



TAKEN

BY

Temptation

GIORDANO MAFIA BOOK ONE

TESSA WINTERS

Taken by Temptation
Giordano Mafia Book One
Tessa Winters

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*To all the girls who fell for the villain in the story.
This is for you.*

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Forbidden Love Series

Lessons in Sin

Chapter 1 – Arcan

I pull the trigger and the shot rings out, echoing as Bruno's body goes limp, flopping to the floor like a fish without fight. He was a weak man; he knew he couldn't withstand the sort of torture I could inflict. I guess that was why he begged for me to take his life the minute I dragged his carcass down to this basement.

Weak men always beg for their deaths eventually, the torture is always too much for them, too painful, too scary. Bruno couldn't even bother to wait for it to begin before he started pleading, his pathetic cries proof enough that he was, in fact, a traitorous bastard.

Silence hangs in the air as the echo of the bullet fades, and in it I feel myself uncoil. Bruno has been part of the family for three years, and for three years I have felt his clock ticking, that little hand tick, tick, ticking closer to his end. He was always erratic, his decisions too reckless and rash, his anger always leading his actions. Mix that in with a drug addiction and you've got a recipe for disaster.

A disaster that came in the form of treason against the family, against Dante, against us *all*. Turns out Bruno was selling information to a rival mafia family – a family we've had a treaty with for seven years – in exchange for drugs. Luckily, he wasn't privy to anything of importance but it's the principle: you don't fuck over your family.

And it had enraged me that he would, betray us, his brothers, for a few measly lines of coke. I should have pushed harder for Dante to cut him loose sooner, but truthfully, I wanted Dante to be right about him but now he'll only blame himself for it.

Sighing, I take one last look at Bruno, his body growing stiff with the cold touch of death and leave the room. On the way out, I send Jimmy, my clean-up guy, a coded text to tell him that there's a body that needs disposing of. Many years back, when I was a freelancer per say, when anyone and their mother could order my services, I would dispose of the bodies myself. It was just part of the job. But now, being Dante's only appointed assassin, hit man, angel of death ... whatever you want to call it, I have the luxury of getting others to do the job.

Pulling out my phone, I step outside of the terraced house I call home and press dial on Dante's name. He picks up on the second ring.

"Is it done?" Dante asks, straight to the point as always.

"Yes, it was as we suspected." I confirm, stepping around a woman struggling down the street with two children, my steps clean and casual – unsuspecting in the eyes of the public.

"Fuck."

"I'll update you fully when I get to the offices."

"I'll call a meeting." He half murmurs before hanging up, his mind already lost to everything this could mean.

Sliding my phone back into my pocket, I hurry my pace, my steps beating in time with the many other New Yorkers rushing about their business. When I bought this place, it was a dump but with what I do, it was perfect; an under-patrolled area, a basement I could soundproof, neighbours who keep to their own shady deeds.

Perfect for an assassin with an active nightlife.

The only downfall is that it happens to be quite the walk from the complex of offices, all owned by the family, where we tend to do all our business. And my car is in the estate where Dante lives.

Stepping around a corner, I collide with a small slip of a woman. Her small frame presses flush against mine, her cry muffled by the fabric of my suit. My arms come around her automatically, holding her up as she regains her balance.

“Oh god, I’m such a klutz!” She looks up at me, her eyes fixed on mine, and suddenly I’m lost. They’re such a rich, deep blue that they feel depthless like I could dive into them and never find a bottom. I’m ensnared, unable to look away. I’ve got no fucking idea how long I stand there staring at her, taking her in but its long enough to feel her warmth seep deep into my skin, warming my ice-cold core.

Her hand wiggles against mine and her lips part to let out a laugh as a blush tinges her cheeks a rosy hue. “Well, anyway. I should go.”

Go? Not a fucking chance. I’d kill anyone who tried to take her away from me. Part of me feels sorry for her; this sweet angel has fallen at the feet of a devil, and she doesn’t even know it. But before I can stop her, before I can grab her and swing her over my shoulder caveman style, she’s gone.

And so is my wallet and watch.

Dumbfounded, I turn swiftly in the direction she went. She’s walking away from me, her pace hurried but casual enough not to draw attention. My eyes zero in on her ass, those perfect globes of flesh tugging at something deep in my core, something that lengthens and throbs the longer I look. What the fuck is going on? I’m no virgin, but I don’t get hard from looking at a girl’s clothed ass. I have more control than that, or at least I did until it comes to her it seems.

After a beat, her head turns, looking at me from over her shoulder. Our eyes meet, and her lips curl in a tempting, sinful smile right before she turns back and takes off running.

“Fuck.” I growl but I don’t feel angry, I feel intrigued. This small slip of a girl has made me her ... victim. I breathe out a laugh. I’ve killed and mutilated and tortured some of the most intimidating, powerful men of the crime world and never have I thought of myself as the victim.

Not until this sexy little thief.

Shaking my head, I take off after her. I’d not planned on letting her leave, and don’t they say that the chase just adds to the excitement?

Racing after her, my steps eat away at the distance between us as I gain more and more ground but once again the sight of her strikes me down. She's so fucking beautiful. As she runs, her hair tickles the sweet curve of her ass, those dark tresses like the deepest, darkest night. A curtain of ink dripping down her back. My eyes catch on her sweater, the material thin and threadbare and suddenly I'm wondering why the hell she isn't decked in the thickest jumpers, the most expensive jewellery.

She may be a thief but she's *my thief* and she deserves the world.

Fuck I can't even concentrate on catching the little minx because I'm so fucking concerned about her. I shake off the worry and push harder and harder until I'm barely a hairbreadth away. She's fast, I'll give her that. She takes a right turn into an alley, and I follow. The place is secluded. The lone occupant a ginger tabby licking its paws on top of a dumpster and thankfully a dead-end looms beyond.

A chain-link fence stills her steps. She looks desperately around, those perfect little denim-blues round and wide in panic. It pains me that she's worried, that I could ever strike fear into her heart, but she doesn't know me yet. She doesn't know that I would burn the world before I would hurt her.

It takes everything in me to stop, to still my steps instead of grabbing her and never letting go. But I know enough about women to know that that wouldn't go down well. Placing my hand in my pocket, I discreetly adjust my hardened cock and stop before her.

With a metre of space between us, I look deep into her eyes and grin. "Well, hello there my little thief."

Chapter 2 – Kinsley

“Well, hello there my little thief.” He grins

His voice shivers through me, the deep timbre sending my pulse racing as I look, desperately, for an escape route. In retrospect, it was a bad idea to steal from him, but in my defence when I saw him striding down the street, shadows clinging to the sharp lines of his cheek, something just pulled me towards him. And anyway, men like him – handsome, expensive suit wearing men – don’t typically notice when the expensive things they buy go missing or if they do it’s when I’m long gone.

I should know since I’m technically still married to a man who matches that exact description. I guess I was wrong.

Taking a step back, I feel myself clash with the chain-link fence behind me. The fence that was not here two weeks ago when I scoped out the area. Gulping, I run an eye over him. He’s *big*. You can see his muscles straining beneath his suit, carving the lines of fabric into a cutting impression of whatever’s beneath – an impression that sends an annoying throb of heat pulsing through my core.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I lie.

His smile grows, carving out a dimple in his cheek as he clicks my tongue at me. “A liar and a thief. And here I was thinking you were an angel.”

I roll my eyes, pushing away the fear that’s clouding them. Fear means bad decisions. Fear means that your opposition has something to use against you. “Well, sucks to be wrong I guess.”

I glance behind him, hoping someone will pass so I can play the damsel. I’ve not been homeless for long enough to *look* homeless. My hair still falls in shiny waves, the effects of the absurdly expensive shampoo Jack would buy still clinging to the ends. My fingers still end in a perfectly manicured white tip. My clothes, though dirty and a bit threadbare, are still expensive designer brands. So, if someone *were* to pass, I

could successfully play the poor rich girl that's been cornered by a sleazy businessman.

But not a single person passes.

Tilting his head, he looks at me like he's dissecting me, cutting me open to the bone and I feel it down to my toes. "So, if I were to, hypothetically, of course, place my hand in your pocket, I *wouldn't* find a gold Rolex with my name engraved onto the back?"

"I'll scream." I snarl, feeling much like a cornered kitten in front of a wolf ... albeit a sexy muscled wolf.

His brows raise, reaching for his hairline, but for a beat he says nothing. We simply stand there staring at one another in a standdown that makes me feel as though I should spread my feet and reach for a gun holster that I don't have.

And then ... "You're not from New York."

Stumbling over my words, I stutter. "Wha-what?"

"You're not a New Yorker." He repeats.

My eyes flicker, left to right, searching for an escape because he's reading me like I'm an open book for his consumption and I *do not like it*. "Of course I'm a New Yorker." I lie.

In truth, I'm as far from a new yorker as you can get. I grew up in a small town in Colorado, trailer trash to the bone. Until I met Jack that is, until he turned my life upside down – and not in the good, sweet, knight in shining armour way. Well not in the end anyway.

His eyes crinkle like paper, the grey like sharp lines of led slicing me open and peering in. "A New Yorker wouldn't threaten to scream. They know screaming in a city full of busy people is as pointless as screaming in an empty room."

I take note of that. Five years ago, before Jack muted my street smarts, I might have thought of that myself but living in luxury *does* soften those instincts. No matter how much I like to pretend that I'm still that same street-smart girl I was back then, it doesn't make it the truth.

“Well, maybe I’m just a different kind of New Yorker.” I say.

“Maybe you are.” He murmurs, that smirk materialises again, cutting deep into his cheeks. Part of me wants to damn the consequences and just punch it into a frown.

I blow out a breath, the wisps of my hair fluttering from the breeze, and reach for the watch. I pull it out and hold it towards him. “I don’t want any trouble.” I’d rather go hungry tonight than risk the wrath of another man. It just isn’t worth it.

He ignores the watch but takes a step closer, and then another, and another until there’s barely any space between us, until we’re breathing the same air. My heart begins to race as he leans in closer toward me, but I’m not scared, I feel *electrified*. Heat is coming off him in waves, caressing my front, warming my insides until I’m sure there must be a fire burning in my eyes.

I look up into those steely greys and something thrives between us. Something burning and brilliant and *alive*.

Reaching for my hand, he pauses. I narrow my eyes, wary, but nod, assenting to whatever this is. A beat later, his fingers touch mine. I feel myself uncoil as that heat in my stomach drips lower, sinking until my sex throbs – at a touch? Ridiculous Kinsley.

Incredulous, I watch as he folds my fingers over the watch. “Keep it.” He whispers before stepping back, stealing away the throbbing heat right from under me.

Dumbfounded, my mouth gapes. “What?”

A softer smile smoothes over his lips. “You can keep the watch.” He thinks on it for a second and then clarifies. “You can keep the watch if you tell me your name.”

Alarm bells ring, but they’re those old, rusted ones that formed from living with Jack, my husband. So, I ignore them because right now, my instincts aren’t screaming, they aren’t begging me to run. They’re calm, like a wolf that’s been given a bone. For so long Jack turned my instincts against me, he

made me doubt the red that flashed when he spoke, he made me doubt that hazy, uncomfortable feeling that followed him like a cloud. He made me doubt *me*.

But I'm trusting my instincts from now on, and right now they're telling me I'm safe.

"Kinsley." I whisper, the word like a nail being plucked from a coffin. "My name is Kinsley."

He holds out his hand, not to hurt or grab me, but to shake mine. "Arcan."

His name lingers, dark yet sweet like chocolate melting on my tongue. I take his hand, my movements hesitant but then we're touching and all I can think about is how his touch feels like freedom.

His hands clench mine for a second before letting go while mine hover in the air for a second too long, stilled by the memory of his touch until I feel a blush crawling up my neck, settling along my cheeks like an unpleasant guest. Embarrassed, I thrust my hand back down and frown at the delight in his eyes.

Arcan takes a step back and turns to go, but he looks at me from the corner of his eye. "Be careful who you steal off Kinsley. Not every monster will let you go."

And then he's gone, his warning echoing like an omen.

Chapter 3 – Arcan

Most people who know me would never believe me if I told them that, up until I was seven, I was raised by nuns. But it's true. I grew up under the watchful, all-knowing eyes of God, being taught bible verses and confessing my sins.

