabinet and some plaster strips. I can take a look at it if you give me a few minutes.”

“I can take care of it,” he says dismissively as he goes to the cabinet.

He dabs his eye with some alcohol-soaked cotton wool without as much as a flicker of discomfort. Then he disappears out of the room again without another word. By the time he returns, Maximo and Bud are helping a fully sewn up and pretty wasted Mitch out of the room.

“I’ll take these guys home,” Maximo says to Dante, who nods his

appreciation.

And then there is just the two of us in the room. Dante has stripped off his blood soaked clothes and stands a few feet away from me in just his tight black boxer shorts. My eyes are drawn like a magnet to the outline of his cock.

“You enjoying yourself, kitten?” he asks with a dark chuckle, making my cheeks flame with heat.

I avert my gaze a little too quickly, making it even more obvious that I was just staring at him.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed. If you were standing here in only your underwear, I’d be staring at you too.”

“I wasn’t... I’m sorry,” I say with a shake of my head. I need out of here.

He crosses the room and stands right in front of me. A solid wall of muscle, ink, and sex. It’s as though he has some kind of magnetic field around him. His presence is inescapable. Once I’m in his orbit, I can’t seem to think straight. I act like somebody I don’t even recognize. My pussy develops a mind of her own. He is so full of potent, raw sexuality and masculinity. Everything about him screams run away, but my body is drawn to him anyway.

“Who am I kidding,” he says, his voice low and deep, as he bends his head and brings his mouth closer to my ear. “I stare at you no matter what you’re wearing.”

Oh, dear God! “Stop,” I whisper.

We can’t do this. I cannot let this man get a hold on me, because I know he was right last night. We would be so good together. For whatever reason, we have insane chemistry, and I can’t let him take this any further. I can’t allow myself to have any feelings for him. The moment he tires of me, he’ll toss me away like trash. I am dispensable. And the sooner I let him fuck me, the sooner I’ll become useless to him.

“I can’t stop, Kat,” he says, his voice dropping another octave. He places a hand on my hip, and my skin blooms with heat. “Believe me, I’ve tried. I need to fuck you more than I have ever needed anything in my life.”

“We can’t,” I protest, but my voice is so quiet it’s barely audible.

“We can.” His other hand is on my other hip now, and he pulls me closer to him until our bodies are almost touching.

“Look at me,” he commands.

And I do it. Just like that, because he told me to. Because my body obeys

him and I don't even know when that started to happen.

I blink as I stare up at him. His pupils are so wide, they make his brown eyes appear black. They are full of longing and fire and need. "It wouldn't work. It would be a huge mistake," I offer feebly.

He shakes his head. "No, it wouldn't, and you know it. Let me take you to my bed and I'll show you exactly how much of a mistake it wouldn't be."

I open my mouth but no words come out. All I can focus on are his strong fingers flexing on my hips. How good they felt two nights ago when he touched me. How much I wanted him to carry on before he stopped.

My core contracts, flooding my pussy with heat and making me suck in a stuttered breath.

Dante narrows his eyes at me. "Okay, kitten. I'll make you a deal."

"What deal?" I breathe out the words.

"Look at the clock on the wall behind me, and if I can't make you come in two minutes, then you can go to your own bed and I'll go to mine. But if I do make you come, then you spend the night with me. What do you say?"

I lick my lips, staring at him. I'm already wet. But under two minutes? There's no way he could pull that off. I've never had anyone make me come that easily. Not even guys I was really into. And I don't even like Dante, so I can hold out, right?

Besides, every cell in my body is vibrating with sexual energy. I want his hands on me. I want his fingers inside me. Just this once. Just to relieve this constant aching need in my pussy. Just once.

"Okay, but when you don't get the job done in two minutes, you don't get to leave me hanging," I say with a tilt of my head.

He smirks, full of confidence and arrogance. "I'll make you come no matter how long it takes. I promise."

"Okay," I whisper.

What the hell are you doing, Kat?

"Eyes on the clock, kitten," he orders. "I trust you'll be honest about the time."

"Of course," I insist, my eyes now trained on the clock behind him, watching the second hand tick around.

"Then start timing me," he growls.

It takes him exactly two seconds to get his hand inside my panties. I place my hands on the counter on either side of me to keep myself steady as he slides his fingers through my folds.

“So wet already,” he says with a wicked grin.

“You have one minute and fifty seconds,” I tell him as the clock goes on ticking.

“Plenty of time,” he growls as he starts to rub the pads of his middle and pointer fingers over and around my swollen clit with the perfect amount of pressure.

Pleasure skitters around my body.

He presses his lips against my ear. “Oh, you like that, don’t you, kitten?”

“Yes,” I breathe, my knuckles turning white as my grip on the counter gets firmer. He’s still not going to do this in under two minutes though.

But then he starts kissing my neck. Trailing his lips and teeth over my sensitive skin as he dips his hand further into my panties, pulling them down as he works his entire hand between my thighs and forces me to spread my legs wider apart.

One minute, thirty-two seconds left.

“You like this more though, right?” he whispers as he slides a finger inside me.

Fuck yes, I do!

He eases it in and out of me, and I bite my lip to stop from screaming his name and begging him for more. I’m not giving him any pointers.

One minute, nine seconds.

Clearly though, he doesn’t need any help. A few seconds later, he adds a second finger and my pussy coats him with slick heat as she practically purrs his name.

“Fuck, Kat, you’re so tight,” he growls. “How long has it been?”

“A long time,” I whimper.

“Yeah?” he growls as he drives deeper until he hits my G-spot and starts to massage it with his skilled fingers.

Holy mother of fucking God. Fifty-two seconds.

“Yes,” I moan as I wrap my arms around his neck and cling to him while he finger fucks me like he has the cheat codes to my pussy. Like he just unlocked expert level and completely bypassed all the others.

His lips dust over the shell of my ear. “Your cunt loves my fingers. Wait until she feels my cock.”

“Dante,” I groan as the familiar wave of an impending orgasm start rolling through my core. My thighs are trembling.

“Keep your eyes on the clock,” he pants as I bury my face against him.

“Yeah, clock,” I gasp as my head goes on spinning and my body starts to vibrate with its impending release. I look over his shoulder.

Thirty-one seconds. He’s not going to do it.

He drives his fingers harder and deeper while he starts grinding the heel of his palm against my sensitive clit.

Twenty-two seconds.

“So wet. You hear that?” he growls.

And I do. I hear the sound of my arousal dripping over his fingers as he works them in and out of me.

Damn, he’s going to do it. Fifteen seconds.

“You’re going to come like my good little kitten so I can bury my cock inside you, too, aren’t you?”

“Dante,” I cry out his name as my orgasm crashes into my body. He wraps one strong arm around my waist, holding me tight while he continues gently massaging my pussy as my body bucks and shudders.

My eyes roll in my head as I struggle to focus on his face. He’s staring at me. His eyes blaze with fire. But then he lets me go and walks to the other side of the room. The loss of heat makes me shiver in the cool room as I come down from the most intense orgasm I think I’ve ever had in my life. He opens a cupboard and pulls out something before walking back to me. It’s only when he’s standing right in front of me again that I see what he’s holding.

A condom.

“Take off your pants,” he orders in his signature low growl before he tears into the packet with his teeth.

“I thought we were going upstairs?” I whisper, surprised by how much the thought of him taking me to bed and continuing what he’s just started makes my entire body buzz with an excitement that I haven’t experienced in years.

He’s looking down, rolling the condom onto his cock. I mean, I knew it was big because I’ve seen it beneath his clothes. I’ve felt it pressed against me. However, up close and quite literally in the flesh, I’m not sure how he’s going to fit inside me. He looks up at me again to answer my question, his dark eyes locking on mine. “Oh, we are, kitten, but I need to fuck you right now, so take off the goddamn pants.”

I swallow a thick knot of anxiety that feels lodged in my throat, but I start to slide my sweatpants and panties down my thighs. *What if somebody comes*

in here?

“Nobody will come in without knocking,” he says, because he seems to be able to read my freaking mind.

Before I can take my clothes all the way off, he crouches and does it for me, tossing my sweats and panties onto the floor behind him.

“Turn around,” he orders as he stands again.

My blood turns to ice in my veins.

“Now,” he commands, but I can’t move.

“Why?” I whisper.

He frowns at me. “Because it will be a better angle to fuck you at down here. Now turn around.”

“I don’t l-like it from b-behind,” I stammer, and damn, now the whole moment is ruined.

He’s going to ask why, or he’s just going to assume that I’m a prude or some kind of inhibited freak. But instead, he wraps me in his giant, tattooed arms and lifts me onto the counter.

“Then this will work just fine,” he groans as he positions himself between my thighs.

He mumbles something in Italian as he presses his huge cock against my opening. My thighs are trembling. My pussy is quivering. Because of our height difference, we are eye to eye for a change. He seems different like this. Looking straight at him rather than up.

“How long has it been, Kat? Really?”

“T-two years,” I mumble, feeling like an idiot. Why does he even need to know that? Does that make me less attractive to him somehow? Or more?

“I’ll take this first one easy, okay?” he whispers, and the softness in his voice makes me almost burst into tears.

He doesn’t wait for an answer before he edges the tip of his length inside me, stretching me wide. It burns, but it feels so damn good too.

I wrap my arms and legs around him, burying my face against his neck as he eases in deeper.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he hisses through clenched teeth. Then he takes hold of my legs and unwraps them from around his waist. “I need you to let me in, kitten,” he groans, full of frustration and impatience. He hooks his forearms under my knees, pulling my hips toward him and spreading my thighs wide open. I suppose all that Pilates paid off after all.

My heart starts beating wildly as he looks at me. So exposed and open

and vulnerable. “Your cunt looks so good being stretched by my cock,” he groans, and I reward him with a moan as my pussy squeezes around him.

“Just keep holding on to me,” he growls as he slides a little deeper, and wet heat floods my pussy.

I cling to his neck, dragging my lips over his skin as his muscles vibrate with the effort of holding himself back. I can feel the raw power in every muscle of his body, and the fact that he’s trying to be gentle makes my heart ache. This is torture. The slow burning stretch of being filled by him is turning my brain to liquid, not to mention every other organ in my body.

It hurts, but it’s not enough. I need all of him. Suddenly, I’m overcome by a desperate need to be filled by him. A burning desire to have him deep inside me, until there is no space left between us. My pussy throbs with a deep, carnal longing for his cock.

Dusting my lips over the skin of his neck, I smile as it elicits a deep growl in his throat. “I want more,” I whisper.

“More?”

“For the love of God, Dante. Just fuck me,” I plead, surprised at my own words because I have never, ever, begged to be fucked before. And certainly not by a man as dangerous and hateful as this one.

He curses in Italian as he drives all the way inside me. I press my mouth against his skin, muffling my cries of pleasure tinged with pain as he fills me. I try to squeeze my thighs, but he holds me open as he slides out before driving back inside. Warmth floods my hot channel. Each time he pulls out and thrusts back in, my pussy rewards him with more slick heat.

“Oh fuck,” I whimper in his ear as he groans in mine.

“You feel so fucking good. This cunt... I knew it would...” He thrusts harder, and I almost pass out as the crown of his cock rubs against something inside me that makes me scream in pleasure whilst also wanting to declare my undying devotion to him. How can a devil like him fuck like a God?

As the last tremors of my second orgasm pulse through me, Dante whispers in Italian as he grinds out his own release. When he pulls out of me a few seconds later, the wet sound that echoes around the small room makes my cheeks burn with heat. He was wearing a condom, so that was all me.

He pulls the condom off and tosses it into the trashcan. I lean against the counter with my legs wobbling like Jell-O and wondering what happens now. This is an unfamiliar territory for me.

But then he grabs hold of my hand and pulls me with him as he starts

walking out of the door.

“Where are we going?” I whisper.

“Bed, kitten,” he says with a wink. “I am nowhere near done with you.”

DESPITE WHAT WE just did downstairs, I feel nervous and kind of awkward as I stand in Dante’s bedroom, next to his king-sized bed with pristine white cotton sheets.

He stalks toward me, and it makes a shiver run the length of my spine. I am so out of my depth here I just might drown.

He runs his fingertips over my cheek. “Why are you so nervous, Kat?” he asks in a deep, commanding tone that makes goosebumps prickle out all over my body.

“This isn’t... I don’t usually do this kind of thing,” I say, my voice little more than a whisper.

“Have sex?” he asks with a flicker of amusement.

“With strangers who I don’t even like, yes,” I snap. If he’s trying to intimidate me, then he can go to hell.

“There’s my feisty little kitten.” He slides his hands over my hips and onto my ass, pulling me close to him so that I can feel his hard cock pressing against my stomach. “But you have nothing to be nervous about. You already know how hard you make me and how much I want to fuck you.”

He reaches for the edge of my t-shirt and starts to peel it off me, and I lift my arms to help him. And now I’m standing in front of him completely naked. His hands coast over my back, running over every inch of skin, including the hideous scar just above my ass. I shudder when his fingers brush it, and he doesn’t touch it again.

“You’re beautiful, Kat,” he murmurs as he trails soft kisses over my neck. “I want to see every part of you. I want to taste you.”

He pushes me back against the bed until I’m lying on it. His strong hands slide up my thighs as he spreads them wide open until I’m completely exposed to him. The look in his eyes makes my thighs tremble, and before I can stop him, his head is between my thighs and his mouth is on my clit.

“You don’t have to do that,” I whisper, tugging at his hair.

He looks up at me with a look of bewilderment on his face.

“I’m ready, is all I meant,” I say with a swallow. God, I’m such an idiot.

“Yeah, I can see that, but I’m not eating your cunt to make you ready,

kitten.”

“Then why?”

His brow furrows into a frown. “Hasn’t a guy ever eaten your pussy just for the sheer fucking enjoyment?”

“Well, yeah, I suppose. And I have enjoyed it.”

“I meant his own, Kat. Although yours is important, obviously, but fuck.”

“I’m sorry. I feel like I keep ruining these moments. Maybe I should just go back to my own room?”

He pushes himself up to his forearms. “My face is inches from your pussy. You smell fucking delicious, and I swear if I don’t eat you right now, I might implode. So unless you have any legitimate objections, I’m just going to go back to doing what I was doing.”

I smile at him in spite of the weirdness of this situation. “I have no objections.”

“Thank fuck,” he growls before he dips his head, pressing the flat of his tongue against me. He licks the length of my wet slit and damn near makes my eyes roll back in my head.

“Fucking heaven,” he murmurs before he sucks my clit into his hot mouth and swirls his tongue over the sensitive bud of flesh.

“Holy fuck,” I hiss as my toes curl and my thighs tremble.

He is so good at that. How much practice has he had?

Suddenly, I don’t care. Heat and pleasure builds in my core and rolls through my thighs while he feasts on my pussy with more skill than any man should have all to himself.

When he slips two fingers into me and starts to fuck me while he eats, I enter a whole new realm of pleasure. In fact, I think I might just have drifted onto another plane of existence. And when I look at his face, he catches my eye and winks, and I almost pass out. He didn’t lie about enjoying this, he’s getting as much out of it as I am.

I press my head back against the pillow, silencing my constant internal chatter and focusing on his magical fingers and tongue and the pleasure they are currently wringing from my body. And when I come with a breathy cry of his name, he doesn’t stop. Not even when I pull his hair and tell him I’ve had enough.

“I haven’t,” he growls, wrapping his arms around the backs of my thighs to hold me close to his face as I squirm. “Give me one more and then I can fuck you as hard as I want to.”

A wave of pleasure rolls over me, knocking the breath from my lungs and rendering me speechless. And only when he has wrung another mind-altering orgasm from my body does he stop. Pushing himself up and rolling on a condom, he plows into me, burying his face in my neck as he nails me to his mattress. And all I can do is cling on, with my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck as he fucks me better than I had ever even dreamed was possible.

DANTE and I lie in bed, facing each other, which feels strangely personal even after what we've just done.

"Why don't you like it from behind? Does it hurt?" he asks.

Yes, but not in the way you think. "It's not that." I try to swallow but my throat is dry. "It's... I have some bad memories."

I wonder if he's going to say something cruel or unkind.

"Is it anything do with the scar on your back?"

Oh God. He saw my ugly, ugly scar. "Yes."

"It's a strange scar."

"I know. It was a word," I say, forcing down the emotion that lodges in my throat.

His eyes narrow, and I feel under way too much scrutiny. "Somebody carved a word into your skin?"

"Yes, and then I tried to carve the word out so nobody could ever read it."

"Is that also to do with the reason you have nightmares?"

I blink at him as my cheeks turn pink with shame. "You know about my nightmares?"

"It's kind of hard not to hear you screaming in your sleep almost every night, Kat."

"I'm sorry about that," I whisper.

"Don't be."

I take a deep breath. This might be the strangest conversation I've ever had in my life. Maybe that's what makes it easier? Neither of us have any investment in making the other feel better about anything.

"Yes, it's why I have nightmares too," I whisper.

"But before that. Were you okay with being taken from behind?"

"Yes. It was my favorite," I admit. "But now. I mean, I haven't been with anyone since, but the idea of someone behind me, holding me down..." I

shudder again.

“So you have two lives, right? One before and one after whatever it was that happened to you,” he says, and I’m taken aback by his insightfulness.

“Yes, exactly like that. There’s before the attack, and after.”

“Hmm,” he mumbles absentmindedly as his fingers trace over the skin of my back. He avoids my scar, and I wonder if he’s doing that on purpose, and if so, is it because he’s being kind or because he’s repulsed by it. Not that he seems repulsed by my body at all. In fact his impressive erection suggests the exact opposite.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask him, a little scared of the answer.

“I’m not going to lie, Kat. Your ass is a thing of beauty and I want to see it bouncing when I’m nailing you. I spend way too much time thinking about bending you over every piece of furniture I own and fucking you until you scream. So, are you open to working on the issue with me?”

He wants to work on this? Like we’re a couple or something? Is he for real? The man who kidnapped me wants to help me work through my issues. But despite those thoughts, the words that come out of my mouth are, “I’ll think about it, sure.”

His response is a half groan, half growl, that makes goosebumps prickle over my forearms. Who am I kidding? A few more orgasms like the ones he’s given me tonight and I’m going to let Dante Moretti bend me over whatever the hell he likes.

CHAPTER II

KAT

Shutting off the shower, I squeeze out some of the excess water from my hair and step out onto the bath mat.

Damn! I left the clean towels on the bed, and the laundry hamper was emptied this morning.

I walk to the dressing room just as Dante is coming through the other door. His eyes roam over my body as I stand, dripping all over his expensive floors.

“Sorry. I left the towels on the bed,” I say as I tiptoe across the room.

But he doesn’t move out of my way. He goes on staring at me, licking his bottom lip like he’s considering what to do next.

“Fuck, Kat, I honestly thought there could be no improvement on your naked body,” he growls.

I frown at him. “Huh?”

“But naked *and* wet. Fuck!”

“Oh,” I blush as he takes two steps toward me, and suddenly, I’m in his arms and my body is crushed against his, soaking the suit he only put on about a half hour ago.

“I’m getting you all wet now too.” I giggle as he squeezes one of my ass cheeks in his hand.

“You want to get wetter, kitten?” he groans before he kisses me, and I’m done for. I don’t care about the towels on the bed because all I can focus on is Dante’s kiss. A devil’s kiss shouldn’t feel this good. He coaxes my lips open, his tongue claiming every inch of my mouth as he sucks all the breath from my body.

I don’t even feel him walking me backward until he breaks our kiss and

we're standing in front of the full-length dress mirror. I can't see anything because he has his back to it and he's way too huge to see past.

He grips my jaw between his thumb and his pointer finger, tilting my head up so he can look into my eyes. "Kneel," he orders.

I drop to my knees and reach for his belt, but he grips my jaw tighter, tilting my head again so I'm looking at his face instead of the bulge in his pants.

"I'm sure you're gonna be so good at that, but that's not what I want right now."

I lick my lips as he lets go of my jaw and starts unbuttoning his shirt. "Don't move," he commands as he steps away from the mirror, leaving me staring into it. I avoid my own reflection and watch him instead as he stands behind me and pulls off his damp clothes. He takes a condom from his pocket before tossing his suit pants onto the chair nearby. When he's naked too, he kneels behind me, putting the condom on the floor beside him.

My limbs freeze, and my breathing intensifies as my heart rate kicks up a notch when he moves closer.

"Relax, kitten. Watch what I'm doing in the mirror, okay?"

"Okay," I mumble as my body starts to tremble.

But then his hard chest is at my back and he pulls me a little closer to him. There is comfort in his body against mine, but I can't relax. Not with him behind me, able to push me down and fuck me at any given second.

His lips dust over the shell of my ear, and I shiver for an entirely different reason. And when his hand slides over the curve of my hip and between my thighs, I whimper. My body's torn between fear and anticipation of the pleasure he can bring me.

"I'm not going to bend you over or hold you down," he whispers as his fingers slide between my folds, and he starts to rub the sensitive bud of flesh. "But I need you to relax, kitten. You'll be able to see everything I'm doing in the mirror."

"Okay," I breathe as I watch his strong fingers dipping between my thighs.

Then his free hand slides over my breast, and he kneads one in his strong palm, causing wetness to pool in my core.

His teeth graze over the sensitive skin on my neck and his hot breath on my damp skin makes goosebumps prickle out all over my body. "Spread a little wider for me," he commands.

I shuffle my knees so that my legs are spread open, and his entire hand slides between my thighs before he dips two fingers inside me. I lean back against him, moaning his name softly as pleasure rolls through my body.

“So fucking wet already and I’ve hardly touched you yet,” he groans. “You’re gonna feel so good like this.”

He sinks his fingers deeper, and I drop my hips, grinding down on him. “That feels incredible,” I whimper as he gives me what I need, rubbing against my clit with the heel of his hand.

“You’re squeezing me so tight. You’re going to come for me and then I’m gonna fuck you like this, right?”

“Yes,” I pant as the waves of pleasure roll through my core, making my thighs tremble.

“There’s my good kitten,” he soothes as the pads of his fingers press against my G-spot. “Let go for me.”

Let go? I couldn’t hold on if my life depended on it. I cry out his name as my orgasm shreds my body to pieces, tearing into my limbs with a million little explosions of pleasure and relief, like tiny starbursts igniting in every cell of my body.

“You look so hot when you come for me,” he growls, and when I meet his eyes in the mirror, the fire in his makes my skin burn.

He slides his fingers out of me, sucking them clean before he opens the condom and rolls it on. Then he grabs my hip, and with his other still squeezing my breasts and toying with my nipples, he grips me tightly as he nudges the tip of his cock at my entrance.

“Dante, please,” I beg him to take me. Because what he’s already given isn’t enough. He’s merely stoked the embers, but I need the fire. And I know the exquisite relief of being filled by his huge cock is the only thing that will bring it.

“I got you, Kat,” he whispers against my skin, and then with a roll of his hips, he’s inside me. Filling me so completely that I gasp for breath. The pain and the pleasure of being stretched so wide by him fighting for control as he drives into me again.

“Holy mother of fucks...” I moan as he wraps both arms around me, caging me inside them as he hugs me tightly and fucks me hard.

“I knew you’d be tight like this, but Jesus, fuck, Kat,” he grunts.

I whimper as another orgasm starts to wash over me in slow, undulating waves.

“I can’t wait to bend you over my desk and fuck you. Tell me you’ll let me,” he says as he runs his nose over the back of my neck, pushing my hair out of the way with his face.

“Yesss.”

“Good little kitten,” he growls as he drives harder, crushing me to his chest as I fall apart in his arms.

Then he sinks his teeth into my neck, sucking hard, as he rocks his hips and finds his own release.

CHAPTER 12

DANTE

Maximo frowns as he reads whatever message just came through on his cell.

“Something wrong?” I ask him.

“The guy from the other night, the one who shot Mitch?”

“Yeah?”

“Died about a half hour ago.”

“Fuck,” I sigh, running a hand through my hair. That guy was the last one breathing from the situation three nights ago. We were at a dinner an old friend of ours was hosting for his girlfriend’s birthday, when three guys showed up out of nowhere and started shooting. There were so many families there, no one has any idea who the intended target was and the three men involved were taken down before they could do any lasting damage. But our best lead just went and died.

To make things worse, my father was there too, and after the Kat situation, the last thing I need is him breathing down my neck to find out who was behind this. I have bigger issues to deal with right now.

“The kid who died, he was Italian, right?”

Maximo nods.

“Then it has to be a power grab. Someone must know something, Max.”

“I have turned this city upside down, D. I even tracked down Carmine Santangelo.”

That name is a blast from the past. “Fuck, Max. I didn’t even know he was still breathing.”

“Alive and barely kicking, but yes, he’s still around.”

“And you went to see him, why?”

“Leave no stone unturned, you said.”

“And you thought maybe he’d hold a grudge and it took him six years to act on it?”

“Who knows? You did wipe out his son-in-law and his grandchildren.” He laughs.

“Yeah, but he hated them even more than we did.”

Maximo nods his agreement.

Carmine was the maternal grandfather of my ex-fiancée, Nicole. He despised his son-in-law even before he discovered what sick, twisted shit the evil fuck was into, and what he’d dragged his kids into. After I tortured Jimmy Santangelo and put a bullet in his son’s head, Carmine shook my hand.

“If he was our best lead, we should get out there and find some more,” I say.

“Leave it to me,” he says, pushing himself to his feet. “You got enough on your plate.”

“I miss not being tied to this fucking desk, you know?” I sigh, my thoughts drifting to my older brother.

“You have any idea when Lorenzo might come back?”

“Nope. None at all,” I admit.

We’re interrupted by a knock at my office door. Maximo opens it on his way out to reveal Kat standing in the doorway dressed in a white sundress and a blue cardigan that looks like it’s as old as her, but fuck me, she looks good enough to eat.

“I’ll keep you updated, *compagno*,” Maximo says before giving Kat a quick greeting and leaving my study.

“Everything okay?” I ask her as she walks into the room, fidgeting with the sleeve of her cardigan.

“I was just wondering if I could order some medical supplies for the doctor’s office? I did an inventory and you’re running low on quite a few things and some of the medicine is kind of out of date?”

“It’s your office now, kitten,” I remind her. “And yes, you can order whatever you need.”

“Thank you. I won’t spend a lot. I’ll need to use a computer though.”

“I think I have an old laptop somewhere. I’ll dig it out for you.”

Her eyes light up at the thought of contact with the outside world, but I guess there’s not a lot she can do now that she’s here. Even if she told her

cousin about our *arrangement*, this house is a fortress. And she's not stupid enough to call the cops.

"You can use it to email your cousin too," I suggest, and the smile that lights up her face would knock me on my ass if I wasn't already sitting down.

"That would be really nice too. Thank you."

"One of my tech guys will look at it each night though. If you try anything stupid..."

"I won't. I promise."

"You should order yourself some new clothes too," I suggest as my eyes roam over her outfit.

"That's okay. I know this is old, but it was my mom's, and I love it." She tugs at her cardigan. "And I don't have money in my account."

I frown at her. "I'm not suggesting you spend your own money."

"I'm already in your debt," she replies, and I don't miss the sudden coolness to her tone.

"Then consider it a gift."

Her throat thickens as she swallows. "I'm fine with what I have."

I don't know why her attitude makes me hard, but it's all I can do lately not to fuck her where she stands every damn time I see her.

"Come here."

She stares at me for a few seconds before she obeys and walks toward my desk, standing on the opposite side. I push my chair back a little. "No, here," I say, looking down at the small space I just created.

She's wrestling with wanting to tell me to go to hell, but she's also helpless to fight this attraction between us. She's spent the past three nights in my bed and we have barely slept at all because I cannot keep my goddamn hands off her.

She sighs softly, just to keep up the pretense that she hates me, before walking around and standing directly in front of me. She leans back, resting her ass on the desk as she looks at me. Because of our height difference, we're face to face, and I lick my lips as I stare into the dark blue orbs of her eyes. I roll my chair forward slightly, spreading my thighs so she's between them.

"Is there something I can do for you?" she asks with a tilt of her head.

"So much you can do for me, Kat, but right now..." I grab her hips and bite my bottom lip. I'm trying to take it easy with her. She's obviously been through some fucked up shit that has left her with scars and nightmares, but

it's becoming increasingly difficult to hold myself back.

"Right now, what?" she whispers.

"Turn around."

Her fingers grip the edge of my desk. "I-I'm not sure I can. Not yet."

"Have I done anything that you're not comfortable with?"

"No."

"So, turn around." I try to keep my voice low and calm even as my cock is throbbing to be inside her.

She hesitates for a second, but I loosen my grip on her hips, and she spins around until she's facing my desk. Reaching beneath her dress, I hook my fingers into the waistband of her panties and slowly peel them down her legs. She shivers as I pull them off over her feet. Sliding my hands up the back of her legs until I reach the edge of her dress, I push it up until it's bunched around her hips and her bare ass is inches from my face.

"Put your hands on the desk," I tell her as I slide my knee between her thighs, nudging her so I can spread her a little wider for me.

She leans forward, her breathing heavy and her body trembling as she plants her palms on my desk. "You're so fucking delicious, Kat," I growl as I run my hands over her perfect ass. Her scar is just out of sight for now, although I intend on getting her naked very soon.

"Dante," she breathes my name, and I hear the tremor in her voice.

"I'm not going to bend you over my desk until you're ready, kitten. Relax."

She nods her head, but she's still shaking and she doesn't stop until I slide a finger inside her pussy a moment later. She moans softly as I slide slowly in and out of her tight cunt. When her wetness is slick on my fingers and the sound of her is filling my study, I add a second digit and press deeper and harder.

"Holy fuck," she groans, rocking her hips back against my hand. Reaching my free hand around to her front, I rub her clit as I finger-fuck her to a quick climax that leaves her legs shaking for an entirely different reason. And when I pull my fingers out of her sweet cunt, the thick coating of her cream on them makes my cock almost bust my zipper.

Standing up, I work quickly to free myself from my pants while she's still coming down from her high. Then I remove her cardigan before pulling her sundress all the way up and over her head. She lifts her arms to help me get rid of her clothes. With a flick of my wrist, I unfasten her bra, and it falls

from her shoulders, allowing her incredible tits to spring free. I palm them in my hands, squeezing, as I press myself against her back. My cock is twitching against the seam of her ass, and I'm almost fucking feral for her.

I press my mouth against her ear. "I think you're ready, kitten."

Her throat thickens as she swallows. "I don't know."

I take a condom from my desk drawer and tear it open with my teeth. "I'm not going to hold you down, okay?" I assure her as I press my hand between her shoulder blades and push her gently over my desk. I roll the condom on quickly, and only when her cheek is pressed against the wood do I grab hold of her hips. "I'm going to keep my hands here the whole time. You'll be able to stand up again if you need to."

"Okay."

"Good girl," I soothe as I edge the crown of my cock inside her wetness and her muscles tense as her pussy squeezes around me. It damn near kills me to hold myself back from driving balls deep into her, because I've never wanted to fuck anyone as hard and as much as I want to fuck this woman right here. I rub a hand over her hip and her lower back, tracing my fingers over the scar that she hates so much but that is so much a part of her.

"Relax, Kat. Let me inside you, *tesoro*."

I lean over her and trail kisses over her shoulder blades, careful not to press my body against hers so she feels no weight from me. She lets out a soft moan and her muscles relax enough for me to slide deeper inside her.

"Oh fuck," she whimpers as I hit that sweet spot deep in her pussy and then her entire body goes lax as she sinks against the desk and allows me to fuck her almost as hard as I want to.

"You look fucking exquisite bent over my desk," I growl as I plow into her. "And your tight pussy looks amazing being stretched by my cock."

"I need it harder," she pants, and I almost come inside her.

"You sure?" My fingertips dig into her hips as I prepare to rail into her.

"Yes, please, Dante," she mewls like my feral little kitten.

And so, I give her exactly what she needs, driving into her deeper and harder until she's squirming on my desk, moaning my name and squeezing my cock with her tight cunt until my balls are drawing up into my stomach.

"Help me out, kitten," I growl as I try to think of anything but how good she feels before I empty myself into her. "Rub your clit for me."

Her hand disappears between her and the desk as she touches herself while I'm nailing her from behind. The fact that she trusts me enough to let

me do this to her almost steals the breath from my lungs.

“Oh fuck, Dante,” she moans loudly, her pussy rippling around my cock as she comes hard, tipping me right over the edge with her.

I lean over her again, pressing my lips against her ear. “You did so fucking good, Kat. So good.”

A tear runs down her cheek, landing on the dark wood. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her up as I slip my cock out of her and sit on my chair with her on my lap.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, brushing her hair back from her face.

“Yeah,” she whispers, wiping another tear from her cheek. “That was just a little intense.”

“It was.”

“Thank you for pushing me,” she says with a soft smile that would melt my heart if I had one.

“My pleasure, kitten.”

CHAPTER 13

DANTE

Walking into the bedroom, I smile to see her lying in bed reading, because after the day I've had, I need her.

"Hey," she says with a smile as she puts her book on the nightstand. It's strange how easily we have fallen into this routine of her being in my bed and me enjoying the fact that she is always in here before me every evening.

I sit down beside her and sigh.

"Rough day?" she asks.

"Kind of."

"I have an idea that might relax you," she says with a devious grin.

"You definitely have a few things that would relax me, kitten, but what did you have in mind?"

"Lie down," she whispers as she climbs out of the covers.

I do as she asks, lying on the bed with my arms behind my head as I watch her straddling me. She's wearing my t-shirt and those cute heart panties again, and I hope whatever she has planned involves my cock being inside her.

She runs her hands over my chest and down to my belt, tugging on the leather and unbuckling it with deft fingers. I definitely like where this is heading. She works down my zipper and then her slender fingers reach inside my boxers and she wraps them around my stiff cock.

I arch an eyebrow at her. She's not usually so forward.

"I just got my period, so I thought maybe a change?" she says with a shrug. "Although I haven't done this for a while, so I hope I still know what

to do.”

I don't want to think about any other men she's wrapped those beautiful lips around, but she's twenty-nine, and I'm not naïve enough to think that she didn't have a life before the attack that seemed to change her completely.

“If you're thinking about sucking my cock, you will get zero objections from me,” I tell her, although I'm not sure what her period has to do with that. I'm still fucking her regardless.

She licks her lip nervously before she shuffles down the bed until her mouth is inches from my groin. Darting out her tongue, she licks the precum from the crown and the soft little moaning sound she makes is so fucking sexy. She holds onto the base of my shaft with one hand. Then she presses the flat of her tongue beneath the underside and licks me from root to tip before swirling it over the crown again and making hot rivulets of pleasure sear in my balls.

I thread my fingers through her hair as she sucks me deeper into her mouth.

“You're so good at that, Kat,” I grunt as my balls are already drawing up into my stomach. She cups them with her free hand, squeezing with the exact amount of pressure that makes my eyes roll. “So fucking good.”

She murmurs around my cock, breathing heavily through her nose as I rock my hips and slide deeper into her throat. Her eyes water, but she doesn't resist me at all and she doesn't gag. Fuck, she's too goddamn perfect.

“You're gonna make me come soon,” I growl. “So, this is your chance to stop and finish me off with your hand.”

She looks up at me, her long dark lashes fluttering against her hollowing cheeks as she sucks harder. I brush away a tear with the pad of my thumb. She had her opportunity to stop, and now, I'm all in. I palm the back of her head, forcing her to take a little more of me.

“I'm going to come in your throat and you're going to swallow it all down. Every last drop.”

“Mmm,” she mumbles, flicking her tongue over my skin and giving my balls a gentle tug. I drag in a breath as my entire body shudders with the force of the orgasm she sucks from me. When she's swallowed all of my cum, she looks up at me, as sweet as sugar and as wicked as sin. She licks her lips and grins at me.

“My turn, kitten,” I say, flipping her onto her back.

“Dante,” she squeals. “You can't.”

“I can,” I growl as I pull her t-shirt up over her head before she can protest further. Then my mouth is on her neck. Trailing over her collarbone until I reach her perfect tits. I squeeze one in my hand while I take the other nipple into my mouth and suck until she’s moaning and grinding her pussy against my thigh.

“Your mouth should be illegal,” she groans.

I work my way over her entire body, kissing and biting and sucking every inch of her skin that I can reach. Palming her pussy, I let her grind herself against my hand while I take my time tasting the rest of her.

“Dante,” she breathes.

And when my cock is hard again and I’m desperate to be buried in her cunt, I fist my hands in her panties and pull them down her legs.

“I’m on my period,” she reminds me, like I didn’t hear her earlier and like I give a fuck.

I curl my finger around the string between her thighs and pull out her tampon, making her gasp loudly.

I place the blood-soaked tampon on the nightstand while she goes on staring at me in horror. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

“Do you honestly think a little blood is going to stop me from fucking you, Kat?”

“I-I,” she stammers, still shocked.

I nudge her thighs with my knee. “You can’t get pregnant on your period, right?”

“It would be highly unlikely,” she whispers, and at least now, she’s not thinking about me fucking her on her period, but the fact I’m about to fuck her with no condom. “But that’s not the only reason to use a condom, Dante.”

“I’ve never fucked any woman without one before.”

“Never?” She narrows her eyes at me.

“Women rarely spend more than one night in my bed. I’ve never felt the need to.”

She frowns at me. “How do you know that I’m clean?”

“You’re a nurse. Something happened to you a few years ago and I would bet my life you got yourself checked out after.”

Her throat thickens as she swallows.

“And there’s been no one since, right?”

“I’m clean,” she whispers.

I hold myself over her, my cock nudging at her entrance and my forearms

on either side of her head. “Then let me feel you without anything between us, Kat. Just for tonight?”

I’m desperate to be inside her, and when she finally says yes, I sink in to the hilt. Balls deep inside her hot, wet pussy as it squeezes around me. She feels so fucking good. Her wet heat slicks me and I grit my teeth because she feels even tighter like this, so much better than when I have to use a rubber. The way her walls ripple and clench around my bare cock causes white hot pleasure to burn through me. Her silky smooth juices coat every inch of me as I drive in and out of her.

“You feel incredible when I’m fucking you bare, kitten,” I growl in her ear. “Your cunt is so fucking wet, it’s unreal.” I slide out and slam into her even harder and she moans loudly. “Tell me it feels better for you too.”

“It does,” she gasps. “So much better. But the blood, Dante. It will be all over you.”

I pull out and drive into her again. “I’ll happily paint the two of us and this whole goddamn bed in your blood as long you let me fuck you. I have no idea how I’m ever going to fuck you using a condom again.”

“Dante,” she groans as she wraps her arms around me. I seal my lips over hers and her mouth opens up so easily so that I can tongue fuck her while I nail her to my bed. And when I make her come loudly a little while later, I’m pretty sure she doesn’t give a fuck about bleeding on my sheets or my cock.

“How about we take a shower?” I offer when we’re both done and she’s staring up at me with her beautiful blue eyes.

“I think that might be a good idea,” she replies with a smile.

CHAPTER 14

KAT

It's been three weeks since Dante and I first had sex together, and we haven't stopped since. I try to keep myself busy sorting out the office he's assigned me, but I have very few patients. I hang around this house reading or watching TV and waiting for him to show me some attention. I realize how pathetic that sounds and the me who walked into this house six weeks earlier would have me carted off to a psych ward. But that me wasn't drunk on orgasms, hot sex, and Dante Moretti's mouth.

Yesterday, he stopped me in the hallway, pressed me against the wall with one hand around my throat and the other on my ass, and he just kissed me. For over ten minutes, he just kissed me, and it was the hottest thing I've ever experienced in my entire life. I don't know when he'd have stopped if Maximo hadn't interrupted us.