Ironic, I know.

If Sister Linda or Sister Simona knew what I do for a living now, they'd probably drop down dead from the shock of it but technically it was their fault ... their fault for selling a child to 'good' catholic men who they really had no inner knowledge about. But I don't hold a grudge against them, after all they shaped my mind to be what it needed to be to survive – even if it wasn't intentional.

They taught me control; they taught me how to stop my urges from corrupting my actions. And those lessons have served me well. I have always been in control of myself, my mind, my actions ... until now.

Now, I can't get that sweet-assed angel out of my mind.

It took all of that learned self-control to leave her there, in that alleyway, alone and unprotected. What I really wanted to do was toss her over my shoulder cave-man style and lock her in my house. But I know that, in the long run, patience is better.

I've tuned out the men around me, I've tuned out the meeting that I should be listening to, to think of *her*. The memory of her flickers across my vision; a quick flash of her raven curls, the pink of her pouted lips, that slight dusting of freckles on her cheeks. There's something about her that's just so enticing, something that calls to that prowling beast inside of me – the one I keep on a tight leash of control.

Pulling out my phone, I bring up the tracking app. You see, the watch she stole happened to be a gift to myself, a twenty-four-carat gold Rolex with a specialised GPS tracking feature. Using an app I designed myself, the watch will track my movements – without saving them into a paper trail of my

assassinations – and if I ever need help, I click a button at its side and my location will be sent to my phone and Dante's.

What can I say, I'm over-prepared but no one ever died from being too organised.

The little red dot blinks up at me from my phone, moving quickly. This way I can keep an eye on her ... until she sells it that is. I know she's probably planning to pawn the damn thing, but for now, I can keep her safe, and I'll come up with something more permanent soon enough.

Those raven curls blind me for a second, the image of her impossible to get rid of. Shifting in my seat, I adjust my pants to hide the raging hard-on that's now pressing insistently against my zipper. It's like she stokes some primal part of me. Her baby blues fueling some instinctual need for her.

Usually, I fuck faceless women and by the end of it I can never remember their faces, their names. Nothing. For me, fucking is like eating. I get an itch and they're there to scratch it. But this is different, this is a need that can only be satisfied by her.

And more than that, I feel a need to know more about her. I want to know why a girl like her who has all the markings of a well-kept woman - the silky hair, the manicured nails, the blemish-less skin – is going around pickpocketing watches and looking at people with a look like that of a cornered cat.

She's depthless, and still, I want to find the bottom.

Fuck. I need to stop; I need to focus and push away the distraction. Distraction is a skilful killer; it slips in without notice until you're held within the ink-stained fingers of death.

When you're distracted, you lose yourself, Arcangelo. You must never lose yourself. Sister Agnes' voice shivers through my mind, her old warning as applicable in this situation as it was back then when she was scolding me for not paying attention to the bible verses she was reciting.

Pushing the thoughts of Kinsley out of my mind, I tune back into the conversation.

“Boss, the treaty is still intact!” Lorenzo, one of Dante’s right-hand men, argues. He scratches his closely clipped beard and shakes his head. “Why would they break it and risk war when things are so good?”

“Exactly!” Gabe says, shaking his head. “They wouldn’t, not right now.”

I stay silent, watching them fight like rabid wolves over the carcass of an animal as always. I’m sitting to the right of Dante, and I can sense the storm brewing within him even if those two animals can’t. Five years ago, Dante took Gabe and Lorenzo in and gave them a place in his inner circle and truthfully, I never understood the decision. In my eyes, they’re nothing more than brash brutes who have no critical thinking skills but I trust Dante and so I trust he had a reason for doing it.

Though, I’m yet to witness any reason for keeping them.

Shifting, I lean forward. “The reason never matters in terms of war. If power can be stolen, men will steal it if given half a chance. The treaty gives them that chance since it means we expect them *not* to do it and therefore it becomes easier to do it.” I look between them. “Thinking that they wouldn’t betray the treaty is the exact brand of stupidity that leads to us losing.”

The shadow clouding over Dante stirs, shifting with my words, growing darker. “He’s right. We need to expect the worst.” He turns to me. “Arcangelo, share with them what you learned.”

When it comes to Dante, my name is always *Arcangelo*, never Arcan as the people closest to me call me. There’s always that line between us, that strict separating line as clear as oil in water; *we are not friends* and yet what we really are is as murky as a swamp.

I nod. “We got a tip that Bruno was selling us out.” Curses sound from every direction of the table, every man sitting there thrumming with anger. We are bad men, we kill and torture and monopolise crime, but we are still men who live by a code. Bruno, a man considered one of us, broke that code

and paid dearly for doing so. “Before he died, he confessed to selling out some of our customers to Vlad. Some of which have been mysteriously turning up dead.”

While Dante is stern, he still rules with respect for his men. Vlad, the boss of the Russian mafia in New York, rules ... differently. He rules with fear, treating his men like disposable dogs that can be replaced with the snap of his fingers. It’s foolish to believe a man like that wouldn’t be behind these deaths, especially since he’s been wanting to become the main distributor of arms in New York since he took over as boss.

“Fuck.” Lorenzo drags a hand through his hair. “The Treaty is broken then?”

I go to speak but Dante beats me to it. “More than likely, but we’ll keep them ignorant of our knowledge for now. We need to prepare for war with every advantage we can.” A smile, soft and sinister appears, his teeth glinting in the low light of the meeting room. “And then we burn them to the ground.”

Nodding, I leave without another word, thoughts of Kinsley and war stealing away any goodbye I might have said.

Chapter 4 - Kinsley

The sweet smell of pastries float from the door of the bakery and my stomach clenches in response, the gnawing hunger ripping at my insides. I am starving. Food is just about the only thing I've been able to think about for the past six hours. Well food and a certain steely eyed man.

Reaching inside my pocket, I grab for the watch. It's heavy and solid in my palm, the metal cooling my heated skin. I don't know why, but I couldn't let myself sell it and I really did try. I walked all the way to the pawn shop, the one owned by a guy who looks the other way at stolen goods and ... I just couldn't do it.

But now, the hunger is chipping away at my resolve.

Stopping, I look in through the big, panelled windows, my eager face pressed against the glass and my mouth water. The sight of countless pastries and desserts like torture to my empty stomach.

I sigh and push away the hunger but just as I'm about to leave, the torture too much, I catch sight of the solution to all my problems.

A man, dressed in an obnoxious baby-blue polo and beige trousers, walks out of the bakery. He's laughing into his phone, his eyes glazed over with laughter. Sunglasses dangle from the v of his shirt and a wallet shaped bulge hints from his trousers.

Perfect.

"Yea bro, that dumb bitch thought *I* needed *her*. As if it wasn't me that was funding her shopping trips and all-expenses paid holidays ... Yea exactly! Gold digging whore."

I roll my eyes at the conversation. The small sliver of guilt sticking in my side disappears as I listen to him talk. Men like him don't deserve luxury. Not when they use it as a stick to beat others with.

Pulling away from the wall, I shadow his steps, ghosting him until I'm within touching distance and with a carefully

misplaced step, I'm falling into him. I bite back a yelp as my knee connects with the concrete, the pain blossoming in its wake sharp and cutting and only softened by the promise of food.

"Fuck!" He shouts as his phone goes flying. It hits the concrete with a resounding thud and the screen splinters like too thin ice being stepped on. He bends towards his phone, ignoring me entirely.

Jerk.

While he's distracted by the debris of his phone, I slip my hand into his pocket, fishing the wallet out with, rusty, but skilled fingers. When I was younger, it wasn't uncommon for me to use pickpocketing as a way to eat. My mother and father were always too concerned with their drinking habits to bother to remember to feed me. But in the years since Jack, I haven't had to use that skill much.

Which is probably why, just as my hand slips free, polo guy turns. His furrowed brow of confusion shifts to anger when he sees his wallet clasped between my fingers.

"What the fuck?" he growls, his eyes flashing. "You ... you thief!" he points at my wallet, his phone forgotten. People passing by turn to look, their eyes flooding my cheeks with a flush.

I take his bewilderment as an opportunity. Pushing up from the floor, I take a breath and for the second time in two days, I'm running away from a man I've tried to steal from and I very much doubt that this guy will be as forgiving as Arcan. As I shove past commuters, New York passes by in a blur of grey. The sounds, the smells, they all dim to white noise.

After I met Jack, I thought I'd never be in this position again – fighting and stealing just to live. But that was when I still thought Jack was the hero in my story. The white knight who stole me away from a shitty life. Turns out, he was just offering more of the same thing but dressed up in a pretty package.

Glancing behind, I watch as polo douche gains on me.

Think Kinsley, think! I need an escape route, some way to lose him. His wallet burns a hole in my pocket, the weight promising but is it really worth it? Maybe if I threw the wallet at him, I'll have a chance to escape. But that also means choosing between going hungry *again* or selling Arcan's watch. Those are two options I really don't like the sound of.

Swallowing, I suck in a breath, my lungs burning from exertion and push harder. I don't know this area well at all. I don't know any alleyways I could lose him in or hiding spots. I've been in New York less than two months. That's not really enough time to learn the ins and outs of the city, especially when you're focused on lying low.

A few steps ahead there's an alley.

Closing my eyes, I beg the universe to just give me this and right before I pass it, I throw myself to the right. And what do I get for trusting the universe? A dead end and an angry man that is soon to be boxing me in.

Why does this always happen to me.

A second later polo douche is there, his reflexes surprisingly agile.

Turning to face him, I hold out my hands. "Look I'll give you back the wallet if you let me go."

I am screwed. This is how it ends for me isn't it? Polo douche is going to call the police and I'll be carted away and locked in a cell and somehow, I just *know* that Jack will find out and come for me. He'll pay whatever fine he has to and drag me back to that prison he calls a house – an estate in the middle of nowhere that consists of me and him and his lackeys.

I try to swallow against the panic, the taste of fear like swallowing shards of glass, but tears prick at the corners of my eyes anyway.

His face twists in cruel amusement. He spits. "Or I'll just take it from you, how about that?"

"You touch a hair on her head, and I'll break every bone in your body." Says a dark, calculated voice.

Stunned, all I can do is stare as Arcan walks down the alley, his hands in his pocket, a small smirk on his face. He runs his eyes over me, his gaze dripping lower and lower until not a single part of me is untouched by those stormy greys.

He walks closer, sidestepping the confused polo douche, walking until we're an inch apart. "Are you okay?"

I nod. "Yea."

He nods, and his smirk grows. "We have to stop meeting like this." Turning, he once again faces polo douche who seems to have recovered, the angry look on his face back, but uncertain, as if he doesn't know what to do now Arcan is here. "Leave."

"She has my wallet!" he protests, gesturing to me. I take a step forward and throw it to him. He jumps to catch it but misses and, much like his phone, it goes flying away from him.

Arcan tilts his head. "There, now leave."

Polo douche opens his mouth, possibly to argue, but slams it shut at the dark look on Arcan's face. In all honesty, if he was directing that look at me, I would probably keep my mouth shut too.

Scowling, he bends and picks up the wallet, disappearing a moment later, leaving Arcan and I alone. Breathing out, I feel my body deflate. I don't want to live like this, but I have nowhere to go, no one to turn to and even if I did, Jack would just find me there.

Hot tears make tracks down my cheeks and a sob shudders through me. I feel a blush steal over my cheeks, mortified that Arcan is seeing me like this ... but then he's there. His hand threads through my hair as he pulls me towards him. His warmth seeping into me as I cry against him.

Sniffing, I whisper against his chest. "I don't know why I'm crying." A delirious laugh slips from my lips. "And I *really* don't know why I'm crying on a stranger."

"I'm not a stranger." He says, sounding slightly offended.

“Arcan, we met yesterday, you know, when I *pickpocketed* you.”

He strokes my head. “Ah yes, but you know my name which makes us at least acquaintances.”

Shaking my head, I pull away from him. “How did you know where I was?”

He avoids my eyes, instead he watches his fingers playing with my hair. “Lucky coincidence.”

I raise my brows and step away fully, my arms crossed. “Oh *really?*”

His eyes meet mine. “Really.” I stay silent. He sighs and a small smile plays at his lips. “I’ll tell you if you do something for me.”

“What?”

“Don’t be difficult. I have a spare room you can use at my house.” He glances at his watch, the new Rolex similar to the one I stole but instead of gold, this one is black. It fits him better.

I immediately begin to shake my head. “No way, that’s crazy!”

“So is being homeless.” He gives me a pointed look.

“I cannot move in with an *acquaintance* I just met.”

He nods. “I understand the fear, but can you really tell me that living out here is safer than taking a chance with me?” He gestures between us. “I know you feel this ... connection. I’m not one to thwart my instincts and I don’t think you are either.”

It’s true and I *do* feel whatever this is between us. But I’m also not a trusting idiot.

“Fine. If you get me a phone, I’ll come.” I say in my best business mode voice. At least that way, I have a way to call the police. A last resort? Sure, but it’s always better to be overprepared.

But he’s right. These streets are dangerous. For the past two months I’ve slept somewhere new every couple of days, if I

stay any longer than that people notice. And if people know the areas you frequent, you're more likely to attract their ... bad intentions.

He nods and holds his hand out. "A deal then?"

"A deal." I say, placing my hand in his, delighting in the jolt of electricity that travels from his hand to mine.

Now let's just hope my instincts don't fail me with him.

Chapter 5 – Arcan

I hold open the door to my apartment, letting her in before me. The scent of her, an intoxicating mix of vanilla and coconut, floods my nostrils as she brushes past. My hands twitch with the effort it takes to not just drag her into my arms and bury my nose in that sweet-smelling mane of hers.

Pushing away my need for her, I watch as she circles the apartment. Her eyes widen as she takes in my place, her baby-blues sparkling like a starlit sky, and her mouth opens in a big O. My cock throbs, dirty thoughts of what might fit into that wide open O flooding in at the sight of her.

“I was expecting you to live in some fancy high-rise in the richest part of town.” She muses, running a finger across the countertops.

“Are you disappointed?”

“No.” Her eyes glimmer. “This place is perfect.”

When I first bought this place, it was a dump. But over the years, I’ve built it up into a nice little home ... the perfect place for a killer. On that note, I need to make sure she keeps away from the basement – I’ll move my work to Dante’s estate but I don’t like the thought of her being anywhere near that part of me.

Moving away from the kitchen, she heads to the couch, plopping herself down before stretching out like a cat and her shirt rides up, affording me a glimpse of her flat stomach. Temptress. “Did you decorate?” She says, her eyes blinking steadily up at me.

I shake my head.

She smiles. “I thought so.”

I raise a brow at her. “And what is *that* supposed to mean.”

“Well look at this place.” She gestures around her to the open plan kitchen and lounge area. Decorated in tasteful slate greys and red brick, softened by hints of white, the place looks

like the poster child for industrial interior design. Her eyes crinkle teasingly as she hammers her point home. “There is *no way* a man would decorate this tastefully.”

I smile, lightened by her teasing. It’s strange, the ease with which I can speak with her. It’s like meeting someone and feeling like you knew them in another life. Like some tether has kept you connected, and you finally get to see them again. “My boss’ daughter is an interior designer.”

She nods. “She is *good*.”

“I agree. Now, the bedrooms are upstairs. Yours is on the left.” I point to the tv. “The tv has cable, and the fridge is stocked but if you need anything you can message me. Once you have your new phone that is.”

She sits up suddenly, her tits bouncing as she does. Even doing nothing inherently sexy, she’s irresistible. She points a finger at me, her eyes narrowed. “You still need to tell me how you knew where I was.”

Damn, I thought she’d forgotten about that. But really, this whole situation is weird and so very unusual. What’s one more creepy, unusual thing in the face of all that? “The watch you stole.” I begin. “It has a tracking device inside it.”

She purses her lips. “I knew I should have pawned it.”

“Why didn’t you.” I challenge. I had wondered why when I tracked down the location and saw it was still attached to her. It didn’t take me long after that to tail her, to keep close. I didn’t want to risk her getting away, getting hurt and I’m damn glad I did. Who knows what would have happened in that alley if I hadn’t been there.

“No reason.” She mumbles, a blush tinting her cheeks, but she shakes it off quickly, her eyes sharpening as the cogs in her mind turn. “That first time we met, you called yourself a monster. Why?”

Taking a breath, I contemplate lying. The last thing I want is for her to run but I don’t think she will. One skill I’ve honed over the years is reading people and when I read Kinsley, I’m getting a reflection of myself. She knows this is ... strange, to

say the least, but she also knows that this thread between us is something worth exploring.

Looking down at her, I'm hit once again by how beautiful she is. I'm also hit by the mystery hidden behind her eyes. There's so much I don't know about her, and I want to know it all. I want to pick her lock and look inside, and I just know if I lie to her now, that lock will be soldered shut. Gone forever

Sitting, I don't look at her as I speak. "My full name is Arcangelo but most people in my line of work call me the Archangel of death."

"Why?" She whispers.

"Because, for the people I assassinate, I'm the last thing they see." I look towards her. "I called myself a monster because I'm a member of the Italian mafia and it's my job to kill."

Her face doesn't change. She doesn't crumble in fear or press away from me in disgust. She keeps herself perfectly blank in a way that makes me wonder at the story hidden between those pretty pink lips of hers. Whatever the story, it's one of survival, I know that much. She's learnt how to hide her reactions when she needs to. How to shutter her face against speculation.

I'm impressed, even as a part of me rages at the fact that she's needed to learn this. Rages at all the possible reasons of *why* she needed to. Swallowing, I wait for her to speak.

After a moment she does. "Okay."

Surprised, I look at her incredulously. "Okay? That's it? No running or screaming or swearing?"

She rolls her eyes. "I don't exactly have many options, do I?" Her smart mouth surprises me, and not many people can say they've done that. Shrugging her shoulders, she continues, her eyes going faraway. "And anyway, living with a man who doesn't pretend to be a hero is much better than the alternatives I've experienced."

A wave of deadly calm rolls through me. "And what other alternatives have you experienced?"

Her eyes refocus. “Monsters who pretend to be heroes.” She shakes her head, and smiles, moving along the conversation. “Anyway, I am *famished*. Can I raid your fridge?” She pats her stomach.

I want to push for more, I want to know exactly who these monsters are, but I know its best if I leave it ... for now.

Grinning, I stand. “I make a mean grilled cheese.”

Her eyes light up in the most adorable way as she looks up at me. “I haven’t had a grilled cheese in so long.”

And so, I make grilled cheese, imagining that the sizzle of the pan is the sound of flesh burning from the bodies of every monster that’s ever hurt her.

Chapter 6 - Kinsley

So far today, I have watched two whole seasons of Grey's Anatomy, rearranged the icons on my new phone, watched a YouTube video on improv and walked through the nearby park three times.

In other words, I am *bored*.

Arcan left this morning, saying he had business meetings he needed to attend. I'm not really sure if that's code for murder and I'm not sure if I even want to know. I'm here now, and I don't want to leave for more reasons than I'd like to admit.

But I'm not going to psychoanalyse that right now, I'll just tuck it in some drawer in my brain, you know the one – the one filled with old memories that are just a little *too* embarrassing to think on and traumas that are just *slightly* too difficult to process. You can just throw them in to be sorted through at a later date ... or never.

Never is sounding good right now.

Sighing, I throw the remote away from me and glare at it. Anymore endless scrolling through Netflix and I might just lose my mind. I think I've been so used to being constantly on edge these past few months, constantly waiting to be captured by Jack that I'm finding it hard to adjust to being ... safe?

Just as I'm about to rip my hair out, the door opens. Arcan walks in and my core throbs at the sight of him ... another thing I'll analyse at a later date.

Ignoring the heat rushing through me, I jump up, feeling suddenly awkward at the sight of him. "Hi."

He smiles. "Hello."

"I need something to do." I blurt out.

He places his car keys and a sagging bag on the table. "Oh?"

"I don't want to just live here rent free." I explain.

I've been thinking about it all day. Before Arcan, before Jack, I worked at a rundown little diner where I'd work the graveyard shift seven days a week, sleeping all day and working all night. It was horrible, but it made me realise that I'm anything but lazy and now, I can't be without anything to do.

"I want to be able to provide something. But I just don't know how to do that."

A piece of dark hair falls into his eyes as he thinks. "I'll think on it." He murmurs. "I'm going to go shower."

He disappears through the house, his footsteps echoing loudly. A second later, I hear the shower turn on. Clenching my teeth, I try to ignore the dirty thoughts trickling in at the sound. Thoughts of Arcan. Naked. His hard muscles rippling under the steady stream of water. Droplets clinging to his hard co—

Shaking myself out of it, I let out a frustrated hiss. I don't know why I'm reacting to him like this. It's like I'm some crazed animal in heat. I've spent all day trying not to think about him and for what? The minute I'm in his presence my brain shuts down and all I can think of is ... well him.

I push away the images that are trying to seep in and drop to the floor by the tv. The one thing I *didn't* do today is snoop. Snooping, though frowned upon, makes total sense – you can learn a lot from someone when you snoop. I didn't snoop when I met Jack and look where that got me? Homeless, bruised, and without a penny to my name.

Ignoring the heated pulse under my skin, I reach for the cupboard nearest to me. Arcan has a mean TV setup. It's fully equipped with surround sound and the TV is set into a cabinet that spans a large portion of the wall, and dozens of cupboards, and snooping possibilities, beam back at me.

Pulling open the cupboard closest to me, I frown. It's empty bar from a spare remote and a few spare batteries. Reaching for another, I find much of the same. Again, and again until I get to the end. A large vertical cupboard looms over me. I immediately throw the door open, and a giggle slips free.

Now I wasn't expecting *this*.

Staring back at me are countless rows of shelves, each and every one filled with movies all set in neat little lines like soldiers marching in rows. Tilting my head to the side, I read the titles. *Casablanca*, *The Shining*, *Back to the Future* ... I can even spy a copy of *Clueless* – a so called chick flick to most men. And more than that, each title is placed in alphabetical order.

So, Mr big and tough mafia man is a film nerd. Smiling, I feel a flutter in my stomach.

“Snooping?”

Wincing, I wait for the inevitable anger, but it never comes. I turn to the side, looking at him from wide open, innocent eyes, ready to plead my case, only to find him smiling back at me, a twinkle in his eyes.

He's changed out of his dress shirt and slacks. Instead, he looks completely at home in a black shirt and a pair of loose grey sweatpants, swung low enough on his hips that a temptingly sexy V line peaks over. I bite my lip as I stare at him in all his muscled glory. His arms shift and tense as he folds them, and just like that my mouth goes dry, the moisture racing to my core.

“My eyes are up here Angel.” His voice sends rivulets of need through me, that teasing tone like my kryptonite.

Blushing I look up to find a darkened, heated look turning those steely greys into charcoal. “I'm not snooping.”

“Oh, really? Then what are you doing?”

“I'm researching.”

His muscles clench. “Researching what exactly.”

“You.”

“And how is that different to snooping.”

I think for a second. “Snooping is ... well it's just for nosy people. Now *research* is what smart people do.”

Instead of answering he walks closer, and I feel my tongue go leaden in my mouth, tying itself in knots as I wait for him to get close. Squatting down, he gives me a look. “And did you learn a lot, Kinsley?” My name on his tongue feels like a kiss.

Breathless, I fight past the desire that’s sending me stumbling over my words. “Uh ... oh yes. Lots.” This close, I can see silver specks threaded through the grey, flickering like stars. Ignoring the pathetic, aching, throb, I reach for a film, pulling out the first one my fingers touch and hold it up to him. “Do you want to watch a film?”

The stars in his eyes flicker. “Interesting choice.”

Confused, I look at the title and ... I want to die. Clutched in my hands is the tell-tale cover of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Stumbling, I shove the film back into the cupboard and cross my arms like a scolded child. “I didn’t realise what I picked up.”

Shaking his head, he laughs. “How about *American Psycho*? It is October after all.”

Nodding, I settle beside him on the couch, a palm sized space between us, and for the next hour and forty-two minutes I resist the urge to slide closer to him, to bridge that gap between us and give in to temptation.

Chapter 7 – Arcan

“Who paid you to do it?” I say evenly, the icy killing calm sliding against the words like the tip of a blade. He knows what this is – he knows that whatever he says is a death sentence and I’m to be his executioner.