My lips were swollen, and my skin was red and tender from his beard, but I could have let him do that all day. Because while he might be a devil who fucks like a god, his kisses are hellfire.

He summoned me to his office a few minutes earlier, which usually means sex on his desk, or on the sofa in the corner, or against the door. But not today. I'm going to grow a backbone and behave like the girl my momma raised instead of being driven by my hormones.

Dante is staring at his laptop screen with a frown on his face. Apart from a curt nod of acknowledgment when I walked into the room, he's ignored me.

Asshole.

He rolls his neck and the thick veins pulse as he grinds his jaw. My heartbeat is thrumming in my ears as I stand just a few inches from him. If I stretch out my hand I could run my fingertips over his thick biceps and onto

his hard chest to feel his muscles flexing beneath the soft rich fabric of his shirt.

Goddammit. Stop it, Kat.

He lifts his head, training his fiery gaze on me and I'm done for. My determination and resistance wilt like a flower in need of a good water in the heat. What the hell is wrong with me?

He stands so quickly I gasp, but I have no time to let it out again because his mouth is on mine, his huge arms around my waist, crushing me to him as he kisses me with so much fire that my skin burns from the heat. One of his strong hands coasts up my back, his fingertips grasping at the fabric of my dress until he reaches my head and palms the back of it. Taking a handful of my hair in his fist, he tugs at the root, tilting my head to his desired angle so that he can claim my mouth as he pushes me back against his desk.

"Fuck, Kat," he groans as he breaks our kiss for a moment, running his nose over my cheek and down to my neck. "Why do you always smell so fucking good?"

I reach for his hair, curling my fingers into his thick dark locks as I sit on the edge of his desk, spreading my thighs to allow him to press himself against me. And he takes full advantage, grinding his hard cock against my pussy and making me whimper with shameless need.

When the hell did I turn into this person? Desperate for any crumb of affection and contact he will offer me.

As he crushes his mouth against mine again, the hand he has on my waist slides over my hip and my outer thigh until he's pushing my dress up even further, giving himself access to take whatever the hell he wants from me. His touch is warm as his hand slips beneath the fabric and onto my soft skin until he cups one of my ass cheeks, kneading it in his powerful hand and using it as further leverage to press our bodies even closer together.

"Dante," I whimper into his mouth, trying to pull away and take in some air, but he refuses to let me, and I remain pinned to him.

There is no escaping him. No fighting him. Not that I want to. I am as desperate for him as he seems to be for me. Slick, wet heat burns between my thighs as I rock my hips against him, chasing the friction that comes from his thick cock rubbing against my clit through my panties.

"Yeah?" he grunts. "Tell me what you want, kitten."

Kitten. A word that started as an insult has somehow come to make me pliant on command. I lean into him further, my body melting like warm wax

against the solidness of his.

“I want you,” I murmur. He smiles before his tongue slips back inside my mouth, and he deepens our kiss, consuming me like a fire does oxygen. He slides his hand between my thighs, running his fingertips over the damp patch of fabric on the crotch of my panties and eliciting a moan from deep inside my chest. I pull on his hair and slide one hand down his back, my fingernails scraping over his shirt as I fight to get him closer to me. To get him where I want him, where I need him.

He growls in response — actually growls. It’s an animalistic sound that starts in his chest and rumbles up through his throat, making me shiver. He tugs my panties aside, dragging the tip of his pointer and middle fingers through my soaking folds.

I whimper again. Shameless, needy, and desperate for more, I hook one leg around his waist and pull him to me, shifting my hips, hoping his fingers will slip lower and deeper. I want him inside me. My body is screaming for him to touch those places that only he knows how to reach. Knowing exactly what I want from him, he slides two thick fingers inside me and my pussy squeezes around him as pleasure and heat surges through my body. Wrenching my lips from his, I throw my head back and moan his name, loudly enough that anyone passing his study might hear, but I don’t care. His touch turns me into someone I barely recognize.

“I love to hear my kitten purring,” he says with a dark laugh that rolls through me as he starts to finger-fuck me with such ease and skill, it’s like he’s known my body forever.

“You... feel...” Those two words are all I can manage as he thrusts deeper, massaging my inner walls as the heel of his palm rubs against my clit until my orgasm starts building to a crescendo. Waves of rippling pleasure start rolling through my core as he buries his face against my neck, dragging his teeth over my sensitive skin.

“You hear how wet your cunt is for me?” he asks before he starts to suck on my neck, pulling his fingers all the way out before driving them back in for emphasis. The slick sounds of my pussy are almost drowned out by the blood rushing in my ears as I tug at his shirt. He’s holding back. Denying me the rush that is so close but so frustratingly far away.

“Please, Dante,” I beg him, lost to any rational thought now. I scramble to unbuckle his belt and pants.

“I don’t have any condoms in here,” he groans in my ear.

“It’s okay, just pull out,” I rasp as I reach inside his pants and squeeze his thick, hard cock in my palm.

“Fuck,” he hisses. “Are you sure?”

No. But my wanton whore of a pussy wins out. “Yes. Please,” I plead instead.

Then his fingers are gone and he releases his grip on my hair, making my head spin at the loss of his touch. Until he reaches between my thighs and tears my panties down the middle, effectively making them crotchless.

I blink at him.

“They were getting in my fucking way,” he snarls before he wraps his arms around me and slams into me.

“Ohhh,” I moan, circling my arms around his neck so that I can have something solid to hold onto because I’m pretty sure my soul is about to leave my body.

“Fuck, you feel so good like this,” he says, his lips brushing over my ear. “So fucking good.”

I wrap my legs around his waist as he pushes me back slightly, adjusting his angle so that he can slide in even deeper.

When there is a knock at the door a few seconds later, I bury my face into the crook of his neck as my cheeks burn with shame.

He shouts — loudly and angrily — something in Italian, and though I don’t understand the words, I appreciate their meaning.

“Oh God,” I whisper.

“I am your fucking God, kitten,” he growls in my ear as he goes on railing me on his desk.

The orgasm that has been taunting me for the past ten minutes is so dangerously close now. I hope whoever just knocked on that door has walked away because I’m about to implode.

“Dante,” I cry as my pussy squeezes around him, pulling him deeper and never wanting to let him go.

“Fuck, Kat,” he growls. “I can’t... I need to stop.”

“No,” I cry out in frustration, and my brain stops working entirely as my body chases the endorphins that are only a heartbeat away. I cling tighter to him, crossing my ankles behind his back to keep him where I need him. “Don’t stop.”

He doesn’t stop. He drives into me one last time and my climax burns through every cell in my body like a wildfire. “Oh fuck.”

When he bites down on my neck and grinds his hips against me, I know that he's found his own release too.

We both cling to each other, panting for breath and not daring to look the other in the eye. *What the hell did we just do?*

"You can get a pill for that, right?" he asks.

I blink in confusion. Then I realize he's talking about Plan B.

"Yeah. I'll need to go to the pharmacy," I whisper.

"I'll go," he replies as he pulls out of me and releases me from his grip.

Of course he'll go. Can't let the prisoner out alone, can he? Before I can say anything else, a knock sounds again. We look to where the sound came from and my skin flushes bright pink.

Oh my God! They must have heard everything!

"What is it?" Dante shouts as he starts to zip up his pants.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Boss, but Joey is here," comes the voice from the other side.

His brow furrows into a deep frown. "Joey?"

"Yes, Boss."

He sighs softly. "I'll be right out."

He's still frowning as he fastens his belt.

"Who is Joey?" I ask as I slip off the desk and straighten my dress, fixing my torn panties as best I can.

"You're about to find out," he says, and I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

I follow him out of his study and along the hallway, anxious to discover who Joey is. From Dante's reaction and the fact that he was disturbed twice about this man's arrival, he is obviously someone of some importance or influence.

But when we get to the entrance hallway, it's empty. Dante doesn't seem bothered though, and he heads off in the direction of the kitchen, with me close behind him. Guests are never allowed to roam the house freely, which means Joey is not a guest.

When we step into the kitchen a few seconds later, the first thing I notice is possibly the longest pair of legs I have ever seen in my life. A young woman, probably in her early-twenties although she could pass for younger or older, sits at the kitchen table, her feet resting on the table top as she stares at us.

"Guisseppina, what are you doing home?" Dante asks with sigh, but there is a hint of a smile on his face.

He's happy to see her. Who is this woman with the perfect pouty pink lips and legs that would make a super model jealous?

"You know I hate that name," she replies with a dramatic eye roll as she flicks her long dark hair over her shoulders. Then she stares at him, her face full of defiance and an air of arrogance in the way she holds herself. She knows exactly how beautiful she is. I bet people have been telling her that every single day of her life.

"What are you doing here, Joey? I thought you were staying with Lorenzo and Anya?"

Something about what he just said unsettles her, if only for the briefest second. Pain flashes in her eyes before she pushes herself up and strides over to him with a wide smile. "I thought you might be missing me, big brother."

Big brother? He has a sister? I've heard plenty about the Moretti brothers in my neighborhood, but never about a sister.

"Of course I do. But Lorenzo told me you were spending the summer in Italy once you finished school?" Dante replies.

"Hmm."

"Is everything okay?" he asks, a deep frown on his face again, and suddenly I feel like an intruder. It feels like they're having a conversation that is loaded with meaning, even though they're barely saying anything.

"Things were getting a little... *difficult*," she says before closing her eyes for a second. When she opens them again, they are wet with unshed tears. "And I thought I might as well come home. Trade one prison for another, right? At least this one has decent WIFI."

A prison?

If he is bothered at all by what she just said, Dante doesn't show it. Instead, he wraps his arms around her and kisses the top of her head. She's a few inches taller than me, but she's still dwarfed by his six-foot-four frame.

She rests her head on his shoulder, and I see a glimpse of vulnerability from this young woman who calls her home a prison. He says something to her in Italian and she nods her head. I don't know what he said, but I suspect they were some words of comfort given the tone of his voice and the soft smile that plays on her lips. But the moment passes quickly and she pulls back from him and glares at me, her dark eyes narrowed as she looks me up and down.

"And you are?" she asks, her tone dripping with disdain.

I glare back at her. It's not like I chose to be here.

“This is Kat. She’s staying here for a while,” Dante says, but his tone is cold and distant. There is none of the warmth that he had when he was speaking to Joey. None of the fire that was there when we were in his study just a few moments ago. He doesn’t even look at me.

“Kat?” she says, her nose wrinkled in what I can only describe as disgust. Then she links her arm through her brother’s. “Come on and help me unpack and I’ll tell you about my summer.”

“Sure,” he says, but he’s distant, even with her now. He’s in this kitchen with us, but his mind is elsewhere. Still, the two of them walk out of the room without giving me a second glance.

I stand rooted to the spot and watch them leave, with Dante’s cum dripping out of me and feeling more worthless than I ever have in my entire life, well except for... *No, don’t go there now, Kat!*

That is the last time I will ever let that man use me. The sooner I can get out of this goddamn house, the better.

CHAPTER 15

DANTE

After an incredibly tense and emotional conversation with my older brother about how our little sister managed to fly halfway across the world without him noticing, I call Joey to my study.

“Is Lorenzo super pissed at me?” she asks, all wide and innocent-looking. But she’s capable of causing more trouble than both of us brothers combined.

“Yeah, he’s pissed. But I guess he’s kind of distracted right now.”

“I know. Anya is sick again and I don’t think Lorenzo even wants to acknowledge it,” Joey says with a shake of her head as we sit facing each other on the opposite sides of my desk.

“Well, it took him a long time to accept it the first time around,” I remind her, remembering my older brother’s violent outburst and epic rages when his wife was diagnosed with cancer four years ago.

“I know. What if he loses it again?” she asks.

“He won’t.”

“Yeah.” She chews on her bottom lip. It’s a habit she’s had since she was a little kid. She does it when she’s nervous or worried. She’s only twenty-one and the baby of the family. Lorenzo and I have always looked out for her and protected her from the worst of our father’s rage and cruelty, but she soaked up plenty of it anyway. Kids do, don’t they? Like little sponges. She resents our protection, obviously, and I get that. She feels claustrophobic, *a prisoner*. But one day, she will see that it’s all for her own good. Everything we have ever done for her has been only out of love and concern.

“She’ll beat it again, Joey,” I tell her.

“What if she doesn’t, Dante?” she asks, her eyes brimming with tears.

I shake my head because I don’t have an answer for that. Our mother died

of cancer when she was thirty-seven. I was thirteen, Lorenzo was seventeen, and Joey was only four.

“Anyway, tell me about Kat,” she says, changing the subject. She has a wicked grin on her face. My sister can be as sweet as sugar when she wants to be. Innocent and vulnerable in a lot of ways, but she also has a cruel streak a mile long. She just gets a kick out of hurting people — even the people she loves.

“Her brother stole money from Pop. I can’t find him and she doesn’t know where he is. So it was either kill her or bring her here to work for us.”

“So?” she replies with a frown. “Why not just kill her?”

I glare at her. That question brings up so much emotion and I don’t want her to see even a sliver of it. The truth is I’ve killed people for less. Not innocent women though. I’ve certainly never killed a woman with crystal blue eyes that can see into my soul and has an ass that haunts my every waking thought.

“She has nothing to do with her brother being an asshole, Joey. We don’t just go around killing people for nothing.”

“Not for nothing if he stole from us, though? Family is family,” she replies with a shrug, as though taking a life costs nothing. I hope she never has to learn the harsh reality that it costs something that can never be regained. “You just going to keep her here forever?”

Yes. For fucking ever and then some. “No.” I rub a hand over my jaw. I really have no idea what I’m going to do about Kat, especially now that Joey is back. She adds an extra element of complication. She will make it her mission to push Kat’s buttons at every possible opportunity, and I will wind up being stuck in the middle of the two of them. “Just until she can work off her brother’s debt or comes up with something that helps me find the piece of shit.”

“Yeah, right,” she snorts.

I scowl at her. “What?”

“You’re fucking her.”

“Guisseppina!”

“Aren’t you?” she asks with a smirk.

“None of your damn business,” I snarl.

She sits straight in her chair and stares at me, her huge brown eyes wide. “Oh my God, you like her!” she says with disgust and a little sadness too. My little sister is not used to competing for my affections.

“She’s working here for a few months and then she’ll leave,” I lie, but I say it with such conviction I almost believe it myself.

“Whatever you say, big brother,” she says with a sweet smile. Devious little witch is already up to something.



It’s after midnight by the time I head to bed. I haven’t seen Kat since Joey’s arrival. I’d rather keep the two of them apart for as long as possible. Joey is a wildcard but Kat can give as good as she gets. The last thing I need is petty squabbling while I’m still trying to find out what happened the night one of my men was shot. But I didn’t see her around the house at all. The only privacy she has is in her bedroom, and I have cameras trained on the door and windows so I’m aware when she leaves the room. I know where she is at all times, but not actually seeing her for myself, it makes me feel something that I can’t figure out. Not quite sad, but something kind of like it.

I shake my head as I make my way up the stairs. I stop outside her room. I should go to bed, but fuck if I don’t need her right now.

My fingers curl around the door handle, and I go to open it, only to find it locked. She’s pissed at me. But she can get over it because I want her in my bed tonight. My cock hardens as I recall fucking her on my desk. Sinking into her hot, wet cunt without a condom felt incredible. I never want to wear them again with her and I make a mental note to get the doctor here to prescribe her some birth control.

I press my forehead against the cool wooden door. “Kat,” I call out loud enough that I know she’ll hear me even if she’s sleeping.

She doesn’t reply.

“Kat. Open the door.”

Nothing but silence.

“Open this goddam door or I will kick it down,” I hiss. “And if I do, it won’t be put back.”

Footsteps pad across the room, and a few seconds later, the door is opened a crack. “I was sleeping,” she snaps.

I frown at her. “Why did you lock your door?”

“Because I want to be on my own.”

I narrow my eyes as I search her face. She is pissed. And upset.

“Joey can be a bit much,” I explain.

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “I’m really tired. Can I go back to bed?”

“You can come to my bed.” I push the door, forcing her to take a step backward.

“I told you I’m tired.”

So am I, and I can’t fucking sleep without you. “I’ll let you sleep,” I whisper.

She swallows, then turns her head so she doesn’t have to look at my face. “Please, Dante. I just want to sleep alone.”

I cup her jaw in my hand, tilting her head so I can meet her gaze. A tear runs down her cheek, and she swats it away.

Fuck this. She doesn’t get to be alone. Not after she’s made me so addicted to her.

“You either sleep in my bed or I’m sleeping in yours. Your choice.”

She glares at me, her jaw clenched, as she considers her options. Realizing she doesn’t have any, she turns around and stalks back to bed. Stepping inside the room, I close the door behind me and follow her. She slips beneath the covers while I undress. Once I’m naked, I climb in beside her, pressing myself against her back.

She shuffles forward, but I wrap my arm around her and pull her back to me, burying my face in her hair. “You pissed at me, kitten?”

“No.”

“Seems like you are.”

“Sometimes, I just need a little reminder who I am to you, and you gave me that today. I’m not mad at all. In fact I should be thanking you.”

“And who exactly are you to me?”

“Nobody. Nothing. Just your latest plaything, right?”

I close my eyes and draw in a deep breath before I press my lips against her ear. “Never forget who you’re speaking to, Katerina. I will only indulge you for so long before I remind you of the man I am and the things I’m capable of.” She shivers in my arms, and damn if it doesn’t make my cock hard. I press it against her ass. “Does this feel like nothing to you?”

“I know exactly who you are, Dante Moretti. How could I forget?”

That sounds loaded with meaning, but I’m too tired to argue with her. I just want to fall asleep next to her. I close my eyes and pull her tighter. “From now on, you only sleep in my bed unless I tell you otherwise. And I’m

going to get a doctor to come over soon. I want you on birth control,” I tell her.

“What? Why?”

“Don’t ask questions you already know the answer to, Kat.” I yawn. “Now get some sleep or I’ll reconsider my promise to let you.”

“Injections don’t agree with me,” she whispers.

“Then you can take a pill, right?”

“They’re best started after a period, so that we can be sure they’re one hundred percent effective.”

“Fine. As soon as you have your next period, then. Now go to fucking sleep.”

Even in the dark and with my eyes closed, I can sense her mouth opening to come back with something else – but she doesn’t.

I lie with my arm around her and her warm skin pressed against mine, exhausted but unable to sleep. When her breathing evens out, I roll onto my back and stare into the darkness.

CHAPTER 16

KAT

T here's a hand on my neck. Another one on my back, pushing me down. I try to scream, but my throat is raw, and it hurts. Not that anybody is coming for me. More hands now. Clawing at me. Pushing me. Violating me.

"No!" I scream, waking up from the same nightmare I've been having for the past two years.

"Kat," a deep voice speaks against my ear.

"No, get off me," I shriek, twisting in the covers as I try to get away from the monsters that are still here. But I can't. I'm being pulled up, wrapped in strong arms and pressed against a solid wall of muscle.

"Kat, it's just me. Just you and me," he says softly, his breath dusting over my ear as he sits up and pulls me onto his lap.

"Dante," I breathe out, sagging against his chest at the realization that it was just a dream. I'm here in the house of the most powerful man in the city. Except that it's not just a dream, is it? It's a living, breathing, all-encompassing memory. And I'm pretty sure a part of me is actually still stuck in that hellish basement. A part of myself that I will never get back.

"I've got you. You're safe," he whispers as he runs a hand over my hair.

I nod, my cheek brushing against his chest. It's wet with tears I don't recall shedding. "I didn't know you had a sister," I say, wanting to talk about something that doesn't involve me being a freak. "She's not talked about like you and your brother are. I mean, everyone knows who you are."

"Yeah, and we kind of like it that way."

"Why?"

"Because Lorenzo and I can take care of ourselves, but Joey... Anyway, I

have two sisters.”

“You do?”

“Well, Toni is my half-sister. We were born within a few days of each other.”

“Oh? That must have been awkward at Christmas.” I laugh softly.

“Exactly,” he laughs too. “Lorenzo has always hated her for it.”

“Are you close with her?”

“Kind of. We were when we were kids, but she moved to LA when we were thirteen. She’s an MMA fighter.”

“No way. That is so cool.”

“Hmm. She is kind of cool. She’s back in Chicago right now actually, but she’s training for some big thing so…” He clears his throat as though he’s said too much — shown me too much of his real self. Then he turns to the conversation so expertly back to me. “You don’t have these dreams when you’re in my bed. Is there something about this room that’s a problem for you?”

Heat flushes over my cheeks. It’s not about the room at all.

“Kat?” he asks again.

“It’s not the room,” I breathe.

He’s silent, waiting for me to explain. I feel like such a fool for even admitting this, but… “It’s you.”

“But I’m here with you now?”

“But you weren’t holding me,” I whisper as my cheeks burn with embarrassment. I can’t believe I’ve become so dependent on this man who basically kidnapped me — a man who has made it abundantly clear that I am nothing more than a warm body to him.

The muscles in his chest tense, and his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows hard. God, I’m such an idiot.

He lies back down, wrapping his arms tighter around me as he pulls me with him until I’m lying on top of him.

“I’m okay now,” I mumble, feeling like the world’s biggest fool. I try to push myself up, but he tightens his hold.

“Go to sleep, kitten,” he says softly.

Accepting defeat, I lay my head against his chest again and listen to the steady thrumming of his heartbeat against my ear. He strokes my hair and whispers something in Italian that I don’t understand, but the deep, soothing timbre of his voice makes me feel safe and protected.

I'm falling for this monster even though I'm trying my damn hardest to keep him at a safe distance. I've kept my heart behind a wall for so long, but he makes me realize that wall was only made of glass and he's shattered it without even trying.

He's an enigma. And the contrast between the man he is now, holding me and making me feel safe, to the one who ignores me and makes me feel entirely worthless, is going to break me. I don't think I can handle being broken for a second time.

This is why I need to leave.

CHAPTER 17

KAT

I slept late and Dante was gone when I woke. He'd worked out and eaten breakfast by the time I made it down to the kitchen and I don't know if I'm relieved or not that he's not sitting opposite me wearing nothing but a pair of boxing shorts as I eat my scrambled eggs. I am such an idiot for becoming so reliant on him, and even more of one for actually telling him that last night.

I close my eyes as a wave of embarrassment rolls in my stomach as I recall the things I said to him.

I'm enjoying the last bite of the delicious eggs Sophia made me when Joey strolls into the kitchen — all tanned long legs, thick dark hair, pouty lips and dripping with entitlement. I roll my eyes as she takes a seat opposite me and proceeds to stare at me like I'm an exhibit in a museum.

"Can I help you?" I ask.

"No." She wrinkles her nose and shakes her head.

I pick up my coffee and take a gulp.

"You want some pancakes, Miss Moretti?" Sophia asks.

Joey rolls her eyes. "Please don't call me that, Sophia. You know I hate it."

Sophia sighs softly. "Joey, would you like some pancakes?"

"Please," Joey replies with a sweet smile, which is so obviously fake it makes me want to hurl up my eggs I just ate. When she turns back to me a few seconds later, there is no trace of a smile left.

"Ack! We are out of flour," Sophia groans. "Let me go check the spare pantry." She walks out of the room, leaving Joey and me alone.

"So, you sure landed a sweet deal getting to live here with my brother,"

she says with an arch of one perfectly manicured eyebrow.

“A sweet deal?” I snap at her. “Are you kidding me?”

“Your brother steals from us and you get to live in this beautiful house and sleep in my brother’s bed as punishment?”

The skin on my neck and chest turns red as heat and shame wash over my skin. I can’t believe he told her that we sleep together. I mean, I don’t know why I’m shocked. It’s not like I mean anything to him.

“You think I’m taking advantage of him?” I snort.

“Aren’t you?”

I glare at her. She’s as bad as her brother. “No, I am not. I didn’t ask to come here. You might think it’s a beautiful house, but to me, it’s just a prison. I would much rather be in my tiny house in Washington Park, but your brother refuses to let me leave.”

Her dark brown eyes narrow as she stares at me for a few seconds. “I could help you leave,” she offers.

I almost fall off my seat. “Yeah, right,” I laugh.

“I could do it.”

“What’s the point? He’d just come to my house and bring me back.”

Joey rolls her eyes again. “You wouldn’t be able to go back to your house. You’d have to start over somewhere. But I could get you some documents. A little cash. You could go anywhere you please and never have to see him ever again.”

What the hell is her deal? “You’ve done nothing but look down on me from the second you came in here, so why on earth do you think I’d believe you wanted to help me?”

“I’m not doing it to help you,” she says with an exaggerated sigh. “I’m doing it because I don’t want you here.”

“Well, at least you’re honest.”

“But mostly I’d be doing to aggravate my brother,” she adds with a wicked grin. “I think he’d miss having his little pet around. At least for a while until he moved on to the next one anyway. You know that’s what will happen, right? He’ll dump you at the side of the road if you’re lucky. But it’s more than likely he’ll just kill you. Less messy.”

I ignore the not-so-veiled death threat because I already know the kind of man her brother is and I’m under no illusion that the simple fact he enjoys fucking me offers me any protection in that regard. I mean, he murdered his own fiancée. “Why would you want to make him so pissed? He’s your

brother.”

She leans closer to me. “You think this is your prison, Kat? At least you might get out one day. I’ve been living in a prison since I was born. Dante and Lorenzo watch every move I make. I’m not allowed to go out. Not allowed to date. They even packed me off to some convent school in Italy. I hated every second. I begged them to let me come home to college here, but they refused. So, why does my brother get to do whatever the hell he wants just because he’s a guy?”

Yes, she’s an entitled, spoiled princess with a bad attitude, but it seems like she has her own crosses to bear. I still don’t trust her for a single second though.

“So, what do you think? You want me to speak to my guy or what?” she asks, eyes narrowed as she waits for me to answer.

“I think that you’re crazy if you believe you can rescue me when you can’t even rescue yourself.”

She blinks at me, and I take the opportunity to stand and walk out of the room.



I BARELY SAW Dante all day, apart from a few fleeting glimpses of him in the hallway. It feels like something big is going on for him right now that is about more than just Joey’s return. I didn’t see Joey either after our chat in the kitchen. I stayed in the library for most of the day, while she watched TV in the den and talked — loudly — with her friends on her cell phone. I heard her announcing her triumphant return when I was passing by after lunch.

I stare at the ceiling as I lie in Dante’s bed. I did consider going to my old room but I don’t want a repeat of last night because I’m too exhausted to carry on fighting with him. How can a man make me feel so worthless and yet so important to him at the same time?

As much as it kills me to admit it, I’ve missed talking to him today. I walked by his study and was going to pop in and say hi, but there was an armed guard outside and that means he’s not to be disturbed. Maybe he won’t even come to bed tonight, or it will be so late that I’ll be asleep. I should use this time to plan my escape rather than pining after a man who I clearly mean so little to.

The door creaking open a few seconds later makes me sit up and I see his familiar silhouette walking into the room. I watch as he peels off his clothes, the moonlight casting dark shadows over his skin as he strips naked. A few seconds later, he slips under the covers and his warm hand glides onto my stomach.

“Hey,” I whisper in the darkness.

“I’m glad you’re still awake,” he says, propping himself up on one elbow.

“You are?”

“Yeah.” He tugs my t-shirt up before sliding his fingers into the waistband of my panties. “It’s been a long day and I need you, kitten.”

I swallow the disappointment. Of course that’s all he needs. It’s all he ever needs from me.

“Are you okay?” he asks when I remain still.

“Yeah, I’m good. Just a little tired,” I lie.

He bends his head and his warm breath dances over my skin as he kisses my neck so softly it makes me shiver. His lips are against my ear as his hands slides between my thighs, and he starts to toy with my clit. “You want to go to sleep?”

“You told Joey about us,” I reply, opting for a distraction.

“No, she guessed. I didn’t know it was a secret though,” he growls as his fingers go on teasing me.

“Well, she kind of blindsided me with it. A heads-up would have been nice,” I say, biting on my lip to stop myself from moaning as the familiar waves of pleasure build in my core.

“Joey will make it her mission to make you as uncomfortable as possible, Kat. You just have to ignore most of what comes out of her mouth.”

“Well, if that was her mission, she achieved it,” I snap, clamping my thighs together to stop his fingers from driving me to distraction.

It works because he pulls his hand from my panties and brushes my hair from my face. “What did she say to you?”

“She... she suggested I was taking advantage of you.”

He laughs darkly, and I glare at him. “I’m glad you find that funny, but it was horrible, Dante,” I say, remembering how small and cheap she made me feel. “She made me feel like...” I choke back the emotion.

“Like what?”

“A whore,” I whisper. I hate that word. It’s one that’s used to degrade women, but I don’t know how else to describe how she made me feel.

“I’ll speak to her.”

“No, please don’t.” I sigh. “I can handle her myself.”

“Whatever you want, kitten. You know I don’t see you that way, right?”
he asks as he starts to kiss my neck again.

“Don’t you?”

“Just because I fuck you every chance I get, doesn’t mean that’s all I want from you.”

“So, what else do you want, Dante?” I ask.

His hand slides down my body again and back into my panties. “Everything,” he growls, and before I can ask him what the hell that means, he silences me with a deep kiss full of fire and longing, while he slides two fingers inside me.

Dante Moretti is a monster — the most ruthless and violent man I’ve ever known, but that’s not why he’s so dangerous. He’s dangerous because I’m falling for him a little more every single day.

CHAPTER 18

KAT

I rifle through the cupboards of the medical room as quickly as I can before someone catches me. When I open the cupboard above my head, a roll of bandages falls out, bouncing off my head onto the floor.

Dammit. I'm sure I saw some in here. I know I did because I wondered why the hell Dante even had them in his house. Chasing after the errant bandage, I wrack my brain to recall which cupboard they were in.

I've hardly been in this room lately. I don't know if that's because Dante's men are no longer getting themselves into any scrapes that need my attention, or whether it has anything to do with Joey's return almost three weeks ago and her protective older brother doesn't want his injured men in the house. Whatever it is, I haven't been using any of my nursing skills and I'm wondering exactly how I'm paying off my brother's quarter of a million dollar debt. I spend my days reading or walking the grounds — and mostly avoiding Joey. But I spend every night in Dante's bed and occasional afternoons in his office where he fucks me over and over again, no longer giving me any of the warmth or affection that I was becoming used to. Currently that seems to be the only service I provide and whenever that fact starts to make me feel uneasy, I've become an expert at pushing such thoughts away.

But when Dante asked me if I'd called the doctor to prescribe me some birth control, well, now I have some thoughts that I can't push away no matter how hard I try.

Opening the small set of drawers beneath the locked medicine cabinet, I find the little pink boxes I'm looking for.

I take one out and stuff it into the pocket of my jeans. Now I just need to

get out of here and reach a bathroom without getting busted.

I STARE at the small piece of plastic in my hands and the two lines that are marked so clearly they may as well be flashing neon. I cover them with my hand, half suspecting Dante to be watching me on some hidden cameras.

I'm going to throw up, or pass out. Up until thirty seconds ago, I'd convinced myself my period was a week late because of stress and anxiety, or just one of those things. I mean I don't track my cycles because I haven't needed to. I haven't had a boyfriend or even a friend with benefits for over two years. So I didn't even notice it was late at first, not until Dante reminded me of the conversation we had three weeks ago. I remember it well because it was the same day that Joey came back. And I remember putting off the birth control because I had less than two weeks before my period was due. And that was the same day we had that stupid, frantic sex in his office too. He was supposed to get me the morning-after pill, but then Joey was here, and we had a fight, and we both forgot.

Stupid, stupid Kat!

I slip the test into my pocket and put my head in my hands. My heart is beating so fast it sounds like a galloping racehorse in my ears. Dante is going to think I tricked him into this. Or he's going to kill me, or hand me over to his men now that I'm no longer any use to him. What if he forces me to have an abortion?

I jump up from the edge of the bath as my lunch decides to make a sudden and violent reappearance. With my head in the toilet, I heave out the entire contents of my stomach. When there's nothing left, I sink to the floor and lean against the cool bath.

There is only one thing for it. I have to run.



IT TOOK me half an hour to calm down in the bathroom as I ran through so many scenarios in my head. I thought of every exit in this house and they are permanently manned by armed guards both inside and out. The grounds are patrolled twenty-four hours a day and the walls are way too high to scale. And the main gate is like a fortress. There is only one way out, even though it

seems unthinkable, but what choice do I have? I have to make a deal with the demon witch who has done her best to make me feel as uncomfortable as possible for the past three weeks.

She's sitting in the den, flicking through a glossy magazine when I find her. She looks up at me when I walk into the room, then rolls her eyes in annoyance and disgust before going back to reading.

"Can I ask you about something?" I say as I take a few steps closer.

"What?" she sighs heavily.

"Your offer? To help me get out of here? Does it still stand?"

That certainly piques her interest, and when she looks up at me again, her eyes are filled with mischief and delight. I swallow the ball of anxiety in my throat. I know I'm going to regret this.

"What changed your mind, kitty-kat?" she asks with a pop of one perfectly manicured eyebrow.

"I'm just tired of being your brother's plaything," I say with a shrug and all the indifference I can muster.

"Then yes, it still stands," she says with a grin.

"So, what do we do?"

"Leave it with me. I have a guy who can get you some papers."

"But how do we actually get out of here, Joey? You're as trapped in here as I am."

"Not quite, kitty-cat. Not quite," she says with a knowing smile. "It might take me a couple of weeks, but I'll have you out of here by the end of the month."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"And you won't tell your brother about this?" I ask with a frown.

"Now, where would be the fun in that? By the time you're gone, I'll have no idea where you're headed, and I'll enjoy watching my big brother lose his mind for a few weeks, before he finds a new pet to keep him entertained." She laughs wickedly.

I can't imagine taking such glee from someone else's misfortune, but I suppose I never grew up as a Moretti. I kind of feel sad for her in a way.

"Okay. So, you're sure you can do this?"

"I'm sure. Trust me."

CHAPTER 19

KAT

Trust me!

I can't remember a time in my life when those two words were uttered and the outcome was positive. But that's what Joey asked me to do, and with limited alternative options, that's exactly what I did. And that is why at almost midnight, I am following her to God knows where.

I'd just dealt with a particularly nasty bout of morning sickness — although why they call it that when it lasts all goddamn freaking day, I don't know — when she knocked on Dante's bedroom door and told me it was *time*.

"How the hell do you expect to get us out of here without anyone noticing, Joey?" I snap, fueled by irritation and fear as she leads me down a hallway I've never seen before. This house is like a goddamn maze.

"Dante and Maximo are out tonight. Now is the perfect time."

"But there are guards everywhere," I remind her.

"Not down here though," she says with a mischievous grin. "I used to sneak out this way all the time when I was in high school. It's a secret entrance."

"A secret entrance? Really? What is this place? Like Hogwarts?"

Joey stops dead in her tracks and glares at me. "Look, Kat, do you want out of here or not? I mean, I was even kind of getting to like you these past few weeks, so if you'd rather stay and be my brother's little plaything for the rest of your days, then be my guest."

She folds her arms across her chest and waits for my reply. I suppose I've kind of gotten to like her a little too. Once you get beneath all the snark and sarcasm, she's actually really smart and funny.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I’m just nervous. If he catches us...” She’ll be fine, she’s his annoying little sister, but he’ll kill me.

“He won’t,” she says with an eye roll, full of that Moretti confidence that she and her brother have by the ton. “My guy is solid. We got this.”

I take a deep breath. I have to get out of this place. I have to get us away from him. “Okay. Let’s go.”

She smiles and then carries on walking down the hallway until we come to a small store room. Once we go inside, she moves a metal shelving unit out of the way and pushes a brick in the wall, and sure enough, it opens to reveal a hidden passageway.

“Wow,” I gasp.

“Told ya,” she smiles triumphantly.

“Doesn’t Dante know about this though?”

“Nope. Don’t think so. Like I said, I used to sneak out this way all the time.”

“Where does it lead to?”

“Like some kind of underground bunker or something. I don’t know what it is, but there’s a door that leads out onto the street. My guy will be waiting with your documents and a car and then you’re out of here,” she says as she steps inside the dark passageway and flicks on the torch on her cell phone.

I’m hit by a flood of emotion that almost knocks me off my feet. I feel something about leaving this place, about leaving him, that is not pure joy. And I feel so grateful to Joey. Whatever her agenda is, she’s giving me an out and I will always owe her for it.

I intend to change my name and get new papers as soon as I’m far enough away from this place, I mean she’s still a Moretti and if Dante wants to find me badly enough then she’d probably tell him. But I figure he might be pissed for a little while that we duped him, but he won’t bother coming looking for me. He’ll move onto the next warm body. At least that’s what I hope anyway.

“Thank you for this, Joey. I don’t know how to repay you.”

“Seeing the look on Dante’s face when he realizes you’re gone is payment enough for me,” she says as she heads along the dark tunnel.

I follow behind her until we reach another door. “Almost there,” she whispers. “Here, take this.” She passes me her cell as she starts to draw back the huge steel bolt. It creaks loudly like old, rarely used metal does, and I wince at the sound echoing off the stone walls. What if someone in the house

hears?

“There,” she pants as she draws it all the way back and pushes open the huge metal door. I’m still holding her cell phone, pointing at the open doorway. It almost slips from my fingers when his face comes into view and my racing heart stops beating as time literally freezes around us.

“Going somewhere, ladies?”

“Maximo! What the hell?” Joey shrieks. “You scared the shit out of us.”

He shakes his head in amusement as he flicks on his torch and shines it in our faces. “And I’m not even the entrée,” he says with a cruel laugh. “Wait until you get back to the house and see how pissed Dante is.”

“N-no,” I stammer. “I’m not going back.”

“Oh, you are,” Maximo says.

“How the hell did you know?” Joey snaps, her body shaking with fury while I’m trembling with fear.

“You think we didn’t know about you sneaking out of here as a kid? You think I didn’t follow you every single freaking time? And your guy, Joey?” he hisses.

“He’s Dante’s guy,” she says with a sigh.

“Everybody is Dante’s guy,” he says, his tone dark and menacing.

“I’m going to throw up,” I whisper.

“Don’t give a fuck. You both better start moving. Now!” Maximo barks as he walks through the door, his huge frame crowding us backward as he does. Then he closes it with a bang, fixing the steel bolt back in place, and now, I can’t breathe.

I gasp for air. Joey grasps my hand and squeezes. “It’s okay,” she whispers. “I’ll tell him it was my fault.”

“It doesn’t m-matter,” I stammer. “He’s g-going to k-kill me.”

“Move!” Maximo barks again, and Joey squeezes my hand again as we start to head back through the passageway, which somehow seems even smaller and tighter than it did a few minutes earlier. It’s strange how a space can change without really changing. A few moments ago, this dark tunnel was full of hope and possibility. Now it’s full of fear and dread and monsters.

When we reach the doorway of the store cupboard, Joey opens it first and the small room is flooded with light. And he’s standing right there in the hallway waiting for us. His hands stuffed into the pockets of his suit pants and the fabric of his shirt stretched taut over his huge muscles as he literally vibrates with anger. The three of us step into the hallway, but Dante’s focus

is entirely on me. His eyes are blazing with heat and fury and every single cell in my body is trembling with fear.

“Dante, it —” Joey starts, but he cuts her off.

“Go and wait in my study. I’ll deal with you later,” he snaps, never taking his eyes off me. And I can’t look away from him either. I want to avoid the intensity of his glare, but I can’t. So, I stand, blinking and desperately trying not to throw up.

“And this one?” Maximo asks.

“Take her to the guest room. The one in the east wing,” he hisses through clenched teeth, his rage palpable in every single word.

“I’m s-sorry,” I mumble, but he doesn’t acknowledge me.