Blood and tears mingle in tracks down his cheeks as he fights against the pain. Slowly, I peel the fourth nail from his finger. I thought he’d break at three but he’s proving himself to be more resilient than I had first thought.

The first time I tortured a man, I threw up all over his dying body. Later, when the man had passed, Leo, my adoptive father, forced me to sleep in the room he lay in – his decaying body lying in a pool of my vomit, the scent thick and cloying so that by morning, I also happened to be lying in a pool of my own vomit.

Now I feel nothing but annoyance at the fact that this is taking away from my time with Kinsley. She fell asleep not long after the film started, her soft snores sending a wave of possessiveness through me that I never thought to be capable of. And then the message from Dante came through telling me I needed to get to the compound asap.

Turns out, Lorenzo had caught this one killing one of our loyal customers and we all know who sent him to do it. We just need confirmation.

With Kinsley in my house, I’ll have to take my work to the compound, and more specifically to the torture rooms we call the pits. It’s not the most convenient thing but it’s worth it to keep this out of her life.

Picking up the knife from the small, clinical array of tools, I balance it between two fingers, the tip drawing a pearl of blood. The man, who I’ve long since learnt is named Billy, watches at the droplet drips to the floor beside his head. A sob heaves out of him.

I wonder how Kinsley would react to learning the true extent of what I do. I wonder if she would still want to watch

films and live with me if she got a glimpse of this side of me. A tremble of guilt sprouts in my stomach at the thought of her but I shut it down quickly.

I don't feel guilt. I haven't for a very long time, and I cannot let myself start feeling it now. Pushing away any thoughts of my angel, I push on.

"Silence will get you nowhere my friend." Shaking my head, I channel the disappointed looks that the Sister's would give us boys whenever we did anything ungodly.

Billy's eyes narrow, the fight still clinging to him in tensed muscles and hateful glares. But he knows this job, he's an assassin himself, he knows that his life is over. Eventually the pain will get too much, and he will break.

"Okay." A breath whistles past my lips. "I can respect your strength, brother." Placing the knife back down, I roll my sleeves up. It's time to get to work.

The sounds of his screams echo against the walls like a nightingale's call, trapped inside the room that will, eventually, become his tomb.



Slipping inside my home, I feel panic grip hold of me. Kinsley isn't on the sofa where I left her, and the air feels charged. Dark and gloomy and dripping with something ... wrong.

Making my way through, I make note of everything. The tv is still on, the end credits of *American Psycho* playing softly in the background, accompanied by the steady hum of the refrigerator. The blanket I tucked around her before I left is drooping sadly from the sofa, discarded while a glass lays unaccompanied on the coffee table. Nothing is out of the ordinary.

I take a steady breath. She's fine. I'm not one for being dramatic, but I can't shake the possessive need to make sure she's okay. The beast inside me needs to see it for himself.

And that's when I hear it.

A scream shatters through the apartment, the echoing shards slicing through my calm as I race for her room, my hands freeing my gun from its place in my pants. Shoving her door open, my gun raised and ready, It takes three strides to reach her bed ... to find her alone.

There is no man looming over her, trying to steal her from me in the dead of night. No threat that could cause such fear.

But then she screams again.

She's kicked the covers away from her, her bare legs slick with sweat as she writhes around, swiping for an enemy that doesn't exist. A nightmare. She's having a nightmare.

Without a second thought, I'm at the side of her. Stroking her hair, I push back the sweat soaked strands. "Kinsley? Kinsley, wake up you're having a dream."

Her movements calm slightly but whimpers still slip from her lips, the sound fracturing my cold, black heart. Whatever happened to her, *whoever* happened to her, is dead. I've lived around monsters long enough to know that her heart is pure and does not deserve the baggage it has to carry.

An angered growl wants to escape me, this beast inside me screaming that she's hurt, that *we* need to hurt whoever is the cause. Taking a deep breath, I calm myself. Control – if you can control the storm, you can direct it.

I shift into her bed and lay her against me, her back to my front and the sweat coating her skin dampens my fresh clothes – a fresh pair is always kept for late night visits to the pit. Humming against her head, I try to soothe her. Eventually her whimpers stop, and her body stiffens as she wakes.

"Umm, what's happening?" her voice has turned husky and rough from the screams.

Swallowing against her scent, I answer "You were screaming. It was a nightmare."

"Oh." She whispers and her body relaxes and moulds against mine.

“What were you dreaming of.” I say against her hair, the black strands fluttering in the echo of my breath.

She laughs, the sound delirious. “Monsters ... and princes.”

I raise my brows even though she can't see. “All that for a few monsters?”

Shifting, she looks up at me. “Just one monster.”

I want to ask more. I want to demand she give me the name of this ... *monster*. I want a location and a description. I want to quench this need to kill this monster that has hurt her. I want to feel his blood stain my skin, the slick crimson drips like a trophy of battle.

But I want her to be okay more than I want to hurt whoever caused this and I have a feeling that digging deeper just might cause her more pain.

Instead, we linger in the silence, the secrets between us like living things.

In the now silent room, I suddenly become *very* aware of how little she's wearing. A grey shirt, large enough to fall to her thighs, clings to her skin, the material damp from sweat. A rush of blood sends my heart pounding and my cock hardening.

Fuck I need to get out of here. Slipping from under her, I stand and look directly into her big, open blue eyes, still glazed with the reminder of her tears. “Goodnight Kinsley.”

She smiles a soft, sweet as sugar, smile. “Goodnight Arcan.”

I am so incredibly fucked.

Chapter 8 – Kinsley

Waking up this morning was mortifying.

The slow blink of my lids as consciousness filtered in, my hands shading my eyes against the sunlight streaming in the room, a lazy smile dripping from my lips. And then, a crashing wave of realisation stole the lazy, happy smile from my lips as I remembered the events of the night before.

The nightmares started not long after I finally ran from Jack but they've always come in waves and drips of images that don't last long. The kind of nightmares where I wake up and feel unsettled, but never writhing and screaming.

But for some reason, last night, a new, terrifying nightmare stole away my sleep. Maybe it's because I finally feel safe enough to have one, maybe my subconscious knew that I needed to stay quiet to stay safe on the streets but here, Arcan can protect me.

I trust him, though I don't know anything about him.

It still doesn't make last night any less mortifying, and I was dreading seeing him again but when he strode into the kitchen, a new suit clinging to the sharp lines of his body, he didn't even acknowledge it. He just looked at me spooning cereal into my mouth and told me he had thought of something I could do so I wasn't bored all day.

So now here we are, walking down the corridor of a club called Hypnotic. A club that he apparently owns.

Like his house, the club is decorated tastefully.

Small grouped, crimson velvet seats are raised above a dance floor, allowing guests to overlook the dancers below. Pictures and illuminated displays of New York are placed throughout the club giving it a modern, appealing feel. Black and gold, fully stoked bars, span the walls while the lighting, dimmed and tinted red, seeps from the lights hanging from the roof.

It's a kick-ass club.

Bouncing on my toes, I tap Arcan on the shoulder. “This place is cool and all, but what are we doing here?”

Glancing towards me, he smirks. “You’ll see.”

“Well okay Mr tall, dark and mysterious.” He shakes his head at me, but I see the smile in his eyes before he turns his head.

Out of nowhere, a tall, muscled, blonde guy comes out of the back carrying a crate between his tree trunk arms. His hair, long and tickling his jaw, paired with his full blonde beard gives him the appearance of a Nordic Mountain man. Paired with his check flannel – it creates quite the picture.

Spying us, he nods his head in greeting. “Arcan.” His eyes slide over to me. He places the crate of clanking drinks on the door before rounding the bar and holding his hand out to me. “And you are?”

I place my hand in his. “Kinsley.”

He presses a kiss against my knuckles. “A pleasure, I’m Erik.”

The gentlemen behaviour would usually have me swooning but the only thing I feel as he looks at me with those *let me fuck you* eyes is ... cold. Because they’re blue, not grey and his hair is blonde and not black, and his name isn’t ... Arcan.

Ever since I woke up and remembered the feel of his body against mine, his firm planes against my soft curves, I haven’t been able to stop my mind from drifting. I felt an immediate connection to him, even as he caught me stealing from him red-handed, but I’ve at least been able to keep it under control.

But now?

It’s becoming impossible.

“Give it a rest.” Arcan growls and grabs my hand from Erik. He gestures to the club. “Kinsley, we need a few more hands working here so I thought you might be interested.”

Blinking, I smile. “Work here?”

“Yes, only if you want to though—”

Before he can say another word, I've wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you." I breathe.

This is exactly what I need. Now I have a place to stay, I need to do something to occupy my time, and this is perfect. I don't know how but in the few days I've known him, he's given me everything I need. Everything. He's given me more in a few days than Jack did in five years of marriage.

His arms come around me, his warmth sinking into my bones until all I feel is him. After a second, Erik coughs and the sound separates us. My cheeks heat and I swear his do too, but I can't be sure in the dim shadows of the club.

"Okay, good." He nods. "I'll be gone for a few hours, but Erik and the girls will help you get settled." He turns to Erik. "Keep her safe." And then he turns and walks away without another word.

The minute Arcan is gone, Erik's smile turns wolfish. "So that was new."

"What was?" A woman comes bouncing out of the same door that Erik came from, her blonde hair pulled up into pigtails. When she sees me, she stops. "Oh hi!"

"Hey." I say as Erik points at me.

"Arcan seemed ... territorial over this one."

The woman with pigtails face stretches into a look of surprise. "*Territorial?*" She looks me over. "Well, he's got good taste. You, darlin', are beautiful."

Blushing, I shake my head. "Thank you but Erik has it wrong. He is *not* territorial over me!"

Erik sends me a look that says *Sure he isn't* and heads back behind the bar. "Well, anyway, Lucy little miss in denial here is also known as Kinsley. Kinsley this is Lucy and she'll be able to show you the ropes." He looks to Lucy. "Kinsley here is giving us an extra pair of hands."

Once again bouncing, Lucy takes my hand. "Now *that* is good news. Our last girl quit not long ago, and we've been

drowning in work.”

I tilt my head. “Why did she quit?”

Lucy rolls her eyes, a look of exasperation on her face. “She got involved with one of our security guards and it turned sour.”

I nod. “Oh.”

“Yea. More fool her, *Hypnotic* is the best place to bartend at. Arcan’s the kind of boss that the angels send.”

I tuck away that little piece of him, I’ll analyse just how a man who’s part of a criminal organisation is also described as an angel sent boss and put my game face on. “Okay, so what do I have to do?”

And for the next five hours I’m taught how to make a club run smoothly and for the first time in a long time my old life – the one where monsters and husbands look the same and money is as easy to come by as bruises – feels so very far away.

Chapter 9 – Arcan

“If you glare at that screen any harder, you’re going to strain your eyes.” Damien warns but humour lines his words, softening them into a brotherly scolding.

Turning, I direct my glare at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Damien, a fellow assassin freelances, may not be family by blood, but he’s family all the same. We both grew up under Leo, my adoptive father. We both suffered under his thumb and now, though Damien is still freelancing, we keep in touch.

Sadly, this means that he knows me better than anyone and can read my shuttered face as easy as reading a book.

Sighing, I sink into my groaning office chair. We’re in my office in *Hypnotic*. I wouldn’t usually come here often but for the past three weeks with Kinsley working here, I find that I like to keep an eye on her. Make sure she’s safe.

Looking to Damien, I catch him staring. He’s giving me that psychoanalytic look he always has on his face when he’s trying to work out the reasoning behind my actions.

“What?” I growl, glancing back to see Kinsley serving a group of bachelorettes, her smile lighting up at the sight of the pink bridesmaid ribbons and fluffy crowns. Seeing her safe soothes me. Whenever I see her, or hear her, or smell her, it’s like some hidden, prowling beast inside me finally settles, heeled by her soft hand.

“I’ve never seen you happy before, but I can see it when you look at her.” He smiles. “It’s nice to see brother.”

I nod. “Right now, were just ... roommates.”

The humour in his eyes lightens as his lips pull into a grin. “No girl that looks at a man like she looks at you is thinking about you as a roommate.”

Ignoring him, I run a hand through my hair and let out a frustrated groan. “Damien, somethings going down.”

The humour drains from him and his eyes, like chips of green glass, dim. “I’ve heard whispers.”

“The treaty is gone.” I continue. “But Vlad is taking it slowly and I need to know why. Have you heard anything on your end?” Damien and I decided to keep our link a secret from everyone in the criminal underworld. The only one who knows is Dante. That way, he gets the anonymity he loves, and I get information through him, information I usually wouldn’t be privy to.

People are much more willing to talk and whisper when you’re a lone wolf.

Damien tugs at the ring on his lip, the silver glinting under the lights. “A few weeks back I heard that there had been a ripple in the Russians. That some new advisor of Vlad’s was stirring up a shit storm. But nothing since then.”

“An advisor?”

“Yea, some rich property owner who was new in town. Apparently, he’s looking for someone and Vlad is helping him find them.” He shakes his head. “It could be his council that’s causing this but I can’t imagine why Vlad would go along with it. As much of a prick as he is, he isn’t a puppet.”

Pulling out my phone, I send Dante a message. I need to tell him this. Leaning forward, I brace my arms on my legs. “This is so fucked.”

“How is Dante planning on retaliating?”

Usually, it would be considered treason to reveal any spec of information to someone outside of the family, but Dante knows I trust Damien and Dante trusts me.

“All-out war.” I whisper, the words dark and foggy as the situation were in.

He nods to the screen which shows Kinsley. “Is that why you’re holding yourself back?”

“Yes.” I say, my voice lowered to a growl. I hate it, I hate staying away from her. I wake up hard and aching, the ghost of a dream tugging at my balls, urging me to just *take her*. To

fuck her until my seed drips from her tight little hole and her belly is round with my child.

Just the scent of her these days is enough to send me into overdrive.

But for now, with this war peaking over the horizon, I'm resisting. I don't want to risk putting her in danger. If she ever got hurt, if anyone *ever* dared to touch her, I would burn the world in vengeance.

Damien looks at me, his face in big brother mode. "Brother, if you want my advice—"

"I don't." I interject but he ignores me and continues.

"I'd say that waiting is useless. There won't be a safer place than in your arms." His words trail off into dust as I look back at the screen, a flicker of something snatching my attention.

There in the black and white flickering image is Kinsley, her face felled by terror as she's dragged across the bar by her neck, her delicate skin pinched between the meaty paw of a pot-bellied drunk.

A second later, I'm gone, running to her as Damien follows at my heels. The image of her face, pinched in terror, pushes me to run faster, harder. Bursting through the door at the back, I jump the last few metres.

I see security running towards her but I'm quicker, my need to keep that dead fucker's hands off of my woman giving me a boost of adrenaline. Her eyes, wild and terrified but *fighting*, connect with mine. Something between us tugs, that sacred bond solidifying as I see relief wash over her at the sight of me.

Mine.

Swinging my fist, I hear the crunch of bone as his cheek shatters. His scream pierces my ear, the pathetic, drunken yelp like the sweetest wine. And that's when that killing calm slides into place, numbing me to everything but my kill.

I need to hurt him. I need to make him hurt for hurting her. I need to hurt him. I need to make him hurt for hurting her. I

need to hurt him. I need to make him hurt for hurting her.

My brain screams it at me, repeating over and over again as I throw punch after punch. Everything has dimmed to a silent drawl, and I feel myself float beneath the surface of sanity.

But then hands are grabbing at me, pulling me away from my prey, from the moaning writhing mess of what's left of it. I growl and pull like an animal.

Damien growls, telling me to stop but I cant. I need to feel its blood on me, I need to feel it soak into my skin like cream. But then she's there.

Her baby-blues drag me in, dunking me into their depths, shaking me out of my insanity. Her fingers dig into my cheeks and finally the world settles. Voices shout around me but all I can focus on is hers.

“Arcan, it's okay.” She strokes my cheek. *“I'm okay.”*

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I drag her against me until every inch of her is pressed against me. Until her soft curves are fitted snugly against my hard lines.

Over her shoulder, I glare at the man. Spitting, I seethe. “If you ever, and I mean ever so much as fucking look at her again you're a dead man. Do you Understand?”

The man groans, his pot belly shifting as he rolls on the floor, but I take it to mean he heard.

Burying my head in her neck, I inhale the scent of her. I let it wash away that need to kill, to hurt, until all I can feel is her.

“I'm taking you home.” I whisper into her ear, and she nods against me.

I understand now, what Damien meant, she's safer in my arms than she is without them so screw Vlad and his war, screw politics and threats.

I'll keep her safe. I'll *always* keep her safe.

Chapter 10 – Kinsley

Wincing, I press the bag of frozen peas flush against my neck. The skin there has already turned, the white smeared with purple and blue like a winter morning sunset. Beautifully morbid.

The pain is something you'd expect to remember, like a thorn embedded under the skin, impossible to remove, but in the months since leaving Jack, I *had* forgotten it. The pain. Bruises are much better than broken bones at least.

It's funny, before Jack, I was the sort of girl who could boast of never having broken a bone or needing stitches or an overnight hospital stay. But after him, the nurses knew me by name. They knew just how *clumsy* I could be – just how easily, and how often, I fell down the stairs or walked into doors.

But even with all those hospital stays and broken bones and stitches, time still softened the pain into a dull ache.

But now I remember.

A breath whistles between my clenched teeth as I press slightly too hard. And then he's there, his eyes both darkened in anger and wide with concern – a storm that has no idea in which direction to go. He takes the peas away from my neck and those grey eyes become electric.

"I'm fine." I say firmly. He's been pacing like a dog without a bone for half an hour and I'm not sure how much more of it I can take. There's still some unspoken conversation that needs to be had between us, the words lingering between our every breath, but right now, I just need to calm him down.

"You're not fine." He growls.

"It doesn't hurt." I lie and he gives me a look that tells me he knows just how much shit I'm talking. I don't even know what happened, one second, I was serving some dude, dodging his meaty hand pawing for my ass and then the next he's got me by the neck, his rank, stale breath wafting into my face.

And then Arcan was there.

I feel like a therapist would tell me that I should feel scared of him with my history and his actions, but no one has ever hurt someone to protect me. I've always been the one hurt.

And a small, blackened part of me was glad to see the man in pain.

I try to press the peas back onto my neck, to hide the bruises that I know have already bloomed, but he stills my hand.

His eyes run over the column of my throat as he assesses the damage. "I'm calling my doctor."

"Arcan, it's eleven pm and I am *fine*."

He purses his lips, clearly not satisfied but after a beat, he relents. "Fine." Sitting more firmly onto the couch, he gives me a dark look. "What happened?"

"One second the guy was flirting and the next he was angry. There's not much more to say. It's not like guys like that ever need a reason to be an asshole."

"Who hurt you, Kinsley." His whisper is like a knife, sharp and ready to kill.

Smiling, I shake my head. "Arcan, I'm fine. You hurt the guy enou—"

"No." He swallows. "Who hurt you before tonight. Who made you run. Who made it so you knew just what to do with the bruises, and the aftercare."

Looking away from him, a sigh escapes me. "I married a bad man. He ... he wasn't who I thought he was but by the time I realised what kind of man I had married – it was too late." A single tear rolls down my cheek, but he catches it with his finger. His hands pull me gently towards him and I melt into his arms. "I ... it was bad. So bad that I don't think I'd be here today if I hadn't run."

I feel his anger, but it doesn't scare me. *He* doesn't scare me. I feel connected to him in a way that goes deeper than any marital bond I had with Jack. With a mental thrust, I push Jack

away and focus all my attention on Arcan. I want him, I want him more than I want to breathe.

He feels right. *We* are right. Together.

Turning in his arms, I look up at him beneath lowered lashes. His breath fans my face, tickling my hair as I move closer. The air between us feels alive, our lips barely a hairsbreadth apart ... that is until they aren't.

A second later, his lips are crashing down onto mine. The taste of him, sweet and minty, sends rivulets of need rushing through me, flooding my core until I'm dripping. He kisses me like he's feasting. Like he's a man that's been deprived and the only thing he's ever wanted is me.

I drown in him, his scent like a drug, but still, even with the fogging of my mind, I meet his every move. He licks and suck and nips until my sex is throbbing, pulsing in time with our heartbeats.

All I know is the feel of him and that is all I ever want to know.

With a growl, he moves down to my neck, his kisses growing softer as he dampens the tender flesh and the gentleness, the care in those kisses ruins me. I feel my heart open, this thing between us becoming branded onto my very soul.

I want more.

Standing, I grin at his protesting groan, and rip the pants from my legs. I quickly reposition, swinging my leg over until I'm straddling him, my core pressed flush against his. Grinding against him, I moan as I feel his hardened cock tense and throb, pushing solidly against my clit.

"I want you, Arcan." I whisper against his lips.

Opening my eyes, I take him in. Desire has darkened his eyes to a stormy grey and his jaw bristles with tension as he wars with himself. I know he's trying to talk himself out of it, I know he's telling himself to wait but for what? I want him now and he wants me. That's all that matters.

I won't let him convince himself to let me go. Not tonight.

Sliding off him, I fall to my knees. The soft rug cushions them as I unbuckle his belt and pop open his pants. His thighs tremble as he holds himself still. Sliding my hand into his pants, I grasp the warm length of him, his throbbing cock so big that I almost can't touch my fingers together.

My mouth goes dry as I pull it out.

His tip glistens, that beaded drop of need so tempting that I immediately swipe my tongue across the top of it, moaning at the taste. His hips jerk at the contact, his lust a living thing.

"Fuck, Kinsley." I suck in a sharp breath as he groans, the sound sending a sharp rush of pleasure skittering down my spine. He cups my jaw as I stroke him, his monstrous cock throbbing with each swipe of my hand, my pussy growing wetter with every groan that slips past his lips.

I've never felt so captivated, so entranced by the sight of something but I can't look away from him. I swipe my thumb along his tip, earning another deep, sexy groan. Cupping his balls, I move forward once more, the saliva pooling in my mouth like my body instinctively knows that this will be the best meal I've ever had.

The minute my mouth envelops him I feel a trickle of need seeping into my panties, my pulse beating wildly at my core.

"Such a good girl." He groans.

The praise sends me reeling, need and want and desire crashing together in one overheated wave as I lick and suck and give him everything I've got. A second later I feel his hands gather my hair in a fist as he begins to guide and control my movements, his domineering need over taking any shred of control he had a minute ago.

I can barely take half of his length, but still I try. His bulbous tip wars with my mouth, demanding entrance to the tight column of my throat. Narrowing my eyes, I swallow, and finally, I feel him slide deeper, my throat contracting around him. And that's when he explodes.

Ropes of thick creamy cum shoot from his cock and I swallow every drop, moaning at the taste.

“That’s it, take it all.” He murmurs, softer than I’ve ever heard him speak.

Sitting back on my heels, I swallow every last bit of his cum just like he demanded, my eyes trained on his as I do. His gaze drips down to my lips as I swipe my tongue over a drop that’s escaped savouring the sweet but salty taste of his cum and I see him tense, the still hard steel length of him demanding more.

He stands, his body like a work of art, and holds out his hand to me. “Now it’s my turn to devour you.” My pussy clenches at the promise in his words and without a second thought, I place my hand in his ready for whatever he has to give.

And hopefully, he’ll give me *everything*.

Chapter 11 – Arcan

The minute she places her hand in mine, I feel my resolve crumble. I want this woman more than I want to breathe and Damien is right, she's safer with me than she is without.

Tugging her up, I slide my hands around her a waist, the curve a perfect fit for my hands, and lift until she's in my arms, my hands palming those perfect globes.

God, what an ass she has.

Nipping at her neck, I walk us into my bedroom, placing her carefully on the bed. Impatient to be inside her, I rip down my pants, throwing them to some forgotten corner of my room. She watches me from the bed beneath half-lidded eyes, those baby-blues now dark as denim, growing darker still as I unbutton my shirt.

Smirking, I nod at her. "I want to see you. Bare."

With her teeth pulling at her lips, she nods. She peels her shirt free leaving her in a simple black bra and panties but my god I've never seen a sight so beautiful. A blush dusts her cheeks with pink as she looks up at me, her eyes silently begging.

Now naked, I tilt my head at her. "I said *bare*, Kinsley." I look pointedly at her underwear.