“Follow me,” Maximo says and begins to walk down the hallway, and I obey him because at least it means I get to escape Dante’s wrath for a while. Maybe he will calm down. Maybe he will understand when I tell him why I tried to get away. Maybe pigs will fly over Chicago tonight.

I FOLLOW Maximo up the stairs and to the east wing of the house. He leads me to a bedroom which looks much like the others, until I notice it’s not.

“There are bars on the windows,” I say with a frown when I step inside.

“Yeah,” Maximo agrees.

When I scan the room, there’s nothing in here but a bed and a nightstand with a lamp fixed to the wall. It looks like there’s a small ensuite attached, but the room is sparse and nothing like the luxury of the one I was staying in previously.

“But I won’t... There are bars...” I blink at him.

“Yeah,” he says again. “And a lock on the door too.” And with that, he disappears out of said door, and I hear the click as he imprisons me inside.

My heart sinks in my chest and I fight the urge not to cry as I sit on the bed and wait for Dante.

Why did I listen to Joey? Why didn’t I just accept what was before? It was so much better than this. Except that it wasn’t really. I was still a prisoner, just a comfortable one. The reason I need to escape hasn’t changed.

I look at the pale, bare walls and wonder if this was Nicole’s room. Is this where Dante kept his fiancée before he murdered her?

I wonder if he’ll come tonight. If he’ll come at all or just leave me to drive myself into a full-blown panic attack while I wait for whatever

punishment he has in store for me.

Lying back against the bed, I place my hands on my stomach and whisper quiet words of assurance to my tiny little ray of hope.

And I wait.

CHAPTER 20

DANTE

The door to my study almost comes off its hinges with the force as I burst inside to confront my devious little sister. She sits on the small sofa in the corner, her hands in her lap as she picks at her fingernails. She's nervous as hell and she should be because I have never been so goddamn pissed at her in my entire life, and she has pulled plenty of shady shit before today.

"What the fuck, Joey?" I hiss, anger vibrating through every muscle in my body and making me shake with suppressed rage.

She looks up at me, her long dark lashes wet with tears. "I'm sorry, Dante —"

"Sorry? Fucking sorry?" I shout, banging a fist on my desk and making her jump in fright.

"I didn't think you'd care."

"Don't fucking lie to me," I snarl. She has never been afraid of me before and she'd never had reason to be, but I haven't felt a rage like this for such a long time. Not since I found out about Nicole. I swallow a ball of anger and it knots in my chest instead.

"Why, Joey? Do you really hate me that much?"

Her eyes flicker with anger and years of suppressed emotion. I actually see it ripple through her body before she jumps up from the sofa. "I hate this goddam house. I hate that I can't take a fucking shit without someone watching me, Dante," she screeches. "I hate that you and Lorenzo get to do whatever the fuck you want because you were born with a dick! While I have to be the perfect, pampered princess who doesn't get to even breathe without permission." Her chest heaves with the effort of her diatribe and tears run

down her cheeks.

“What the hell does that have to do with Kat?”

“Why do you get to keep your little pet? Why can’t you be miserable just like I am?”

I step closer to her. “You think I wanted this life, Joey? You think I don’t dream about just walking away?”

“Running off to Italy like Lorenzo?” she snipes.

“I never said that.”

She shakes her head and stalks to the other side of the room. “I have no one, Dante,” she sniffs.

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, I wanted to hurt you. I wanted to pay you back for sending me away. And Kat wanted out of here. She is desperate to leave, she had to be if she came to me, right? She even pretended to like me.” She scoffs. “She would have found another way if it wasn’t with me. She will find a way, big brother. Lucky for her she’s not tied to this family like I am.”

Her words hit me way harder than I expected them to because I know there is a ring of truth to them. How desperate must Kat have been to trust my little sister, who has shown her nothing but contempt. And I knew it all along, didn’t I? I convinced myself that I was the one in control, and she manipulated me into thinking that there was something more between us than just physical. Damn, she was good at it too.

“I hope it was worth it, Joey,” I say. “Because whatever happens to her now is on your hands.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “What are you going to do to her?”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t.” Lies come so easily to her, tripping off her tongue like they cost nothing. I’m not sure there has ever been a woman in my life who hasn’t lied to me as easily as Joey just did. And usually, I can see right through them. Like I did with my mom when she used to tell me everything was okay and my father was a good man. Like I saw through my ex-fiancée, Nicole. But I didn’t see it with Kat. She lay in my bed every night, and I never saw it. I guess I didn’t want to.

“Good to know,” I say before I turn and head out of the door.

“I know what really happened to Nicole, Dante. Lorenzo told me.”

The mention of her name makes me falter for a second. My heart seems to stop beating. I knew he was going to tell her the truth, but I didn’t think

she'd ever speak of it.

I don't reply. I can't think about anything but Kat and how she's ripped out my goddamn heart. I can't take my anger out on my sister, but I will damn well take it all out on her.

CHAPTER 21

KAT

I have no idea how long I've been lying on this bed. It could be hours, it could be minutes. Time seems to have taken on a whole new meaning. It does when you have nothing to tell the time by. It's still dark outside, but I don't even know if it's tomorrow yet or still today.

The sound of the door being unlocked makes me bolt upright. My heart rate kicks up a gear, and I swallow as I wait for someone to walk inside. I don't know whether to be relieved or terrified when I see Dante walking into the room. He closes the door behind him, and I jump up from the bed, running to him.

When did I become so pathetic?

"Dante, I —"

He doesn't let me utter another word before his huge, powerful hand is wrapped around my throat, and he slams me against the wall.

He presses his face close to mine. His anger from earlier hasn't dissipated at all. In fact, it seems even fiercer than before. "Don't," he hisses, his hot breath dusting over my cheek as he squeezes my throat tighter until I'm struggling to breathe. This isn't the way he usually grabs me. I've never felt my airway restricted like this before. He's trying to hurt me. To kill me. "Did you honestly think I would be blind enough to let you slip out from under my fucking nose, Kat?"

"N-no," I rasp, my throat already raw from the pressure of his grip.

"You think I'm stupid, then? Is that it?"

"N —" Tears run down my cheeks, and my head pounds from the pressure on my throat. In a few seconds, I'm going to pass out and then I won't be able to tell him. I won't be able to tell him about the only thing that

might make him spare me. I use every ounce of breath left in my body to gasp out two words. "I'm pregnant."

I clutch at my throat as the cool air rushes into my lungs. It's only then I realize he's let me go. His hands are on either side of my head now, caging me in as he keeps me upright with the weight of his body against mine.

"What?" he growls.

"I'm p-pregnant," I breathe.

He shakes his head. "You're lying to me."

"I'm not," I insist. "That day in your office. You never got me the pill after..." And I forgot to remind him.

He narrows his eyes at me.

"I took a test. I'm five weeks." I sniff.

"So, not only were you running from me after you swore you'd repay your debt, but you were trying to take my child away too? Is that what you're telling me?" he growls, and it's so full of menace and vitriol that it makes me shiver. But he does not get to pretend like he's the victim here.

I wipe my tears away and glare at him. "What choice did I have, Dante? It's not just me now. I did what I had to protect my child."

"My child," he snarls. "You think it needs protecting from me?"

"I don't know," I admit. "But I do know that I would rather die than be forced to give him or her up."

"You think I would make you do that?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know. You made all these decisions about our child without knowing anything. You didn't think of just telling me you were pregnant instead?"

"I only know what you told me," I shout in his face, and he inches closer to me.

"And what is that?"

"That as soon as I'm no use to you, you'll hand me over to your men." I swallow hard as the thought of that happening, of being torn from my baby makes me feel like someone just tore my heart out of my chest. "What use will I be to you when I'm nine months pregnant. Or breastfeeding a tiny infant? Or when I'm exhausted and sore?"

He slams his fists on the wall either side of my head and I can feel the anger in him rising to a crescendo. But he pushes himself back and then walks out of the door, locking it behind him and leaving me alone.



I MUST HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP SHORTLY after Dante left because it's bright when the sound of the door unlocking startles me. I rub my eyes and focus on the figure walking into the room. It's the young new housekeeper who started here a few days ago, and whose name I can't recall. She's carrying a tray of food and my stomach growls at the smell of eggs and toast.

She sets the tray down at the end of my bed, avoiding eye contact the entire time.

"Thank you," I say as I pull the covers off myself and climb out of bed, but she slips silently back out of the room, leaving me alone again.

I sit next to the tray anyway, wondering how long it will be before I see Dante again. We have so much to talk about. I expect he'll be here in a few hours. Shouting at me for leaving and demanding answers that I don't have. So, why is a part of me look forward to seeing him anyway?

There are two boiled eggs and two slices of brown buttered toast on the tray as well as a jug of water and a glass of orange juice. And right there, nestled beside the cutlery is a blue and white box containing a pregnancy test — one of those expensive digital ones. So, he wants proof, does he? Fine by me. I will light that baby up like the Fourth of July.

I sit cross-legged on the bed and start to eat, feeling better with each mouthful and hopeful that if Dante hasn't killed me yet, then maybe we can figure this out.

CHAPTER 22

DANTE

The soft ticking of the clock feels like it's taunting me as we wait for his arrival. My father found out about Kat and Joey's little escape attempt last night and has insisted on coming to the house today to discuss my lapse in security.

"Do I really have to be here for this?" Joey says with a sigh and an eye roll.

"Yes, you fucking do," I snap. "You're the reason he's coming here."

"Ugh," she groans as she flops onto the sofa.

"It will be over soon. Let him have a gripe about your safety and how I need to keep a more watchful eye on you. It will make him feel like he's being a good father, and then I'll offer him a Scotch and he can leave."

"Fine," she sighs. She rolls her eyes again at the sound of his voice filling the hallway outside.

I look over at her. "It will be fine. Be nice to him and we can get him out of our hair as soon as possible."

She makes another disapproving noise from deep in her throat right before he walks into the room. As soon as he's inside, she stands and smiles at him. It's a well-practiced routine.

"Hi, Papá." She goes to hug him, but he brushes her off and storms across the room, planting his hands on my desk and glaring at me. "How the fuck did you let this happen? My daughter and your whore just walk out of here like it's nothing."

Pushing my chair back, I stand too, refusing to have him towering over me like I'm still a kid. "She's not a whore," I defend Kat even though I'm beyond pissed at her. "And they did not walk out of here. Maximo knew

exactly what they were up to and he stopped them before they could leave.”

“She needs to be dealt with,” he snarls.

I’m aware that Joey is staring at me with her mouth hanging open, but I remain focused on my father. “She’s twenty-one. What do you want me to do, take her cell phone away?”

“Not Guiseppina. The *whore*,” he spits.

“Her name is Kat,” I snarl at him. “And she is being handled.”

“It was a mistake bringing her to this house. She has seen too much. You need to deal with her, Dante,” he insists, and now I know exactly what he means.

“I can’t fucking kill her, Pop,” I snap.

“Because you’re weak,” he snorts.

“No,” I shout at him. “Because she’s fucking pregnant.”

He blinks at me, and Joey gasps in shock, her hand flying to her mouth.

“With your child?” my father asks with a frown.

“Yes, with my fucking child.”

“Dante, I didn’t know,” Joey says. “If I had, I would never...”

My father turns to her, his face twisted in anger as he raises his arm and slaps her so hard that her head snaps backward.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I round the desk to get to him as he goes to hit her again. I grab hold of his wrist as Joey staggers backward, her hand pressed to her face as she stares at our father in horror and shock. He hasn’t hit her like that since she was a sullen teenager.

“She needs disciplining. You’re too soft with her,” he bellows as he shrugs his arm free.

“And you need to calm the fuck down, old man. And if you ever lay a finger on her again, I will cut off every single one.”

He trains his glare on me now. I haven’t seen him this pissed in a long time. He’s always cruel and a constant pain in my ass, but he’s so angry right now he’s practically foaming at the mouth. “I’ve called Lorenzo this morning. Told him to make arrangements to come home. He’ll be back in a few weeks.”

My brow furrows into a scowl. “You didn’t have to do that.”

His lip curls in disgust. “It seems I did.”

“We don’t need him.”

“He’s had more than enough time away. He should be home looking after his family instead of playing the fool in Italy.”

“He’s looking after his sick wife,” I remind him.

“He will be returning. It is done,” he says with a dismissive shake of his head.

I grit my teeth before I say something that I’ll regret.

“If you’re not going to kill this *Katerina*,” he spits out her name, “then you will marry her.”

“The fuck?” I growl at him, my teeth bared as I advance on him.

“Your mother would never forgive you if you raise her firstborn grandchild as a bastard,” he insists. “Put a bullet in her head or a ring on her finger, *mio figlio*. Because I will not allow a bastard to inherit my empire.”

“Get the hell out of my house. Now!”

His nostrils flare as he stares me down, waiting for me to back down. But that is never going to happen.

“Set a date or dig a grave, Dante,” he snarls before he marches out of my study.

As soon as he’s gone, I walk over to Joey who’s still holding her hand to her cheek. “Let me see,” I say as I gently move her fingers away to reveal the beginnings of a deep red and purple mark bruise.

“What the hell, Dante?” she winces as I run my fingertips over her cheekbone. “What just happened?”

“Nothing is broken,” I tell her as I inspect her face. “You should see Sophia about getting some ice for it.”

“Dante?”

I shake my head and sigh. “I have no idea why he reacted like that. I’m sorry he hit you. He will never do it again, I promise you.”

I wrap her in a hug as tears trail down her cheek.

“Is Kat really pregnant?” she whispers.

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know. I swear. I would never have helped her if I had.”

“I know, kid,” I say, giving her a quick kiss on the top of her head before I let her go.

“What are you going to do?” she asks. “Are you going to marry her?”

I blow out a breath as I walk back to my desk. As much as I hate to admit it, my father is right. My mother would want her first grandchild to be born in wedlock. A pure blood Moretti through and through. But how do I marry a woman who hates me and whom I can never trust?

CHAPTER 23

KAT

Hope is a crock of shit!

I lie on the bed with my hands behind my head, teary-eyed. I can't seem to stop crying lately. It's been four days since I was locked in this room. At least I think it has. I have no way of knowing for sure. No TV. No radio. No cell phone, obviously. I think there have been four sunsets since I first spent the night here and it's dark again now, so four days and soon-to-be five nights.

It's been four days since I saw Dante. Four days since anybody uttered a single word to me. A housekeeper brought me some of my clothes and toiletries the first day. He wouldn't let Sophia in here because he knows she would crack and offer me some kind of comfort. Whoever this new one is brings me three meals a day and two snacks as well as prenatal vitamins too. But she never speaks to me. I speak to her of course. I've tried being nice to her. Begging her. I've tried bombarding her with questions. Shouting. Threats. Crying. Nothing works. She's impenetrable. Like a robot.

So all I have left to do is cry. And throw up. I throw up a lot. I feel sick all the time. I haven't been able to keep any food down since yesterday morning, so I didn't even bother trying to eat my lunch, afternoon snack or dinner today. They are all still sitting on the tray, untouched. Congealing. Like me. Or maybe I'm stagnating. I don't know.

Perhaps I'm just going crazy.

The door unlocking doesn't even make me lift my head now. I'm too tired.

The housekeeper shuffles into the room and places another tray of food

beside my bed.

“Mr. Moretti says you need to eat,” she says quietly.

So, she has a voice after all.

“Mr. Moretti can go fuck himself.”

“It’s not good for the baby if you don’t eat.”

“Pretty sure it’s not good for the baby’s mother to be driven completely insane either, but no one gives a flying duck fart about that, do they?”

I keep my head turned away from her and hear her collecting the old trays of food, but she doesn’t speak again.

CHAPTER 24

DANTE

I wait at the bottom of the stairs for Maria to come from Kat's room. She carries a tray full of uneaten food with her.

"Is she still refusing to eat?" I snap.

"Yes, sir," she whispers.

"Fuck!" I shake my head in annoyance. "Did you tell her I said she had to eat?"

"Yes."

"And?"

She looks down at the tray of food rather than answer me.

"Maria?"

"She said you could go fuck yourself, sir," she says, her voice barely even a whisper this time.

I scrub a hand over my jaw. Starving herself so I'll pay her some attention is so fucking reckless. Maria fidgets as she stands in front of me, waiting to be dismissed.

"Maria?"

She looks up at me and her eyes are shining with tears.

"Why are you crying?" I snap at her.

"She's so sick, sir," she sniffs. "She keeps throwing up throughout the day. Even when she only drinks a little water, she's sick. I wait outside her room like you asked and she doesn't even sing or shout for you anymore."

"She's playing you. You cannot trust her. You hear me?"

She nods.

"Go," I tell her, and she scurries off down the hallway. I rest my head against the wooden banister, wondering what the hell I'm going to do about

Kat and her hunger strike.

“You are certainly living up to your reputation as the most ruthless man in Chicago lately, big brother,” Joey say as she walks up beside me.

I’m not in the mood for her games either today. I’m still pissed at her for the stunt she pulled. “Leave it, Joey.”

“What? I’m paying you a compliment. I mean, there’s cruel and then there’s Dante level of cruel,” she says with a wicked laugh.

“What the hell are you on about?”

“Kat,” she says with a roll of her eyes. “You’ve outdone yourself.”

“She’s breathing, isn’t she?” I snap. “No thanks to you.”

“Yeah, but come on. Depriving someone of any human interaction or any kind of mental stimulation at all is probably one of the cruelest things you can do to a person. Well played, brother.” She pats me on the back as she says it, but her voice is dripping with sarcasm.

“Are you suggesting she should be rewarded for trying to escape? For trying to take my child away from me before I even got a chance to know about it? I should let her walk around here like she used to?”

“Everything is so black and white with you. Everything you do is extreme. It doesn’t have to be that way. You can still punish her while making sure she doesn’t have a full-scale mental breakdown in the process,” she says before she starts to walk down the hallway.

“Joey,” I call after her.

She spins around, a smile on her face because she knows she just played me.

“She’ll be sleeping soon. Take her some magazines or books or something tomorrow morning.”

“Whatever you say, big brother.”

CHAPTER 25

KAT

“Hey, Kat,” a soft voice says, and I figure I’m dreaming because nobody talks to me anymore. Hands are brushing my hair back from my face and there’s a damp cloth wiping over my jaw too. My eyelids flutter open.

“Joey?”

“You were sick,” she says, her face pulled into a frown.

“Yeah,” I say, my head throbbing as I shuffle into a sitting position. I remember now. It came on so suddenly and violently that I couldn’t even make it to the bathroom. And then I think I passed out.

“How long have you been sick like this?”

“A few days.”

“Are you keeping anything down?”

“No,” I say. I don’t even have the energy to shake my head.

“Is this normal in pregnancy?”

“No. I think it might be... I might have hyperemesis gravidarum. My mom had it with me.”

“What the hell is that?”

“A fancy way of saying extreme morning sickness.” I give a feeble laugh.

I’m pretty sure Joey isn’t really here and I’m hallucinating or something. I wonder why it’s her of all people I’m seeing though. I mean, I thought it would be my mom or my grandma.

My eyes fixate on her face as my brain wakes up a little more. Dream Joey has a huge purple bruise on her cheek.

She covers it with her hand when she sees me staring.

“I’m sorry he did that to you because of me,” I whisper, even though she’s not real.

“It wasn’t Dante,” she says as she places her hand on my forehead. “Kat I’m really worried about you.”

“I think I need to go to hospital, Joey,” I croak. My throat is so dry from lack of fluids that it hurts to even talk.

Dream Joey squeezes my hand. She must be a dream. She’s never this nice to me. “I’ll go speak to Dante.”

CHAPTER 26

DANTE

I'm on the phone when my little sister comes storming into my office like a tornado on steroids.

"Kat is really sick," she shouts, completely ignoring the fact I'm busy.

"I'll call you back," I say to the asshole I was talking with so I can give her my full attention.

"You need to get her to the hospital. Now."

"Like fuck I do. What the hell do you think you're doing coming into my office —"

"She needs a doctor," she shouts back at me.

I cross my arms over my chest and glare at her. "So the two of you can plan another escape attempt?"

"You know, I would never have done that if I'd known she was pregnant. Dante, I'm not kidding around. She says she has something her mom had. Hyper gravity or something?"

"She's a goddamn nurse. She's baffling you with medical nonsense so you'll fall for her bullshit."

"She's not eating. That can't be good for the baby."

"She'll eat when she's hungry," I say, picking up my cell to make another call.

"Dante, please just come see her for yourself."

"For fuck's sake!" I pocket my cell and follow my little sister up to Kat's new bedroom. At least I can put an end to this nonsense so I can get back to work.

When I walk into the room, Kat is propped up in bed with some pillows.

“I sat her up so she wouldn’t choke if she was sick again,” Joey whispers, and I roll my eyes. I’ve never known anyone be able to fool my kid sister so easily.

“Kat?” I snap as I draw closer to her.

She’s pale, but then she would be if she’s refusing to eat. Her lips are cracked and dry. She’s wearing one of my t-shirts and that rattles me more than I care to admit. Part of her plan, no doubt, but I can also see she’s lost weight. Nothing so far that can’t be explained away by her refusal to eat though.

“Kat?” I say again as I sit on the bed beside her.

Her eyelids flicker, but she doesn’t focus on me.

“You need to eat and drink something.”

“Okay,” she mumbles sleepily, a goofy smile on her face.

“See,” I say to Joey who is staring at Kat with concern.

I take the bottle of water from the night stand and unscrew the cap. Holding it to her lips, I play along with her little game, if only to prove that I’m right. “I’m gonna give you some water, okay?”

“Hmm,” she mumbles, and I tip the bottle, allowing some water to spill out. She swallows greedily, and I allow her some more before I pull the bottle away.

I look up at Joey. “I told you it was all…”

But before I can finish that sentence, Kat groans loudly and throws up the mouthful of water I just gave her. Her head rolls back against the pillows and her eyes close again.

Fuck!

“No, I told you, asshole!” Joey snaps.

“Go tell Maximo to get the car. We’re taking her to the ER.”

Joey runs out of the room and I scoop Kat into my arms. She murmurs softly, but her body is limp and far lighter than it was just a week ago. I press a soft kiss on her forehead.

“I’m sorry, kitten. I’ve got you now.” The guilt of leaving her to rot in this room almost overwhelms me. If anything happens to her or our baby, I will never forgive myself. I don’t care if Kat hates me right now, or if I can’t trust her. I will never let her go.

CHAPTER 27

KAT

I suppose most people might freak out if they wake up in a hospital bed, but the sound of the machines, the low hum of constant activity, and even the smell is so unmistakably familiar to me that I feel a sense of comfort being here. My eyelids are only half open as they flicker in the bright overhead light. My throat is dry and scratchy but I don't feel like I'm going to throw up, so that's a bonus.

"Kat?" I hear his deep voice before I feel his warm fingers curling around mine.

"H-hey," I croak as I open my eyes and see him sitting beside my bed. His face is etched with worry and concern. Then I realize why. He is the reason I'm here. He kept me locked in that horrible room with nobody and nothing.

I wrench my hand from his as both of them instinctively fly to my stomach. My baby.

"The baby is fine," he assures me. "You were severely dehydrated, but you're both okay now."

No thanks to you. I force a smile instead.

"Do you need a drink?"

I nod, and he pours me a small glass of water from the jug beside the bed. He lifts it to my lips, and that first sip feels like heaven, instantly soothing my throat. I take the glass from him, and he sits back down in the chair beside my bed while I glance around the room. I'm hooked up to a drip and a heart monitor.

"How long have I been in here?" I ask.

"Just a few hours," he replies. "They want to keep you in for a day or

two, or at least until you can keep some solids down again.”

I nod.

“How do you feel?”

Like I want to cry for a year. “Not sick at least.”

“Good. Joey has packed some of your things and Max is going to bring them by soon.”

“Okay.” I take another sip of water and glance at the door.

“I’ll stay here with you.”

“I’m not going to run away.”

“I know.”

“You know because you won’t let me, or because you believe I won’t try?”

“Does it matter?”

“I’m not going to try,” I say, leaning back against the pillow and closing my eyes. “As long as you promise my baby will be safe.”

“*Our* baby is going to be safe, Kat.”

“What about me? Will I be safe too?” I open my eyes again and see his handsome features pulled into a frown.

“You won’t come to any harm,” he says coolly.

The sound of the door opening breaks the tension, and we both look up to see a doctor walking into the room.

“Ms. Evanson, you’re awake?” she says with a wide smile.

“Yes.” I smile back, thankful there is another person in here to diffuse this awkward atmosphere.

“I’m Dr. Wilcox and I’ll be taking care of you and your little one.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“And how are you feeling?”

“Much better now, thank you.”

“We’ve given you plenty of fluids, and a whole lot of good stuff for you and your baby. I expect you’re anxious to get home, but I’d like to keep you here for a day or two.”

I see the dark look crossing Dante’s face from the corner of my eye. “Whatever you think is for the best, Doctor.”

She looks at Dante and smiles. “It would be good for Kat to try to eat a little something. Would you mind asking at the desk for them to send her a light snack?”

His eyes narrow as he considers her request.

“I’d love some fries. Hot, salty fries,” I say, licking my lips and letting out a sigh.

He nods his agreement, and then a few seconds later, he disappears from the room, leaving us alone.

“You were in quite a state when they brought you in, Kat,” she says, her face full of concern. “Did nobody notice how dehydrated you were?”

“No. I was kind of tired and sleeping a lot.”

“But the baby’s father, Mr. Moretti?” she says his name like she knows exactly who he is. “He didn’t notice something was wrong?”

This would be my chance to tell her the truth. And then what? Put this lovely doctor at risk for helping me? Live my life on the run? Deprive my child of a chance to know its father. Dante Moretti will never let me go. “He’s been really busy. I haven’t seen a lot of him. But as soon as he saw how ill I was, he brought me straight in.”

She narrows her eyes at me in concern but before she can ask me any further questions, Dante walks back into the room.

“You have hyperemesis gravidarum. I’ll give you some anti-sickness medication to take home with you, but eating and drinking little and often is the key to not becoming dehydrated.”

I nod.

“And please keep a careful eye on her,” she says to Dante. “If she’s unable to keep anything down, then you’ll need to bring her back in immediately.”

“Of course,” he says with a nod.

Doctor Wilcox’s pager beeps and she excuses herself and leaves the room.

“Did she ask you if I was holding you against your will?” Dante asks.

For some reason, that makes me laugh. “Kind of,” I admit. “I think she knows who you are.”

“Well, I’m kind of infamous around these parts,” he says with a wink that makes my insides flutter. I have no idea how to survive this man.

“I didn’t tell her that you were. Even though I probably should have.”

“That wouldn’t have ended well, Kat. For anyone concerned.”

I swallow hard. “I know.”

CHAPTER 28

KAT

I spent another two days and two nights in the hospital, during which Dante did not leave my side again. But at least I feel much better and have medication to control the sickness if I need it.

I look up at the beautiful house through the car window. I completely get now why Joey sees this place as a prison.

“Are you sure you can manage?” Dante asks as I take his hand and step out of the car.

“Yes. I’m fine now. I promise,” I remind him.

He runs a hand over his thick beard.

I walk beside him toward the front door of the house, and with each step we take, a knot of anxiety builds in my stomach. The thought of going back to that room and being isolated makes me feel like bolting for the gates.

“Dante?”

“I’ve moved you to my room,” he says, because of course he can read me so well. “That way, I can keep an eye on you.”

“Okay. Thank you.” At least there’s a TV in his room. And books. And a clock. And him. And despite my brain’s refusal to accept the new status quo that we have officially lost our marbles, been Stockholmed if you will, and have fallen for the man who kidnapped us, my body is all clued in, and it shivers in anticipation.

DANTE ESCORTS me to his bedroom and places my bag onto the bed. He clears his throat. “Your things are all in here now. The closet on the end and

the bottom two drawers are all yours.”

“Thanks,” I whisper, unsure how to navigate this new dynamic between us. I’m sharing his bedroom, but I’m not his partner or his girlfriend. I don’t know what I am, other than his prisoner.

“I’ll leave you to unpack,” he says, then he leaves me alone.

It takes me a few seconds to realize that he’s left the door open. I’m not locked in.

I look around the room, waiting for the trick. Like maybe a huge alarm is about to go off to signal the prisoner has been left unattended. But nothing happens. So I summon the courage to creep toward the door, expecting steel bars to come slamming down as soon as I get within a foot of it. But, no. Just an open door.

My heart races as I poke my head outside. No laser from a sniper rifle waiting to take me out if I step into the hallway. No armed guard to tell me to get back into my cell. The hallway is empty. I could walk out of the room and nothing would stop me.

Despite that, I don’t. I go back inside like a good little prisoner and unpack my bag.

AFTERWARD, I flick on the TV, but I’m too restless to settle. That open door is calling to me. Is it some sort of test? Am I supposed to be conditioned to stay in my room now without any need for locks or bars on the windows? Or am I allowed to walk around the rest of the house?

I turn the TV off and walk toward the door again. I mean, he never told me to stay in here, did he? He just said he’d leave me to unpack. That was an hour ago and nobody has checked on me since. I stick my head out of the door again, waiting for a surprise attack.

Jesus, Kat! You are a grown-ass woman. Go walk down the stairs and speak to another human being.

I straighten my shoulders, smooth my dress over my hips, and stride out of the door with my head held high. Fake it ’til you make it, right? As I reach the stairway, one of Dante’s armed guards is walking from the opposite end of the hallway.

Shit! He’s going to call the other guards on his little radio thing he has clipped to his belt and I’m going to be pinned to the ground with a gun at my head. But he simply nods a polite greeting as he passes by.

With a renewed sense of courage, I walk downstairs. Maximo is the first person I run into, almost literally because my head is on a swivel, waiting for Dante to jump out on me any moment. But Maximo catching me if I'm not supposed to be out here is as good as the devil himself, I suppose.

"Kat? How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Um. Much better. Thanks."

"Good. Joey is in the den. She's been waiting for you to get home," he says casually before heading off down the hallway in the direction of Dante's office.

Home? That would be funny if it wasn't so tragic. I head to the den and sure enough Joey is in there with her feet on the coffee table reading a magazine. The bruise on her face is almost faded now. I have a vague recollection of talking about how she got it, but it's a fuzzy memory that I can't fully recall. At the time, I wondered if I was imagining her, but the bruise is definitely real.

"Kat?" she says, tossing her magazine onto the sofa when she sees me walk into the room. "You're back! And you look so much better."

"Thanks," I say with a faint smile. That's all I seem to be doing today, thanking people.

"Sit." She pats the sofa cushion beside her, and I take a seat.

"Your eye looks better too," I say.

She traces her fingertips over it softly. "Dante wouldn't let me come with you to the hospital because of my black eye. He said it would look bad and people would ask too many questions."

"Well, he's right. It does look bad," I say with a frown. "Did he do that to you because you helped me?"

"No. I told you that already, but you were kind of out of it."

"So, who?"

"It's nothing," she says with a shake of her head.

"Clearly not. Somebody hit you. Who? Maximo?"

"Oh my God, no." She laughs loudly. "Maximo would never. He's a big teddy bear really. He wanted to kill him, but Dante handled it."

"Kill who and handled what, Joey?"

"It was our dad, okay? He found out what I did and he hit me. But Dante stopped him and he's not allowed back in the house for a while, so..." She shrugs.

"But why? What does me trying to escape have to do with your dad?"

“Nothing, I guess, maybe he didn’t like that I tried to undermine the chosen one, you know?” She rolls her eyes. “Anyway, he was furious with Dante and he’d never hit him, so I think I got it instead.”

“He’s furious with Dante?”

“Yeah. Like sooo mad.” She shudders dramatically. “He’s even making Lorenzo come home.”

“Lorenzo? Your older brother?”

“Yep.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Bad for Lorenzo, yeah,” she says. “But Anya, his wife, will be coming too, so that will be nice.” She smiles, and I figure they share a close relationship. I know how hard it is to lose your mom so young and need some positive female energy in your life.

CHAPTER 29

DANTE

“I just saw Kat. She looks much better,” Maximo says as he takes the seat on the opposite side of my desk.

“Yeah,” I say with a sigh that shakes my bones. Even the mention of her name makes the guilt surge in my chest as though it’s going to crush me.

“You did what you had to, *compagno*.”

“The baby could have died, Max. She could have died. I just left her there.”

“You didn’t just leave her. You had Maria taking her food and keeping an eye on her.”

“She tried to tell me Kat was sick, but I wouldn’t listen. I thought it was some ploy to get my attention. If Joey hadn’t...”

“But she did and Kat and the baby are both fine. You had your reasons, D. She tried to run out on you with your kid. What if she’d made it?”

I grind my teeth and my jaw aches in protest. I don’t want to think about what might have happened if she’d managed to get away from me, so I change the subject. “We saw the baby, you know? They did an internal ultrasound and we saw it on a screen. I mean, you could hardly see anything but a tiny blob, but its heart was beating strong.”

“That must have been something.”

“It was,” I say, remembering the look on Kat’s face and how she held onto my hand as tears ran down her face. She deserves so much better than I give her. “You know why she tried to leave?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer me. He leans back in his chair and lets me talk.

“Because I told her that when I no longer had any use for her, I’d hand

her over to my men to do whatever they please. She thought that being pregnant would mean I had no use for her, because I made her believe I was only ever interested in fucking her. I used that because I knew it was her biggest fear. Not death but being used like that. I told her that to keep her in line, Max. What kind of person does that?”

“The kind of person you have to be every day of your goddamn life,” Maximo reminds me. “You didn’t know she was going to end up pregnant with your kid.”

“Stop making excuses for me,” I snap at him.

“Fine,” he snaps back. “You want me to tell you that it’s been clear you’ve had a thing for this woman from the moment she threw a baseball bat at our heads? You want me to tell you that you should have been a little more honest with her about everything so she wouldn’t have been terrified to tell you that you’d knocked her up? Because I can do that too, but none of it matters, D. All you can control is what you do from here on out.”

“She fucking hates me.” I sigh, recalling the way she looked at me when she woke up in that hospital bed. Sure, her fake smile was in place as soon as she realized where she was and what was going on, but that first few seconds when she woke up and stared at me with nothing but terror in her eyes... I don’t think we can ever recover from that.

“Have you told her about the wedding yet?”

“Fuck, no. Now is not the right time.”

“So what happens now? You got to do all that baby stuff? Could Kat get sick again?”

“She has appointments with an OB GYN in a few weeks. She’ll still have the morning sickness, but she has some meds to help with it, and as long as she eats little and often, that seems to stave off the worst of the nausea. She won’t get sick like she did before anyway. But if she can’t keep the fluids down, I have to take her back to the hospital.”

“It will all be fine, *compagno*. I know she’s pissed at you right now, but it will pass.”

“I fucking hope so, Max.”

CHAPTER 30

KAT

Lying in bed, I stare at the clock on the nightstand. I'm so tired and I want to sleep, but I'm too on edge here in Dante's bed, wondering if he's going to join me. And if he does, will he have any expectations that we can just go back to having sex every night just because I'm lying next to him. Will he still sleep naked?

I pull the cotton t-shirt down so it covers as much of my body as possible. If I fall asleep, I don't want to be pressing any of my bare flesh against him. But what if I do though? What if my body just does that in my sleep, like muscle memory? And I wake up draped all over him?

The sound of the door opening makes me hold my breath. Shit! Now he'll know I'm not asleep because I would be breathing if I was. Dammit, Kat!

I focus on him instead and listen to him as he brushes his teeth in the bathroom. Then the door closes, and I hear him undressing before he climbs into the bed with a sigh. I stay as still as humanly possibly, facing away from him. He always used to always roll onto his side and press his body against my back while sliding an arm around my waist.

But I don't feel his touch. I don't feel him move at all and a part of me misses that closeness we used to share. Instead, we both lie on separate sides in complete silence. I have no idea why it makes me feel so sad when it's exactly what I wanted.



IT'S BEEN two weeks since my stay at the hospital. Dante checks in on me

twice a day after lunch and dinner, to make sure I have eaten and I'm keeping hydrated, which I am, but other than that, I barely see him or speak to him. He comes to bed each night when he thinks I'm already asleep and we lie next to each other without touching. But on the nights when I wake up in a cold sweat from a nightmare, I feel his arms around me for a few moments as he soothes me back to sleep. Then in the mornings, he's gone again, making me wonder if the comfort of his body was just part of the dream. We are like two ghosts — existing in the same space without any connection.

I talk to Joey a lot. She is keeping me sane right now, because she is the only person I really get a chance to have a conversation with. I call my cousin, Mia, once a week, under Maximo's supervision. I haven't told her about the baby yet. It's still so early and in a lot of ways, it still doesn't feel real. I have my scan booked in four weeks' time and maybe I'll tell her after that.

I wonder how much longer I can go on living this half-life. Not knowing where I stand in the order of things. I feel like a shadow, drifting through this house without actually being in it. Because Dante is the soul of this place, and without him, there is nothing for me here. Maybe when our child is born, I'll feel like I have some purpose again? But that is still almost seven months away, and I might lose my mind before then. I need to speak to him, if only he would give me a chance to.

I wander down the hallway that leads to his study. The guard gives me a polite nod. We have been doing this dance every day for the past two and half weeks.

"Can I speak with him?" I ask.

"He's not to be disturbed."

"Can you tell him I'd like to talk to him when he has a moment?"

"Will do, ma'am."

I chew on my lip and contemplate just barging through that door and speaking to him anyway. He has no right keeping me here if he's not even going to speak to me. But the guard is huge and mean-looking and I doubt he'd let me get through that door even if the study was on fire and I was carrying a firehose.

"Thanks," I mumble and walk away.



YAWNING, I make my way along the hallway to head for bed. Joey and I just watched seven episodes of *Drag Race*, and I can barely keep my eyes open. I knew first trimester tiredness was a kicker, but it's barely nine p.m.

I hear the sound of laughter before I see them. In fact, it's not laughter. It's giggling. High-pitched and squeaky. Dante comes into view, escorting a tall, beautiful brunette with boobs so huge she looks like she's smuggling two bald men into the house beneath her dress.

He places his hand on the small of her back, guiding her into the large dining room that he barely uses. When the door opens, a chorus of laughter and shouting breaks free from the room. They're having a party. He's taking her to a party.

An overwhelming rush of anger blindsides me as if I've been hit in the chest with a sledgehammer. It's not just anger though. I'm heartbroken at his cruelty. She runs a hand over his chest and smiles up at him. Then he looks up and catches my eye. This is his chance to walk away from her and run to me, to tell me that this is all some misunderstanding and he's not about to have sex with that woman tonight. Or one of the other women whose laughter is drifting out of that room. But he doesn't do that.

He smirks at me.

Tears blur my vision as he disappears into that room with his hand on another woman's ass.

Dante Moretti can go back to hell, and if he thinks I am ever sharing his bed again, he is sadly mistaken.

CHAPTER 31

DANTE

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when I went to bed to find that Kat wasn't in our room. I guess, I deserved it after she saw me with that woman downstairs. Nothing happened, and it was never going to, but I let her think that it was.

I bang on the door of the guestroom where she used to sleep. "Let me in, Kat, or I will break this goddamn door down," I shout.

"Go to hell," she shouts back.

Fuck me, this woman is going to put me in an early grave. Using my shoulder, I drive against the door with all my weight and the wood around the lock splinters allowing me to step inside.

"Dante! What the hell?" she yells, jumping up and glaring at me.

"What the fuck are you doing in here? Did I give you permission to sleep anywhere other than my bed?" I advance on her.

"Permission?" she hisses as she pushes onto her tiptoes, her entire body vibrating with rage. "You think I need your permission to do anything."

"No, you need my permission to do *everything*, kitten. Now get your ass to bed or I will carry you there myself."