A small smile flits across her lips as she reaches behind her. A second later her breasts spill free from the confines of her bra, and my mouth waters for a taste of those dusky nipples that are pointing straight at me.

It takes all my might to restrain myself, to stop myself from pouncing onto her right there and then but I do it because I want to watch her bare that sacred place between her thighs to me.

Reaching down, her breath coming in pants now, she grips her panties and tugs until they're balancing on her foot. With a flick, she sends them flying in the direction of my pants. Looking me in the eye, she smiles and spreads her legs.

Her pussy is pink, the lips puffy with desire as her need drips down to her ass. I've never felt so hungry.

"I'm going to devour you." I growl.

Crawling onto the bed, I must look feral - a look of hunger so pure, and so animalistic in my need for *her* but she doesn't back down. No, she stays still, her legs spread for me, ready to take everything I give her. When I reach her, I run two fingers up her sex, spreading the wetness that's gathered there, watching her tremble and gasp at my touch. She's so responsive that my every stroke sends her trembling, her moans so loud that I'm sure whoever lives beside me knows exactly what's about to happen.

Sliding a hand down my length, I guide my cock towards her entrance. Dipping my head, I brush my lips against hers, savouring the feel of her lips against mine. "I'm going to fuck you bare, Kinsley. I'm going to fill you up with so much cum that everyone who comes near you will know that you are *mine*."

She nods, her eyes unfocused. "Please ... Pl—"

I push inside her, barely an inch. She smiles as she whimpers.

Stilling, I put my hand, covered in her need, flush against her neck. "Tell me you're mine." Her hips gyrate, needing more of me inside her, but I pull back and squeeze her neck in warning. "Say it."

"I'm yours, fuck Arcan, I'm all your—"

She finishes her sentence with a scream as I thrust all the way inside her. Resting my head against hers, I take in the feel of her. She's so tight and wet and warm, and with each second that passes her sweet little pussy clenches around me, begging me to move. Shifting down to her throat, I lap at the skin there, my tongue soft against the purple bruises that have blossomed on her throat and begin to move my hips in hard, punishing strokes, my cock bottoming out.

"Fuck yes." I growl into her neck as her moans fill the air like music. "You're going to take everything I give you." I

thrust into her hard. “Everything, you hear me?” She moans, her head nodding as her eyes roll back into her head. Gripping the headboard for better balance, I slam into her. “Play with yourself Kinsley. I want you on the edge.”

Like the good girl she is, she listens, her delicate hand slipping down between our bodies to roll that little nub of pleasure.

Her jaw goes slack and her head tips back as she moans uncontrollably. I push into her again and again and again until her screams are the only sound I can hear. Her tight little pussy, thirsty for my cum, clenches as her entire body trembles.

My poor girl, she’s so desperate to cum.

Gripping her hips, I push into her again and again, harder and harder until all I know is her and the feel of her cunt pulsing around my cock. Her hands rub harder, her face scrunched up in such pleasure that I feel it throbbing through the room, rippling through us like disturbed water.

“Kinsley.” I say, firm and commanding. Her eyes blink open slowly, the lids heavy from pleasure. “When I tell you to cum, you’re going to listen. Okay?”

She nods, a moan tumbling from those tempting lips and then, I let go. I fuck her with every ounce of my power, muscles rippling as I plow into her, watching as those rosy nipples bounce.

I’m so close, so fucking close and with one more thrust I’m ready.

“Cum right now.” I growl and she listens.

With a scream, I feel her pussy clench down, tightening its grips as I spill my seed inside her, coating her insides, marking her as *mine*.

Her pussy pulses as I slowly fuck her, making sure that cum is deep inside. Deep enough to take root. I still, my cock still inside of her and lean down to kiss her sweat drenched face. She blearily blinks up at me, a half-smile playing on her lips.

After a moment she giggles.

Amused, I sink onto of her fully, my head pressed into her neck. “What?” She giggles harder, but it soon turns to a moan when I suck at her neck, avoiding the more tender skin. “Kinsley, what are you giggling for?”

Breathlessly, she answers. “I just never imagined ... well this.”

“What?”

“Having the best sex of my life with a man I’ve only known for a few weeks. A man that *isn’t* my husband.”

“Best sex of your life, eh?” I nipple at her ear. “I say we try and improve on that.”

“I think that orgasm took just about every ounce of energy I had left.” She yawns, her point made.

Sinking into the space beside her, I look into those blue orbs, like the ocean on a clear day, and nod. As much as I want to go for a round two, and three and well you get the idea, I want her well rested. After everything that’s happened today, I’m sure she’ll need a good, *long* sleep.

After a while her eyes drift closed, and I find myself watching her as she sleeps. She’s turned towards me, her head cradled by her hands and her knees pulled up in a foetal position. Something heavy drops into my stomach, an anchor tossed overboard, causing something unfamiliar to flood my chest, something soft and pure and as complex as a killer with a heart.

And I find that I don’t dislike the feeling.

Chapter 12 – Kinsley

After the events of yesterday, Arcan took the day off and I couldn't be happier. We still haven't spoken about what exactly this is between us, and if we're giving it any labels but ... it feels right. And, for now, that's all I need.

Yawning, I giggle. He looks over at me and gives me that pointed look of his. "What?"

I shrug. "I just can't believe you've watched *Clueless* before."

His eyes roll, those darkened skies so much calmer than they were last night. "It's a classic." He says as if that explains everything.

"If by classic you mean brilliant then I agree." I grin teasingly. "I just never expected you to have such a soft side and such an intense love for rom-coms."

"I do not have a soft side." He deadpans.

"*Of course*, you don't." I shouldn't tease him, but I can't help it. His love for film is so unexpected, so out of character that it's become one of the many things I love about him. But really, so many parts of him have been unexpected. He's like some vaulted bank full of sparkly things you see in those old western films, a locked away treasure trove of jewels and gold and light. Though I very much doubt he'd be caught dead being described as 'light'.

His scowl shifts, lifting into a wolfish smirk that has my toes curling. And then he moves. His strong body, muscles shifting under his grey shirt, jumps like a hound after a rabbit. Squealing, I put my hands up as his fingers dig into my sides, tickling the delicate skin there. Laughter tumbles from me, so loud and uncontained that the voices of Cher and Tai fall silent.

"Arcan, stop!" I wheeze out around my panting laughter, but he doesn't hold up. A second later he stops and I still, my

breath coming out of me in loud puff of air. Looking down I take him in and what I see has me freezing.

The shirt I'm wearing, grey and soft and one of his, has rolled up to expose the flat planes of my stomach. Arcan, his fingers placed neatly at my sides, is zeroed in on my skin, his hair shielding the desire I just know is flooding his gaze.

Slowly, painfully slowly, he leans down to press a kiss to my stomach and butterflies flutter in the wake of his lips, sending my stomach summersaulting.

My breasts, still hidden, swell as he looks up, a devastating, hungry look on his face. "What would your last meal be on death row?"

The question startles me but at this point in time he could ask me to tell him my darkest secret and I'd spill it the minute he asked. "Pumpkin pie from the diner in my hometown." I whisper. "Ummm ... you?"

He smiles and peels away my underwear. The underwear that's now so soaked that they stick to my core sending a flush to my cheeks. "I would ask for you." He growls before burying his head between my legs. I jolt at the feel, moaning as he drags his tongue up my pussy, gulping down the wetness that's gathered there.

"Fuck you taste so good." His voice is low and guttural and sends a whole new wave of pleasure rippling through me.

His fingers sink into me, filling me, stretching me until I gasp out. It feels too good, too much.

"Arcan!" I scream, the pleasure overwhelming my senses.

"What is it angel?" He says before sucking my clit back into his mouth, the throbbing bundle of nerves sending me reeling.

"I need ... I ... I need something." The words refuse to come, my thoughts too clouded by need. I roll my hips into his hand, hoping he knows just what I want.

"You want to cum baby?" I can feel him grinning into my pussy, his warm breath tickling my most delicate parts.

I nod frantically, desperate. "Yes!"

I hear a puff of laughter escape him right before he renews his efforts. His tongue delves deeper, his strokes growing faster and into a rhythm that sends wave after wave of desperate, mind-blowing pleasure through me.

Fisting the sheets, I scream, begging for release and with every stroke of his tongue and pump of his fingers, I get closer and closer, the edge nearing like the sun on the horizon, until ... a knock sounds from the door.

A hard, pounding, urgent knock that swipes away the beautiful horizon in my path. Growling, Arcan stills, his tongue and fingers still buried firmly within me. Mewling, I roll my hips, ignoring whoever is at the door, but the knock sounds again, this time even harder.

“Arcangelo! Open the fucking door. It’s urgent.” The voice is unfamiliar to me, not belonging to Damien who I briefly met the night that creep tried to choke me.

Arcan’s head dips, a curse whispering past his lips. “Fuck.”

Standing, he looks right at me as he licks his fingers clean, the desire edging against a storm. Biting my lip, I send him a desperate look but he shakes his head and pulls the blanket firmly up around me, hiding my bare, naked, legs.

Great, whoever this is is coming in, I guess. Resisting the urge to pout, I watch as Arcan opens the door and a big, bulging, figure passes through, Damien following close behind. Damien sees me immediately, his grin going wild as he sends me a smile, but the other guy misses me completely.

Storming in, he drags a hand through his already dishevelled hair, and paces. Arcan closes the door and folds his arms. “Dante, what the fuck is going on?”

“Lorenzo is dead.”

He stills. “How?”

“Turned up on our fucking doorstep this morning, tortured ... it was hard to identify him.”

Arcan swears. “Pace all’anima sua.” *Peace to his soul.* The man, Dante, his eyes like chips of green glass, hard and ready

to cut, finally spots me.

“Who the fuck is this.” He says, evenly and calm enough to send my heart racing.

“She’s mine.” Arcan moves in front of me.

Dante’s eyes narrow. “How long have you known her?”

“Irrelevant. She is mine.” Arcan’s fists clench.

“Fucking hell Arcangelo.” Dante pinches the bridge of his nose. “You understand that if any of what we’ve said gets out that will be *treason* against the family.”

“I trust her.” Arcan gives me a soft look.

“I won’t speak a word of this to anyone.” I swear, looking at Dante in the eye.

He nods to Arcan. “It’s his head if you do.”

Gulping, I nod. Until now, this part of Arcan’s life has stayed separate but it was never going to stay that way. I always knew that eventually it would intertwine, and I’m ready. From the looks of it, Arcan is in deep. These men, no matter how dark or twisted, are family, and I have to respect that.

Damien, cooling the spell of anger as usual, grins and sends me a wink. “Ignore him sweet cheeks, Dante just has a stick up his ass since he hasn’t had any in months.”

“Oh, and when was the last time for *you*.” Dante bites back before shaking his head. “Fuck, I’m dealing with children.”

Arcan, as even as ever, brings the conversation back on track. “Do you know what they got out of him?”

“No.” Dante sends him a dark look. “That’s the most concerning thing. We need to hit them. And soon. We have no idea the intel they’ve gathered through Lorenzo, and we have no idea when they’re going to use it. We don’t have the luxury of time anymore.”

Arcan nods. Damien walks to the door. “I’m going to go scope my usual haunts and see if anyone has heard anything.” He disappears a moment later.

“Call a meeting.” Arcan pulls out his phone. He turns to me, his face lined with a frown. “War has begun.”

Chapter 13 – Kinsley

Arcan's club, Hypnotic, is full tonight and I couldn't be gladder for it. When it's this busy I don't have time to think or overthink or dwell on things like the man you're growing to love dying in a war between to mafia families.

You know, the usual stuff that everyone deals with.

Since the night Damien and Dante interrupted us, Arcan has been gone all day, every day for three days straight and I get it, I do. I know that right now, time is of the essence. But it still doesn't stop me from thinking up a thousand possibilities of what might be happening at any second.

My phone buzzes from my pocket. With one hand I pull it out while my other pulls a beer for a customer.

Arcan: That one's easy. The Godfather. Come on give me something that'll make me work for it.

Grinning, I feel a sigh of relief leave me. We've been swapping texts back and forth; I think he knows I worry, and this is a way for him to relief me of it whenever he catches a breath from work. I give him a film scene, void of names, or a riddle and he takes a guess. So far, he's gotten every single one.

Kinsley: Nerd! Okay fine. Everyone in this world is an actor and the main character fails to notice the live stream.

Arcan: Really? The Truman Show. Next.

Kinsley: Show off ... I'm going to get you one day.

Arcan: I'll be waiting.

Letting out a happy sigh, I slip the phone back into my pocket and focus back on the job. I really do love working here, there's something electric about it, something so unknown to me. In my old life, I couldn't ever afford to go out clubbing with friends and when I met Jack, he'd barely let me go for coffee so clubbing was, no doubt, off the table.

Maybe that's why I love it. Because I never got to experience it prior to coming here.

Before working here, I never understood just how crazy these places got ... until now. Now I know that crazy is an understatement, and a better description would be cult-like and erratic.

Another drunk college student pushes through the crowd, ordering a beer. Pulling the tap, I watch as the golden liquid distorts the scene beyond, turning the ritualistic frenzy, like some enactment of a cult losing their mind, into something ... worse. A depiction of a drug taking over someone's mind.

I slam down the cup and the sticky beer sloshing over the side, soaking my hand but the guy is so drunk he doesn't even notice. Cursing, I pause and take a breath.

"Damn girl, what's got you all wound up? You're tighter than a virgin pussy right now." Erik grumbles.

I roll my eyes at his crude words, but he's right. I *am* all wound up and the culprit is this god forsaken war. Arcan explained the bones of it after Dante left. He told me all about the tense bonds between Vlad and Dante, about the murders, about the treaty ... it's chilling. I feel like I've stumbled onto the set of *The Godfather* with no way to exit. Not that I would want to but the option being there would be nice.

Another breath whistles past my lips as I temper the frustration. I can't tell them anything so there's no point in talking about it. "I'm fine." Erik and Lucy both look at me, before looking at each other, their eyes having a silent conversation. Before they can say a word, I hold up my hand. "Guys, leave it okay?"

"Fine, but if it's—"

"Lucy!" I glare.

"Okay, okay, *fine*." Her lips tighten, keeping those unneeded worries trapped inside.

Turning away from them, I get back to serving the crowd. Orders are screamed at me from every direction, a tequila shot here, a vodka-coke there until the only thing I know is serving.

And that's when I feel it, as I pour my thousandth shot of tequila, that tickle against my neck, that invisible hand that treads along my spine.

Turning, I see him slide along the crowded bar towards the area where the seats are. They're empty, of course they're empty – very few people want to sit down in a club. Damien, who I hadn't noticed, sits at the seat beside him.

Releasing a breath, I slide the girl her shot and make my way over, teeth parting in a relieved smile. There's a small smile ghosting over his lips as he takes me in, his eyes darkening as they always do when they see me.

“Ladies.” I tease. “What can I get for you both?”

Damien opens his mouth to speak but Arcan beats him to it. “When's your break?”

I look at my phone. “Not for another twenty minutes.”

He looks over my shoulder. “Eric!” His voice booms, so deep you can hear it over the music.

Eric pops up behind me. “Yes boss?”

“Kinsley's taking her break early.”

Protesting, I shake my head. “Arcan, it's too busy! No!”

“It's okay Kinsley.” Eric interjects.

“You're just saying that because he's the boss.”

Arcan smirks before turning back to Erik once more. “Damien will fill in.”

Damien, his mouth gaping, sends him a dark look. “No, I will n—”

“Brother's law.”

Damien's face falls as he lets out a frustrated groan. “Fuck, fine!”

With a please smile on his face, Arcan gestures to me. “Come on.”

Rounding the corner, I send Damien a confused look but he just shrugs. Sidestepping drunken customers and dancing

bodies I let Arcan, his hand around my shoulder, lead me to his office.

Once inside, the sounds of the club dimmed to a quiet murmur, I fall into him. He has a couch in his office, a long black leather piece that runs along the wall near his personal bar. Snuggling into him, I huff a laugh into his neck. "I missed you."

He runs his nose up my neck and into my hair. "I missed you too."

"What's brothers' law?" I send him a questioning look. "Damien looked like he couldn't say no after that."

"Because he couldn't." He shakes his head. "It's something we made up when we were younger."

Confused, I send him a confused look. "How long have you known Damien?"

"When I was seven, I was adopted by a man named Leo in Italy. Damien was already in his care and under Leo we were taught how to be bad men." I stay silent and place my hand on his chest, stroking softly. "We both suffered under him, and it bonded us. It wasn't long after meeting that we became each other's life lines."

He laughs. "Leo used to make us clear up his kills and one day, I don't even remember why, but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to look into those cold, unseeing eyes, as we disposed of the body. So, Damien did it by himself, said that he owed me one anyway since I saved him from insanity by coming there and said he'd cash in on the favour at a later date." Looking down, he places his hand on my cheek, and smiles. "We're always indebted to each other. If we call brothers' law, we have to do it."

My heart aches for him as anger flushes my cheeks. How could anyone do that to a child? Looking into his steely greys I stutter. "I never ... I never knew."

"No one does." He presses a kiss to my brow.

"I want to hurt him." I whisper.

“He died a long time ago.” He grins down at me. “You have quite the vicious streak you know? Stealing, lying and now murder?”

I push at his chest. “Technically you *gave* me the watch.”

“After you tried to steal it.”

I poke my tongue out at him. And then I get an idea. Slipping down to the ground, I lower my lashes. “I could make it up to you.”

His eyes go black with need the minute the words pass my lips. “And how will you do that, Angel?”

Playing with his belt, I smirk. “I can think of a few ways.” Slipping the belt from the loop, I pull at it until its undone. A second later I’ve popped the button open and shoved them down, along with his boxers, enough so that his cock comes into view.

My mouth dries as I look at the hard, throbbing length of him, pulsing in time with my heart beat. Stroking it once, I stand and rid myself of my work clothes. He’s hard and ready and I want to take him all. I swing my leg over him, straddling his thighs, my knees cushioned by the couch and looking deep into his eyes, I lower myself onto him.

I let out a contented moan, savouring the feel of him stretching me. Pain, love, and pleasure all intermingle, grazing every nerve, sending them into overdrive. Rising on my knees, I pause before sinking back onto him with a moan, my speed building and building until I’ve found a rhythm.

My senses pool around me in a puddle of desire, and I lose myself to him. His hands on my hips, his eyes on mine, everything is connected. And it turns me electric.

Crying out, I gyrate my hips harder, rubbing my throbbing clit against him, feeling that cliff-edge near. Growling, he thrusts up into me as I feel my body string tighter and tighter until ... we fall.

Screaming out, I cum, my pussy clenching, milking him for everything he’s got. With a hard thrust I feel him empty

himself into me, his hardened cock so thick I can feel the veins as they throb in time with the ropes of cum filling me.

Collapsing against him I sigh, and let oblivion take me.

Chapter 14 – Kinsley

I rub my forehead against his chest, savouring the feel of his warmth seeping into me. “Arcan?” I whisper.

“Hmm?” He presses a kiss to the top of my head.

Taking a breath, I breath the words that have been fluttering in my gut for days, desperate to be out in the world. “I love you.”

His muscles tense like he’s holding in a breath. “Fuck, I love you too Kinsley.” He pulls me up and gazes into my eyes and I feel his cock, still buried inside me, tense. “You are the best thing to have ever happened to me.”

“Right back at you Mr film nerd.” I grin. Looking back, I catch the clock slowly ticking away and sigh. “I need to get back.”

“No, you don’t.” He argues and wiggles his eyebrows. “Perks of dating the boss.”

I give him a look. “I am not letting Damien cover my entire shift Arcan.”

He presses a kiss to my jaw. “Are you sure about that?” His voice is dark and sexy and my pussy, the traitor that she is, clenches in response.

“No.” I grumble but before he can do anything else that’s temptingly sexy, I jump up, and immediately regret it, missing that feeling of him filling me until I feel myself coming apart at the seams.

Sighing, he stands with me, buckling his belt. “Fine.” Walking towards me he presses a kiss to my lips before whispering against them. “But tonight, I’m going to fuck you so hard that you won’t be able to walk, never mind work, for a week.”

Ignoring the fluttering in my stomach, I pull my hair up into a pony tail and reply in the most even manner I can manage. “I look forward to it.” Ignoring the need clenching in my

stomach, hungry for what only he can give, I go towards the door but before I reach it, an explosion fractures the air sending me flying.

Arcan's arms catch me before I reach the ground and we both clutch at each other as the walls shake and tremble. There's a split second of silence, in which something dark and deadly lives between, before the screaming starts, the sounds muffled by the thick brick that separates us.

Arcan, with an unnatural calm about him, stands, pulling me up with him. I turn to look at the collection of monitors behind me, wanting to know the damage, but he stops me. His fingers dig into my jaw, holding me tight. "Kinsley, I need you to listen to me and do exactly as I say." His words are barely a whisper, but I hear them, as clear as if they were screamed at me. His thumb brushes along my cheekbone. "I need you to hide beneath the desk, and not come out for anyone but me or Damien. You understand?"

I shake my head. If he thinks I'm letting him leave he's crazy. "You're staying here too."

"I'll be fine. You need to worry about yourself. Not me." Pulling out his phone, he sends a text while urging me into the compact space beneath his desk. Frowning, I go willingly but I don't like it.

I need to trust him when it comes to this sort of stuff. I love him, and loving him means loving every part of him. And besides, he can look after himself. He's done it for many years before me, I know he'll be fine ... I have to believe in this.

Sliding open one of the drawers in the desk, he pulls out a gun and stuffs it into the back of his pants. Sliding down on his haunches, he reaches for me. Tears well along my waterline, blurring my vision as he cradles my cheek for a second longer, the rough callouses comforting in their familiarity.

"I love you." He smiles softly and then he's gone.

I hear the door open in a quiet swish before it clicks closed. Taking a breath, I try to slow my erratic heart, to listen for

danger, but the cries from below send me reeling. The pained, terrified screams grow louder and louder until they're all I hear, until they no longer sound muffled and muted.

I don't know how long I stay like that, cradled by Arcan's desk, my head swimming with pained screams. So many screams that I almost don't hear the door click open.

Placing my hand over my mouth, I forcibly silence the scream that wants to escape. A fresh flood of tears wet my cheeks as footsteps tread towards me. The steps are slow and steady, never faltering, never hesitating.

Frantic, my eyes search for a weapon, for something, anything, I can use to defend myself. But there's nothing and if I move to try and look whoever it is might see me. I can't let that happen.

Sitting as still as possible, I wait, my breath held in my throat. The stranger's steps grow closer, the thump of heavy boots on wood like the sound of a drum at a funeral rite. One step, two step, three step ...

The dark curve of the boot-covered toes appears at the side of me their dark shine dusted with the remnants of the explosion while the stranger's body is hidden by the desk. Pressing my hand harder over my mouth, I close my eyes.

I close my eyes and count in my head. Fear has been a constant in my life for years – the darkness so familiar that it has become my friend and if there's one thing it's given me over the years it's this; fear is only an illusion, you can push past it when it holds your life clutched in its claws.

Opening my eyes, I see the boots have disappeared. The silence settles like dust, and I strain to hear for any sound that might tell me where he is, but I needn't have bothered. A scream rips from my throat as the desk is thrown over my head, exposing me to the booted man.

Scrambling back, I try to get as far away as possible. I swallow in fear, my back pressed against the desk that's now lying sideways, the pens that fell from it rolling along the floor. The man is easily three times my size with greasy dark

locks of hair hanging into his eyes, cutting off the scar that travels up from his lips.

Lips that don't smile or grin or do much of anything.

In fact, his entire face is set in a cold, emotionless mask. He takes a step towards me, his hand clenching and for the first time since he was revealed, I notice the dirty rag clutched in his hands.

I've watched enough tv shows and movies with Arcan to know exactly what that rag is for.

His steps grow closer and closer and with them my desperation doubles. I can't just lie here and let him take me. I have to do *something*. Without thinking, without breathing, I grab for the pen that my fingers have slowly been inching towards and jab it straight into his neck. He roars.

I jump up, a burst of adrenaline fuelling my muscles, and run for the door. Sidestepping his fists, I make a last jump for the door. My fingertips graze the handle, the gold cooling my heated skin, but then arms grab me from behind.