"Like hell you will," she retorts, her nostrils flaring as she stares me down. I haven't seen this side of her in weeks, and it makes my cock ache with the memories of all the things I've done to her beautiful body. Why her smart mouth gets me so worked up, I don't know, but I am a whisper away from fucking her where she stands.

"You think I would share a bed with you after you've been downstairs doing God knows what with those women?" she screeches.

There's my feral little kitten. And damn, jealousy looks good on her.

I drop my head so I can lean closer to her. Pressing my lips against her ear and making her shiver in response. “Now, Kat. Do not make me ask you again.”

“Or what?” she challenges me. Her eyes narrowed and her jaw titled in defiance.

I can’t stand the tension any longer. My need for her burns through my veins like it’s my lifeblood. I’ve tried to stay away from her. To give her some space after what I did to her. I could have killed her and our baby and the weight of that will never be easy to carry, but I can’t hold back any longer. I need her like I need air. She gasps when I push her down onto the bed, crawling over her. I wedge my knee between her thighs, spreading them open for me.

She pummels her fists against my chest so I take her wrists and pin them above her head.

“Get off me,” she hisses. “I hate you.”

“You keep telling me that, kitten, but I don’t buy it.” I run my teeth over the soft skin of her neck, and she moans softly, almost inaudibly, but I heard it and it spurs me on.

“You’re an animal.”

“I know,” I laugh darkly as I pin her wrists with one hand so that I can touch her. My hand glides along the side of her body over her t-shirt, over her ribs and the curve of her hip until I reach the bare skin of her thigh.

“Don’t,” she whispers, even as she grinds her pussy on my hard cock.

“Are you already wet for me?”

Fire flashes in her eyes. Anger mixed with a desire that matches my own. Slipping my hand between her thighs, my fingertips brush over panties. Right over the wet patch of fabric.

“Just like I thought,” I growl as I start to unfasten my belt.

“Dante, don’t,” she pants, wriggling beneath me as I work to open my zipper.

But I’m frantic for her, blinded by a desperate need to be buried deep inside her cunt because it’s been too long since I felt her. Gripping my shaft in my hand, I push her t-shirt up as I nestle between her thighs.

She bucks her hips, rubbing herself against me, or is she trying to throw me off?

“Dante! No!” she cries, and I realize it’s the latter.

I push myself up onto my forearm and study her face.

“The baby. It could hurt the baby,” she whispers.

I frown at her. Is she expecting me to buy the fact that she actually believes that? She’s a goddamn nurse, for fuck’s sake. “Us fucking doesn’t hurt the baby, Kat.”

“I know, but if you...” she licks her lip as tears fill her eyes. “If you were with those women downstairs, you could have caught something... an STI. And that could harm the baby.”

I swallow hard. I guess this is my own fault. Because that’s what I wanted her to think, right? I wanted to hurt her the way she hurt me when she tried to leave.

I slip my hand between her thighs again, tugging her panties to the side and dragging my pointer and middle fingers through her wet folds.

“No. You don’t get to do that if you were with that woman,” she whimpers.

I release her wrists and hold myself up on my forearm as my fingers circle the entrance of her tight pussy — my heaven on earth. “Since the day I met you, Kat, there has been no one but you.”

She blinks in surprise. “But —”

“Those women were here for a party. It was Mitch’s birthday yesterday and I figured they all deserved to blow off some steam after the few weeks they’ve had. So I arranged for them to meet the women here before they went to a club. I showed that woman into the room, had a quick drink with my men, and then they left.”

“You had your hand on her ass,” she hisses.

“No. I had my hand on her back.”

“It looked like her ass from where I was standing.”

“I assure you, I have no interest in anyone’s ass but yours.”

“S-so, you didn’t?”

“There is only you, kitten,” I tell her, pressing my lips over her neck and inhaling her sweet, intoxicating scent. Then I sink two fingers inside her and her walls clench around me.

“Dante,” she says my name on a breathy moan, and it makes me even more desperate for her.

“It’s been far too long since I made you come.”

“I know,” she whispers, rocking her hips, and I drive deeper inside her, rubbing her clit with my thumb.

“I missed this, Kat,” I growl, sealing my lips over hers. She opens her

mouth, allowing me to slip my tongue inside and taste her as I nudge her thighs wider apart with my knee.

I kiss her and finger-fuck her until her soft moans turn to desperate whimpers full of need and longing. My cock pulses with need, but I can't stop yet. She's on the edge, and I have missed the feeling of her coming apart around me. Her slick juices are running down my fingers as I work her into a frenzy. She claws at my skin, desperate for me to give her some release, but I hold back, drawing out her pleasure as long as I can because I need her desperate and wet and moaning my name.

When I break our kiss, she gasps for air.

"You're soaking, Kat," I whisper in her ear. "So ready for my cock to fill you, aren't you?"

"Yes," she moans.

"Yeah?"

"Yes, Dante."

"Who owns you?"

Her walls clench around my fingers and her back arches in pleasure as her orgasm rocks her to her core. "You," she cries out as I go on rubbing, massaging her sensitive flesh until the last tremors have rippled through her body.

When I pull my fingers out of her, they are slick with her release. I hold them up to her. "You see that? You see how much your cunt loves me?"

"You're an asshole," she pants, but there is a wicked grin on her face.

"You ever tasted yourself, kitten?"

Her cheeks flash with heat. "No."

I bring my fingers to her mouth. "Open," I command, and she parts her full pink lips, allowing me to push my fingers inside. "Now suck."

I keep my eyes fixed on hers as she sucks, swirling her tongue over the pads of my fingers. When I pull them out a few seconds later, there is a string of spit from her lips to my fingers, and it might be the hottest thing I ever saw.

She runs her tongue over her lower lip, cleaning herself up.

"You see how good you taste? You know now why I'm addicted to your hot little cunt and how fucking difficult it's been to stay out of you these past weeks?"

"You seemed to be handling it just fine," she retorts.

I arch an eyebrow at her. "Still pissed at me? How about I fuck that

attitude out of you?”

“Huh,” she snorts. “You could try.”

“Oh, I do enjoy a challenge,” I growl as I push myself up to my knees and reach for her panties. Fisting my hands in the soft cotton, I tear them in half so her pussy is completely exposed to me.

“Was that really necessary?” She sighs.

I hover over her, pushing her thighs apart with my own as I line my cock at her entrance. “Yes.”

“Dante,” she hisses out on a breath when I slam inside her.

“I’m not even halfway in yet. You sure you want me to try and fuck that bad attitude out of you?”

She doesn’t answer me. Instead, she stares into my eyes and there is so much defiance in them that it makes my balls draw up into my stomach. “I’m going to enjoy every fucking second of nailing you to this bed.” I roll my hips, thrusting all the way inside her.

“Oh God,” she cries out, her arms wrapping around my neck as she clings onto me while I fuck her hard enough that we will both forget all of the tension and the hurt of the past few weeks. At least for now anyway.

“You’re definitely calling out the wrong name, kitten,” I say before dropping my head and sucking one of her hard, pebbled nipples into my mouth through her t-shirt. I bite gently, and she whimpers as her back bows and her pussy ripples around my cock.

“Of course. I forgot you’re the devil,” she purrs.

I look up at her, my face inches from hers as she narrows her dark blue eyes at me. “Your devil, Kat.” Taking hold of her hands, I lace my fingers through hers and pin them above her head. “But if you hold still and wrap those legs around my waist, I’ll take you to see that other guy too.”

CHAPTER 32

KAT

When I woke up this morning, Dante was gone. He carried me back to his bed after he fucked me in the guestroom and then he made me come so many times I lost count. But despite everything that we did last night and the way he whispered softly in my ear, he's gone again, and I feel his absence even more keenly than before. I couldn't understand his Italian murmurings, but I felt the meaning behind them anyway. We were back to a good place.

Maybe I'm just fooling myself and clinging on to something that was never really there. Perhaps Dante Moretti is incapable of feeling anything for anyone but himself, because each time I get a little close to him, he seems to drift even further away. But I'm no longer going to stand by and be a spectator in my own life. I want answers from him, and I'm determined to get them.

I SHOWER and change and head straight to Dante's study. I can't keep living in this house as a prisoner, waiting for whatever crumbs of affection he decides to throw me.

The armed guard is standing at the door as usual.

"He's not to be disturbed," he says before I even ask if he's in there.

"Well, can you tell him this is an emergency and I need to speak with him urgently?"

"He's not to be disturbed," he repeats.

"Well, I'm not moving until you at least knock on that damn door and tell

him I need to speak with him right now.” I fold my arms across my chest and glare at him.

He rolls his eyes in annoyance before knocking on the door and poking his head inside the room. “It’s Miss Evanson, boss,” he says.

“I’m busy.”

“She says it’s an emergency.”

There’s a few seconds pause before he speaks again. “Show her in,” Dante says, and the giant guard steps aside and allows me into the room before closing the door behind me and leaving us in privacy.

“What is it, Kat?” Dante asks with a sigh, running his hand through his hair.

I sit on the chair opposite his desk, clasping my hands in my lap to stop myself from fidgeting. “I need to talk to you.”

“Can’t it wait? I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“No, it can’t, Dante. I’ve been waiting for two weeks to talk about this and you avoid me constantly.”

“I have a lot going on.”

“I know, but you’ve practically ignored me since we left the hospital.”

He narrows his eyes as they search my face. “So talk.”

I swallow as I try to think of what I need to say and the best way to say it.

“What are we doing here, Dante?”

He frowns, but he doesn’t reply.

“Do you even really want me here with you? Do you want a baby?”

“You know I want you here, Kat,” he snaps.

“I know that you don’t want me to leave, but that’s not the same thing, is it?”

He shakes his head in frustration. “It kind of seems like it is.”

“But it’s not,” I insist. “You won’t let me leave, but you ignore me ninety percent of the time. When we started, this was just about the sex, but I’m having your baby. I know we didn’t plan it that way and I know you wouldn’t have chosen this, but it’s happening and you can’t go on pretending that I don’t exist.”

“When do I ever pretend that you don’t exist?” he snaps.

“When you sleep beside me every night but never speak to me. When you spend all of your time locked away in your study.”

“I was giving you some space.”

“I don’t want space. I want you,” I choke out the words. But hearing them

aloud feels alien to me. How can I want this man who I so desperately want to hate. The man who turned my entire life upside down?

“You kiss away my nightmares and you fuck me like our bodies have known each other forever, but you refuse to give me any assurance about my future and what it might hold. You have never even once apologized for taking me from the only life I had and keeping me here like some pet for you to stroke and fuss over whenever the need strikes you. And despite all that, I still want you. I crave your affection, Dante, even though I know I’m a fool for doing it. So, if you don’t want me too, then please just tell me and let me go.”

He blinks at me, his eyes so dark I can barely see his pupils. Then his damn phone rings, snatching his attention. “I really need to take this,” he says.

“Of course you do,” I say with a heavy sigh before I stand up and walk out of the room. There are tears in my eyes, but I blink them away because I refuse to waste any more over that asshole.



STEPPING OUT OF THE SHOWER, I dry myself off with a soft towel before slipping into my new cotton pajamas. Joey helped me pick some out online and they were delivered this morning. I didn’t particularly feel comfortable spending Dante’s money, but what choice do I have if he insists on keeping me here and I have nothing to wear.

When I walk into the bedroom, I blink in surprise to see him standing beside the bed, shirtless and with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his suit pants.

“What are you doing up here so early?” I ask as I cross the room, averting my eyes from his toned body, because it makes me drop at least one hundred IQ points.

“You wanted to talk, right?”

“I think I said everything I had to say earlier,” I say coolly as I waft past him, but he grabs my wrist, stopping me in my tracks.

“So, maybe you can just listen?” he says in that low, growling tone that drips with both menace and sex appeal. I shiver at his touch as he yanks me close to him. “If you’re waiting for me to apologize for bringing you here that

day, Kat, it is never going to happen.”

I should have known a man like him wouldn't know the meaning of the word sorry.

“Because I don't regret any of it. And I would do it again a million times over.”

“You would?” I whisper as heat blooms beneath my skin.

His brow furrows as his eyes burn into mine. “Yes. So I am never going to be sorry for taking you.”

“Well, at least I know that now,” I say, trying to sound calm and collected while my pulse is racing.

“But I am sorry for the way I've treated you, kitten,” he whispers as he brushes a damp strand of hair back from my face. “You deserve better. I will be better.”

I blink at him, floored by his admission and his honesty, but he's not getting off that easily. “I do,” I agree. “So much better.”

“I want to do this with you, Kat. I want you here with me and not because my ego would be dented if you left, but because my life is better with you in it.”

“What about my future though, Dante? What does it look like for me? Forever your mistress, unable to leave this house?”

The fingers circling my wrist flex as he tightens his grip. “Not my mistress. You'll be my wife.”

“Your wife?” I laugh out loud because this has to be some kind of practical joke.

“My wife,” he repeats, enunciating each word clearly.

“I'm not marrying you.”

“And I'm not having my child born anything but a Moretti in every sense of the word.”

“Jesus Christ.” I try to wrench my arm from his grip, but he refuses to let me. “You're aware we're no longer in living in the '50's, right?” I snap.

“This is non-negotiable, Kat. My family is built on tradition and legacy and I will not allow there to be any doubts about the first child born of the next generation. You will be my wife by the time our baby is born.”

I stare at him, open-mouthed. He's serious. Dante Moretti intends to make me his wife — with or without my consent.

“You asked me for some answers about your future, so why do you still find a way to resist me?”

“Because this is being done to me, like I have no choice in the matter, Dante. I have no control at all.”

He sighs and releases my wrist, running his hands through his hair in exasperation. “You’re carrying my child, Kat. When you got pregnant, it changed our lives and there is no escaping that now.”

I know he has a point. Dante isn’t a guy you can have a kid with and expect to have a happy, separate co-parenting deal going on. Family is everything to him and there is no way he would allow his child to live anywhere but in the protection of his mansion. And I know that is the safest place for the son or daughter of the head of the Cosa Nostra, but it still stings that my fate is sealed.

“And what about everything else? As your wife, do I remain a prisoner here? Never able to leave?”

“No, as my wife, you will be the mistress of this house. You will be able to come and go as you please —”

“I will?” I interrupt him, suddenly elated at the prospect of some freedom.

“Within reason, Kat,” he says, his voice stern and commanding. “I will still need to know where you’re going and you will always have security with you.”

I frown at him and he narrows his eyes before he adds, “For your safety and not because I think you’ll run.”

“How can you be so sure I won’t run?” I whisper, unable to resist the challenge.

He takes a step forward until his body is pressed against mine. “Because you would never leave our child. And if you ever tried to leave with our kid, you know that I would scorch this earth to ash to bring you both back to me.”

Heat blooms beneath my skin. His possessiveness is a red flag for me, at least it should be, so why does it make me feel so powerful and protected? Why does the thought of belonging to this man make me feel safer than I ever have in my life? Not to mention the fire in his eyes when he says things like that makes me want to wrap my legs around his waist. “Is this your idea of a proposal?” I ask instead.

“Kind of,” he says with a wicked grin.

I suck my bottom lip into my mouth as I stare into his dark eyes.

He runs one hand down my side until he reaches the hem of my top. “What the hell are these, kitten?”

I look down at my new nightwear. “Pajamas?”

He arches an eyebrow. “Where did you get them from?”

“Um, that boutique you have a line of credit for. Joey helped me. I was going to ask you if I could buy them, but you were busy, and I needed —”

“I don’t care that you spent any money, Kat,” he growls, caressing my cheek. “You can spend whatever you need. I’ve been meaning to tell you to buy some new clothes, but I do care that you bought this monstrosity.”

I look at the inoffensive clothing. They are soft, brushed white cotton with a faint love heart pattern. Hardly a monstrosity.

“They cover far too much of your beautiful body and I never want to see them again.”

Oh. They do kind of cover everything except my hands, feet and head. “Well, they’re also for sitting in the den, watching TV, or going for breakfast in the mornings,” I say with a shrug. “And I kind of like them.”

He fingers the hem as his eyes trail over my body. “I suppose they may have some use then, but they’re not for my bed.” He starts to pull the top off over my head.

“I was going to watch some TV with Joey,” I offer a feeble protest even as I lift my arms in compliance.

“Max and Joey are watching a movie. She won’t mind.”

“I’m so easily replaceable,” I say with an exaggerated sigh.

He tugs my top off and throws it onto the bed before pressing his lips close to my ear. “Not to me, kitten.”

His warm hands skate down my back until they dip beneath the waistband of my pants. When his fingers brush my bare ass, he lifts his head and arches an eyebrow at me. “No panties?”

“I don’t need them with pajamas,” I murmur as heat flashes over my cheeks.

A low growl rumbles in his throat as he peppers kisses over my neck while he pushes my pants over my hips. “My naughty little kitten.”

When the soft cotton lies in a pool at my feet, Dante lifts me, wrapping my legs around his waist and carrying me to the dresser before sitting me on it.

He slips a hand between my thighs, dragging a finger through my folds and making me moan softly. “Always so wet for me,” he hisses through clenched teeth.

I run my palm over his hard cock as it strains against the zipper of his suit pants. “Always so hard for me.”

“Hmm. Always,” he growls, his lips gliding over my skin before he reaches my breasts and sucks a nipple into his hot mouth, flicking the stiff peak with his tongue as he pushes two fingers inside my pussy.

“Jesus, Dante,” I breathe as wet heat surges between my thighs. I fumble with his belt and zipper, opening them until I can reach inside and take hold of his stiff cock. Wrapping my fingers around his thick shaft, I squeeze, and he curses, curling his fingers inside me and making my thighs tremble. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I tilt my hips until his hard length is pressed against my pussy.

He grips my hair at the root, tugging my head back until my throat is completely exposed to him. My back bows as he drags his teeth over my sensitive skin, edging the tip of his thick cock inside me until I’m whimpering with shameless need.

With one arm around my waist, he holds me in place, tantalizingly close to him but still too far away.

“Dante, please,” I groan as I try to shift my hips and make him slip further inside me.

“Tell me you want to marry me, Kat. Say it and I’ll give you my cock.”

“Stop being an asshole.”

“Tell me.” He edges in a little further, and my walls squeeze him before he pulls out again.

I claw at his back. My pussy throbs and my core contracts with the need to be filled by him. “I thought I had no choice in the matter,” I remind him.

“You don’t, kitten, but I want to hear you say it anyway. Just a few words and I’ll fill your tight little pussy up.”

“No,” I bite out the word. “Just fuck me. Please.”

He skims his nose over my throat, inhaling deeply. “You have no idea how badly I want to sink inside you, Kat, but I won’t do it until you tell me what I want to hear.”

I wrap my legs around him, sinking my heels into the muscles of his ass, but he remains frustratingly steadfast. My fingernails scrape the hard muscles of his back. My skin is on fire and the ache between my thighs is so intense that I can barely think straight – and surely that is the only explanation for the words that tumble out of my mouth. “Yes, I want to marry you.”

“Good girl,” he growls as he rocks his hips and sinks all the way inside me, filling me to the hilt.

A rush of air fills my lungs as pleasure and relief sweep over my body.

“Oh, that feels so good,” I moan loudly.

“You have no idea how much I love the fact that I get to keep you in line using sex, Kat.” He laughs darkly.

“You do not,” I whimper.

“Yeah, I do. Because you’re so fucking hungry for my cock, kitten, you’ll do anything for the promise of me inside you.”

“You’re the devil, and I hate you,” I pant as I pull him closer.

“I know, *vita mia*.”

I want to ask him what he just said, but he seals his lips over mine and his tongue slides inside my mouth, silencing my question with a kiss so full of longing and fire it almost takes my breath away.

CHAPTER 33

KAT

Joey's painting her toenails when I walk into the den.

"Hey."

"Hey," I reply as I sit on the sofa beside her, picking up the bottle of nail polish she's using and inspect the label. Cherry Bomb. I smile. She's definitely a cherry bomb kind of girl, while I'm more of a pale pink or soft caramel kind. Although I'd love to be the cherry bomb type myself sometimes.

"You want me to do yours? You know it won't be long before you can't reach your toes?"

I rub a hand over my expanding stomach. "I think I'm going to get real fat." I giggle. "Especially as I'm craving pancakes and waffles every morning."

"Pancakes *and* waffles?" she asks, turning to me with a look of feigned horror on her face. "Girl, you'll be as big as a house." She laughs harder as she goes back to painting her nails. "I'm sure my brother will still look at you with that dopey-ass loved up look on his face," she says before making a fake gagging noise.

"He does not have that look," I insist, because I have never seen it. She focuses on her toes so I carry on talking. "Well, he's kind of stuck with me now, anyway, even if I do get to be the size of a house."

"Hmm."

I take a deep breath, hardly able to believe the words that are about to come out of my mouth. "Because we're getting married."

"Oh, he's finally told you about that," she says.

"What do you mean? Don't you mean he asked me?"

“Told. Asked. Same thing.”

“Except that they’re not,” I insist. “How long have you known?”

“Um. A few weeks maybe. Since he told our father you were pregnant. Once he found out...” She trails off.

“Once he found out, what?” Why do I always seem to be the last person to be clued up on anything.

“He told Dante he had to marry you or kill you,” she says it so casually as if it’s a completely ordinary thing to say and do.

“He what?”

She sighs softly before turning and looking at me. “Our dad is kind of a giant asshole. Don’t worry about it. Dante chose wisely, right?”

“So all this time, he’s been weighing up those two options?” I snap, shaking my head in disbelief.

She scoffs. “He was always going to marry you because he would never do the other thing.”

I fold my arms over my chest and frown at her. “Oh well, aren’t I the lucky one?”

“Kat, my family is not normal. This kind of shit is just how they roll. Women like us are second-class citizens. We don’t get a say in our own lives.”

My frown deepens. I don’t want that for me, or for Joey. I certainly don’t want it for my child.

“The sooner you get used to that, the easier everything will be for you.”

She goes back to her toenails, and I scowl, feeling like the rug has been pulled from under me again. This morning, I wanted to marry Dante. Even though he admitted that I had no choice, I could see a way to build some kind of life with him. But not anymore.



I STALK down the hallway to Dante’s office, barging past the armed guard and opening the door before he can react. I guess he was waiting for our usual polite exchange before he tells me the great Mr. Moretti can’t be disturbed. Not today, Satan!

Dante’s head snaps up when I storm into his office.

“I’m sorry, Boss, she just...” the guard fumbles.

Dante glares at me, his eyes never leaving mine as he tells his guard to get out and close the door. “I just told Joey about our *engagement*,” I snarl at him, ready to crawl over his desk and slap his arrogant, self-entitled face.

“And?”

I take a few deep breaths to calm my racing heart because I feel like I’m about to implode with unsuppressed rage. “And she told me all about your father’s ultimatum.”

He sighs and closes his eyes.

“So it’s true then? You had to marry me or kill me, is that it?” I shout as I take another step toward his desk, unable to keep a lid on my emotions any longer.

“It’s not that simple,” he says, his voice strained and low.

“I suppose you think I should be grateful you chose the former, right?”

He stands, pushing his chair back, but I continue.

“You gave me that whole speech about marrying me and securing my future, when you only made that choice because your father forced you to. I guess if I wasn’t pregnant with your first-born, it would have been a much easier decision for you? Just kill me and move on to the next one?”

His dark eyes narrow as he glares at me.

“And that’s kind of your MO, right? When they become too problematic, then just toss them aside like trash? Is that what happened to your last fiancée?”

His jaw ticks in annoyance. “Enough,” he says, his voice low but dripping with menace but I’m not scared of him anymore. I won’t be quiet like the good little hostage he’s trained me to be.

“Did your father give you the same ultimatum with Nicole? Kill her or marry her?”

The veins in his neck bulge as he clenches his fists by his sides.

“Did you decide to marry her first and then realize the other option was a better fit for you the night before the wedding, Dante? Is that why you murdered that poor woman?”

“I said enough, Kat,” he warns me but I’m too swept up in my anger and the deep feeling of betrayal.

“Was she pregnant too?” I hiss.

He slams his fists onto the table with such force that the entire room seems to rattle and the papers on his desk scatter onto the floor. “Enough!”

I flinch, taking a step back as I wait for him to come for me. But instead,

he sits back on his chair. “Don’t you ever get tired of this?” he says with a sigh.

I frown at him. “Of what? I’m tired of a lot of things, so you’re going to have to be a little more specific.”

“Of fighting with me on everything. Of finding something new every single day to be pissed at me about?”

I open my mouth and blink at him in shock. “Don’t you and your family get tired of finding ways to piss me off?” I retort. “You only asked me to marry you so that your father wouldn’t force you to kill me and our child instead, and I’m not supposed to be pissed about that? I’m supposed to roll over and be thankful for the fact that you are not as cruel and awful a man as you might be? Is that right?”

“My father hasn’t forced me to do anything for a long time, Kat.”

“I don’t believe you, Dante. I don’t believe any words that come out of your mouth, because every single time I find a way to make some peace with whatever the hell this thing is between us, you throw me a massive curveball.”

He stares at me, unflinching.

“But this time it feels even worse, because this time I believed you.” I wipe my eyes as they fill with tears.

His tongue darts out as he licks his lower lip.

“And now I find out that *we’re* not in this at all. I’m not in any of it. It’s just you and your family and whatever is best for the Moretti empire. So, congratulations, Dante, you have finally won. I give up. I’m defeated. You do whatever the hell you want and I will stand by and nod and smile like the perfect little wife. If that’s what it takes to keep myself around here so that I can see my child grow up, then so be it.”

His eyes darken as though what I said just pained him in some way. Before he can feed me another line, I walk out of his office. The fact that he doesn’t even try to stop me only proves my point further.

CHAPTER 34

DANTE

The door closes behind her, and I sit in stunned silence. She says I've won, so why do I feel like I just lost? Because I don't want to win with her, and definitely not like this. Seeing her so broken feels like a shard of ice slicing through my heart.

I could throttle my sister for telling Kat about my father's ridiculous ultimatum. Joey causes way too much drama around here. I need to find her something to do to keep her occupied before she drives my wife-to-be, and by default me, completely crazy.

JOEY IS in the den when I find her a few minutes later.

"Hey," she says with a grin when I walk into the room, completely oblivious to the carnage she has caused in my life today.

I take a seat on the armchair. "Why are you so cruel to her, Joey?"

She blinks at me. "Cruel to who?"

"Mother fucking Teresa," I snap. "Kat, obviously. Who the hell do you think I mean?"

"I'm not cruel to her. I'm a goddamn ray of sunshine," she snaps back at me.

"So why the hell did you tell her about Pop? About what he said about marrying her?"

"Oh," she winces as she screws the lid onto her nail polish bottle. "I didn't do that on purpose actually. It just kind of slipped out."

"Well, she's fucking furious with me about it, and she's..." I sigh.

“She’s what?”

I swallow as emotion balls in my throat. “She’s really upset. I really fucked up this time.”

“You fuck up all the time where she’s concerned. You two fight and make up. It’s kind of your thing.”

I run a hand through my hair and lean back against the soft armchair. “I don’t think I can fix this one so easily, Joey.”

“Why? What did she say?”

“She thinks I’m only marrying her because I have no choice. She mentioned Nicole. She asked me if Pop had given me the same ultimatum when I agreed to marry her.”

“Ouch.”

“Then she asked if Nicole was pregnant too.”

Joey winces. “Double ouch.”

“Exactly.” I run my hands through my hair and sigh.

“So, did you tell her the truth?” she asks, as though it would be that simple.

“You know I can’t. Not yet.”

“You don’t trust her?”

When my sister isn’t being a bitch, she’s kind of good to talk to. “I don’t know. She’s not from our world, Joey. If she knew everything...”

“I get it. But the alternative is she hates you for what she thinks you did.”

“Better than her hating me for what I actually did.”

“Maybe. But I figure if she doesn’t hate you already, there’s nothing much could change that.”

“But she does hate me, Joey.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. Of course she doesn’t. But there is an easy fix to your current problem.”

“There is?”

“Yes,” she says with a roll of her eyes.

“Then enlighten me, little sister.”

“Forget about the Nicole situation for now. Kat thinks what she thinks and she loves you anyway. So this is about her thinking that you don’t really want to marry her. So prove that you do, Dante.”

“How? She said she doesn’t believe a word that comes out of my mouth anymore.”

“So don’t speak, jackass.”

I groan and drop my head in my hands. “Stop talking in riddles, Joey.”

“You still have great Grandma’s old ring, right?”

“Yes.”

“You know that thing is magical?”

“Apparently so,” I say, feeling a flicker of hope, despite never believing such fairy stories.

“I happen to know what Kat’s favorite food is. It’s salted caramel cheesecake from Mona’s Bakery.”

I look at my watch and sigh. “They’ll be closing in an hour and I have to deal with something.”

As if on cue, Maximo walks into the room to remind me that I need to leave.

“Then I’ll go,” Joey says excitedly. “Seeing as I’m partly responsible for this mess, let me help fix it?”

“I can’t spare enough men to take you and guard the house right now.”

“Max can take me,” she says, giving him her best puppy dog eyes. “You can do your thing without him, right?”

I look at Maximo who is staring at me in bewilderment.

“This is for Kat, Dante,” Joey reminds me.

“You think you could even get there in time?” I ask her.

“If we leave now,” she says, jumping up from the sofa.

“Where the hell are we going?” Maximo interrupts us.

“A bakery,” Joey replies. “But it closes in less than an hour.”

“We’d have to take the bike,” Maximo adds, and Joey’s eyes light up like a Christmas tree.

I look at the man I trust more than anyone else in the world. “You’ll take care of her?”

“I always do, D,” he says with a frown.

“Fine. Go get me a cheesecake and I’ll ask Sophia to make the best lasagna of her life.”

“Is something big happening?” Maximo asks with a frown.

“Dante is going to propose to Kat with Grandma’s ring,” Joey says with a flutter of her eyelashes.

Maximo grins. “About time, *compagno*.”

CHAPTER 35

KAT

“Hey, Kat,” Joey says breezily as she wanders into the library where I’ve been sitting for most of the afternoon, trying my best to read but getting so distracted I think I’ve read the same chapter half a dozen times and I still can’t remember why the female character is so pissed at her boss. I bet it’s not because he’s being forced to marry her instead of killing her though.

“Hey,” I say with a faint smile.

“Dante asked if you could meet him in the dining room.”

“I’m not hungry and I’m in the middle of a really good book.”

She gives me a sympathetic smile. “I was pissed earlier. I’m so bored around here and I let my anger at my own situation cloud yours. The truth is my father might treat women like second class citizens, but my brothers don’t. They’re maybe a shade too overprotective.” She holds her pointer finger and her thumb an inch apart to emphasize her point. “And I know Dante can be a jackass, but he asked me to come get you. So?” she says with a shrug.

“And if I don’t obey his every command?”

“He’ll no doubt walk in here and carry you to the dining room himself.”

I ignore her and go back to my reading.

She sits beside me on the huge sofa, clasping her hands together in front of her. “Please, Kat? For me, if not for Dante. I promise it’s something nice.”

“Nice and your brother do not belong in the same sentence, Joey.”

“Come on,” she laughs softly, holding out her hand to me.

“Fine,” I say with a sigh as I put my book down.

I follow Joey along the hallway. There is a nervous energy about her. What the hell is going on?

She stops outside the door to the dining room and turns to me. “I know he has a really fucked up way of showing it, but Dante would do anything for you, Kat.” Then she leans forward and gives me a quick peck on the cheek before she opens the door. “Have a wonderful time.”

She walks away, and I step into the room. Dante is at the dining table, dressed in a black shirt and black suit pants. His shirt sleeves are rolled up, exposing his huge, tattooed forearms. I’m so focused on him that it takes me a moment to see the white rose petals scattered over the table and the candles that are strategically placed around the entire room. He stands when he sees me and suddenly, I feel very underdressed in my maternity leggings and tank top, not to mention the old cardigan that once belonged to my mom. Yes, that is how old some of my clothes are.

“What is all this?” I ask him with a frown.

“I believe it’s called dinner,” he says as he pulls out a chair opposite his and indicates me to sit.

I sit on the proffered chair and it’s only then that I see the delicious peace offering sitting in the center of the table. I lean over and look closely at the cheesecake of my dreams.

“Is that from Mona’s?”

“It is.”

“How did you know about my salted caramel cheesecake fetish?”

“Joey told me,” he replies as he takes a seat.

“Of course. I told her about it a while back. I didn’t realize she’d sell me out to you though.”

A flicker of annoyance flashes across his face, but when he sees my grin, it disappears. “She didn’t sell you out. She actually told me what an asshole I’ve been.”

My eyes narrow as I stare at him. “For real?”

“For real.”

“I always did like her.”

“Liar,” he says with a wink and my heart rate kicks up a notch. Why does he have to act like such an arrogant tool most of the time, when he can be like this?

“So, can I have a slice?” I ask, reaching for the knife in the center of the table.

“How about we eat dinner first? Sophia is making your favorite.”

“Her amazing lasagna?” I groan as my stomach growls loudly.

“Yes.”

“Then I can wait.” I rest my hands on the table in front of me.

“You look beautiful,” he says, his eyes narrowed as he watches me intently.

I pull at the tattered edge of my old cardigan. I feel anything but beautiful right now, but the heat in his gaze tells me he’s not lying. It makes me squirm in my seat. Dammit, I’m so easy for him.

As though he’s reading my mind, he laughs softly.

“What?” I squeeze my thighs together beneath the table.

“I love the way you blush whenever I compliment you, kitten.”

I look down at the table as my blush deepens further. “It’s embarrassing.”

“It’s adorable.”

I swallow as I allow my gaze to drift back to his. The way he’s still looking at me is doing nothing to lessen the heat in my cheeks or between my thighs. Thankfully, Sophia walks into the dining room carrying a huge dish of lasagna and breaks the spell he has me under.



PLACING my hands on my stomach, I groan softly. “I think I ate too much.”

“You barely ate any of the cheesecake,” Dante replies as he watches me from across the table.

“Because it’s bigger than my head. You should have had a slice.”

“I don’t eat sweet things,” he replies with a wicked grin. “Well, apart from you, kitten.”

I blush at his words. We’ve managed to have a very polite, bordering on pleasant, dinner, without any talk of sex or the other massive elephant in the room — our upcoming wedding.

“You just had to go there, didn’t you?” I whisper, placing my cool hand on my flushed cheek.

“I can’t help going there with you,” he says, his tone low and serious now. It makes goosebumps prickle over my forearms and my insides turn to liquid. I’m such a slave to my hormones around him, especially now that I’m pregnant. It’s as though my body is hardwired to his in some way.

I fidget with a stray thread on the sleeve of my cardigan because suddenly the air is thick with tension again, supercharged with electricity and sex. He pushes back his chair and walks to my side of the table. I expect him to pick me up and throw me onto the dining table, because that is how our encounters like this seem to end. But instead, he drops to his knees.

When he produces a beautiful emerald ring, I almost pass out. He holds it between his thumb and forefinger and the deep green gemstone sparkles in the candlelight.

“Will you marry me, Kat?”

Instead of answering, I sit here like an idiot blinking at him.

“Maybe I should have done this before,” he says with a sigh.

“It wouldn’t change the reason why you’re asking me though,” I remind him, my voice barely a whisper.

He rubs a hand over my gently rounded stomach before taking hold of my hand in his, lacing his fingers through mine. “We are in this together, Kat. Me and you. My father can go to hell for all I care. The Moretti name is an empire built on a century-strong foundation of blood and tradition. It’s my legacy. Everything I have and everything I am is saturated in the misery of others and the perpetuation of outdated traditions. This house, and everything in it, was built and bought with blood-soaked money,” he says, rubbing the pad of his thumb over my knuckles as he stares into my eyes.

“Everything in my life has been given to me because of who I am. Everything except you, kitten. You are the only thing in my life that I have ever truly chosen for myself. So yes, I want to marry you because I want to honor my family and my mother’s memory, but I also want you to stand by my side until the end of days.”

I swallow the swell of emotion that surges all the way from the pit of my stomach to my chest. This is the first time I have ever seen even a hint of anything resembling vulnerability in him. He’s trying, right? Fighting against his true nature to give me something of what I need from him. And shouldn’t that count for something? Because the truth is, I feel more cherished in his darkness than I have ever have in anyone else’s light. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

The thick vein pulses in his neck before he looks up at me again with dark eyes full of fire.

He slides the flawless stone onto my finger. “It’s beautiful,” I tell him.

“It was my great grandmother’s.”

“Really?” Suddenly, this moment feels even more intense than before.

“She believed it had magic powers,” he says with a wry smile.

“Good magic, right?”

“The best,” he replies before giving me a soft kiss on the lips.

It doesn't take long for the kiss to turn into something more, as it always does with him. And as he slides his tongue inside my mouth, he wraps me in his arms. He stands and then pulls me up from my chair before lifting me onto the table. And without breaking our kiss, he sits in my now vacant chair.

His hands slide over my skin, pushing off my cardigan before placing it on the chair beside him and that simple act makes my heart swell. He usually tosses my discarded clothes with no consideration for where they end up, but I told him once that was my mother's cardigan and how much it means to me.

“Time for my dessert,” he growls as he breaks our kiss and starts to pull off my leggings and panties.

“You're so unoriginal,” I giggle as I wriggle my ass to help him.

“You won't be saying that when I've got my tongue in your sweet cunt, kitten.” He pulls my clothes off over my feet and tosses them unceremoniously over his shoulder.

“Maybe.” I thread my fingers through his hair as he bends his head and begins to trail soft, featherlight kisses from my knees up my thighs. His hot breath dusts over my skin, making me shiver.

“You smell so good, Kat,” he murmurs against my skin as he pushes my thighs wider apart until I'm spread open for him. “So fucking wet for me too.” He drags one finger through my folds, and I suck in a quick breath.

Then he clears the plates off from behind me with one sweep of his arm before pushing me back on the table. He lifts my legs by my ankles, planting my feet on his shoulders as he pushes my thighs wide. “Such a sweet *fica*,” he breathes against my skin, his voice so low and husky that it vibrates through my body.

His tongue dances over my skin, working his way to the top of my thighs before he flicks it lightly over my pussy, making my back bow in pleasure.

“Dante,” I groan, tugging his hair harder, trying to direct him to where I want him to concentrate his efforts.

“So impatient for my mouth, kitten.”

“Because you're teasing me,” I protest.

“I'm not,” he laughs softly. “But we're not in any hurry. Let me take my time with you because after I eat you right here, I'm taking you to bed to fuck you all night.”

“You’re a devil,” I whimper as he lazily runs his tongue along my wet center before swirling it over my sensitive clit. My hands fall from his hair as the warm waves of pleasure roll over me, and I rock my hips until stars flicker behind my eyelids.

If he promises to do this for the rest of our days, then maybe marrying this devil won’t be such a bad thing after all.

CHAPTER 36

KAT

I shuffle from one foot to the other, chewing on my fingernail as we walk down the hallway. Today is the day Lorenzo Moretti finally returns home, along with his wife, Anya. Since his proposal a week ago, Dante has been attentive and caring and we are in a better place than we've ever been. But I'm a little apprehensive about the impact his older brother's return will have on our relationship.

"Stop," Dante orders, removing my hand from my mouth and entwining my fingers in his to stop my fidgeting.

"Sorry, I don't understand why I'm so nervous," I admit in a whisper.

"Hmm." He releases my hand and stuffs his into his trouser pockets instead.

The stories about Lorenzo Moretti and his love of violence have been around for as long as I can remember. Dante, however, isn't the slightest bit nervous. Distracted maybe, but not nervous. I know he's the head of the family, but it's no secret that Lorenzo was supposed to be. However, for some reason, Dante took over their father's mantle instead. Rumor has it that Lorenzo was furious at the time and has never forgiven his father and brother for the slight.

We come to a stop in the hallway, a few feet from the huge oak doors that lead into the main house. I glance sideways at Dante but he's staring intently at the doorway, as though he's worried he might miss his brother's return. Joey comes out of the den and stands beside us, rocking on the balls of her toes as she stares at the door too.

The door swings open, and Joey squeals, "Anya," running forward and enveloping the tiny blonde woman who just walked through the door in a

hug.

“Guisseppina,” the giant bear of a man beside her, who I assume is Lorenzo, says gruffly.

“Oh, quit it,” Joey snaps at him as she releases his wife from her arms.

Lorenzo’s dark eyes drift to his brother and then to me and his face is so unreadable that it makes me feel a little queasy. He looks a lot like Dante with his thick dark hair and his beard, but he’s bigger than his younger brother and his jaw a little squarer. There is something about his eyes that makes me shiver. He is the meanest looking man I have ever seen in my life. I have no idea what to expect from his arrival, but I do know that I feel his presence in this house already.

“Dante,” he says, his tone low.

“Welcome home, brother,” Dante replies as he takes hold of my hand again and squeezes gently. “Anya, it’s a pleasure to see you.”

“You too, Dante,” Anya replies with a faint smile. She keeps her head up but her eyes down as she replies to him and something about that feels off. She is so tiny she reminds me of a little bird. Lorenzo has his hand on the small of her back, but his whole aura is possessive and controlling. She doesn’t meet his eyes either and it’s unnerving.

“This is Kat,” Dante says.

“It’s lovely to meet you both,” I say with as warm a smile as I can manage with my stomach twisted up in knots.

Lorenzo gives me a faint nod and then whispers something in his wife’s ear. That’s when her eyes finally meet mine, and she smiles at me, her face transforming completely. She is stunningly beautiful and absolutely captivating.

“Shall we leave the ladies to become acquainted?” Lorenzo says, addressing Dante now.

“Yes,” Joey says excitedly, grabbing hold of Anya’s hand. “We have so much to catch up on.”

Dante gives me a soft kiss on the forehead. “I’ll see you before dinner, kitten.”

Then he releases my hand from his, and he and his older, incredibly mean and moody looking brother, disappear along the hallway to his study, leaving us ladies alone.

As soon as Lorenzo is out of sight, Anya walks toward me. “Kat?” she says with only a trace of a Russian accent. “It’s so wonderful to meet you.”

Then she pulls me into a hug, and I wrap my arms around her slender frame. She smells like candy floss.

“Let’s go. Sophia has made us some cocktails in honor of your return.” Joey giggles like a carefree twenty-one year old for once. “Alcohol-free for you two obviously,” she adds.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Anya says, clasping one of our hands in each of hers as we head off to the kitchen.

“Do you not drink, Anya?” I ask.

“It doesn’t agree with my medication,” she replies with a sweet smile.

“Oh,” I reply, not wanting to ask what medication that is because it feels too much like prying.

“So I hear we have a wedding and a baby to prepare for?” Anya asks excitedly, changing the subject.

“Kat still won’t set a date,” Joey groans, making Anya chuckle. “And she won’t let me choose any bridesmaids dresses or buy anything for the baby.”

“I’ll set a date soon, but I don’t want a fancy event. And as for the baby, it’s too soon to be buying anything yet. I’m only ten weeks.”

“Ugh,” Joey says with a dramatic roll of her eyes.

“Patience, my dear Guiseppina,” Anya says softly, and the sweet smile Joey gives her in return makes my heart swell in my chest. They have a beautiful relationship and it gives me hope for my own future in this family. Although I’m not sure I like Lorenzo, I think his wife is going to become one of my favorite people.

CHAPTER 37

DANTE

Lorenzo's heavy footfall echoes around the empty hallway as we head to the study. My study. It could have been his. It should have been.

"Is he here? In Chicago" he barks, breaking the silence.

"No, he's gone to the Keys for a week with his new side piece," I reply, aware he's referring to our father. "No fatted calf for the prodigal son today."

Lorenzo snorts.

I open the door and step aside to allow him in first. As soon as it's closed behind us, he turns to me, and in here where there is just the two of us, he lets the mask slip. There is so much sadness in his eyes that it makes me feel like the air is being sucked from the room.

"Is it back?" I ask him.

"More aggressive this time."

"I'm so sorry, brother."

He nods, defeated.

"I'm sorry you had to come back." After Anya's cancer went into remission, Lorenzo decided to take a couple of years off and has been living in Lake Como with his wife for the past two years.

"It was inevitable. We couldn't stay out there in paradise forever. Besides, the best specialists are here," he says with a shrug. "And learning of your upcoming wedding and the fact she's about to become an aunt has given my Anya a huge boost. So, thank you."

I could tell him that his wife and the woman for whom he believes the sun sets and rises is going to be okay. That she'll beat it again like she did before, but we both know that may not be true and that's not what we do for each other. He wouldn't appreciate false hope. Lorenzo is a realist. So instead I tell

him the only other truth that matters right now.

“I’ve fucking missed you, Loz.”

“Missed you too, D,” he says, throwing his arms around me.

We hug each other fiercely, and I choke up as the years we’ve spent apart fall away and I remember how good life is when this man is at my side. Despite my father’s best efforts, he could never drive a wedge between us. I would die for him in a heartbeat and he would do the same for me. There has always been the three of us — him, Maximo and me. There is no ego between us. None of us care who the outside world believes us to be. We are equals in each other’s eyes and we always will be.

“I’m sorry I was away for so long, brother,” he says as he steps back.

“You don’t have to apologize. You did what you had to do. Maybe one day, I’ll run off to paradise for a few years and leave you to run things.”

“You only have to say the word,” he replies with a smirk, but I know that he means it.

“So, what do you think of Kat?”

“Any woman that can handle you must be something special. Do you want to marry her? Truly?”

My answer comes without hesitation. “Yes.”

“Then I’m happy for you both.”



“YOU THINK THIS WILL BE OKAY?” Kat asks as she smooths down the fabric of the blue wrap dress over the slight curve of her stomach. “It’s not too tight?”

“It’s only dinner in the kitchen like we have every night, kitten,” I remind her.

“No, it’s not *just* dinner. It’s dinner with your brother, who terrifies me.”

I slide my arms around her waist and press her close to me. “You have no need to be terrified of him, and even if you did, I’ll protect you.”

“I think he doesn’t like me,” she whispers.

“He doesn’t like most people, but I promise he likes you. Did you enjoy talking to Anya?”

“Yes, I did.”

That doesn’t surprise me. Most people light up like that when they talk

about my sister-in-law. She's one of those people who can put anyone at ease.

"But she was..." She chews on her bottom lip as she stares into my eyes.

"She was what?"

"Different around him? Like not herself?"

"Oh," I say with a nod of understanding. "I probably should have told you something about their dynamic."

"Their dynamic?" she blinks at me.

"Did you see the diamond necklace she wears?"

"Yes. It was stunning."

"It's not a necklace, kitten, it's a collar."

She frowns. "A collar? Like for a pet?"

"No, a collar for a submissive. Lorenzo is a dominant and Anya is his submissive as well as his wife."

"I-I mean I've read about them in books, but how does that work? Does he control everything she does?"

"I don't know, Kat. It's their personal business, but I do know they're both very much devoted to each other and very happy."

"Okay," she says with a frown.

"What?"

"She just seemed a little afraid of him when they were together in the hall."

I laugh out loud at that because the thought of Anya being scared of Lorenzo is one of the funniest things I've ever heard. I mean it shouldn't be — he makes grown men shit their pants — but Anya has him wrapped around her little finger. "Trust me she isn't the slightest bit afraid of him. They have a power exchange, yes, and he controls a lot of aspects of her life, but it's a consensual one, which they navigate together as a couple. Sometimes, they will appear like any other couple, and other times, like today, he takes control. He often does when they're in a new or unfamiliar situation, like meeting you today. You should talk to her about it."

"So are they into BDSM?" she whispers.

"No idea. It's none of our business what they do in private." I laugh at her curiosity because it is so nice to have these open conversations with her after months of frustration and miscommunication.

She wraps her arms around my neck. "So, you and Lorenzo are good then?"

“He’s my brother, Kat. Of course we’re good.”

“Well, we both know that simply being related by blood does not guarantee a happy and respectful relationship,” she says, and I don’t miss the tears pricking her eyes as she blinks them away.

I brush her hair back from her face. “Whenever I see your brother again, I will thank him for bringing you to me.”

That makes her blush, and that makes my cock twitch. “There are rumors about you and Lorenzo though, did you know that?”

“That I stole his crown and we hate each other?” I ask, aware of such idle gossip.

“Yes.”

“You should never believe everything you hear, kitten.” I press a kiss on the tip of her nose, and she sighs contentedly.

“Are there any other rumors that aren’t true that I should know about?” she whispers.

“Sophia will have dinner waiting,” I tell her, avoiding the question and taking her hand. “And if you think Lorenzo was terrifying earlier, then wait until you see him when he’s hungry.”

She laughs and the sound is so carefree and sweet that it makes my heart sink. One day, she’s going to find out the truth about the other rumors, and I wonder if she’ll forgive me for keeping it from her.

CHAPTER 38

DANTE

I roll my neck until it cracks. The sound makes Lorenzo glance at me. He's been back home for over two months, and I love having him here, but he's not as involved in our family business as he was. Anya has medical appointments that he needs to attend with her.

I expect he can feel the tension in me too, even from a few feet away, but I can't fucking help it. This whole situation with Kat and the baby, and how unreasonably pissed it's made our father, who calls me about setting a wedding date at least four times a week, has me on edge. Not to mention that we still haven't figured out who was behind the shootout at the restaurant a few months earlier. I need to do something to work off this rage that is burning through me. If she wasn't five months pregnant, I would work it all out with Kat. Lock us in my bedroom and fuck her seven ways to Sunday until I feel better.

"...so, I told him to go fuck himself," Tony says, directing my attention back to the two men sitting opposite. My father sent them here because he thought we might need extra manpower.

I don't particularly like either of the men sitting in front of us, but they are remnants from my father's glory days, and I keep them around because he asked me to. Despite the fact that they are annoying assholes whose egos are way too big for their position in life, they get the job done when necessary.

This isn't a private meeting and the door to my study is open. I stare out into the hallway, waiting for an excuse to show these two assholes out of my house. I almost smile when she appears, standing in the open door, wearing the pale blue overalls that Joey bought for her, and despite my protests that they were hideous, they actually look cute on her.

After the four-month scan, we chose a room for the nursery and she's been decorating it for the past few days. She has a streak of white paint on her nose, and fuck me if she doesn't look goddamn adorable.

Her eyes lock on mine, and the corners of her lips curl up slightly, as though she's about to offer me one of her beautiful, genuine smiles.

"And then I told him to go fuck her too," Tony adds, and both he and Elmo laugh loudly. Elmo has the most annoying laugh I've ever heard in my life – like someone is strangling a fucking hyena. The noise offends my ears, but Kat's expression changes in an instant.

Her face turns so pale the smudge on her nose no longer stands out on her tanned skin. Her lip trembles as she stands there, one hand on the door and the other frozen in mid-wave. If that wasn't enough to raise my hackles, the wet patch spreading across the crotch of her overalls, turning the pale fabric dark blue, makes my heart start to hammer in my chest. What the hell?

My hands ball into fists as they rest on the arms of the chair. I'm about to go to her, but suddenly as though she's found the strength to move again, she turns and sprints silently from the room.

I look to Lorenzo. Did he see that too?

His face is unreadable, but he gives me a subtle nod. Yes, he did see. So I'm not crazy. Something in this room has just terrified my strong, stubborn wildcat.

Elmo and Tony are still too preoccupied with laughing at their own wit to notice that the atmosphere in the room has changed dramatically in the last five seconds.

I push myself up from my chair, and the sudden movement draws their attention.

"Everything okay?" Tony asks.

I glare at him, my nostrils flaring as I draw in a breath through my nose. "I just need to take care of something real quick. I'll be right back," I grind out the words before I walk out of the room.

Kat disappears up the staircase, and I make my way after her. I call her name, but that makes her run faster. She heads straight for our bedroom, closing the door as though a simple piece of wood might keep me from her. When I walk into the room after her, she spins around, her face wet with tears.

"N-no," she stammers, taking a few steps backward. "D-Dante, don't. P-please. I p-promise I-I won't r-run away." She's sobbing now as she

continues walking backward until she bumps into the huge wooden dresser.

I cross the floor to her in two strides. Her entire body is trembling, and the thought that I am somehow the cause of this fear is abhorrent to me.

“Kat, why did you run away? What happened downstairs?”

“Dante, please, I’ll be good. I’ll do whatever you say. I’m sorry,” she pleads, her eyes wide as she babbles at me.

Placing my hand on her arms, I grip her firmly, narrowing my eyes as I search her face for some sign of the usually strong and rational woman I know. “What the hell is going on, Kat?”

“Don’t l-let them take me. I promise not to r-run.”

“Who? The men in my office?”

She nods.

My heart is fucking breaking right now. I’ve never seen her like this despite all the shitty and dangerous situations I’ve put her in. Adrenaline thunders through my body. I drop my voice until it’s barely a whisper. “What did they do to you, kitten? Tell me.”

She shakes her head. “No, Dante,” she gasps, her chest heaving with the effort of her words. “I can’t.”

I cup her chin in my hand, my thumb pressing on the curve of her jaw until she stares at me. Her blue eyes swim with unshed tears. “You have to tell me, Kat. Tell me so I can repay them for any hurt they caused you.”

She blinks at me. “Y-you don’t know?”

“Nothing those men have ever done to you has been in my family’s name. I swear to you on my mother’s grave.”

She still doesn’t speak.

“Kat?” I ask, my tone firmer now.

“My scar,” she whispers, and a wave of indescribable rage washes over me, almost knocking me from my feet.

“They were the ones who carved a word into your skin?” I hiss.

She looks at the floor, and I tilt her head up so I can look in her eyes. “Tell me.”

“Yes,” she says as she glares back at me now, some of that fire I admire in her flickering amidst the shame and fear. “It was *whore*.”

“What else did they do to you?” My teeth are bared because I can barely contain the anger that is burning through my veins like it’s my lifeblood. This is about way more than what she’s already told me.

“They took me,” she says, her voice trembling. “I was leaving the

hospital after a double shift. We'd had three RTAs. I didn't notice their van. They kept me ch-chained in a basement for two days. I think they would have killed me, but I escaped."

I suck in a lungful of air and force myself to keep staring at her. I want to look away because I can't stand to see how much this is hurting her, but I owe her more than that. If I'm asking her to bare her soul to me, I at least owe her the courtesy of looking her in the eye while I do it.

"What did they do to you?" I ask again.

"Dante, I can't..." She closes her eyes.

I brush her tears away with the pad of my thumb. Sliding my hand to the back of her neck, I press my forehead against hers, as though somehow it might allow her to read my thoughts and let her know that she can trust me with this. "Whatever it was, it stays in here. Just me and you," I say quietly.

The deep breath she takes ripples through her entire body. "They raped me," she whispers. "They held me down. Over and over. Not just..." She chokes on a sob. "But e-everywhere. One of them carved that word into my back while he was inside me and the other one laughed while he did it."

My blood burns white hot. I have to force myself not to run from this room and crush their skulls with my hands right now.

"Then they..." Her breath stutters, and her eyes fill with so much emotion that it's killing me to keep looking at her.

"Breathe. It's just you and me," I say through clenched teeth, trying to keep my voice calm and soothing while my insides rattle with rage.

"They peed on me," she mumbles, her pale cheeks flaming with heat. "But they laughed. The whole time, they laughed at me. Like what they were doing was just a big joke."

"They won't be laughing as soon as we go back down there," I snarl.

Her eyes widen in horror as she tries to wrench herself free from my grip. "No." Her lip trembles as she says the word. "I can't go down there."

"Yes, Kat. You can. Get yourself cleaned up and then we go back to my office."

"I can't, Dante. Please," she pleads. "I promise never to run again..." She sobs now as she struggles in my grasp until I loosen it slightly. She thinks this is a punishment? "Please don't make me face them," she begs me as she stares into my eyes, tears flowing freely down her cheeks again.

It would be all too easy to wrap her in my arms and promise her that she's safe. A part of me would like to tell her that she never has to see those two

sick fucks ever again. But life isn't that easy. Strength is never that easy. "You have to."

She shakes her head.

I tuck her hair back from her face. "These are the men who haunt your dreams, Kat. You have made them into monsters — powerful monsters. But they are not. They are simply men — weak, pathetic men."

She blinks at me, her eyes deep pools of fear and uncertainty.

"I will hold your hand every second if you need me to. Come with me and let me show you how powerful you truly are."

She wipes the tears from her cheeks. "I'm not powerful. I just literally peed my goddamn pants. You are the one they'll be scared of, not me. Can't I just stay up here?"

I cup her face in both of my hands now. "You have no idea how strong you are, kitten. *You* will go in there and make those men tremble with fear, and not because I'm by your side but because you are equally powerful standing alone."

She blinks at me, her long dark lashes fluttering against her cheeks. "I am?"

I press my forehead against hers again, pulling her closer until she wraps her arms around my waist. "You are the only woman who has the power to bring me to my knees."

"Dante," she whispers my name, and the way she does it makes my heart ache. Her arms tighten around me and then she's silent, letting the enormity of what I just said hang uncomfortably between us for a moment, before she breaks the tension again. "But I peed my pants."

"I know."

"I feel so embarrassed."

I kiss her forehead. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about. You need me to help you get cleaned up?"

"No. I can do it myself."

My eyes narrow as I search her beautiful face. "I'll wait right here. Okay?"

She swallows and then gives me the faintest nod. "Okay."

I HAVE a view of the study from here although I can't see inside because the blinds are partially drawn and the sunlight bounces off the windowpane,

obscuring the glass. But I know *they* are in there. Lorenzo won't let them leave no matter how long he has to wait for my return.

The shower stops, and a few seconds later, Kat emerges in a white towel. Her hair is piled on top of her head and her tanned skin glistens in the sunlight coming through the windows. She used to be so pale because she worked nights and rarely left the house, but she's been spending so much time in the gardens these past few months. And fuck me, she is beautiful.

I nod to the bed where I have laid out one of the new dresses Joey and Anya helped her choose.

"Thank you," she says quietly while I turn back to the window and allow her to dress without my eyes on her.

When I turn around a minute later, she's fully dressed and smoothing the fabric of her dress over her hips in that way she does when she's nervous. Crossing the room, I take her hand in mine. "You ready?"

"No," she says with a faint smile.

I brush her cheek with my knuckles. I could pretend that this isn't going to be difficult for her. I could wrap my arms around her and whisper promises in her ear that this will be a walk in the park, but that is not who I am. And that's not what she needs right now. "They will never hurt you again. No one will ever hurt you in this house, Kat. Understand?" I tell her, my tone harsh and clipped.

"Yes."

"Then let's go." I stride out of the door, my fingers laced through hers as she follows me. Her hand trembles in mine, and I squeeze it tighter.

The sound of Elmo's annoying laugh echoes down the hallway as we get nearer the study, and she falters. "Dante, I c-can't," she stammers.

I push her against the wall, one hand on the back of her neck and the other still holding onto hers. "Breathe," I command.

She sucks in a breath and stares into my eyes.

"Which one of them carved that word into your skin?" I growl.

"Not him," she whispers. "Not the one with the crazy-ass laugh."

"But he hurt you too?"

She bites her lip and nods.

"Come." I pull her with me and walk quickly down the hallway because if I don't get my hands on those scum-sucking little cunts, I will fucking explode.

As we reach the door and she hears both of their voices, she squeezes my

fingers but then she tugs her hand free from mine.

She's going to run. And I can't say I blame her after what these animals did to her.

But she doesn't run. She strides into the room all on her own. My fucking tiger. I walk behind her, closing the door.

"Ah, you're back," Lorenzo says, his eyes narrowed as he tries to read the situation.

"Yes. I went to find Kat to introduce her to our colleagues. Have you met my fiancée and the mother of my child?"

Elmo and Tony turn in their seats, smiling, as they look at me and then her.

"Pleasure to meet you, ma'am," Elmo says.

Evil fucks don't even recognize her.

"Actually, I think we've met before," Kat says. Her voice trembles slightly, but I have never been so fucking proud of her.

Now... they recognize her. Tony's mouth drops open, and Elmo's eyes widen to the size of dinner plates.

I slip my arm around her waist and pull her to me. Letting them know that she is mine. Letting them know they will never see the light of another day.

"Is that so?" Lorenzo asks, leaning forward in his seat, his hands steeped beneath his chin.

"Yes," Kat replies as she glares at the two useless sacks of shit sitting across from her. Now they are the ones trembling with fear. "It was kind of a memorable few days for me. I'm surprised you don't recall."

"W-we..." Elmo stammers.

"You know my new sister-in-law?" Lorenzo asks with a scowl.

"It was b-before —"

"We had no idea who she was... who she'd be," Tony interrupts Elmo's babbling as his eyes dart around the room, looking for a weapon or something to defend himself with.

He won't find either of those things. He could be holding a semi-automatic in his hands and he still wouldn't have a hope in hell. Nothing will protect him from the vengeance I'm about to take.

"You didn't know who I'd be?" she yells as she steps toward the desk, placing her palms flat on the solid mahogany. Her legs tremble and her voice falters, but she goes on. "It shouldn't matter that I'm about to become Dante Moretti's wife. It shouldn't matter whether I mean nothing to him, or

everything. You have no right to do that to anyone. Every woman is someone's daughter, someone's future partner or wife, someone's mother or sister or best friend. Who do you think you are that you can just take someone and do...?" The breath catches in her throat as she forces out those last words.

"What the fuck did you two do?" Lorenzo barks.

"It was just a bit of fun," Tony says, his eyes wide and pleading as he turns to Kat, trying to appeal to her sweet nature as a last-ditch attempt to save his skin. "Right?"

I'm filled with pride as she reaches across the desk and slaps him across the face so hard that his head snaps backward. "Fun! You kidnapped me. You raped me. You tortured me for two days. You think a single second of that was anything but a living hell for me?" she shrieks.

"Breathe, my little wildcat," I whisper in her ear, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her back. She shudders against me. "I'll take care of them for you now."

"They laughed at me," she says. "They laughed when I fought back."

"Rest assured, they will never know a moment's joy for the rest of their very short and very miserable lives, Katerina," Lorenzo snarls as he glares at the men in our office with such ferocity that I'm surprised they don't wither under his gaze alone.

CHAPTER 39

DANTE

After I took Kat to the den to be with Joey and Anya, I called Maximo and told him the plan for dealing with Tony and Elmo. Then Lorenzo and I escorted the two sick fucks to the room in the basement. It's concrete and soundproof and perfect for such occasions. The room is bare but we won't need anything except the drugs, the knife and the large glass bottle of water that Maximo just brought in with him.

Tony and Elmo kneel on the cold floor, trembling with fear but knowing better than to beg for their lives. All they can hope for is a quick and relatively painless death, which isn't going to happen.

"You sure you don't want me to handle this, D? You can go be with Kat," Maximo says.

I shake my head. "I need to hear them suffer the way that she did."

"Okay, *compagno*," he replies as he takes off his suit jacket and hangs it on the hook on the back of the door. Elmo and Tony shuffle back on their knees at the sight. Maximo's reputation as an unhinged psychopath who enjoys gouging out eyeballs and flaying people while they're still alive is well known and entirely deserved. But he's not about to touch them. Not yet anyway. They're going to do most of the damage themselves.

He takes a packet of blue pills from his pocket. "Four each?" he asks me.

I nod while Tony and Elmo cower as Maximo approaches them.

"Open your mouth," he snarls to Elmo who clamps his lips together and shakes his head.

"We didn't know, Dante. He gave her to us, man. He owed us and he gave us her as payment. He's the guy you should be going after. We were just doing our job," Tony pleads.

I hold up my hand, stopping Max momentarily.

“Who gave her to you?”

“Leo. Her brother,” he says as though I should know this piece of information.

“And since when do you two take women as payment instead of cash?” I snarl, aware of the irony because I did exactly the same thing when I took her too.

“Your father knew. He was fine with it as long as we cleaned up any mess we left behind.”

“Pop knew about Kat?”

“No, he just knew we took the girls and had fun with them.”

“He would never let you leave a loose end like that,” I snarl.

Tony shakes his head as snot runs down his face. “We were supposed to kill her.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“I thought we had. She was almost gone. I thought someone had found her and dumped her for us.”

I roll my neck until it cracks, trying to calm down before I lose my shit. Leo Evanson just made it back to the top of my list of people to kill. But I’m not surprised by my father turning a blind eye to what Elmo and Tony used to do to women. Not given what I know about him.

I nod to Maximo, and he continues with our original plan, grabbing Elmo’s jaw and squeezing so tightly his mouth is forced open before he tosses four pills inside.

He sputters and coughs as Maximo holds his mouth wide.

“Can one of you pass me the water,” Maximo asks.

Lorenzo picks up the bottle from the floor and takes it over. If I get too close to either of those sick cunts right now, I might rip out their throats and that would be far too easy a death.

Unscrewing the cap, Lorenzo pours water into Elmo’s open mouth before Maximo clamps it shut again. Then using two fingers, he massages Elmo’s throat until he swallows the drugs down.

“Now you,” Maximo says to Tony, “open wide.”

Realizing he has no choice, Tony allows Maximo to toss the pills inside before Lorenzo pours in some water. Once he’s swallowed, Maximo forces his mouth open anyway, stuffing his fingers inside to make sure that he swallowed them all.

“What the hell did you just give us?” Elmo asks.

“Viagra,” I reply.

“W-what? Why?” Elmo snivels.

“Strip, assholes,” Lorenzo barks at them.

“Why?” Tony starts sniveling now too. “What are you gonna do to us?”

“Strip or I will remove your clothes for you,” Maximo snarls.

The two of them start taking off their clothes under the fierce glare of my older brother and my best friend, and once they are naked, Lorenzo forces them to kneel again.

“What are you gonna do?” Elmo cries as he looks at me, as though I might be the one to show him a little mercy.

“What we’re going to do is more merciful than what you did to Kat,” I tell him. “You see, there were two of you when you raped her and you violated her while she cried and begged you to stop, but there’s only one of each of you.”

They blink at me in confusion.

“You’re going to do to each other exactly what you did to her,” I tell them. Elmo retches, but nothing comes out, while Tony pisses himself. “One of you will hold the other one down and you will fuck his ass until he’s bleeding and crying. And when he begs you to stop, you’re going to carve the words *SICK FUCK* into his back. It’s up to you two who gets to give and who gets to take.”

“N-no, please.” Elmo shakes his head as saliva drips from his chin. He’s smaller than Tony and is no doubt aware he’s the one about to be raped. “You can’t make us do that.”

“You just swallowed four viagra, fuck-face. Lorenzo so much as taps his foot on your cock and you’re gonna be as hard as iron. But you know, if those tablets don’t work...”

Lorenzo passes me the bottle of water and I smash the neck of it against the wall, leaving a jagged edge protruding. “Or if I think one of you is taking it easy on the other, I’ll just do the job myself with this.” I hold up the bottle.

“Those tablets should start kicking in soon. So while we wait, you two can decide which one of you is going to fuck the other in the ass,” I tell them as I lean back against the wall with my arms folded over my chest. A few seconds later, Lorenzo and Maximo join me.

For the first few minutes, neither Tony or Elmo does anything, but soon, they start getting twitchy as self-preservation kicks in. I guess they start

feeling the affects of the pills because they jump to their feet and begin to circle each other.

“Who do you think is gonna be lying face down in that dirt getting fucked in the next few minutes, D?” Maximo asks me.

“My money is on Elmo.”

“I dunno, you know. He’s a wily little fucker. He might just get the better of the big guy,” Maximo says.

Elmo and Tony can hear us talking, but they remain focused on each other, circling like a pair of dogs primed to fight. It’s Elmo who strikes first, dropping his shoulder and running into Tony and almost knocking him on his ass. But Tony grabs him and takes him down. Then the two of them slug it out for a few minutes, each of them trying to top the other until eventually Tony has Elmo pinned to the ground.

“Told you,” I say to Maximo who shrugs his response.

“Tony, come on, I’m your kid’s godfather, man,” Elmo wails as Tony keeps him pinned to the floor.

Tony looks at me, tears in his eyes even as the stimulation and the drugs have his cock hard. I hold up the broken bottle again. “It’s your choice.”

“I’m sorry, buddy,” he growls as he rams his cock into Elmo whose screams for mercy echo around the small concrete room.

“Did Kat scream like that?” I take the knife from Maximo and walk over to the two men on the floor and pass it to Tony. “Carve those fucking words into his back and make it fucking hurt, because if he’s not crying and bleeding all over this floor in agony, I will make both of you feel pain like you have never even imagined.”

He takes the knife from me and starts to carve the words into Elmo’s skin. Elmo screams and struggles, but almost all of the fight is gone in him — for now.

I stand back against the wall with Maximo and Lorenzo and listen to the screams of agony mingled with the pleas for help and mercy. I wonder how hard my beautiful fiancée fought and cried when these sick pieces of shit violated her.

When Tony is spent and has to take a breather, Elmo crawls away to the corner of the room, shivering and crying.

“Hey, Elmo, how would you like to make this a fairer fight?” Maximo asks as he pulls a syringe from his jacket pocket hanging on the door.

“What is it?” Elmo wipes his bloodstained face.

“Pure adrenaline, buddy. A shot of this and you’ll feel like you can bench press a tank.”

Elmo nods frantically while Tony starts sputtering. “No. You said. You said if I...” he shouts, his eyes darting between me and the man on the floor he just brutally raped.

Maximo sticks the needle into Elmo’s arm and stands back as we wait for the effects to take hold. It doesn’t take long before he’s powering across the floor where he dives on top of Tony and exacts his revenge in exactly the same way.



IT’S four hours later when we leave that basement. Four hours where we watched two men humiliate and torture each other in a desperate attempt at self-preservation. Hope is a powerful thing. Give someone a glimmer of it and they’ll do almost anything to keep it alive. They suffered in ways I’ve never made anyone suffer before, and the kicker was they did it all themselves. Elmo killed Tony in the end. Jumping on his skull until his brains were all over the floor. And when he was lying spent and bleeding and broken on the floor, Maximo put him out of his misery by slitting his throat. But it still wasn’t enough for the pain they caused her.

“I’ll take care of that mess,” Maximo says as we walk along the hallway.

“Thanks, *compagno*. And finding Leo Evanson just became our primary focus. You got that?”

“I’ll get on it.”

“How you feeling, brother?” Lorenzo asks as he puts an arm around my shoulder.

“Like it wasn’t enough,” I say with a sigh.

“It was. They will never hurt her again and you will help her heal whatever they broke. Now go wash their stench off you and take care of your woman.”

CHAPTER 40

KAT

Dante brought me to the den to sit with Joey and Anya after I left his study earlier. He never told them anything but they could tell by the state I was in that something was wrong. So I ended up telling them about my ordeal two years ago. I've never told anyone before today. Not even my doctor when I went for tests after. Not even my old boss, who I used to have Margarita Tuesdays with every single week since we left college. Not my cousin, Mia. Not Leo. I kept it all to myself. Convinced that the shame was mine to carry.

Those men ruined my life. I left my job. Stopped seeing all of my friends. I moved out of my beautiful apartment because I couldn't afford it any longer. Cut myself off from every single person who had ever meant something to me. When I had to take a job to pay the bills, I chose one that would bring me into as little contact with other people as possible. I rarely left the house. I was a ghost. A shell.

Until Dante.

Talking to Anya and Joey felt surprisingly cathartic. They didn't pity me or make me feel ashamed. They listened and held my hand and now I wish that maybe I'd had the strength to tell them sooner.

I came up to bed a few minutes ago. I haven't seen Dante, Lorenzo, or even Maximo since this afternoon, and I know it's because they will be torturing and killing those two men. But I don't care. I have no compassion for them at all.



I'M STILL awake when Dante comes to bed a few hours later. He climbs in beside me, smelling of fresh shampoo and soap.

"You still awake, kitten?" he asks softly.

"Yes," I whisper and then I'm wrapped in his arms as he strokes my hair and whispers things half in Italian, half in English that I don't fully understand.

I weave my fingers through his hair and pull his face close to mine as I wrap one leg around his waist, rubbing my pussy against his hard cock.

His handsome face furrows in a frown. "I have something to tell you."

"What is it?"

"The reason those men took you..." His eyes narrow as he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. "It was your brother."

Somehow I suspected Leo was involved all along but when such thoughts entered my head I always dismissed them too quickly before they could ever take root. Because the thought that what happened to me had anything to do with my own brother is too unthinkable. "Leo? But why?"

"He owed them some money."

"And?" I mean he owed a lot of people money.

"When he couldn't pay, he offered them an alternative."

Tears sting my eyes. "Me?" I whisper.

"I'm sorry, Kat. I have no reason to believe they were lying to me."

I shake my head as tears run down my cheeks. "I guess you were right about me being his most valuable asset after all, right? Just something for men like you and my brother to trade like poker chips," I snap as anger and injustice and betrayal burn through my veins.

I see the pain in his eyes and I know he doesn't deserve to bear the brunt of my rage right now, but Leo's betrayal hurts me more than I can bear and I can't direct these feelings at the man who deserves them.

"You are the most precious thing in the world to me, Kat. I would die before I ever let anyone harm you."

I look into his dark eyes and despite where we started, I believe him right now.

"I want to forget about it all. I don't want to go to sleep with these thoughts in my head, Dante."

Knowing what I need, like he always does, his hand slides beneath my t-shirt where he traces his fingertips over my scar. "Those men will never hurt you again, Kat."

“I know.”

He presses his lips over my throat as he rocks his hips so lightly against me, causing his cock to rub softly against my pussy.

“Please don’t be gentle with me, Dante. I can’t stand it.”

“Why?”

I choke down a sob that comes at me from nowhere. “I’m hormonal and emotional. Right now, I can’t tell the difference between ownership and affection, or desperation and love.”

“Maybe there is no difference. The world isn’t always black and white, kitten.”

“I know, but I’m afraid,” I whisper.

“Of what?”

“Of falling.”

“If you fall, I promise to catch you.”

My heart blooms in my chest at his words even if he only means that for right now. But then his face changes, and he stares at me with eyes full of concern. “You want to exorcise some demons with me instead, kitten?”

I don’t know what he has in mind, but I am all for doing that. “Yes.”

He pushes himself up onto his knees, taking my hand and pulling me with him. “Get on your knees and face the headboard,” he commands in a soothing voice that makes my insides melt like butter.

I do as he tells me, maneuvering into the position until I’m kneeling on the bed, facing away from him. He moves behind me until his chest is pressed against my back. He slips my t-shirt off over my head before wrapping one hand around my throat and yanking my head back so that it’s resting on his shoulder. Then he slides his other hand over the curve of my hip, pulling me close.

His hot breath dances over my skin as he peppers soft kisses over my neck. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” Despite everything he is, he showed me today that I can count on him.

“Good girl,” he soothes, and suddenly the hand on my throat slides to the back of my head until he’s gripping my hair at the roots. He tugs lightly as his free hand dips between my thighs and his fingertips brush over my clit.

“Dante,” I whimper as waves of pleasure roll through my body, even as I know what’s coming next — the demons he wants to exorcise.

“I’ve got you, kitten,” he says against my ear right before he pushes my

head down, bending me over until my cheek is resting on the pillow. My heart rate almost doubles.

Dante rubs a soothing hand over my back while he keeps me pinned down with his other one. "It's okay," he whispers as he goes on rubbing my back, from my shoulder blades down to my ugly scar and back again, until my muscles relax.

When my breathing evens out, he releases his grip a little, but it's only to slide his hand from my head to the back of my neck, and I tense again.

"There's only me and you here, Kat," he assures me as that hand from my back slides down to my ass and he squeezes my ass cheek before sliding his fingers through my wet folds. I force myself to breathe deeply even as my brain fogs with confusion, trying to drag up those old memories of the last time I was held down like this. And I can't stop them now. I can't focus on Dante's hands just the memories and the terror.

My entire body starts to tremble as I shiver with unforgotten fear, until he's leaning over me, his warmth settling into my bones and his hot mouth at my ear. "I'm not going to hurt you, kitten," he growls. "And the next time you have a memory of being bent over and held down, it will be me you think of." He presses soft kisses over my shoulder blades as he edges his cock inside me and my muscles relax around him.

"All you'll remember is how good it feels when I fuck you. How much your pussy loves to come on my cock," he goes on talking to me while he fucks me, and I whimper as the memories dissolve like salt in hot soup, until all I can see, hear and feel is Dante.

His voice affects me in ways I can't even describe, as though he has a direct line to the essence of my being. He makes me believe everything he says is true. And my body molds to his instinctively, like we are perfectly tuned to the same frequency. "There's no before me and you. There's only us. And I will never hurt you. I will never let anyone touch you ever again. You understand me?"

"Yes," I gasp as he drives into me harder and a stream of wet heat rushes between my thighs.

"That's my good girl. Now I'm going to hold you down and fuck you, kitten, and the only thing you'll scream is my name when I make you come."

He pushes himself up, one hand still on the back of my neck pressing my face into the pillow and the other one holding onto my hip as he rails into me.

"I can get inside you so fucking deep like this, Kat. I'm gonna be bending

you over every piece of furniture we own.”

I groan as pleasure rolls through me in a long, undulating wave and my body goes lax, melting into the soft mattress as I give him complete control. Until he ups the ante again.

He runs a finger along the seam of my ass before circling my tight hole, and my entire body tenses once more. “Let’s face all those demons,” he rasps in a husky voice that is filled with emotion and longing and self-control.

“I can’t,” I whimper as I try to pull away, but I’m impaled on his cock and held down by his powerful hand, and there is nowhere for me to go.

“You can, kitten,” he growls as he slides the same finger down to my folds, coating it in my arousal before he starts toying with my asshole again.

My heart is racing. Blood is rushing in my ears as my body teeters between the pleasure that he’s still bringing me and the terror of what he’s about to do.

“I’ll never give you more than you can take,” he assures me as he edges the tip of his finger inside me until I feel the sting of him breaching me. “But you have to relax a little.”

I will my muscles to release and let him inside because I know that’s all it will take for him to make even this feel good. But I can’t let go of that final part of myself. Because then, he will have everything, and I will have given my soul to the devil himself.

He leans over me again, peppering kisses between my shoulder blades, trailing lower until his lips dust over my scar, and I shudder.

“Every single part of you is perfect, *vita mia*,” he says between kisses. “Every single part of you already belongs to me. So you can let go my little wildcat, because I’ve already got you.”

Holy fuck! Dante Moretti’s dirty talk might be some next level filth, but when he speaks like this, from his heart, it’s like he reaches inside my soul and speaks directly to that part of me that nobody else has ever been able to reach. I press my face into the pillow, letting out a long, slow breath as my body loosens again, and I push my hips back a little, taking the little control he will allow, until his finger slides in a little deeper.

“Good girl,” he soothes as he rocks his hips into me, pressing the tip of his cock against my G-spot, making me moan with pleasure and allowing him to slide his finger a little deeper.

He carries on taking it slowly, edging his finger in and out as my body adjusts to the overwhelming feeling of him taking both my ass and pussy at

the same time. There is no pain now, only hot, fierce pleasure that makes me needy for more of him.

“I can take more,” I whimper.

“More?” he growls and then adds a second finger.

“Holy shit,” I gasp as he stretches me wider, but the feelings that are powering through my body are nothing short of euphoric.

Dante goes on fucking me, his hips and his fingers setting an exquisite pace that keeps me dangling on the edge of oblivion. “You going to come for me, kitten? Come on my cock while I’m fucking your tight little ass with my fingers?”

“Yes,” I wheeze.

My orgasm comes slowly at first, ripples of tingling electric pleasure pooling through my core. Dante fucks me through it until the pressure becomes too much, like a river that has been held back by a dam for too long. I scream his name as I experience the most intense climax I’ve ever had in my entire life. It gushes out of me, soaking the two of us and the bedsheets.

“Oh fuck,” he groans, finally letting go of the back of my neck so he can grab hold of both of my hips as he nails me to the mattress. I’m so boneless and spent that the only thing holding me up is him. Pleasure still skitters around my body as I listen to the wet sound of his skin slapping against mine as he takes what he needs. He comes with a roar of my name, holding on to me tightly as he grinds out his release.

When he’s finished, I lower myself to the bed, lying on my side as I gasp for breath. I’m wet and sore and spent and overwhelmed with so many emotions I don’t know how to process them all at once. Closing my eyes, I fight to hold it all together.

“I’ll be right back,” Dante says, but he sounds so far away, like he’s in another room or on another plane of existence. Because there is only me here. Just me in this darkness when my eyes are closed. I’m alone.

Alone? For the first time in two years, I am alone here in that space between sleeping and waking. No monsters. No demons. No flashbacks of memories that I want to bury. It’s just quiet and still. Then a wonderful fluttering in my lower abdomen reminds me that I will never be alone again.

“I’m going to clean you up, Kat.” I open my eyes as he begins to wipe between my thighs with a warm washcloth.

“We made a mess,” I whisper as I snap back to the real world.

“We sure did, kitten.”

“The sheets,” I groan. They are soaked. They’ll need changing but I’m too tired to move.

“We’ll just sleep on the other side of the bed.”

Then he dries me with a fluffy warm towel. “I can do that,” I offer, feeling a little too vulnerable suddenly.

“I know, ” he says as he continues drying me. Then he tosses the towel onto the floor before climbing over me and lying on the other side of the bed. “Come here.” Taking my hand, he pulls me to him, away from the wet patch on the sheets until I’m resting my head on his chest.

He wraps his arms around me, stroking my hair and running his fingertips softly over my side and my growing belly.

Years of anger and rage and frustration and sorrow pour out of me as I soak his chest with my tears. And he just lets me. He doesn’t tell me everything is okay, or try to make me feel better. He doesn’t talk or shush me. He just lets me be.

He might never say those words that I am so desperate to hear from him. But even if he never tells me that he loves me, I feel it. Since the day we met, I have always felt more protected and cared for by him than any man who has ever actually professed to loving me. And that is enough.

So right here, in the arms of the devil himself, I find a peace that even the heavens couldn’t rival.

CHAPTER 41

DANTE

I wake up early and she's still wrapped in my arms, her head nestled into the crook of my shoulder and her leg draped over mine. She cried for almost an hour last night before she finally fell asleep exhausted. I was worried I might have pushed her too far, but she clung to me so tightly I figured she just needed the release. Looking down at her, I smile at her beautiful face. Her pink lips are settled into a subtle smile. My kitten turned into a wildcat. I'm so fucking proud of her. She faced down all of her demons yesterday and conquered them all.

Glancing at the clock, I groan inwardly as I remember I have a call with my father. He's riding my ass constantly about setting a date for the wedding, and I have been avoiding his calls for over a week, until he finally pinned me down to a specific time he could video call me. I should squeeze in a quick workout before I speak to him. Burning off some energy before I have to deal with him is always a good idea. But I can't bring myself to get out of this bed and leave Kat's warm body. I kiss her head, and she stirs, her eyes fluttering open.

"Morning," she says and stretches.

"Good morning, kitten."

She looks up and smiles at me and now I am only interested in one kind of workout. I roll on top of her, holding myself up so I don't crush her swollen belly and our unborn child.

"Are you okay?" I ask, a question so loaded with meaning that those words don't feel enough.

"Yes. In every way," she breathes, snaking her arms around my neck and pulling my face close to her.

I press my mouth over hers, licking the plump bow of her lips until she opens them and allows me inside. I kiss her like a man starved for oxygen and she is my only hope for breath while she threads her fingers through my hair, pulling me closer for more.

When I sink inside her a few moments later, it feels like coming home. She moans, and I swallow the sound as I refuse to let her up for air. There is something otherworldly about fucking this woman. I will never tire of the feeling of her pussy being stretched by my cock. The sweet relief of being inside her and knowing that no man will ever make her feel like this again. No one will ever make her moan his name the way she does mine. I have never cared about that before. The moment I touched Kat, I knew I would never allow another man to do so ever again.

She's mine. I thrust deeper, claiming her over and over again until she falls apart around me.



MY HEAD IS bent over the accounts from one of the casinos when there is a soft knock at the door. A second later, my guard opens it and allows Kat inside.

I can't help smiling at her.

"I'm sorry. You're busy. I did tell him it wasn't urgent, but he knocked anyway," she says, her cheeks flushing pink as she looks back at the door closing behind her.

"I can always make time for you, kitten," I tell her, holding out my hand for her to come straight to me instead of taking a seat.

She walks over to me, and I pull her to sit on my lap, wrapping my arms around her waist and pressing my face into her hair. "You smell good," I whisper.

"You always say that." She laughs softly. "But I just smell like a regular person."

I shake my head. "You smell like... chocolate..." I nip her shoulder blade through her dress. "And sin."

"Well, I can't say I've ever smelled sin." She giggles and squirms as I trail kisses over her neck. "But the chocolate will be my cocoa body butter."

"Hmm," I murmur as I go on kissing her throat.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“What is it?”

“The wedding,” she whispers, and that certainly grabs my attention. Her crystal blue eyes are locked on mine and for once, I can’t get a read on her.

“What about the wedding?”

“I-I was thinking maybe I’d like to wear a beautiful dress? And have a bouquet? And maybe a small party here at the house?” she asks with a pleading smile, as if I would refuse her anything.

“Whatever you want,” I say, brushing her hair back from her face.

“I know I said I didn’t care about any of that stuff, but actually... if this is going to be the only time I ever get married —”

“It will be,” I interrupt her, unable to hide my annoyance at that particular statement.

She just smiles at me and carries on talking. “Then I want it to be memorable. I want to have a first dance and listen to you make a toast. I want chocolate wedding cake with vanilla frosting. I want to feel beautiful and special for one day...”

“You are both of those things every minute of every damn day, Kat.”

“So can we set a date and start planning, then?”

“You set a date within the next two months and let me know when it is. Take my credit card and buy whatever you need. I will be there in my tux with my toast ready.”

“You don’t want to help plan any of it?”

“As long as you’re there, I don’t care what we do. But please let Joey and Anya help you because they have been driving me crazy with questions.”

“Of course. I would love their help. They’re better with color schemes and stuff than I am anyway.”

I kiss her forehead and she sighs contentedly.

“And Dante?” she adds softly.

“Yeah?”

“I might have to leave the house to get a dress and maybe look at some flowers.”

My heart sinks in my chest. Is this what this is really about? Is she going to try to run?

“You can come too, except for the dress part obviously because you’re not allowed to see the bride before the wedding because it’s bad luck. But Joey and Anya will want to come, I’m sure, and Maximo could come along,

too, if that would make you feel better? Or Lorenzo, but I don't really think it's his thing," she rambles on.

"Why are you so nervous, kitten?"

"Because I know you don't want me to leave the house. Or least I know you'll be worried that I'm trying to run away or something, but I'm not. I swear to you, I just want a nice dress to disguise this huge belly." She pats her round bump for emphasis.

"You can go dress shopping. But I need to know in advance where you're going and when you'll be back. You, Joey, and Anya will have armed escorts wherever you go, regardless."

"Thank you." She throws her arms around my neck and kisses me. Then she bites on her lower lip, and I know something else is coming. "Can we go baby shopping too? I know we can buy stuff online, but I just want to go into the store and see all the cute baby clothes," she pleads.

"You want to take the girls baby shopping as well? Will this be the same day?"

"I suppose we could, but actually, I meant us. But I know you're busy. I can go with Joey and Anya."

I hadn't even considered taking her for any of that stuff and suddenly I feel thoughtless. "I'll clear an afternoon this week and we can go then. How does that sound?"

"Perfect," she squeals excitedly and I can't help smiling at her.

She seems different somehow. Lighter?

"Oh, and one more thing," she whispers.

"Yes?" I ask, wondering what the hell she's going to push for now.

"Just so you know, I do want to marry you. And not because I have to, but because I-I... care for you a lot, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

She didn't say she loved me even though it seemed like she was going to. I'm an impatient man, but I can wait for that. "I'm glad to hear that, kitten."

CHAPTER 42

DANTE

“If I’d known this was all it took to get you to smile like that, then I’d have brought you here way sooner,” I tell Kat as I slide an arm around her waist.

“I always smile,” she replies, giving me a soft nudge in the ribs.

I trail my fingertips over her cheekbone. That is true, but she’s practically glowing today. “Yeah, but not like this.”

“Maybe baby shopping with you has just become my new favorite thing in the entire world,” she says with a contented sigh. “I mean, everything is just so damn cute.”

She picks up a tiny white romper with a baby elephant on the butt and holds it up to me. “I mean look at that. How adorable is our baby going to look in this?”

“They certainly will,” I agree with a nod as my damn cell phone rings. I scowl at the interruption. I cleared my afternoon to do this with her and told everyone I’m not to be disturbed.

“It’s okay. You can take it,” she says softly. “I know you’re busy.”

“I’m sorry. It will just take a minute.”

“I’ll give you a little privacy. I’m just going to look at the blankets,” she says as I take the cell from my pocket.

She goes to walk away, but I grab her wrist and shake my head. “Don’t need any privacy from you,” I tell her. “You don’t leave my side.”

She rolls her eyes but she’s still smiling at me like I’ve just hung the moon for her. I’ve rented this entire store for the afternoon and there is only me, her, and the store manager here, but I’m still not taking any chances with her safety.

It's Lorenzo's name flashing on my cell and I answer the call as Kat leads me over to the blankets section. "Everything okay?" I ask him.

"Hey, I know you're busy with Kat, but I just need to run something by you real quick."

"Shoot."

"That night at Little Cesar's when Mitch was shot?"

"Yeah?" We still don't know why those three kids burst in and tried to shoot up the place.

"*He* was there, right? Sal?"

He refuses to call our father by that title any longer. "Yeah?"

"Did he have a woman with him?"

"No, he was on his own that night. Why?"

"I was looking into those punks and the only thing that stood out was that one of their sisters went missing a week before, so I did a little digging."

"And what does that have to do with Pop?"

"She was eighteen. Brunette. An orphan. You know his kryptonite?"

"So she was his type, Loz. Anyone with a pulse is his type," I remind him, hoping that his hatred of our father is clouding his judgment.

"Yeah, but she'd just started working at that coffee shop he goes to every afternoon. I spoke to one of the other baristas and after a little persuasion, he said that Sal took something of an interest in the kid. He used to roll up in his Bentley every day and she was flattered and would flutter her eyelashes at him. One day, she just didn't show up for work and they assumed she'd left. But a few days later, the cops showed up and started asking questions about a missing girl."

"Fuck," I snarl.

"Yeah. I know it's thin, but..."

"Our father is a piece of shit."

"It wouldn't be the first time he's got rid of a problem like that, would it? Maybe she said no? Maybe she changed her mind? Maybe he just got a little... rough?"

"Fuck, Lorenzo."

"I know."

"And you think her brother and these other kids either found out or at least suspected that he had something to do with her disappearance?"

"They all grew up in the same foster home together. They know going to the cops would have been pointless. What other choice did they have?"

I swallow the bile that burns the back of my throat and then Kat looks at me and smiles and I'm reminded that I have so many other things going on in my life right now. Things that demand and deserve so much more of my attention than I currently give.

"So, what do you want to do?" Lorenzo asks.

"She got any other family?"

"No. Just her and her brother. Foster parents died in a house fire shortly after she turned eighteen."

I take a deep breath, screwing my eyes shut. "So there are no loose ends?"

"None that I can find."

"You're a fucking bloodhound. You know that? I fucking missed you."

"I'm sorry I was away so long."

"Don't be."

"We leave this then? You have the wedding and the baby coming. No good can come from opening up this can of worms with him."

"I know, Loz. But why does it feel so fucking wrong?"

"Because he's an evil son of a bitch, D. We know that better than anyone. We confront him and what? Finally put him down after all these years? Because as much as I despise the man..."

"I know," I agree. The thought of killing our own father is equally abhorrent to us. Despite everything he's done, it's as though we're conditioned to respect him. It was ingrained into us from such an early age.

"So, it's done?" Lorenzo says.

"Yeah."

Kat holds up a blanket with baby elephants for me to look at and I nod my approval.

"I'll let you get back to your afternoon with Kat and we'll talk later."

"Lorenzo?" I say before he ends the call.

"Yeah?"

"What was her name?" We at least owe her that.

"Megan." He ends the call, and I slip my cell phone back into my pocket.

"Everything okay?" Kat asks.

I wrap my arms around her and kiss her forehead. "Yes."

"Can we buy all the baby elephant stuff?" she asks, resting her cheek on my shoulder. "It's all white so it's gender neutral and it's just too cute for words."

“We can buy all the baby elephant stuff. I’ll even get you an actual baby elephant to go with it if that makes you happy?”

She shakes her head and wrinkles her nose. “I hear they poop a lot and I think we’ll have our hands full with this little one.” She rubs her hands over her stomach and I slide mine next to hers.

A second later, something nudges my hand. “Did you feel that too?” She laughs as she looks down at her belly.

“Was that the baby?”

“Yes,” she breathes, placing her hands over mine and pressing lightly until I feel another nudge against my palm.

“That’s your daddy, little jelly bean,” she says sweetly, and I get the sense she talks to our kid all the time, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard her before.

Daddy. It makes me feel so many emotions that I didn’t expect — fear and worry as well as a sense of hope and peace that I have never experienced before in my life.

Standing here with her in the middle of the empty store, feeling our baby kicking, I wonder how the hell my life has managed to change beyond recognition in just over a few months. And it’s all down to this woman right here.

CHAPTER 43

KAT

For the last six weeks, I have thrown myself into wedding plans. Dresses. Flowers. Cake. The church. The guest list, even though nobody I know is on it. It consists entirely of Dante's family and friends, which is fine with me. I don't have any friends. The only family I did invite was Mia, but she'd couldn't come all the way from Boston because her husband, Brad, is kind of a dick who never lets her go anywhere.

The irony of that is not lost on me – I mean my husband to be is kind of an asshole who kidnapped me, and who doesn't let me go anywhere either. But it feels different with Brad. He's so mean to her, cruel even. I have never even seen him so much as hold her hand affectionately. Mia is a warm ball of sunshine and I have no idea how a grumpy dick like Brad ever managed to snag her. I guess he must have been charming once.

"Are you ready?" Joey's voice startles me, and I realize I'm staring into space.

I look down at my beautiful white gown and smile. "Yes."

"You look amazing. I know I told you that a million times already, but you do," she says with a grin as she links her arm through mine.

"So do you. That green really suits your coloring. I have a feeling Max is not going to be able to take his eyes off you." I give her a nudge in the ribs.

"Kat!" she shrieks with laughter. "You know you would get both Max and me killed if Dante or Lorenzo heard you say that."

"Well, they're not here," I say with a shrug. "They're on their way to the church. And I've seen the way you look at him."

"Yeah, so he's hot." She rolls her eyes, and we head for the door. "But he's my brothers' best friend and you know how crazy close they all are. He

would never breach their trust like that.”

“I suppose,” I admit.

“Anyway, this is your day. Let’s get you hitched.” She laughs as we go outside to the sleek black limousine that’s waiting for us to take us to the church. Anya is my bridesmaid too, but she’s been feeling a little unwell and so she went ahead with Lorenzo. So it’s just Joey and me and our security.

I LEAN BACK against the seat, one hand resting on my bump and one under my chin as I stare out of the window. It’s rare I get to leave the house and whilst I understand why, it’s nice to be out and I will enjoy every single moment of it. But I have memorized the route to the church and this isn’t it.

“Hey, we’re going the wrong way,” I turn to Joey and frown.

“No, we’re not,” she says with a dismissive shake of her head.

“We are. He should have turned left back there.”

“It’s fine, Kat,” she says with a sigh, but suddenly something feels off.

I look at one of the guards. “Can you ask the driver why he’s not going directly to the church, please?” I ask him.

“We’re going the right way, ma’am,” he replies coolly.

My heart rate kicks up a gear, and I swallow hard as I look back to Joey who now seems to be acting a little shady. “Joey, they’re going the wrong way.”

“Relax, Kat,” is all she says, paying more attention to her manicure than to me.

Has she just been pretending to like me all this time, while secretly plotting my demise? And super villain that she is, she’s chosen my wedding day to do it.

“I’ll relax when we get to the church. Everyone is waiting for us.”

“I know. We’ll be there soon.” She looks out of the window.

“Joey, please? Tell me what’s going on.”

It must be the tone of my voice that makes her take pity on me. “Dante has a little surprise for you. Relax.” She places her hand over mine reassuringly.

But my brain is already in overdrive. What kind of surprise? Is this what happened to his last fiancée? Was she all happy thinking that she was about to spend the rest of her life with him before he killed her? Am I being driven out to the middle of nowhere? Will he do it himself or ask one of his minions

to do it for him?

Holy shit! Breathe, Kat. Dante would never do that. He wouldn't kill his own fiancée right before their wedding.

Except that he would. I place my hands over my stomach protectively. I wonder if Nicole was pregnant too?

"It's just here on the left." Joey sits forward in her seat and I realize she's speaking into the intercom. A few seconds later, the car swings into the forecourt of a hotel.

I look out of the window and my racing heart almost bursts out of my chest. "Mia?" I shout as I see her waiting patiently. Dressed in a stunning yellow dress that makes her look like the Hollywood movie star that she was born to be.

One of the guards opens the door and she peers inside cautiously until she sees my smiling face and almost dives into the car to get to me.

"Kat!" she shrieks as she sits beside me and wraps me in a warm hug.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I sniff as tears well in my eyes.

"Don't you cry and ruin that make-up, young lady," Joey chides.

I wipe my eyes and hug Mia again before introducing her to Joey, and it appears the two of them have spoken numerous times while keeping their little surprise a secret from me.

"So how did you get here?" I ask her.

"Dante flew me out here on his jet. I landed about two hours ago. He wanted it to be a surprise so I stayed at the hotel instead of coming to you."

I can't believe he did that. I didn't even know he had her number. But of course he did. He researched me well before he kidnapped me. "I'm so glad you're here," I tell her, squeezing her hand in mine.

"I couldn't miss my favorite cousin's wedding now, could I?" she says with a wink.

"Was Brad okay with you coming?"

"I can handle Brad," she replies as she settles back in her seat. "Is Leo still not around?"

"No. I haven't heard from him for almost a year now," I say, and a wave of sadness washes over me. Leo might be a pain in my ass, but he's still my brother.

"That's such a shame he's going to miss your big day." she say, flashing me a look of sympathy.

I don't tell her that Leo would be about as welcome at our wedding as a

dose of gonorrhoea.

CHAPTER 44

DANTE

I take Kat's hand and lead her to the dance-floor, a sea of faces watching us as we prepare to have our first dance. Suddenly, I'm regretting allowing her to plan every aspect of this wedding with no input, because if she makes me dance to One Direction or a country music ballad, I might never forgive her.

I slip my arms around her waist and pull her as close as I can, but our child growing inside her is making it increasingly difficult to get her body as pressed up against mine as I'd usually like. I have had to be way more creative when I'm fucking her too, because I can't stop doing that every single chance I get.

She loops her arms around my neck and the opening bars of "At Last" by Etta James begin to play.

I smile at her as I move her around the floor to a chorus of clapping, sighing and cheering. "I love this song."

"I know. Joey told me. I love it too. She said you used to listen to it with your mom."

"Hmm." I kiss her forehead. "I was worried you were going to make me dance to Harry Styles or Taylor Swift."

"Hey, Taylor is an icon."

She rests her head on my shoulder. I press my lips against her ear. "Have I told you how beautiful you look today?"

"Only half a dozen times, so not nearly enough." She laughs softly.

"I am the most envied man in this room, kitten."

"I don't doubt that for a second, Mr. Moretti," she purrs.

"Only because I have you, Mrs. Moretti," I tell her, and she shivers in my

arms.

“Well, I’m pretty sure half of the women in this room would trade places with me in a heartbeat because you are looking pretty hot yourself in that tuxedo.”

“Half of the women in this room are related to me,” I remind her.

“Yeah, so I’m talking about the other half, obviously,” she says with a wicked grin.

“Wife or not, I will still fuck that attitude out of you,” I whisper in her ear.

“I’m counting on it, now stop talking and listen to the song.”

I slide one hand to the back of her neck, gripping her possessively as Etta James sings that last line. It’s perfect for us.

As soon as the song is over, the floor is filled with our guests who join us for the next one. It’s then that I feel his hand on my shoulder, and I bristle.

“How about a dance with your father-in-law?” my father says to Kat. And because she is a nice person, who has no idea what a piece of work my old man really is, she goes to take the hand he is offering her while giving him one of her killer smiles.

I yank her back before he can touch her. “You ever lay a finger on her and I will crush your skull, old man.”

His face twists in confusion and anger, and I pull Kat behind me as she stares at me, bewildered.

“Who do you think you’re talking to, *ragazzo*?” he snaps.

“Just stay the fuck away from my wife.”

I turn around to face Kat and wrap my arms around her again.

“What was that about?” she whispers.

“Nothing for you to be concerned about, kitten.”

She doesn’t believe me, but she doesn’t push me any further. Instead, we dance to a slow song, and I bury my face in her hair as I try to forget about my former fiancée the reason I hate my father so much.

CHAPTER 45

KAT

My cheeks are hurting from smiling so much. Despite this not being in any way the wedding that I'd imagined for myself, it's been an incredible day. Dante has been charming and attentive. I finally met his half sister, Toni, and if I thought that Joey was a whole ball of trouble it was only because I hadn't met Toni. She is funny as hell and she teases Dante like no-one else I have ever met.

Dante's friends and extended family have been so welcoming. Aside from him threatening to crush his father's skull for asking to dance with me, which was weird, there has been no drama at all.

We cut the cake. We had our first dance where he held me close and looked into my eyes like I was the most important person in the world. And even if I'm not, even if he'll never love me the way that I want him to, in that moment I felt it. I will remember this day with nothing but a smile for the rest of my life.

The only sad part was when Mia had to leave early. She made up some excuse about not being able to stay over because of work, but I know it was probably more to do with Brad.

"Your dress is beautiful, Katerina," a cousin of Dante's says as she walks toward me.

"Thank you," I say with a genuine smile. I was worried about getting a dress that would hide my increasing belly, but the stylist persuaded me to make the most of my pregnancy figure, so we went with something that accentuated my bump instead.

I feel his presence before he even touches me. It's like my body is hardwired to his. Then his hands are on my waist and his mouth is against my

ear.

“Have I ever told you how beautiful that smile is?” Dante whispers in my ear.

“No,” I say, my cheeks turning pink as his cousin stares at us.

He laughs softly before lifting his head. “Say goodnight, Beth,” he says to his cousin. “I think it’s time we called it a night, *amore mio*.”

“You can’t go yet. It’s not even ten,” Beth whines.

“You guys can party as long as you want to, but my wife is seven months pregnant and she needs her rest,” he says, his tone clipped.

She rolls her eyes and stalks off across the dance-floor.

I turn around to face him, and he wraps his arms around me. “I’m not even a bit tired yet. Can’t we stay a little longer?”

“Don’t worry, kitten. Now, we’re headed to the real party,” he says with a wicked grin.

“*That* is not a party,” I say, trying to fake a scowl, but still, I can’t stop smiling.

“Um, it is if you do it right. But that’s not what I was talking about.”

“Then?”

He takes my hand in his and gives me a soft kiss on the lips. “Come find out.”

Then he leads me out of the room, along the hallway and toward the main house. The guard stationed outside the door that leads to the living quarters opens it as we reach it, giving us a quiet word of congratulations as we pass.

“Thank you,” I whisper before Dante leads me to the kitchen. I hear muffled voices and laughter as we approach. But when we walk inside a few seconds later, we are showered with rice and congratulatory cheers. Lorenzo, Anya, Joey, Maximo and Toni clap for us. Lorenzo even has a faint smile on his face.

Dante has his arm around my waist, and I stand on my tiptoe so I can whisper to him. “Is Lorenzo smiling?”

“Yup,” he says with a grin. “You should take a picture. It’s a rare thing.”

“We have drinks,” Toni shouts as she walks to the table and picks up a bottle of incredibly expensive Scotch.

“And iced tea for the bride,” Anya adds as Dante frowns at his half-sister.

“Because this definitely calls for a toast,” Maximo says as he heads to the table too and helps Toni pour everyone a drink.

Maximo holds out a glass of Scotch in one hand and a tall glass of iced

tea in the other, and with his hand on the small of my back, Dante guides us both to the wooden table. I take the drink and then have a seat on the bench, but my husband remains standing behind me with a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

“Toast!” Joey declares, drumming her fists on the table.

“We did the toasts already,” I remind them. Dante and Maximo each made one. They were beautiful too. Simple but beautiful.

Anya places her warm hand over mine and smiles. “These are the real toasts, Kat.”

“Oh?” I look around at their grinning faces. “Is this another tradition I don’t know about?”

“We did this after Lorenzo and Anya’s wedding,” Dante tells me.

“And we’ll do it after Toni’s, and mine and Maximo’s,” Joey says with a wicked grin. *Did I hear that right?* I glance at Maximo and his jaw ticks as he stares at her.

“You’re never getting married, Guiseppina,” Lorenzo says with a scowl.

“And I’m definitely not,” Toni snorts.

“I guess it’s all on you then, buddy,” Dante says to Maximo before he takes a sip of his Scotch, “or the tradition ends here.”

Maximo clears his throat. “To the end of tradition then,” he laughs and then downs his whisky in one before pouring himself another.

“I’ll start,” Joey says with a sigh and a roll of her eyes.

“To my favorite big brother and my second favorite sister-in-law,” she giggles as she holds up her glass.

“How much has she been drinking?” Dante asks, directing his question to Maximo.

“It’s your wedding. She’s twenty-one,” Maximo replies with a shrug.

“Not like I can *ever* get into any trouble with my constant bodyguard,” Joey adds. “Anyway, I was playing. That wasn’t my toast.”

“Get on with it.” Lorenzo sighs.

“Fine,” Joey snaps. Then she raises her glass again. “I never thought that *any* woman would capture my brother’s heart, Kat. I know I was kind of a bitch to you when we met —”

“Kind of?” Dante says with an arch of an eyebrow.

“Yes, but that was before I knew how much you meant to him, and also before I knew how much you would come to mean to me,” she adds as her eyes shine with tears. She shakes her head, as though annoyed with herself

for getting so emotional. “I cannot wait to be an aunt and corrupt your little angel, and I’m so glad that you’re here to dilute some of the testosterone and toxic masculinity in this house,” she adds triumphantly. “To Dante and Kat.”

“Dante and Kat,” the others echo before they all down their Scotch and Maximo pours more.

“Anya,” Lorenzo says quietly, and she obediently raises her glass.

“You two are made for each other, like the moon and the stars. You fit together so beautifully. I’m so glad you found a great love, Dante. And Kat, you are the only woman I have ever met who is strong enough to stand by his side. To Dante and Kat.”

Everyone toasts again and downs their shot while I slug my iced tea.

“Me next,” Toni insists. “Kat, I don’t know you very well yet, but I do know Dante. When he told me he was getting married, I almost fell off my damn chair. I thought Sal had finally convinced him to do the unthinkable. That was the only explanation that made sense to me. But then I met you and I saw the way he looked at you, and it all fell into place. The only explanation is you. You two are so meant to be, it’s kind of sickening. And I hope you know what you’re letting yourself into, honey. To Kat and Dante,” she adds with a wink and the shot/ toast process is repeated.

“Ah, I guess I’m up next,” Maximo says with a sigh.

“You sure are,” Dante replies.

Maximo turns in his seat and looks at us both. “Kat. You stole my best friend,” he says with a shake of his head, and everyone laughs. “But you made him a better man for loving you. He’s way less grumpy these days...”

I laugh now too.

“And he no longer works one hundred hours a week, which means that I don’t either. I’m not gonna lie, I really wanted to not like you, Kat, but you make it kind of impossible. And now you’re Dante and Kat and I don’t know when that happened but you’re just a part of him now, and I can’t imagine you not being a part of my life too.”

“Aw,” Joey says, staring up at him with a huge dopey grin on her face.

“To Kante,” Maximo finishes.

“Kante? Fuck no,” Dante says with a scowl.

“Dat?” Anya chuckles.

“True dat,” Joey giggles, and I almost snort the liquid out of my nose.

“Dante and Kat is fine.” Dante sighs.

“Dante and Kat then,” Maximo says with a wink before he stands and

gives his best buddy a bear hug.

“It’s all on you now, big guy,” Joey says to her oldest brother with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

I swallow as I look at Lorenzo. He didn’t do a toast at the wedding. Dante told me it’s because he doesn’t like speaking in public, but I figure he doesn’t like speaking much in private either. Because he barely does. He observes.

Maximo refills everyone’s glasses again and Lorenzo raises his. “Katerina, you’re one of us now. I don’t mean just a Moretti, it’s more than bearing our name. I would die for every single person in this room. You’ll be one of us until your dying breath. It can be a blessing or a curse, but only you get to decide which. Choose wisely.”

“Fuck, Lorenzo,” Dante says with a shake of his head and a dark laugh.

“Jeez, dude,” Joey giggles while Toni and Maximo laugh too.

“No, I get it,” I say as Lorenzo’s dark eyes burn into mine from across the table. I understand what he’s telling me about the family I’ve become part of. Being the object of Dante’s affection could well be considered a curse, but not to me. “There’s no choice though. It can’t be anything but a blessing to me. I’ve never felt part of a real family since my mom died. Not one who looks out for and protects each other like you all do. My whole adult life, I’ve never really felt like I belonged anywhere. And now I do. So thank you all,” and now I’ve given my own toast and everybody except me drinks a shot of whiskey.

Thank God there is only Dante left or they would all need to be carried out of this room.

Lorenzo nods his head and gives me a faint smile. *Wow, two of those in one day.*

“I guess it’s my turn,” Dante says as he takes a seat beside me. He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me closer so that I shuffle a few inches along the bench until I’m almost sitting on his knee.

“I guess it is,” I smile at him, almost breathless with anticipation at what he’s about to say.

“The only people I truly care about in this entire world are here in this room, but until a few months ago, I thought this circle would never get any bigger than this. Because let’s face it, I’m not going to like anyone that either of my sisters marry, and the chances of Maximo finding a woman to handle his crazy are slim to none.” He turns and winks at his best friend. “But then I met this incredible woman, and she changed my life in so many ways that I

would never have imagined. So, this final toast is just for her.” He raises his glass and the rest of them do the same while I press my face against his shoulder. I’m so unused to being the center of attention. “To Kat, my best friend. My wife. The woman who made me a father. *Vita mia. Sei la cosa più bella che mi sia mai capitata .*”

I don’t know what it means, but it makes Anya sigh softly and Joey sniff loudly. “To Kat,” they all say as Dante hugs me tighter.

He kisses the top of my head and I find the courage to look up and see them all drinking and smiling, except for Lorenzo who has already used up his lifetime quota of smiles today.

“But now it really is getting late and I can’t have any more to drink because it’s my wedding night,” Dante says.

“Of course. You have duties to take care of,” Lorenzo replies, and it’s met with more laughter.

“If it’s a duty, then you’re doing it wrong, brother,” Dante retorts.

Lorenzo snorts and his shoulders start shaking, and for a second, I worry that he’s about to have a stroke, but he’s not. He’s laughing. Lorenzo Moretti is laughing.

“Ah, it’s the whiskey,” Anya says to me as I stare at her husband, open mouthed.

Dante stands and takes my hand, pulling me up with him before he scoops me into his arms to a chorus of whistles and cheers that does nothing for my embarrassment levels.

“I can walk,” I whisper.

“I know,” he replies, kissing the tip of my nose before he carries me out of the kitchen and leaves the rest of our family to go on drinking and talking into the night.

I loop my arms around his neck as he carries me up the stairs. He’s not even breathing any heavier with the effort, which is a feat in itself considering how huge I’ve gotten. “Hey, I forgot something,” I tell him.

“What’s that, kitten?”

“I thanked everyone in there, but I didn’t thank you. Not by name. And not enough,” I admit as I stare at him.

“You don’t have to thank me for anything.”

“Yeah, I do. I wouldn’t have any of this without you.”

His brow furrows in a frown, but he doesn’t say anything else until he’s carried me into our bedroom and closed the door behind him. He puts me on

my feet and cups my face in his hands. “I need you to know something, Kat,” his eyes narrowed as he stares into mine. “I never thought today would happen for me. I never wanted a wife. Never wanted to be tied to anyone and have to make decisions based on somebody else’s wants and needs...”

“But the baby changed that,” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “*You* changed that. Baby or not, I knew the minute you walked into this house, I could never let you leave. I wanted you. I needed you. And I figured that was enough for me to keep you here forever. But then you went and spent every damn minute of every damn day making me fall in love with you too.”

A sob wells in my throat and I swallow it down. He loves me.

“You never have to thank me, Kat, because you have given me everything. Or maybe I just took it and you didn’t really give it at all, but it’s mine now. You’re mine and I will never let you go. I meant it when I said I would die to protect you and I would scorch this world before I ever let anyone hurt you or our child.”

“You didn’t just take it from me,” I whisper as a tear rolls down my cheek, and he wipes it away with his thumb. “I gave it all willingly. I’m yours, Dante. Only ever yours.”

“*Vita mia*,” he says softly, his warm breath dancing over my skin and sending a shiver down my spine.

“What does that mean?”

“My life.”

“*Vita mia*.” I repeat, smiling as I’m filled with a happiness that I thought I’d never feel again. How is it that the devil called Dante Moretti, a man with so much darkness in him, could become the light in my previously bleak existence? “And that other thing you said in your toast?”

“*Sei la cosa più bella che mi sia mai capitata?*”

“Yes.”

“You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Wow! “I am?”

“Hmm,” he murmurs as his hands glide down my body, over my huge belly and over the curve of my hips until he’s squeezing my ass in his palms. “Enough talking. I believe I have some duties to take care of.”

“If it’s a duty, you’re not doing it right,” I purr, parroting what he told his brother a few minutes earlier.

“Well, maybe I’ll make you come a few times and then you can tell me if

I'm doing it right," he growls as his fingers easily find the concealed zipper of my dress.

"Oh, you always do it right," I breathe as he slides the zipper down slowly while he trails soft kisses over my neck.

A few seconds later, my beautiful wedding gown lies in a pool of fabric at my feet. He looks at my cream lace panties and growls his appreciation as he slips his hand inside. "These are sexy as fuck on you. I'm going to buy you a pair in every color."

"Hmm, I'd like that," I giggle as he starts to rub his fingers over my clit. I run my hands over his chest, fingering the buttons of his white shirt but he catches my wrist with his free hand.

"Not yet, kitten. Let me take care of you first."

I smile at him. "I guess I can live with that."

"I hope so, because I'm going to be taking care of you a whole lot."

He pushes me to lie on the bed before kneeling on the floor between my thighs. I shiver in anticipation as he slowly pulls my panties off, squirming as his fingers brush softly over my skin.

"Please," I murmur as my body burns with heat and desire.

"I've been waiting to taste my wife's beautiful pussy all day." He starts to trail kisses up my thighs. "You're already so wet, Kat. I wish you could see your cunt glistening with your juices."

"What do you expect? I've been staring at you in that tux all day."

"I might just wear it more often."

His tongue swirls over my skin at the top of my thighs, so close to where I want him but tantalizingly far away. But when he slips two fingers deep into me, I forget about his mouth for a second as my back arches in pleasure and I moan his name.

"That what you wanted, kitten? You need me inside you?"

"Yes," I whimper.

"Soon," he whispers as he slides his fingers out of me again and my pussy quivers at the loss of him.

"Can you lift your hips for me a little?" he asks before he seals his mouth over my clit and flicks it with his expert tongue.

I groan in pleasure as I lift my hips like he asked, and he takes the opportunity to slide his two fingers into my ass.

"Fuck, Dante," I hiss at the delicious feeling of him stretching me wide as he eats my pussy. He slides his fingers gently in and out of my ass as he

sucks and nibbles and licks the length of my folds. Circling my clit before moving to my hot entrance and back again. When I start grinding myself on his face and his fingers, desperate for some release, he fucks my ass harder while he feasts on my pussy like he's been desperate to taste me forever and might never get the chance again.

My orgasm builds in a slow, rolling wave that makes my entire body hum with pleasure and heat. Every nerve ending is tingling with electric pleasure.

"Oh, God, Dante," I whimper as he keeps me on the edge.

"Come on my tongue, kitten," he murmurs against my skin as he presses his fingers in an upward motion and I'm sure he just hit my G-spot from inside my ass because stars flicker in my horizon as my climax bursts through me and I almost pass out under a blanket of warm ecstasy.

I lie back, panting for breath and trying to stop my head from spinning, only vaguely aware of him standing up and disappearing into the bathroom. The sound of running water quickly follows before it shuts off again and he's stalking back toward the bed like a lion after its prey, pulling his clothes off with every step he takes until he's completely naked.

"My turn to take care of you," I say, licking my lips as I stare at his beautiful thick cock.

"Tomorrow morning, you can wake me up with the best head of my life," he says as he crawls over me, pulling me up the bed with him until my head is resting on the pillows. "But tonight is all about you, Mrs. Moretti. Let me fucking worship you."

"Well, in that case, you can worship me as much as you like," I breathe as I wrap my arms around his neck.

"I worship at the altar of your ass every single day already," he says with a wink.

I bite on my lip. "Have I ever told you how much I love you?"

A frown crosses his handsome face. "No, you haven't."

"I do. I love you more than you will ever know. That day you took me, you saved me, Dante Moretti."

"You saved me first, kitten," he says and then he seals his mouth over mine as he slides his cock deep inside me. I wrap my legs around his waist as he claims me for his own. And I am his. In every single way.



IT'S ALMOST four a.m. by the time my machine of a husband finally declares that he's tired and can't go one more round. Which is fine by me because I think I'm already drunk on orgasms. I fear another one might see me leave this mortal plane – pretty sure I barely survived the last one.

“Today was perfect.” I sigh contentedly as I lie in his arms.

“It was,” he mumbles sleepily.

“After my mini anxiety attack in the car anyway.” I laugh as I nestle my cheek against his chest.

His muscles tense. “What anxiety attack?” he asks, suddenly alert now.

“Oh, it was nothing. I was being silly,” I say dismissively hoping he won't press me further.

“You having an anxiety attack on our wedding day isn't nothing, Kat.”

“It wasn't exactly a full-blown anxiety attack. I just freaked out for a minute.”

“Freaked out about what?” he asks as the muscles in his body grow taut.

How the hell do I tell him that I was worried he was going to kill me and our unborn baby before we got to the church?

“Kat?” he asks again, his voice dropping an octave and sending a shiver through my bones.

“When the car detoured, I panicked a little. Then I saw Mia and I almost burst out crying with happy tears instead. It was a wonderful surprise, and so thoughtful. Thank you.”

He completely ignores the latter part of what I just said. “Instead of what?”

“Huh?”

“You almost cried happy tears instead of what? Why did you have an anxiety attack, Kat?”

I shudder at his tone. It's that don't make me ask you again one he has that makes grown men weep and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. “I just thought... just for a moment... Joey was acting strangely and wouldn't tell me where we were going...and those guards of yours might as well be mute...”

“Kat!”

“I thought of your ex-fiancée and I wondered —”

“If I was going to murder you and our child?” he interrupts me, his tone clipped and dripping with anger.

That sounds so awful when he says it aloud, but I'm not going to apologize for feeling that way. The truth is he did murder Nicole Santangelo right before their wedding.

"I still know so little about what happened between you and her, Dante. I panicked. This morning I didn't know for certain whether you really wanted this with me, or you felt obligated because I got pregnant."

"We got pregnant," he snaps.

"Then tonight, you said that it wouldn't have mattered and we'd be together anyway and I believe you. But this morning... I was emotional and I just wanted to get to the church to see you. It was just a moment of panic, that's all."

He squeezes me tighter, sliding one hand to the back of my neck and holding me against him.

"Get some sleep, kitten," he says softly.

CHAPTER 46

DANTE

The sound of my younger sister, Joey, squealing with laughter as she passes the dining room makes me smile. I have no idea what she's laughing about, but the sound has been so rare lately that I almost forgot that she knew how to laugh. Certainly since our father allowed her to come live here with Lorenzo and me, she has been much happier.

A second later, Maximo's head pops around the open doorway. "They're here," he declares.

"Then show them in," I say with a heavy sigh.

He nods before slipping back out of the door. This is my fifth date with Nicole Santangelo. Each time we have met at a restaurant and she has been accompanied by a chaperone, who has sat a discreet enough distance away for us to talk in private, but who has kept a watchful eye on his charge the entire time. Her father does not want his innocent young daughter sullied before she becomes a bride. Not that I particularly mind that. I have no desire to sully her in any way. She's not my type. Sure, she's pretty. She plays her part well. Impeccable manners. A small polite laugh when the occasion calls for it. She's a perfectly programmed robot.

Except that I have been reading people's body language for as long as I could talk. And Nicole Santangelo has a secret. So tonight, I have insisted she have dinner at my home and she won't be leaving here until I find out what it is.

A few seconds later, she and her bodyguard, Vito, are shown into the room. She smiles politely.

As soon as she is seated, I turn to Vito. "Leave us."

She gasps and he blinks at me. "I can't, Mr. Moretti."

“It’s not a request, Vito. Leave of your own free will or be carried out of here. It’s your choice.”

He looks at Nicole and frowns. From what I understand, the old guy has been her bodyguard since she was a child. He’s worried I’ll take advantage of her.

“Her virtue is safe with me. I can assure you of that,” I tell him.

“It’s okay, Vito,” she says softly.

“You can wait in the kitchen,” I add.

He looks between Nicole and I, weighing up his options and realizing he only has one. “Just holler if you need me, Nicole,” he says before he leaves the room and closes the door behind him.

She looks down at the table setting rather than at me.

“Wine?” I ask.

“Please. Just a small one,” she replies with her practiced, polite smile.

I pour us each a glass and then I watch her. I spend a lot of these dates watching her — studying her. Adding up all of the small things that make up the bigger picture. The occasional wince when she sits or moves too quickly. Her differing appearance. Today she wears make-up. It’s thick and heavy and it hides her flawless skin. I know her skin is flawless because on our second and fourth dates she wore none at all. She wears a high-necked blouse today that would look more fitting on sixty-year old college professor than a nineteen year old woman. It’s a little too big, which tells me it’s not hers.

She is hiding something.

“Take off the clothes, Nicole,” I order.

“W-what?” she stammers.

“I said, take off the clothes.”

Her cheeks turn pink. Her mouth opens and closes before she regains her composure. “No.”

I push myself up from my chair, and she flinches as I tower over her. “Take off the fucking clothes before I take them off for you. And you can holler all you want for old Vito to come rescue you, but I can assure you nobody will walk through that door.”

“B-but you said... you don’t even like me,” she stammers, confused and fearful.

“I’m not going to fuck you,” I assure her.

“S-so, why?”

“Just do it. I won’t ask you again.”

Tears fill her eyes. She pushes herself back from the table and stands. With trembling hands, she pulls the blouse from her jeans and starts to tug it off over her head.

As I expected, her torso is covered in bruises. Some fresh purple ones on her right side and some faint yellow ones on her left. There's a large bite on her left breast, peeking out from her bra. She keeps her eyes downcast as she unbuttons her jeans and pushes them over her hips.

"Just to your knees is fine," I tell her.

She nods almost imperceptibly as she follows my instruction. The tops of her thighs are covered with fingertip bruises and similar bite marks to the one on her breast.

Her chest heaves with the effort and the humiliation as she stands there allowing me to inspect her abused body.

"Thank you. You can get dressed again now," I tell her, walking to the window to allow her to do that in private at least.

I take my seat opposite her after she's done. "Who did that to you?" I ask, although I suspect I already know.

She's silent. Years of conditioning have taught her to lie. To cover up the secrets and the shame.

"Your brothers?" I ask.

She nods.

"Does your father know?"

She looks up at me then, her eyes wet with tears. "Does he know?" she snorts. "Who do you think taught them to be the animals that they are, Dante?" she spits out my name, directing her anger at the only person available right now.

Fuck! I suspected her brothers, but her own father too? I knew those dogs were trouble.

"How long has this been happening?"

"I was about eleven the first time," she says with a shrug.

"And how did they think I wouldn't find out? On our wedding night, was I not supposed to notice you're not a virgin?"

"There's an operation you can have to have your hymen replaced," she says. "You were never supposed to see me until our wedding. And once we were engaged, my father said they would all stop so that you would never find out."

"They think I'm that stupid?" She flinches at my tone.

“I know we can’t be engaged now,” she sniffs. “But can you please not tell them that you know. They’ll suspect, but if they can’t prove it, maybe I can convince them. Vito will tell them that you sent him out though. They’ll think that you tried something and saw and then...” She shakes her head and starts to cry.

Then what? They’ll hurt her even more than they already have.

“We’ll get engaged. Today,” I tell her.

She lifts her head and blinks at me.

“As my fiancée, you will live here in my house. You can stay in one of our guest rooms until we’re married. Your *virtue* will be safe here. Nobody will touch you while you live in this house.”

She shakes her head. “They won’t let me leave.”

“They won’t have a choice, Nicole.”

“Why would you do this for me?” she whispers.

I run a hand over my jaw. “If I tell my father we’re engaged to be married, he might let me breathe a little,” I lie. But the truth is, her father and brothers have been top of my shit list for months now. “Go say goodbye to Vito, and my housekeeper will show you to your room. I’ll go speak to your father and bring back some of your things.”

She sucks in a shaky breath, her eyes narrowed as she stares at me, wondering what my angle is. It’s a fucking sin that the men who were supposed to protect her violated her instead.

“You’ll be safe here, Nicole,” I assure her.

“My name is Nicci,” she whispers. “I hate Nicole.”

“Nicci.”



I STAND OUTSIDE the guest room and take a deep breath. Jimmy Santangelo did not take the news kindly that his daughter was moving in with me. Of course I didn’t tell him that I knew about the vile things he and his twisted, fucked up sons had done to her.

When he spouted off about her virtue, it took every single ounce of willpower in my body not to cut off his cock with a rusty spoon. He could barely contain his anger at me taking his plaything away from him. Sick piece of shit! But he accepted it. He can’t go against me.

The faint noise from the TV tells me Nicci is still awake and I knock on the door.

“Come in,” she calls.

I step inside and she’s sitting on the bed, her face scrubbed of make-up, revealing a purple bruise around her eye, and her hair pulled into a high pony tail. She’s wearing a pair of Joey’s pink, unicorn pajamas.

She looks so young and innocent. Like a nineteen-year-old instead of the Stepford housewife she was trying to be to secure our engagement. I sit on the bed beside her, and up close, I see the faint fingertip bruises on her neck too.

My chest tightens, and I suck in a deep breath. “I spoke to your father. I told him we’re engaged and that you’ll be living with me from here on out.”

“Was he okay with that?”

“He accepted it.”

“Okay,” she whispers, and I notice the fear creeping into her voice. She shrinks back from me a little, and I take it as my cue to move a little further away from her.

“I have no intention of marrying you, Nicci, but until I figure a way out of this, everyone must believe that we are engaged. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“That includes Sabine.”

She blinks at the mention of her friend’s name. She told me about her on our second date, and then again on our third and fourth.

“S-Sabine? What does she have to do with anything?”

“I don’t want you speaking to her for a while.”

“B-but she’s just my friend, Dante. I... she won’t...”

Fuck! The naivety of this girl is gonna get us all in trouble. “Nicci!” I snap. “This has to look real. I am the head of the fucking Cosa Nostra. Do you think I would allow my fiancée to consort with her lover?”

Her cheeks turn bright pink. “She’s n-not...”

“Do not fucking lie to me. I am not your fucking white knight, Nicci. I will keep you safe here. I don’t care who you fucked, who you love, who you want, but you do not get to fucking lie to my face.”

“H-how did you know?” she whispers, tears running down her cheeks. “Nobody knew.”

“She was the only person you ever mentioned other than your brothers and father. The only time there was ever any light in your eyes was when you

spoke about her.”

She blinks at me.

“And on our second date when you were sleeping over at her house, you had a manicure. You trimmed your nails extra short and smooth.”

She gasps, her cheeks turning an even deeper shade of pink. “You’re like some sort of a... wizard.”

“That’s definitely something I’ve never been called before,” I say with a frown.

“It’s true. I mean, my nails? Who even notices that stuff?”

“I do,” I say as I walk out of the room. “I notice everything, Nicci,” I warn her. “And I mean it about the lying. You have no reason to lie to me. If I find out you have...”

“You’ll what?” she asks, her eyes narrowed.

“If you put my family at risk, I will kill you. And I won’t lose a wink of sleep over it.”

She nods her head in understanding. She might be young and naïve, but she knows the world we live in. She knows my reputation.

CHAPTER 47

KAT

I have my feet up on the sofa, one hand resting on my growing bump as I hold my Kindle in the other. There's a mug of hot peppermint tea on the small table beside me, and I have nothing to do for the entire day but read. Heaven.

I'm engrossed in my book when a few moments later, a pair of warm, strong hands rest on my shoulders, squeezing gently before he presses a soft kiss on the top of my head.

"Dante," I say with a smile. "I thought you were busy today."

"I am," he says, his lips brushing over my hair. "With you. We're taking a little trip."

"A trip? Where? I thought we agreed...? Do I need to pack?" We spent the entire day after our wedding in bed and that was about the extent of our honeymoon. I'd love to have flown somewhere hot and sunny for a few days, but obviously my heavily pregnant status makes that impossible, and Dante is so busy with work that we both agreed to delay it until the baby is able to be left for a few days with Anya, Joey, and Lorenzo.

"It's just a day trip, kitten. It will be a few hours' drive though. Sophia has packed some snacks for you in case of any extreme pregnancy sugar cravings."

I turn off my Kindle and put it on the coffee table. "Where are we going?"

He holds out his hand to me. "It's a surprise. Come on."

Excitement flutters in my stomach as I take his hand and his strong fingers circle mine. He makes me feel so safe and secure when he looks at me like that, which is kind of ironic given how we met. "But if we're on the road

for a few hours, I'm gonna need to pee first." I rub a hand over my belly. "This baby likes to sleep on my bladder."

He pulls me toward him and gives me a soft kiss on the lips. "Fine. I'll wait in the car."

WE'VE BEEN DRIVING for a little over two hours and despite asking Dante a million questions about what we're doing and where we're headed, he has given me no clue whatsoever. However, as we turn off the freeway and head toward Jackson, I sense the change in his mood. He seems nervous, which is unusual for him.

I put my hand on the back of his neck and he turns his head and gives me a faint smile. "Almost there, kitten. You okay?"

"I could do with peeing soon," I say, regretting the bottle of iced tea I drank about half an hour earlier.

He takes my hand from his neck and dusts his lips over my knuckles. "We should be there in ten minutes. Is that okay or do I need to pull over and let you pee on the side of the road?"

"Ten minutes is fine," I giggle.

"Good. Because I would hate to have to shoot someone just because they got a glimpse of your ass."

I give him a playful nudge on the shoulder. "You would not do that."

"Oh, I would," he says with a wink.

"You sure you can't tell me where we're going to?"

He frowns a little, and I sense a change in him again. "I don't want any secrets from you, Kat," he says, his tone serious now.

"Good. I don't either."

He nods his head and now I'm even more intrigued about where we're going.

MY CURIOSITY IS PIQUED FURTHER when Dante stops the car outside a beautiful house less than ten minutes later. It's the kind of house you see in the movies. It has a porch swing, a tree in the yard with a tire hanging from the branch, secured by a thick blue rope. There is a pickup in the yard and two bikes on the lawn.

“Who lives here?”

“Come see,” he says, climbing out of the car before coming around to open my door. He takes my hand to help me out and then laces his fingers through mine as we walk up the path.

Before we get to the porch, the front door of the house swings open and a woman steps out. She’s a little younger than me, maybe, but she has a small child perched on her hip. A little girl who looks to be about two. Both have the same dark curls and dark eyes.

“Dante?” the woman says. She’s smiling, but there’s a note of something else in her voice. Fear perhaps?

My heart starts beating a little faster. Oh, God. Is this child his? Does he have this whole other life that I don’t know about?

“Is this your secret?” I ask him quietly.

“Yeah,” he says, but his eyes are on the woman and the little girl and he’s smiling. Not many people are worthy of a Dante Moretti smile. “I’m sorry I didn’t call. It was kind of a last-minute thing,” he says to the woman with an apologetic shrug as he squeezes my hand tighter.

My mouth is so dry I can’t swallow.

“You’re always welcome. But has something happened? Is something wrong?”

“Momma,” another child, a little boy with thick brown curls, aged about five or six, rushes out of the door now. “You said we could have ice-cream.”

Instinctively, without even looking at him, she reaches for him, curling her fingers in his thick hair as she pulls him to her hip. “We will, D. Just give me a minute.” Then she ushers him back inside the house.

D? As in Dante? Dante Junior? A bead of sweat trickles down my brow. I try to pull my hand from his, but he holds it tightly. “Nothing’s wrong. But I got married.” He holds up our joined hands and his wedding ring glints in the sun.

Her face breaks into a huge grin. “You? No way,” she laughs as she starts to walk down the steps of the porch. Then she looks at me. “How the hell did you manage to tame this one, girl?”

I rub a hand over my bump and look down. “Um. With this,” I say with a shrug.

“I wanted her to meet you. I want her to know everything,” Dante says. “No secrets.”

She looks at me again, her brow furrowed into a frown.

“This is my wife, Kat. You can trust her. I promise,” he says, and her face softens. “Tell her who you are.”

She lets out a long breath. “Hey, Kat. I’m Nicci. Although I guess most people back home would know me as Nicole.”

It takes me a few seconds to register what she just said. “Nicole Santangelo?”

“The one and only.”

I look between her and Dante. “But you... you let me believe...”

“That he killed me?” Nicci laughs. “Yeah. That was kind of the secret.”

My head is spinning with so many questions I don’t know which one to ask first. Except I do. “Are the children...?” I look to Dante, unable to finish the question, but he knows anyway.

“No,” he says with a chuckle.

“Hell no,” Nicci adds. Then she turns and heads back toward the house. “Are you two going to come in for some ice cream then?” she asks as she reaches her front door. Then she shouts, “Hey, Sabine. You’ll never guess who’s here and who got married.”



TWO HOURS LATER, we’ve eaten plenty of dinner and ice cream. Now, Nicci and I are sitting on the porch swing with a glass of iced tea while Dante and Sabine tidy up the dinner dishes. Nicci’s wife is amazing. She’s a lawyer who specializes in working with women who are fleeing abusive situations. She’s smart and funny and has the most beautiful auburn hair I have ever seen. Their kids are adorable too. Deacon, not Dante, is five and Aurora is two.

“I guess you have a million questions?” Nicci asks with a soft laugh as we sip our iced tea. Hers is a Long Island variety.

“Yes, way too many,” I agree with a sigh. With the kids around, we didn’t get a chance to talk about anything too deep and meaningful.

“He saved my life,” she says, her voice suddenly full of emotion. “He didn’t have to. I mean I was nobody to him, but he saved me. People think he’s heartless and cruel, but actually, underneath all of that armor, he’s probably the best man I’ve ever known.”

“I see that side of him too.”

She smiles at me. “Well, of course you do. Because he is so in love with

you.” She places her warm hand over mine. “A love like that will burn for eternity.”

That makes tears spring to my eyes. “Are your father and brothers still alive too?” I ask.

“God, no.”

“Oh.”

“They weren’t good men. They were the worst kind,” she says, and the tone of her voice makes my heart break. She says that as though she has had first-hand experience of their worst.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” I offer.

“Sabine always tells me it’s good to talk,” she says with a roll of her eyes. “They abused me. Beat me. Raped me. I was their servant. Their verbal punching bag too. My father’s and my brothers’.”

I squeeze her hand in mine.

“It was all I’d ever known. When I was eighteen, they promised me to Lorenzo Moretti, but he married Anya, so they proposed a marriage to Dante instead. My father was desperate for an alliance with the Morettis, so much so that he would even give me up. Not that he cared about what they might do to me, but that he and my brothers would lose their toy.”

I sit in silence as I listen to her story.

“My father’s big mistake was trying to pass me off as some innocent virgin. He even had one of those operations where they stitch a woman’s hymen back in mind for me. Can you believe that?” She snorts. “Like that was all he had to do to have me in tact again. Like that would undo all of the sick, twisted shit those fuckers did to me.”

She takes a long swig of her drink before she goes on.

“Anyway, Dante knew there was something not right. He has that kind of sixth sense about stuff, you know?”

“Yep, I sure do.”

“And when he found out, he took me in. He told everyone we were engaged and I never went home again. His father was happy that he was getting married, and mine was satisfied that his alliance with the Moretti’s was about to become a reality. We planned the wedding and everything. Dante said it had to look real. He never told me his plans but he just kept telling me everything would work out and that I’d be safe. Then the night before our wedding, he told me I was leaving. He gave me a new identity. A new name, social security number. He even called Sabine and told her I was

leaving if she wanted to come with me, and thankfully, she did. My father and brothers disappeared that night, no doubt by Dante and Maximo's hands, not that he's ever told me and I would never ask. Then Lorenzo and Anya drove us to this house and we've been safe here ever since."

"Lorenzo and Anya?" I ask.

"Yeah. He's a good guy too. Don't let that gruff exterior fool you." She laughs. "Even Maximo."

"Maximo the psycho is a good guy?" I shake my head, laughing as I feign my disbelief.

"Yeah."

"Is this the first time you've seen Dante since then?"

"No. He calls in from time to time. He sends the kids presents for their birthday."

"No way!" I cannot believe he sends anyone birthday presents.

"Yeah."

"Thank you for sharing your story with me, Nicci. I know it's not easy to talk about pain," I say softly.

She narrows her eyes as she stares back at me. "Yeah, you do know."

She squeezes my hand and we sit back against the swing and watch the sunset. "He said he wasn't my white knight," Nicci adds. "But he so was."

"No way. He said that to me too." I roll my eyes, and we both laugh.

"And?"

And what? Is Dante Moretti my white knight? Not even close. "He's not my white knight. Pretty sure he's my soulmate though."

"Even better," Nicci says, clinking her glass against mine.

"Yeah, way better."

CHAPTER 48

DANTE

It's growing dark as we head back to Chicago. Kat yawns in the seat beside me.

"You okay, kitten? You want to stop at a motel for the night?"

"No," she says with a sleepy smile. "I want to go home."

I lift her hand and kiss her fingertips.

"Why do you let everyone believe that you murdered your ex-fiancée the night before your wedding?"

"I cannot believe it's taken you a whole twenty minutes to ask me that question."

"So, stop avoiding it, then," she says with a sigh.

"Did you just roll your eyes at me?"

"Maybe, but you're still avoiding my question."

"People believe what they want to believe, Kat. Besides, I don't care what other people think about me. The Santangelos crossed so many lines, they had to be dealt with. It doesn't matter to me whether people think that Nicole was taken care of too. In fact, it's good for business."

"Of course. It kind of feeds into the image you've created for yourself too, right? Cold-hearted Mafia boss who would murder his own fiancée if she crossed him."

I don't answer. My jaw is clenched tight, and a thick vein pulses in my throat. Legitimate reasons, sure, but neither of them are the real reason I keep Nicci's secret.



KAT IS asleep by the time we get home. I lift her out of the car and cradle her to my chest.

“I can walk,” she murmurs.

“I know, but I can carry you just as easily,” I tell her with a kiss on her forehead.

By the time I’ve carried her to our room, she’s awake again, and I set her on her feet.

“Does Joey know about Nicci?” she asks me.

“Lorenzo told her this summer.”

“Oh,” she says as she starts to undress.

“She said she had an idea anyway, but we didn’t tell her at the time. She was only sixteen.”

“I’m glad she knows you would never do that.”

“What?” I scowl at her. “You think Joey cares if I killed Nicci? I could have slit her throat in front of Joey, and it wouldn’t change a damn thing about the fact I am her brother.”

She frowns at me. “I didn’t mean... I just meant... I’m glad I know that you would never do that.”

I wrap my hand around her throat before she can utter another word. “But I would do it, Kat,” I remind her. “In a heartbeat if I had to.”

“D-Dante.” She blinks, confused.

“I am not a good man, Kat. I never have been and I never will be. You need to stop trying to convince yourself that I am.”

Tears well in her eyes, and I release my grip and stalk to the other side of the room, pulling off my shirt and tossing it into the hamper.

“So why did you take me there today.” She follows me across the room. “Why did you do that if you don’t want me to see the good in you?”

I spin around to face her. She sees too much of me. Expects too much of me. “I promised you no secrets. That was a secret.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t believe you. You wanted to show me what kind of a man you really are.”

“I wanted you to know the truth.”

“And I do, but what I don’t get is why you’re so goddamn afraid of it,” she shouts at me, standing on her tiptoes and pushing her face close to mine.

“Don’t, Kat,” I snarl at her.

“Don’t what? We both know why you keep Nicci’s secret, Dante.”

“And why is that?” My heart is hammering against my rib cage as though

it's trying to break free from my chest. It wants to make a run for it before this woman tears it wide open.

"Because her family has so many enemies it makes her a target. You keep her secret to protect her."

"No. I am not that man, Kat."

"Yes, you are," she insists, pushing my buttons the way only she can.

"Don't," I growl.

"Or what? You couldn't hurt a woman that you didn't even love," she says softly, and I snap. My hand is on her throat again and she's pressed against the wall before she can take another breath. I don't squeeze; I just hold her there.

"Do not mistake my love for my family for weakness, Katerina. I would protect you all until my dying breath, but that doesn't make me anyone other than who I am."

"But she's not your family," she says, tears running down her face.

I shouldn't have taken her to see Nicci and given her only half the truth. I should have known it would only bring more questions.

I press my forehead against hers and sigh.

"Please tell me what's going on? I feel like I'm drowning here," she pleads with me, and my heart aches with the weight of it all. My love for her and our baby. My fear that I'm not good enough for her. My need to protect my family from harm. I never wanted to be the one in control.

"I'll tell you the truth, but you have to stop trying to believe I'm anything other than what I am, Kat. Can you do that?"

"Yes," she whispers.

"I took you to meet Nicci because I knew there was a chance you might not believe me if I just told you what happened. I don't care what other people think of me, kitten, but I do care when it comes to you. It's not that I'm not capable of what people believe I did. I am. But you are my family now, and the next time I have a surprise for you, I don't want you to worry that I'm going to have you buried in some ditch."

"Oh."

"That's why I took you to meet her."

"And why do you keep her secret? You said, you protect your family. Is it because you think of Nicci as family?"

"No. *She's* not my family," I admit with a heavy sigh.

"Then who?" She blinks at me and then the penny drops. Deacon is five.

Nicci left six years ago — pregnant with a tiny Moretti. “No... you said...” She starts to cry again. “God, I can’t believe I’m so stupid. He even looks like you. But you said...”

“He’s not my son, Kat,” I assure her.

She sucks in a breath that makes her perfect tits shudder in her dress. “Then whose? Not Lorenzo?”

“God, no. Deacon is our little brother.”

“Your brother?” she gasps, shocked.

“Yes. My father raped my fiancée four weeks before our wedding.” The weight of that statement hits me in the chest with full-force. “He told her he’d kill her if she ever told anyone. She probably never would have if he hadn’t knocked her up. He assumed she and I were fucking. So if she did get pregnant, then it wouldn’t matter if the kid looked like him.”

“But you’re his son. How could he...? How would he have lived with that?”

“Oh, he would have got a kick out of it. Trust me. Maximo had to stop Lorenzo and me from murdering him when we found out. It wouldn’t have been easy to cover up Salvatore Moretti’s disappearance. We would have had to declare war to find his killer. Besides, Nicci begged me not to do anything. I think she didn’t want any attention thrown her way.”

“So you’re telling me Maximo was the voice of reason in this scenario?”

“Yeah.”

“Now, that’s all kinds of fucked up,” she says with a soft chuckle that makes me smile.

“I know.”

“Is that why you wouldn’t let him dance with me at our wedding?” she whispers.

“Yes. He will never, ever lay a finger on you. If he ever hurt you, kitten, there is no one who could stop me from ending his miserable life. But nobody can ever know what he did. Little Deacon can never find out that he was conceived like that and my father can never know that Nicci’s alive and bore him another son.”

“I know,” she says, burying her head against my chest. “Poor Nicci.”

“She’s happy now. And they’re all safe. Her and Sabine have built themselves a good life.”

“I love you so much,” she whispers, snuggling against my chest.

I stroke her hair and kiss the top of her head. “You still tired?”

“After all that fighting? No way,” she purrs, pressing her beautiful body closer to mine.

“You want to *make-up fuck*?”

“God, yes.”

I pick her up and carry her to the bed. I crawl over her, pulling up her dress and peppering kisses over her stomach before I get to her breasts, annoyingly encased in her bra. “I’m gonna need you naked for this next part.”

“Then hurry up and get me naked, demon.”

“Sit up,” I growl, and she does so without hesitation, hands over her head so I can lift off her dress. As soon as that’s done, I unhook her bra and bite on my lip at the sight of her tits spilling free. They’re even bigger now that she’s pregnant.

I push her back down, taking one of her nipples into my mouth at the same time and sucking hard. Her back arches off the bed as she moans softly.

“What are you going to do when they’re off-limits?” She giggles.

“I’ll have to get my fill before they are then, won’t I?” I trail kisses across to her other nipple before sucking on that one too.

“You’re so good at that,” she whimpers.

I slide my hand into her panties and rub her already swollen clit.

“And that too,” she groans.

“You’re a feral little kitten.” I chuckle as I move southward because I want my mouth where my fingers are too.

I don’t even have to take off her panties to know that she’s already soaking for me. I can smell her arousal, and it makes my cock ache to be inside her. When I pull off her panties and get my mouth on her a few seconds later, she rocks her hips against my face as she threads her fingers in my hair.

“And even better at that,” she mewls.

“It’s not hard to be good at eating such a beautiful pussy, *vita mia*.”



AFTER I FUCKED her so hard that we both forgot what day it was, let alone why we were fighting earlier, Kat lies with her head on my chest, her body nestled against mine as I run my hands over the soft skin of her back.

“Dante?” she whispers.

“Hmm?”

“Why do you get so angry when I want to believe you’re a good man?”

“We’ve had this conversation, Kat,” I say with a sigh.

“No, we had a fight about it, and I don’t want another one with you. I’m just asking a question.”

“I don’t know how many times I can tell you the same thing. I am not a good man.”

“But if I think you are, then isn’t that up to me? Can’t you be a good man who does bad things sometimes?”

I kiss the top of her forehead. “One day, I’ll disappoint you, kitten. You will see the kinds of things I am capable of, because it’s who I am and I can’t hide that part of my life from you forever. And while I can handle you mad and disappointed, I don’t want you to be afraid of me. I need for you to know the kind of man I really am so that you don’t run when I do something so bad you’re going to hate for me it.”

“Would you ever hurt me?”

I frown at her. That’s a complex question.

“I mean, physically or intentionally.”

“No.”

“Would you hurt our child?”

“Of course not.”

“Will you ever cheat on me?” she whispers.

“Never.”

“Then I could never hate you,” she breathes. “And I’m going to keep believing you’re a good man no matter what you say.”

I shake my head in frustration. “You are the most stubborn person I have ever met.”

“Well, I kind of have to be being married to you. If I didn’t have my stubborn streak, you would walk all over me, Dante Moretti,” she retorts.

“I do love my feisty little kitten.”

“I love you too.”

“If you’re insistent on this good man thing, how about a compromise?”

“Okay?” She looks up at me, her eyes full of trust and love that I don’t deserve, and it only makes me want to fuck her again.

“I’ll do my best to be a good husband and a good father, because if I can be those things, then I don’t care about anything else. But don’t ask me to always be a good man. Okay?”

“And a good brother?” she adds.

“You always have to push it, don’t you?”

“But you’re already a good brother.”

“Fine, and a good brother. So, do we have a deal?”

“We have a deal, demon.” She yawns softly, nestling her cheek into the crook of my shoulder.

CHAPTER 49

DANTE

The sound of my cell phone vibrating on the night stand rouses me from sleep, and I groan inwardly as I untangle myself from Kat's warmth to answer the damn thing. I swear if it's not an emergency, then whoever is on the other end of that line is going to lose a hand.

Kat murmurs sleepily as I roll away from her and sit on the edge of the bed. When I see Maximo's name flashing on the screen, my heart sinks, because he wouldn't call and disturb my lie in for nothing.

"Hey," I answer the call.

"I've found him."

"Where?"

"LA."

"LA? For real?"

"I've got eyes on him right now. You want me to bring him back to Chicago?"

I glance behind me at my sleeping wife. "No. I'll come to you. Don't let him out of your sight until I get there."

"Sure. I'll be his shadow."

"Don't let him see you. I don't want him spooked before I get there."

"Dante?" he snaps, and I squeeze my eyes closed. I'm tired and I'm not thinking straight, because if I was, I would never have said that to him. He's my right hand, and I would be lost without him. I never need to tell him what to do, he does it without thinking. He's my brother every bit as much as Lorenzo.

"I know. Look, I'll be there as soon as I can."

I hang up and place my cell back on the nightstand before slipping under

the covers. Kat smiles as I press my chest against her back and slide my hand over her swollen belly. I kiss her neck softly, and she purrs. I hate that I have to leave her.

“I have to go away on some business, kitten,” I whisper.

“Where?” she asks with a yawn.

“LA.”

“LA?” She rolls onto her back. “How long will you be gone for?”

“I’ll be back tomorrow. I promise.” I don’t intend on dragging out this whole thing for longer than is necessary.

“Can I come with you?”

I shake my head, and her brow creases with worry. “Lorenzo will be here though, and Toni is still around. They’ll look after you while I’m gone.”

“Who will take care of you, though?” she whispers.

“I can take care of myself,” I remind her.

“Dante?” she breathes. “Can’t you send someone else? Can’t Maximo or Lorenzo go? What if the baby comes early and you’re not here?”

“Kat, you know I have to take care of things sometimes. The baby won’t come early, but if it does, I’m only a plane ride away. Lorenzo needs to stay with Anya, and Maximo will be with me. Besides, this is something I need to do.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Kat, don’t do this. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

She rolls her lips together as she stares into my eyes, and the worry in them makes me want to wrap her in my arms and take us both far away from here. But that’s not the reality of the life we lead. The life I’ve tied her to.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she whispers.

I roll on top of her, holding myself up on my forearms so I don’t crush our baby, and that makes my girl smile. “Will you be good while I’m gone?”

“When am I ever naughty?” she purrs.

“All the damn time, kitten,” I remind her as I run my nose along her jawline. God, she always smells too fucking good. I could fucking eat her. I want to eat her. Bury my head and then my cock in her warm pussy and not leave this bed for the rest of the day. I hate this fucking life sometimes. “So eat properly and take your vitamins.”

“I always do.”

“Good girl,” I say before giving her a soft kiss on her forehead. “Now go back to sleep.” I push myself off her, and she rolls onto her side, pulling the

duvet up to her chin. I walk to the ensuite to take a quick shower before I head to LA to kill her brother.



ONCE I LANDED IN LA, we watched Leo Evanson for eight hours before we grabbed him. He spent most of the day and night in a casino, which was full of patrons and witnesses. In Chicago, I would take him off the street in broad daylight and not give a damn. But LA is not my territory, and I need this taken care of as cleanly as possible. The last thing I need is any interference from the cops. But now I have him exactly where I want. In an abandoned office block on the outskirts of the city with nobody around to hear him scream.

Everything about Leo says slimeball weasel. From the way his beady little eyes scan the room as Maximo and I advance on him, his back pressed against the wall as he looks for an escape, to the bacon grease stains on his faded old Navy t-shirt.

“How funny running into you here in LA, Leo,” I say with a grin as I get closer. He goes to run, but Maximo catches him, slamming the piece of shit against the wall.

“I-I’ll get your money. I just need a few more weeks,” he stammers.

“It’s been twelve fucking months, Leo. I don’t think a few more weeks is gonna cut it.”

“I’ve got something going on. It could be big,” he says, his eyes wide and pleading.

“You see I’ve kind of already collected on your debt, Leo. I took your sister as payment instead. She’s mine now, and I gotta say, she was worth every cent of that two hundred and fifty grand you stole.”

“What?” He scowls at me, and for some reason, that makes me a little less inclined to tear his head off. If he fights for her, then maybe I won’t torture him for too long before I kill him. However, he fucks it all up as soon as he opens his mouth again. “So you took her? My debt is paid, then?”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“You’re a piece of shit,” Maximo snorts.

I grip his throat, squeezing my fingers tightly and pressing my palm against his Adam’s apple until he’s struggling to breathe. “You think that me

taking your sister lets you off the hook? Your debt is settled, but you still stole from me, *coglione*.”

He opens his mouth, but all that comes out is a strangled groan.

I lean in and whisper, “I took her and I made her mine. I fucked her every single day and night, Leo, until she screamed.”

He struggles, trying to escape my grip, but he’s not angry because of what I just told him. He’s struggling because he wants to survive.

I let him go, and he drops to his knees, clutching at his throat. “I can get you money too,” he wheezes. “Just tell me what you need.”

“What I need, you greasy fuck, is for you to pay for having me chase you around the fucking country.”

“Look, I can get you some cash, just let me tell you about this game I have lined up...” he pleads as he pushes himself to his feet.

“And your sister? What do I do with her? Because I’m not gonna lie, I’ve become kind of attached to my little pet.”

He rubs a hand over his jaw and stares at me. “Look, like I said, if you want her, then I ain’t got no problem with that.” He shrugs, as though her life means nothing to him.

I grab him by the shirt and throw him back against the wall. “Well, it wouldn’t be the first time you’ve used her to pay off a debt, would it, Leo?” I snap. “Few years ago, you owed some gambling debts and you told the two guys who came collecting exactly where they could find your sister, right?”

His complexion was already pale, but now he’s turned an unnatural shade of gray. “They were gonna kill me,” he says as though that is a perfectly valid explanation for handing *my girl* over to those two animals.

“They almost killed her,” I spit. “You know what else they did to her, you sick fuck?”

“They just had a little fun. She was okay,” he insists.

Fuck, he is a piece of shit.

I take a deep breath to calm my racing heart before I tear his out with my hands. He’s looking up at me like he actually believes in the bullshit that he’s spewing. My eyes narrow as I search his face for even the slightest bit of compassion for her. No wonder Kat is under the illusion that I might be a good guy when this is what she had to compare me to. “You really think she was okay after that? She left her job. She hardly ever left the house. But you think she was okay?”

He frowns. “She was, man. They didn’t really hurt her. How do you know

all this anyway?”

“Oh, I tortured your little friends to death and they told me about your gambling debt, but the rest, I got from your sister. But how much did you owe?”

“What?” He blinks at me.

“How much did you owe them?”

“Five grand. Why?”

Fuck, I’m going to fucking implode in about ten seconds. “Five grand. You gave them your sister for five grand?”

“I didn’t —”

Before he can finish his sentence, I shove my fingers into his mouth, holding his tongue still as I press my thumb under his chin. “You want to know why I spend so much time fucking your sister, Leo?”

He makes a garbled sound as he stares at me with fearful eyes.

“Because she’s my wife now, you dumb fuck.”

“N-nuh.” He tries to shake his head, but I keep a firm grip on his jaw.

“Yes. My wife. Mother of my unborn child. She is my fucking everything. And she was your sister. You should have protected her. I gave you the chance to redeem yourself a little, but once again, you handed her over to a monster to save your own skin.”

Tears trail down his cheeks as he mumbles incoherently, but I get the gist — he’s begging for his life. I wonder how much she begged those animals he handed her over to.

“If I told you how she still screams in the middle of the night, haunted by what those sick fucks did to her, and how I have to hold her until she falls back to sleep because the sound of her crying splits my goddamn heart in two, would that give you any idea of the ways in which I’m about to make you suffer? Because I want you to know, Leo. I want you to be fully aware that I am about to inflict the kind of pain on you that will make even Maximo struggle to hold back his lunch.”

He’s gagging harder now, choking on his own spit and snot as he cries. “Seems like your sister got the looks and the balls, huh?” I snarl at him before I let him go, pushing him to the floor before I take off my jacket.

“But your pop...” He sniffs, wiping the saliva from his chin. “I offered him the money back, but he didn’t take it. He said she would be enough.”

I look at Maximo whose frown mirrors my own. *What the fuck did he just say?* I grab a handful of Leo’s hair and yank his head back so I can look him

in the eye. “What did you just say about my father?”

“He caught me cheating, man. He gave me a kicking and I gave him his money back, but he wanted more than that, so I told him about Kat and what had happened before. I thought maybe he might be into the same kind of thing. Then he told me we were square. If I gave her to him, he would give me back the money and then we’d call it quits.”

My free hand is clenched into a fist, and I have to hold myself back from smashing it into his face. “Why are you telling me this now and not as soon as I walked in here?”

“I knew he’d come for me one day. I was supposed to meet him the next morning at Kat’s house because she worked nights at that government building. He said he’d hand over the money if I handed her over. But I’m not stupid, man. He could have just taken her anyway. He wanted me there so he could kill me. So I took off. I thought you knew this already?”

I glare at the piece of shit on the floor as I try to make sense of this information. “You didn’t even try to warn her?”

“I was terrified. I left her a note, but I had no time to get to her. She doesn’t even have a cell phone.”

“But why did my father want your sister? And if she was so important to him, why did he send me for her?”

Leo trembles. “If I tell you what I know, will you let me go?”

“Not a fucking chance in hell. But I could make your death less painful and right now I can assure you that you’re going to want me to do that. Now tell me why the fuck was my father so interested in Kat?”

“He wasn’t. Not at first anyway. Not until I told him about Elmo and Tony and how they’d taken her as payment for a debt before. Then he started asking me all kinds of questions like when it happened. I mean, he wanted specific dates and everything. It was like he remembered something, but all of a sudden, he was more interested in her than me.”

“So he just let you go? Just like that? Because you told him about Kat’s attack? You expect me to believe that?”

“He let me leave because the club next door was closing and it was getting kind of busy. But he had no intention of letting me go.”

“So you bailed on your sister and left her for Salvatore Moretti?”

He glares at me. “It’s not like I thought he was going to kill her. He seemed really eager to meet her. At worst, I thought it would be a similar deal to last time.”

“When she was raped and tortured for days?” My head feels like it’s about to explode with holding it together instead of kicking this sick fuck to death.

“Kat is strong. Way stronger than me. I knew she’d be okay.”

“Well, you got one thing right,” I say as I start rolling up my sleeves.

“Dante, please,” he snivels. “She’ll never forgive you if you kill me. I’m her brother, man. Kat’s not like us.”

“Oh, I know that, asshole. But I would rather that than allow you to live and risk the prospect of you ever being in her life again.”

“I won’t. I’ll stay away.” He wipes his nose, his hands clasped as he begs for mercy. If Kat were here, she would take pity on him. She’d ask me to let him go because he’s right — she is better than us and she would try to convince me to show a little mercy. But I am not that man. Not even close.

“No, you wouldn’t, Leo, because people like you are a disease — an insidious cancer that never stops destroying everything it touches. The moment you’re in trouble again, and let’s face it, that’s gonna happen as sure as the sun is gonna rise, you’d be back. Asking your baby sister to protect you now that she’s the most powerful woman in Chicago. If you think I would ever allow that to happen, then you’re the dumbest fuck I’ve ever met.”

“D-Dante, please?” He’s still wailing as my fist connects with his nose for the first time, bursting it open like a ripe peach.

I don’t stop punching him. Not until all that’s left of his face is a bloody mess of skin and brains and bone. Not until my hands and shirt and face are soaked in his blood and Maximo has to drag me off his lifeless corpse. Not until I have poured out most of the rage that is burning through my veins like it’s the only thing keeping me alive.

“Dante, you’re gonna hurt your hands if you keep doing that. There’s nothing left, buddy,” Maximo says in my ear, wrapping his biceps around me. “We got to get you cleaned up and out of here.”

I rock back on my heels, staring at the battered body of Leo Evanson. He was dead by the third or fourth blow. He was a lucky son of a bitch. If I wasn’t eager to get back to Chicago to confront my father and crawl into bed with my wife, if I didn’t have to look her in the eye every single day for the rest of my life, I would have tortured this sack of shit for days. At least I can tell her it was quick.

I shower and change in the small unused office block that Maximo and I

brought Leo to earlier. The building belongs to the corporation of the man who owns LA — Alejandro Montoya. And while he and I aren't exactly friends, we have a mutual respect for one another. I trust that his team will clean up any mess here without any issue. He owes me after the last time I did the same for him back in Chicago.

As soon as Maximo and I are done, we drive back to the airport and spend the entire time wracking our brains to think of any possible connection between Kat and my father.

Have I been played for a complete fool?

If so, by whom?

CHAPTER 50

DANTE

I sip a neat Scotch as I lean back in the seat and stare at the clouds through the window. My entire world just flipped on its axis and my need to get to the bottom of this is consuming me. It's nine in the morning, and we just left LA. My body has no idea what time it is because I haven't slept a wink. I'm too worked up to do anything but think.

"This is all so fucked up, D," Maximo says quietly as he sips a vodka.

"I know."

"I can see the cogs turning in your brain. Anything you want to share?"

There was always the three of us — him, me, and Lorenzo. But Maximo has always been my sounding board, listening while I think out loud.

"I don't think Kat knows my father had any interest in her," I start. The thought that she's somehow mixed up in something with him and has been playing me all along has crossed my mind, and it almost ate me up, but I don't believe it. Or maybe I just can't.

"I agree. Kat is an open book, D."

"Leo said my father asked for details including dates, right?"

"Yeah."

"So something about when Kat was taken is important. Something about Elmo and Tony taking her is important. But why didn't he already know what Leo told him? Elmo and Tony worked for him. Why didn't he ask them what happened?"

"And why did he send them to your house that day, knowing Kat would be there and would probably identify them?"

"He wanted me to kill them? He knew that I would."

"Hmm." Maximo runs a hand over his beard. "Why not just do it himself

though?”

“And why not kill Kat? Why send me to do it?” I add with a frown.

“Maybe so that his hands stay clean?” Maximo offers.

I roll my eyes. As much as my father likes to remind everyone he was once the most powerful man in all of Chicago, he never did have the stomach for killing. He had other people to do that for him, and as soon as Lorenzo, Maximo, and I were old enough, it became our job. “But he risked us finding out something he obviously wants kept hidden?”

“I doubt he thought you’d let Kat live,” Maximo says. “It’s not exactly been in your nature to show mercy.”

“I don’t go around killing innocent women though, Max,” I say with a scowl.

“That’s not what he thinks.”

I run a hand through my hair in exasperation. It feels like the answer is staring me in the face, but I can’t quite reach it. “At least now I know why he was so pissed when I brought her to the house.”

“And why he suggested you kill her when she got pregnant.”

“Kill her or marry her,” I remind him.

“Kind of two ends of the spectrum.” Maximo laughs darkly as he takes a swig of his bourbon.

“Kill her or make her one of us? She knows something, Maximo.”

“I thought you said she had no idea what was going on?”

“I don’t think she knows what she knows though. Or she saw something and she doesn’t understand that it means something?”

“What could it be that would make him go to these lengths though? Why not just tell you what the fuck was going on?”

“Because whatever it is, must be something I wouldn’t let slide. And as much as I despise the man, when it comes to business, I can only think of one thing we have ever disagreed on so strongly that he would go to these lengths to hide it from me,” I snarl as more pieces start slotting into place.

“The Santangelos?” Maximo says with a deep sigh. “I thought all that fucked up shit was dealt with a long time ago.”

“Maybe it was?” I say, wanting to believe that even after everything he’s ever done, my father is not involved in what I think he is.

“You want me to come with you?” he asks. As soon as we land in Chicago, visiting my father is my priority.

“No. I need to handle this myself.”

“Lorenzo?”

“He doesn’t need to know. Not until it’s done.”

“Whatever you say, D.”



It’s evening by the time I arrive at my father’s house. I waited until after seven when I know his housekeeper will have left for the day before I let myself in using a spare key he gave me when he first bought the place. He has two armed guards. I don’t know them. That will certainly make it easier to shoot both of them in the head before I leave.

They smile at me when they see me walking down the hallway. I rarely visit him here, but I’m Sal’s son. I mean him no harm, surely. One of them is about to take a bite out of a meatball sub, but they both stop and make small talk about the weather and the Bulls.

“Where is my pop?” I ask.

“In the den. Watching TV,” the one with the sub replies.

“He alone?”

“Yup.”

“Thanks,” I say before heading off toward the den.

He’s sitting with his feet up on the sofa and a glass of cognac in his hand when I walk into the room.

“Hey, Pop,” I say with a forced smile.

“Dante?” He turns off the TV with the remote. “What are you doing here?”

“I finally found Leo Evanson,” I say calmly as I sit on the armchair beside the sofa.

I don’t miss the subtle twitch of his eye and the tick in his jaw before he says, “Good. You get my money back?”

“Naw. That’s long gone.”

“You kill the son of a bitch, then?”

“Sure did.”

“Good. So, it’s dealt with?”

I ignore his question. “Would you believe he tried to offer up his own sister to pay his debt?” I ask. “Seems it’s a thing with him. Piece of shit.”

“Waste of oxygen. People like that never change, *mio figlio*. You did your

wife a favor getting rid of him.”

“Yeah. You met him then, Pop?”

He frowns at me. “No.”

“Oh, just seemed like you knew him is all.”

“Never met him in my life.”

“I thought you were at the poker game that night?”

“No. Benetti was there. Not me.”

“So you never met him?”

“I already told you I don’t know the guy.” He gets impatient now, that infamous Moretti anger flashing in his eyes.

“Not even when you asked him about what Elmo and Tony did to his sister?”

His eyes narrow. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No? Why did you send Elmo and Tony to see me and Lorenzo that day?”

“They’re good, loyal soldiers.”

I shake my head. “You see, at the time, I didn’t give it much thought because I was too busy torturing the sick fucks to death, but you had no reason to send them to me and Lorenzo. We didn’t have a job for them. You sent them because you knew what they’d done to Kat.”

He bangs his fists on the sofa cushions beside him. “I had no idea they’d taken her. You think I would have sent them to you if I’d known they had raped your wife, *mio figlio*? I would have dealt with them myself.”

“I never told you they raped her.”

“What?” He blinks at me.

“I never told you that.”

“I assumed.”

“You knew. You just said it. They raped her.” I stand and then take a seat on the coffee table directly in front of him.

“How did you know, old man? Why did you send them to my house when you knew what they’d done to my wife? And why the fuck did you send me after Kat in the first place when Leo had already given you back your money?”

He opens and closes his mouth and his eyes dart around the room as he scrambles for a reasonable explanation — another lie he can feed me. “Vic, Emilio,” he shouts to his guards outside, his voice filled with panic and terror.

A few seconds later, the two of them come running into the room, but I've already drawn my gun from the waistband of my suit pants, and I shoot them before they can take more than a few steps into the room.

My father looks at me again, his face ashen as I train my glare on him. "Why?"

"Dante," he pleads, his arms held out in surrender.

I shoot him in the kneecap, and he howls in pain, clutching onto his injured knee as he curses at me.

"You know how many bones there are in the human body, Pop? I will shatter every single one if you don't start giving me some answers. And you know I will do it because you've watched me do it before."

Saliva dribbles from his mouth as he stares at me while bleeding onto his expensive carpet.

"Why did you send me after Kat?"

"Because I thought you'd kill her," he spits. "Trust you to grow a fucking conscience at the worst possible time."

I force down the rage that bubble in my chest. I need answers to so many things before I end his miserable life.

"But why did you want her dead?"

He licks his lips, looking at his injured leg and wincing. "She saw something she shouldn't have. At least I think she did, but now... I don't know."

"When Elmo and Tony took her?"

"Yes. Stupid fucking idiots were supposed to kill any girls they took back there. They swore to me they had. But they were so hopped up on meth half the time I don't think they knew what the fuck they were doing. When I found out she was still alive..."

"Took back where? What did she see?"

He clamps his lips together, his jaw clenched in anger.

"What did she see?" I bark as I point my gun at his other kneecap.

"Cages," he blurts out the word. "People in cages."

My stomach churns. I fucking knew it. I didn't want to believe it, but a part of me knew all along. "People?" I spit. "Or children?"

"Both. Women and children."

Bile burns the back of my throat as I'm confronted with the true nature of the evil that spawned me. "So six years ago, when Maximo and I wiped out the Santangelos and thought we'd put a stop to this vile, disgusting stain on

our family's name, all we did was cut off the tail of the snake? You were the head. I knew there was someone bigger backing Jimmy and his boys, but it was you?"

"I was supposed to bring you and Lorenzo in on it when you were old enough, but after the way you reacted when you found out about Jimmy and his boys being mixed up in it..." He shakes his head, as though he is bitterly disappointed in me.

"I wish you had tried, because I would have killed you six years ago too."

"I'm your father," he yells. "You would be nothing without me. Everything you have is down to me."

"Everything I have is in spite of you. I would rather be completely broke than take any money from what you've been doing. Is that why you wanted me to marry Kat if I wouldn't kill her? So that if she ever did remember seeing anything, then she'd already be my wife and you could silence her? The way you silenced Nicole?"

"I was protecting our interests."

"But it was all for nothing. Kat didn't see a thing. You want to know why I know that? Because she relives what your depraved animal buddies did to her over and over again and she remembers everything in perfect detail. *If* she had seen any women and children trapped in cages, it would have torn her apart until she freed every last one of them."

"I had no way of knowing she hadn't seen anything. I couldn't be sure so I had to take precautions."

"You were willing to have me kill her just in case?" I spit at him. "Just in case she might have seen something that would expose your disgusting secret?"

"No. Because she would have exposed a multi-million-dollar operation. That is all that matters, Dante. It's just business."

Business? I stand and walk away from him before I pound his face to mincemeat the way I did Leo's not so long ago.

Pacing the floor, I run a hand through my hair. "How did I not notice? Women and kids are being moved like dogs through my city and I didn't fucking notice?"

"We moved operations outside of the city."

"*We?*"

His nostrils flare as he glares at me. "Dominik Pushkin."

"For fuck's sake. You're working with the Russians?"

“I didn’t have much choice when you killed Jimmy and his entire family,” he retorts.

“You’ve still not forgiven me for that, Pop? And now I know why. I could never fathom why you were so pissed at us for wiping out a family of scum who made their money trafficking innocent women and kids. Kidnapping them to order for the highest bidder.” I spit the words out like they leave a bad taste in my mouth. “Is that what happened to Megan?”

He blinks in confusion again. Sick fuck doesn’t even remember her name.

“The girl from the coffee shop? Lorenzo and I thought you killed her, but you took her, didn’t you? Was she just another order to fulfil?”

His scowl confirms I’m right. “You think what you do is any better? We are purveyors of misery, Dante. That is our calling. Our legacy. There is no escaping it. Do not look down your nose at me for choosing to make money in a different way, because we are exactly the same.”

I punch him square in the jaw, and his head snaps back before he spits blood from his mouth and goes on glaring at me.

“I am nothing like you, you sick, twisted fuck. I have never killed a man who didn’t deserve it. And I would never hurt a woman or a kid.”

“What about Nicole?” He sneers.

“Nicole?”

“Yes. Your fiancée. The one you had slaughtered along with her brothers.”

“Did you know what Jimmy and those boys used to do to her?”

He shrugs. “What men do in the privacy of their own home is their business, not mine.”

“And what you did in the privacy of my home. Whose business is that, Pop?”

He blinks at me.

“You don’t think I know you raped Nicci too? You don’t think she told me about that?”

He smirks at me. He fucking smirks. I shoot his other kneecap, and he wails in agony before he starts cursing me again.

“Did you know you knocked her up too?”

That gets his attention. He spits more blood from his mouth. “So you killed her baby too. Your own sibling?” he hisses. “You are just like me, *ragazzo*.”

“Nope. You see, I never killed her. Nicci and your son are alive and

well.”

“My son?”

“Yeah. He’s a cute kid. Looks a lot like Joey actually. But he will never know a goddamn thing about the monster who spawned him. Nicci and I will make sure of that.”

“You been keeping secrets from me too.” He laughs maniacally.

The pain’s making him delirious. He never could handle it. Not the way he taught Lorenzo and me too.

“Plenty, Pop. So from now on, I’m going to be completely honest. I’m going to kill you. You like to tell me that I’m weak, but protecting people who can’t stand up for themselves isn’t weak. As long as I’m still willing to kill a man who is a danger to the only people I love, I don’t care who thinks I’m weak or merciful. And that’s what I’m going to do, Pop. I’m going to look you in the eyes when I shoot you in the head. Then I’m going to make it look like someone forced their way in here and I’m going to pin your murder on Dominik. Once the heads of the Bratva families find out what trade he’s been plying these past years, they’ll be happy to hang him out to dry.

I press the barrel of my gun against his forehead.

“You don’t have the b —” he starts, but I pull the trigger, splattering his brain matter on the back of his cream leather sofa.

CHAPTER 51

DANTE

“So, what do you say?” I ask Dmitri as we both sit in the huge leather chairs in the sitting room of his house. He nurses a glass of vodka while I sip a Scotch.

“Never look a gift horse in the mouth, Dante.”

“You’ll have my full support.”

“I appreciate that, friend,” he says, taking a sip of his vodka. “I’m pretty sure I might not need it once people learn the truth about our glorious leader though.”

“I think you’re right.”

“I’ll wait and see how this unfolds then, and thank you for coming to me with this. You could have handled matters yourself. You’d have every right. I appreciate it.”

“Well, having someone sane and trustworthy as the head of the Bratva is good for my business too,” I remind him. Then I down my Scotch and excuse myself. Eager to get back to my wife, even if I’m not so keen on telling her what I’ve done.



IT’S ALMOST midnight by the time I get back home. My guards patrol the gardens, but the house is quiet. I’m about to head upstairs to bed when the approach of footsteps interrupts me. Turning around, I see Sophia.

“Mrs. Moretti is in the den, sir,” she says quietly. “She insisted on waiting up for you.”

“Thank you, Sophia,” I say as I move to find Kat. My heart is heavy with the weight of what I’ve done these past twenty-four hours. Not that I regret any of it, but I anticipate the pain it will cause her. Maybe I should tell her tomorrow? Or the day after? Or after the baby is born? Or after he or she goes to college? Because then, she will still look at me like she once did.

Pushing open the door, I see her sleeping form on the sofa. She’s curled up into a ball with an open book on the floor beside her. Walking over, I pick it up and place it on the table. By the half-naked man on the cover, I guess it’s one of those romance books she’s so into... the kind where the good guy always gets the girl.

I crouch and run my fingertips over her cheek. She’s too damn beautiful and kind for my dark world, but she’s too much a part of my life now for me to ever let her go. So, instead, I will protect her and our child with every last breath in my body.

“Kat?”

She stirs. Her eyelids flicker open, and when she sees my face, she smiles. And now the air is full of untold truths, and it makes my chest tighten to even think about keeping what I just did from her. If she’s going to insist on looking at me like that, then I owe her the truth. And if it costs me never seeing that smile again, it’s a price I’ll have to pay.

“What are you doing down here, *amore mio*?”

“I wanted to wait up for you,” she says as she sits up on the sofa.

I cup her chin in my hand. “You missed me, huh?”

“Yes,” she breathes as the skin on her neck flushes pink.

“You have any nightmares while I was gone?” She hasn’t been having as many since we dealt with the monsters that haunt her, but she’s more likely to have them when I’m not here.

“Nope,” she grins at me. “But I did miss waking up next to you.”

Standing, I pull her up and into my arms. Running my nose over her hair, I breathe in her sweet scent. Cleansing and soothing me. If only it could cleanse my soul.

“Did you do what you needed to?” she asks.

Fuck, if only she knew the meaning behind that question and how what I’ve done these past two days weighs heavy on me. “Yes.”

“Good.” She wraps her arms around my waist and rests her cheek on my chest. “Can we go to bed now, then?” she purrs like my feral little kitten.

Bed? I should take her to bed and fuck her until we both fall asleep. “I

need to tell you something, Kat,” I say instead.

“What?” Huge blue eyes find mine, full of love and trust that I am about to shatter into a million pieces. So, why am I doing it? Why not let her live in blissful ignorance? Because I love her too much to let her go on wondering what happened to her brother and where he is.

“We found him. We found Leo.”

She blinks at me, and so many emotions flutter across her face I can’t tell what she’s thinking or feeling. “Where?”

“L.A.”

She swallows. “So, you went to see him? That’s where you’ve been?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you looking at me like that, Dante?” She takes a step back, and I let my arms fall from around her waist. “What did you do?”

I narrow my eyes as I search her face for clues as to what’s going on in her head. “Don’t ask questions you already know the answer to, Kat.”

Her hand flies to her mouth, and her face twists in disgust as she glares at me. “He’s my brother.”

“He *was* your brother,” I correct her.

Anger flares in her eyes. “You killed my brother! My own brother? And for what?” She opens her arms wide and gestures around the room. “Because he owed you money? Like you don’t have more money than you could spend in twenty lifetimes?”

“No, Kat, I don’t give a fuck about the money. I would have let that go. Even though it would have made me look weak, I would have done that for you.”

She glares at me, her body vibrating with anger.

“I killed him because of what he did to you. You and our baby would never be safe because you’d always be his trump card, Kat.”

“Don’t use me to justify what you did,” she hisses. “You do not get to put this on me.”

She pushes me in the chest as tears roll down her cheeks, and I catch her wrists in my hands and pull her closer. “This is not on you. But I gave him a chance, Kat. I gave him a chance to fight for you, and once again, he sacrificed you to save his own skin.”

“No.” She shakes her head.

“Yes. I wanted him to stand up for you, Kat. I wanted him to fight for you, but he didn’t. He doesn’t deserve a single tear from you.”

She pulls away from me again, and I let her go. Once her hands are free, she wipes the tears from her cheeks. “You looked at him and saw what he’d become, but only I know what he was,” she whispers. “Before our mom died, he wasn’t like that. He used to make me chocolate chip pancakes and take me to the movies. He was my brother and you took him from me.”

“No. His addictions took him from you, Kat. That boy you’re remembering now is long gone. The only person who remained was the piece of shit who let two men kidnap and rape and torture you to pay off his debts.”

She flinches at my words.

“And when I told him that I had taken you as payment, all he was interested in was his debt being wiped. He didn’t even ask me if you were okay.”

She shakes her head, living in denial that someone she cares so much for could treat her like she was nothing.

“You can refuse to believe me if that makes you feel better about what he did. And you can hate me for as long as you need to, but I am not going to apologize or have a moment’s regret for what I did. I would do it again one thousand times over.”

“What people say about you is true,” she spits. “You’re a cruel, cold-hearted —”

I step closer, and her breath hitches, cutting off what she was about to say. “Yes, I am. I am everything they say I am and more. I warned you about this, but you refused to believe me about that too.”

“Well, looks like I was wrong then. Congratulations.” She gives me a slow hand clap and I have to stop myself from throwing her down onto the sofa and fucking the attitude out of her. “You’ve finally succeeded in convincing me that you’re not a good man. Not even close.”

Okay... That stings more than I thought it would.

“You should go to bed and get some sleep before one of us does something we regret.”

“Fuck you!” she snaps and then she storms out of the room, all five feet six of her shaking with rage.

“You sleep anywhere but our bed, Kat, and I’ll come drag you out of it,” I shout after her. No matter how pissed she is at me, she’s still my wife.

CHAPTER 52

KAT

My heart hurts so much it feels like it's actually breaking. I know people say that all the time, but it's a physical ache. Leo is gone. And my husband killed him. Despite knowing how much it would hurt me. Then he told me about it. What did he expect me to do? Thank him?

I walk on auto-pilot to our bedroom. I mean, I should go sleep elsewhere, but Dante would just come find me and carry me to his bed anyway, and I'm too exhausted to fight. Will our lives always be like this? One long battle after another?

I climb into bed with images of my brother swirling in my head. I try to focus on all the good memories, before he became an entirely different person, but they are too mixed up with all of the horrible ones. He took losing our mom so hard, but then so did I, and I didn't turn into the world's biggest asshole. Maybe it was harder for him because he had to look after me, although from what I recall, it was me who did the looking after. I did the grocery shopping and balanced the check books. I cooked and cleaned, while he was always out hustling, trying to make easy money.

Memories assault me of the times I needed him and he was never there. The time he showed up at the hospital where I worked and called me a greedy, evil bitch in front of all my colleagues because I wouldn't loan him some money. How he gave me away like a used toy to pay off his debts. They're all dancing around my head when I drift off to sleep.



HANDS ARE ON ME. On the back of my neck. In my hair. Holding me down. My face is pressed into the dirt floor, and I choke as I breathe it in.

They're laughing now. "Just hurry up, fuck her again already. It's my turn. You've been at her for an hour."

"No," I plead as I cough on the dirt stuck in my throat. "Please..."

They laugh harder as pain sears through my entire body as he takes me again.

"No!" I scream louder.

So loud.

My scream reverberates around the room as I jolt in bed, my hair and my clothes stuck to my body. "No," I scream again because I don't know where I am.

Then I'm wrapped in warmth, and a familiar smell comforts me. I'm blanketed in soft skin and hard muscles as he pulls me tight, pressing me against his chest.

"It's okay, *vita mia*," a soft, soothing voice whispers in my ear. Is this a dream? "I've got you. You're safe."

"Where am I?" I whimper into the darkness as my mind remains clouded with sleep and monsters.

"You're home. In our house. In our bed."

"Dante," I whisper as I suck in a deep breath of air that floods my lungs. I'm not choking. So that means I'm here, not there.

"Shhh, kitten. It's just you and me. No one will hurt you," he whispers as he lies down, pulling me with him until I'm curled up next to him and his giant arms are wrapped around me.

He strokes my hair, whispering something in Italian that makes warmth settle into my bones. But despite that, I shiver in his arms. I'm so cold.

He presses a soft kiss on my forehead. "I'll be right back, okay?"

"Okay," I murmur, still foggy with sleep.

He climbs out of bed. The light from the bathroom gives the wall I'm now staring at a soft glow. A few seconds later, it disappears. Dante places something on the bed and then switches on the lamp on the nightstand before he sits beside me. "Come here, kitten," he says softly, peeling back the duvet and taking my hand.

I allow him to pull me up into a sitting position. He brushes my damp hair back from my forehead, pulling it into a ponytail and securing it with a hair tie.

Then he reaches for the edge of my t-shirt. “Lift up your arms.”

I blink at him. I’m fully awake now, but I’m not sure it’s the right time for this.

“Your clothes are wet, Kat,” he points out, and I take in my soaked t-shirt. “You can’t get warm in wet clothes.”

“Oh,” I reply, still feeling dazed as the whisper of my nightmare dances around the edge of my consciousness. That was one of the worst ones I’ve ever had. It was so vivid. It was so real. Because it’s not just a dream, but a living, breathing memory.

I raise my arms above my head, and Dante pulls off my t-shirt. It sticks to my damp skin in resistance, but as soon as it’s over my head, he tosses it toward the laundry hamper, before he picks up whatever it was he placed on the bed a minute earlier. He opens out a huge gray towel and wraps it around me. It’s fluffy and warm, making it feel so nice that I rest my cheek against the soft cotton and smile.

Dante moves onto his knees and reaches beneath the towel without opening it. He finds the waistband of my panties and peels them down my legs before throwing them in the same direction as my t-shirt. And when he’s done, he leans down, opening my towel just a little but enough to reveal a glimpse of my swollen belly. Then he kisses the exposed skin softly before he whispers something that I don’t understand, although I do catch the word *mama*, and it makes me smile.

When he’s finished, he lies down, wrapping his arms around me and hugging me close, before he pulls the duvet over us. My cheek is pressed against his chest and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat thumps against my ear. The shadows of my nightmare drift away, and I work an arm free from my towel and wrap it around his waist.

I am safe. Here with him, I’m always safe. When I think back on the last year of my life, one fact remains — he has protected me since the day we met. I’m mourning the family I once had, but this is my family now, right here.

Leo was my brother. The boy with the floppy blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes will always be my brother. But the man he became, the one who offered me up like a piece of meat to pay off his debts to the men who ruined my life, he was not my brother. I wouldn’t do something like that to my worst enemy, let alone someone I was supposed to love and care about.

Dante was right. He didn’t kill Leo. He killed the shadow that my brother

had become. And he did it to protect me and our baby, because Leo would come back as soon as he was in some trouble again. It was the one thing I could rely on him for.

A single tear rolls down my cheek, and Dante brushes it away with the pad of his thumb.

“I’m sorry about what I said before,” I whisper.

“Don’t be, kitten. It’s the truth. I’m not a good man, but I’m okay with that.”

I don’t agree, but I’m not going to argue because I know what he means now when he says that. “I’m okay with it too,” I say instead.

“I’m glad.”

“You are a good husband. And I know you’re going to be an incredible father.”

He kisses the top of my head. “Get some sleep, kitten. No more nightmares, okay?”

“No more nightmares.”

“*Ti amo.*”

“I love you too.”

CHAPTER 53

DANTE

The rising sun casts a long shadow over my desk as Lorenzo sits in silence, occasionally nodding his head to let me know he is listening. Maximo is beside him as I tell my older brother about Leo Evanson and everything I've learned in the past two days. I stop short of telling him that I shot our own father in the head.

He knows.

"So, when will they find his body?" he asks quietly.

"In a few hours probably. As soon as his housekeeper arrives and realizes he hasn't got up for his nine a.m. cigar and coffee."

Lorenzo rubs a hand over his beard. "And we will start a war, brother? To avenge our father's death?" He snickers, but there is no humor in it — only menace.

"We'll avenge his death, of course."

"By taking out the Russians?"

"By taking out Dominik Pushkin for the murder of our beloved father and supporting Dmitri Varkov to be Dominik's successor," I say, leaning forward in my chair. "Dmitri has been priming his small army for a takeover for the past year. The Russians are about to have a civil war anyway. We're simply helping them along. And we'll have Dmitri's loyalty when he's the new head of the Bratva."

"But we are going to war?" Lorenzo asks.

"I take it you're on board, then?"

"When have I ever not been by your side, brother?"

"Oh, I've missed you two hellraisers," Maximo says with a grin as he leans back in his seat and looks between my eldest brother and me. "It's been

far too quiet around here lately.”

Lorenzo gives Maximo a sideways eye roll before turning his attention back to me. “It shouldn’t be a shock that he was involved in it, but it still is.”

“I know.”

“Not a shock to me,” Maximo says with a shake of his head.

“Really?” I ask with a frown.

“The way he treated you both and tried to turn you against each other. After what he did to Nicci. He was planning to marry off his own daughter to a sick fuck just to appease the men who were making him a fuckload of money, even though he knew the depraved, twisted shit they were into. His own little girl?” Maximo snarls. His hatred for my father is profound, but I’ve never seen him talk so openly or with such vitriol.

Joey is a sore point for him. For all of us. I suppose she’s like a little sister to him too. It was my father’s plans to marry her off to Dominik Pushkin’s eldest son, which forced Lorenzo and I to send her away to school in Italy — a crime for which I think she’ll never forgive us.

“Well, he’s gone. No more arranged marriages for anyone,” Lorenzo says gruffly.

“What? Really? I can’t imagine anyone actually wanting to put up with Joey for more than a few days, so it looks like we’re all stuck with her forever then.”

Maximo scowls at me, but Lorenzo snorts.

“If that’s all, I’m going back to bed to do unspeakable things to my wife before the shit hits the fan,” Lorenzo says as he stands.

“Sounds like a good plan,” I agree. I’ve barely slept in the last two days and the thought of spending the next few hours curled up next to the softest, most beautiful body I have ever known feels like heaven. I’ll tell her the truth about my father too once it’s safe for her to know everything.

“I guess I’ll just go chat to Sophia then,” Maximo says with a sigh. “See if she’s willing to knock me up some pancakes while we wait for the bomb to drop.”

Lorenzo pats him on the back. “We can arrange a marriage for you if you want, Max?”

“Fuck you, Loz!” he snaps. “I have no intention of ever getting married and ending up pussy-whipped like you pair of disappointments.”

“Says the man who’s about to go eat pancakes while we’ll be eating some of that pussy we’re supposedly whipped by,” I say with a grin.

“Fuck both of you.” With that, he storms out of the room.

Lorenzo laughs again and turns to look at me as I stand from the worn leather wingback chair. He looks at the chair and then at me with a sadness on his face that looks like regret.

“It’s yours if you want it, Lorenzo. It always has been.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “It’s yours, little brother. That’s always the way it was meant to be. I’m honored to stand by your side.”

I walk around the desk and wrap my arm around his shoulder. “By my side. Not beneath or above. Now that truly is the way it was meant to be.”

“There are hard times coming,” he says quietly.

“I know,” I agree, aware that he isn’t just talking about the fact that our father is about to be found murdered in his bed and we’re going to pin it on the Russians, but also because of his own Russian princess and the fact that the cancer has returned. “But we’re in this together, right?”

“Always.”

WHEN I CRAWL BACK into bed a few minutes later, Kat’s eyelids flutter open. “You were up early.”

“I had to talk to Lorenzo,” I say as I slide my hand over her hip and onto her ass, pulling her toward me.

“About Leo?” she whispers.

“Yeah, and some other stuff.”

“What stuff?”

I kiss her forehead. “Nothing for you to be concerned about right now, kitten. Go back to sleep.”

“I don’t want to go back to sleep,” she purrs, trailing her fingertips over my chest and down to the waistband of my boxers. “Unless you’re too tired?”

I’m fucking exhausted, but I am never too tired for what she’s offering. “Not tired at all.”

“I thought maybe we could lay that one last demon to rest?” she says softly.

I run my nose along the column of her throat. “Kat, are you asking me to fuck your ass?”

“Will you be gentle?”

“As gentle as I can be, but it’s probably going to hurt a little at first. We can wait.”

“I don’t want to wait. I want you to be the only one I ever think of,” she says, her voice thick with emotion.

“Is this about your nightmare?”

“I guess. I was thinking about what Leo did and how he could hurt someone he was supposed to love. It was on my mind before I fell asleep.” She trails her fingertips over my cheek. “I know you would never hurt me, Dante. Make me some new memories I can dream about.”

My cock is already hard just thinking about taking her tight little ass. I press my lips against her ear and slide my hand between her thighs. “I’ll have to make you nice and wet and relaxed first.”

“Oh yes, please.”

I MADE HER COME TWICE — once with my mouth and once with my fingers and now she’s on her knees, head pressed against the pillow and her cum dripping from her pussy as I coat my cock with lube.

She shivers when I run a hand over her ass, but it’s in anticipation and not terror. The fact that I get this with her, particularly given where our story began, is a fucking honor. I have never been so proud of anyone in my entire life as I am of her.

“You still okay there, kitten?” I hold my cock in one hand and grab her hip with the other.

“Yes,” she pants breathlessly, still high from her orgasms.

I press my cock against the seam of her ass, and she sighs, relaxing her muscles as I push the tip inside her. “Good girl,” I soothe as I rub a hand over her skin. “You’re taking me so well.”

“You feel so big,” she groans.

“If you’re trying to massage my ego so I’ll take it easy on you, it won’t work,” I tell her, and she laughs softly. “You can take me. I promise.”

I ease a little further inside and the soft mewl that escapes her mouth while the muscles of her ass squeeze and ripple around my cock, almost tips me over the edge.

“Oh fuck, Dante,” she moans, pushing back so that I slip a little deeper inside.

“If it’s any consolation, I’m not going to last long in your tight little ass,” I grunt as I work my cock in deeper.

When I slip my hand between her thighs and drive two fingers into her

pussy, her back bows, and she lets out a scream that's muffled by the pillow. As I finger-fuck her pussy, her muscles relax, allowing me to push almost all the way inside her. I'll have to work her up to taking my entire cock because I'm stretching her so wide I'm worried I'd tear her in half. And I need her to love me fucking her ass, because I want to do all the goddamn time.

"I feel so full," she moans, pushing back, grinding herself on me, demanding more.

"You are full of me, kitten. My cock in your ass, my fingers in your pussy, and my baby in your belly. And you've never looked more fucking beautiful."

"Holy fuck," she gasps as her pussy coats me in a rush of her heat, and I know she's so close to the edge, which is a good thing because I'm seconds away from emptying my balls inside her.

"Come for me, Kat," I grunt as I thrust inside her while I finger fuck her, and like my good little kitten, she does exactly that, whimpering my name as her climax makes her shudder. I grind my own release into her as I cling onto her hips and pump every last drop into her juicy ass.

"Fuck!" I gasp when we're done, pulling out of her and collapsing onto the bed. Wrapping my arm around her, I pull her close. "You okay?"

"Yes, that was..." She bites on her lip.

"Incredible?" I offer.

"I was going to say epic, but incredible works too."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it because I want to do it again." I nuzzle her neck. "And maybe next time I can get all the way inside you?"

"That wasn't all the way? Goddamn." She giggles softly.

I kiss her neck, inhaling her sweet scent as she snuggles closer to me.

"I love you," she whispers.

"I love you too, kitten."

EPILOGUE

KAT

6 months later

Standing in the doorway of the nursery, I smile as I watch Dante cradling our five-month-old daughter, Gabriella, against his chest. She's fallen asleep in his arms as she so often does. He's looking at her with so much love and devotion on his face that it feels like my heart might burst.

He kisses her cheek before placing her down in her crib, whispering sweet nothings to her the entire time. When he looks up to see me, he shakes his head and smiles before walking quietly out of her room and closing the door.

He slips his arms around my waist and crushes me to him. "Watching me again, kitten?" he asks, running his nose over the sensitive skin of my throat.

"I can't help it. You look so hot when you're in dad mode."

"Dad mode?"

"Yep," I whisper. "Super hot."

He brushes my hair back, resting his hand possessively on the back of my neck and making my stomach flutter. "Well, I'm glad you think that, kitten, because I want to fill this entire house with our babies."

"The entire house?" I ask, feigning my indignation. "Then I'd be pregnant forever."

"Fine by me," he says with a shrug before hoisting me over his shoulder and making me shriek with laughter and surprise. I quickly cover my mouth

so I don't wake Gabriella.

He slaps my ass. "How about we get started right now?"

"We can't. I'm still breastfeeding. Nature's own contraception," I remind him as he carries me into our bedroom.

Kicking the door closed behind him, Dante walks to the bed and tosses me onto it, making me laugh harder.

"Maybe," he starts, pulling off his shirt, "if I fuck you enough, we can cheat nature?"

"Well, there's every possibility that could work. I mean, breastfeeding isn't one hundred percent effective."

"Hmm?" He kicks off his shoes and starts removing his suit pants too.

I scoot back on the bed as he eyes me like a recently lapsed vegan eyeing a prime ribeye. "We could wait until Gabriella is a little older though?" I suggest.

"Naw." He plants his hands on the bed and crawls toward me. "I want you knocked up, Mrs. Moretti."

"We still haven't had our honeymoon," I remind him.

"Pick your favorite place and we'll go next weekend," he says with a shrug, advancing closer.

"Just like that?"

"Joey is perfectly capable of looking after Gabriella for a few days and you can express enough for a weekend."

Then, he kisses my ankle.

"That won't work," I insist as his kisses trail higher.

"No?" He looks up and grins at me as his hand slides up my other leg and beneath my sundress until his fingers brush over my panties. "How about this?"

"No." I shake my head and clamp my lips together.

He tugs the cotton aside and rubs the pad of his pointer finger over my clit. "This?" he asks with a wicked grin.

"No," I say on a moan as he slips his finger inside me. I'm so damn weak when it comes to him.

He hovers over me, holding himself up on one forearm while he gently finger-fucks me. "How about we definitely go on that honeymoon next weekend, and you can just let me know when you're ready for me to fuck another baby into you?"

"You have such a way with words," I purr as I wrap my arms around his

neck and smile. Despite how we started, he makes me feel like his equal now. We've been through so much together, but all of it has only made us even stronger. Learning the truth about what happened with his father wasn't even enough to shake my belief in this man. He does what he does best to protect me, and I love him for it. "But that sounds like a perfect plan."

"Just know I'm still gonna try and beat those odds every damn day though, Kat."

"Well, I'd be very disappointed if you didn't."

"I fucking love you, kitten," he growls, then he buries his face in the crook of my neck and sucks and nibbles on my skin, all the while fucking my pussy with his fingers.

I rake my nails over his back, feeling his powerful muscles flex beneath my fingertips, and marveling at how the two of us ended up here. Whatever life throws our way in future, we'll be able to handle it together.

"I love you too, *vita mia*."



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sadie Kincaid is a dark romance author who loves to read and write about hot alpha males and strong, feisty females.

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Bound and Deceived

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always I would love to thank all of my incredible readers, and especially the members of Sadie's Ladies and Sizzling Alphas. My beloved belt whores! You all rock.

But to all of the readers who have bought any of my books, everything I write is for you and you all make my dreams come true.

I'd like to thank my fellow authors, and friends, Mary and Mandy for their friendship and support - not to mention having to listen to me go on and on about the world of independent publishing.

To my fellow romance authors, but especially Vicki H Nicolson, Nicci Harris, Elle Nicoll and BJ Alpha - you all make this journey so much more enjoyable.

Super special mention to my lovely PA's, Kate and Kate (I know), for their support and honesty and everything they do to make my life easier.

To the silent ninja. Thank you for putting up with my impulsiveness and my meltdowns. I love working with you.

To my incredible boys who inspire me to be better every single day. And last, but no means least, a huge thank you to my Thursday PA — my husband, who is my rock, my biggest supporter and my very own supportive, sizzling alpha. I couldn't do this without you!