"Stupid fucking whore." His rotten breath, like cabbage and stale milk, fills my nose. I gag at the scent and a second later the soiled rag is pressed against my face, my thoughts clouded, drifting, as muffled as the sounds from below.

The last thing I see before my vision winks out is the tall silhouette of man, his sly smile like an echo from the past.

Chapter 15 – Arcan

Growing up, I learnt discipline, but human nature is hard to control for even the most well-controlled pupil. It takes years of training to be able to shut down human function, to be able to feel fear and push it away or to be rid of it entirely.

But after so many years in this industry, I've learnt to do just that. I don't feel fear, or worry, or panic. Now, as I stalk silently through corridors that ring with muffled screams of panic, I feel calm. The cool metal of the gun sitting firmly in my palms is a comfort, and like a musician with their instrument, I know exactly how to wield it.

The door that separates the corridor from the club sits ominously waiting before me, the shit show within hushed by its thick wood frame. Crouching, I slide it open enough to slip through. The screams and cries immediately assault me, my ears ringing from the volume of them but again, I push them away until they're barely a trickle in a sea.

There's a hole in the wall, the moon's light filtering through among the particles of dust and debris. The alleyway peeks through, void of any explanation of who this was, but I already have my guesses.

Holding up my Glock, I round the corner and assess. From my vantage point I can see most of the club and ... nothing. The entire place is trashed, the explosion having torn through booths and the DJ equipment, sending it flying in all directions. Two abandoned feet lay motionless, the rest of the body not visible from under the large part of the wall that they're crushed under.

But despite it all, there's not a robbery, or a war being waged. It's chaos that has been caused and then abandoned.

"Jesus fucking Christ." Damien's rough voice curses from somewhere and a part of me uncoils at the sound of my brother. Sliding around the corner, I see him. He's laying among a pile of rubble, blood dripping from a slice along his brow, his cheeks darkened with dust, but for the most part he

looks okay. Heading towards him, I kneel, my eyes still darting around the club. Just in case.

“You okay?” I ask, never taking my eyes from my surroundings.

He rolls his shoulder. “Yea, nothing’s broken.”

“Good. Now get up. We need to assess.” I hold out my palm and he places his hand in mine. Standing, I grit my teeth and pull him up with me. “What the fuck happened?”

He looks around, his face in disbelief. “I don’t fucking know. One second I’m practically being mauled by a pretty blonde for a tequila sunrise and the next second my ears are ringing, I’m on the floor and there’s dust everywhere.”

“No one came in through the hole?”

“Not that I could see. Why blow up a place when you can just get easy access through the door.”

A chill settles over me, stilling my thoughts, confirming what I already knew. “Vlad.” I growl. “It has to be him.”

“But why? Why target a fucking club? It doesn’t make any sense. Surely if he was going to be this brazen, he’d bomb Dante’s compound?” Damien shakes off the dust from his pants.

In truth, it *doesn't* make sense and that’s what worries me. Vlad never does anything without thought, he may be the enemy but that doesn’t mean I can’t admit that he is in fact a sneaky fucker with a quick mind.

I look at him, my mind working in overtime. “Has he ever mentioned this place when you’ve worked for him? Ever shown any interest in it?”

Damien’s eyes flicker thoughtfully. “Never.”

Think, think, think. This war has always been a game of chess, the quiet unspoken battle like an invisible board with every member sat on a square waiting, planning, strategizing. Vlad and Dante always plotting, always trying to be one step ahead and until now it was fine. Dante, who wanted to keep the peace, was the one with the hidden moves but this, right

now, feels like Vlad has finally managed to become a step ahead.

“There’s nothing here. Nothing of importance unless ...” I whisper, more to myself than anything.

And that’s when a sharp, horrifying feeling settles deep into my bones, thick and heavy as a winter fog. A shiver skitters down my spine as something ancient whispers *What about her* into the curve of my ear.

It’s an insane thought, a pointless lead but ...

“Arcan?” Damien takes a step towards me.

But then I’m running, Damien shouting behind me before he curses and unwittingly follows. It’s an unreasonable belief, that they would have any want for her, but something is telling me, something is *screaming* at me that she’s in danger.

This thing between us, I’ve felt it from the beginning. From the moment she stole my watch and I decided to let her go. It might even have been there for longer, waiting with bated breath for us to meet, so it can coil itself around us, tying us together. I felt this very same tug the second before I invited her to live with me, something in me *knowing* she wasn’t safe. That she wouldn’t last much longer. It tugs and pulls and drags me towards her – in danger, in lust, in love.

And I feel it now.

We’re connected in ways that go beyond the natural, and I need to trust that it’s right.

I push harder, urging my legs to carry me to her in as little time as possible. The door to my office looms ahead, the dark wood like stained blood. Slamming through the door, I stop. Damien heaves in breaths behind me but stays quiet.

The desk is upturned and there’s that familiar stale smell of sweat and panic in the air, along with the sweet smell of her hidden in threads beneath.

She’s gone.

Gone, gone, gone.

The beast inside me roars, prowling at the seams, dragging its claws along every sense until all I feel is a need to *hurt*. I will get her back and I will flay the skin of every fucker that so much as touched her.

Mine.

I'm coming for you Kinsley.

Chapter 16 - Kinsley

Blinking, I feel the world come back to me. I don't know if it takes an hour or a day, but eventually my vision sharpens, the soft, dull blur vaporising like fog to reveal a basement. Groaning, I still. My head hurts, my body hurts, my eyes feel heavy. This is wrong.

And then it all comes back to me.

The explosion, Arcan, the strange men who ... *kidnapped me*. Holy fuck. My heart starts to race as my panic starts to drown my senses but taking a breath, I push it away. Thinking of Arcan, of that purposeful calm in his eyes, of the love he has for me, I take a deep breath.

He will find me. I will be fine.

Now fully aware, I take in my surroundings. I'm in a basement, the grey stone stained and seeping with so much damp it's looks like the walls are crying, the tears black and thick like old blood. Taking a breath, I ignore the crimson stain in the corner, and instead focus on what might be useful. Stairs lead up into what I assume is an exit, theirs a chair in the corner, wooden and looking a bit worse for wear, and beside it sits a table.

Moving, I feel something heavy digging into my wrist. They're both bruised and bloody, and chained to the radiator with metal handcuffs. Very Saw-esq. I roll my eyes, could they have gone any more clique with this?

Testing the cuffs, I swivel my wrists and wince at the shot of pain that travels up my arms. Despite it, nothing feels broken or wrong which is ... good. Wiggling, I test the strength of the radiator and feel a little give. It wouldn't be the best option, since ripping a radiator off the wall is likely to cause some noise, but it's an option all the same and I am up for anything right now.

Just as I'm testing to see just how flimsy this radiator is, natural light floods the basement and the sound of footsteps echo. A foot appears on the stairs, and then another, and

slowly, inch by painful inch, more of my kidnapper is revealed.

The minute I see him, a flood of fear rushes through me and this time I drown in it.

“Wha- what are you doing? How?” I stumble over the words, the terror choking me.

“Did you think I wasn’t going to find you?” Jack, my husband, grins. It’s the same charming, carefree smile he uses to manipulate people. To trick people into thinking he’s a good, honest man.

I remember that smile.

I remember what that smile does behind closed doors.

Clenching my teeth, I swim to the surface of my panic and shut down everything apart from anger. I will not feel, because feeling anything but anger right now will get me killed or imprisoned, though the line between the two is too blurry to matter. “Well, it took you long enough didn’t it.” I taunt, a feral grin of my own slicing through his charm.

His eyes flicker but the smile stays in place, as fake and plastic as if it were painted on a wax mask. “*Well*, what matters is that I’ve found you now.”

He bends down, the crisp perfection of his suit whining as he does, and reaches a hand out for me. I force myself to stay still as he runs his thumb along my face, his eyes soft, cushioned, and sweet even as he pulls his hand back and slaps me with enough force for my lip to split.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I narrow my eyes as his smile grows and without an ounce of regret, I spit the blood at him. It splatters against the crisp white of his suit shirt like blood bleeding into snow. Smiling, satisfied with my art, I growl at him. “Fuck. You.”

I used to be scared of him. I used to cower and beg and bleed under him but no more. Arcan has giving me something I’ll never be able to repay; the strength to stand up. To know I am *worthy*. I am worthy of love and kindness and power.

Even if I don't get out of this alive, it will have been worth it just for this.

Jack, the picture of calm, wipes his face with a handkerchief, but I know him better. I can see the anger trembling beneath the surface, rippling beneath his skin like a disease. He isn't unaffected and that angers him.

"I see you've forgotten how to behave in your time away." He bites out. "No matter, you just need a heavy hand to remind you." Standing, he removes his jacket and places it carefully on the chair. "As soon as you've learnt your lesson, we'll be going home." His hands hover over the table, his eyes as delighted as a child at a candy shop, before they dive down to grab something.

Turning to me, he grins, displaying a crow bar to me. And despite my previous calm, I feel the panic rush through. Jack, though cruel and evil, has never hit me with anything more than his belt or hands.

Shaking my head, I feel my eyes fill with tears. The sight of it delights Jack, his eyes lighting up in pleasure. The same sick and twisted pleasure he used to get whenever he'd rape me, brutally and sadistically.

"No." I whisper, despite the word's uselessness.

"Oh, you don't want to play anymore?" He mocks, hitting the crowbar against his palm. The slow slap, slap, slap, like a drum beating down to my end, taunting and ominous. "I guess you should have decided on that before you decided to try and run from me."

I try to thrust away, but the cuffs hold me tight, my arms bent awkwardly behind me. But it's too late. The second he reaches me, he swings. The impact of the crowbar hitting my side shocks the breath from my lungs. I don't even have time to cry out before the next hit.

And the next.

And the next.

My mind drowns in the pain and the panic, but there, in the very depths of my subconscious, I see Arcan. I see his stormy

eyes and kind smile and I feel his arms wrap around me until the pain can't penetrate. Until all I can feel is the dull, drunk, sweep of sleep take me.

"I'm coming for you Kinsley."

Chapter 17 - Arcan

“Arcan, I need you to calm the fuck down.” Dante growls, his hands pushing me to a seat at the table. Gabe and the rest of the inner circle are here, the absence of Lorenzo still aching through the table.

I drag my fingers through my hair. “It’s been three fucking days Dante. Three! I have no idea where she is. I have no way of fucking knowing if she’s still alive or even in the fucking city!” My voice grows low, dangerous, made more so by the fact that this is Dante I’m talking to. I shouldn’t be showing this sort of disrespect but fuck it, the only thing I care about right now is Kinsley. “Please tell me how the fuck I’m supposed to relax.”

The rest of the circle looks tense, on edge, like they too are waiting to see what Dante is going to do. Standing tall, Dante looks down on me. “If you think this angry panic is going to help her, then you aren’t the man I thought you were. Now get yourself together. She’s yours, which means she’s family. We take care of our family.” The men nod their agreement, cold looks turning deadly in the wake of Lorenzo.

With all my effort, I force a calm breath to wash out of me, I think of every panic, every *fear*, as unfamiliar as it is, I have to let them all wash away. He’s right. I’m in no state to help Kinsley if I continue this way.

“Okay. Fuck, okay.” I whisper.

The door opens and Damien walks through, his eyes on me as he asks me, silently, how I’m doing. I shake my head. He nods. He’s been scouting the streets to see if he can hear any whispers. The rest of the circle have now been made privy to my connection with him, but honestly, I couldn’t give a shit if it means helping find Kinsley.

Sitting at an empty seat, he presses his fingers into the wood and looks at each person. “No one knows much, they’ve been keeping this little operation of theirs under lock and key but I did manage to unearth one little shred of something.”

He pauses, pulling out a photo. A photo of Kinsley stood next to a man in a cashmere suit, a greasy smile that might disguise as charming, and in it she's smiling but I know her well enough to see the force behind it, to see how it doesn't even reach her eyes.

"Who the fuck is this?" I growl clenching the sheet in my hand.

"This is Jack Asters." He pulls out another photo. "And this is Vlad meeting with who we thought was an advisor." In this one the greasy little prick is stood with Vlad, their hands clenched, laughter dancing at the edges of their smiles. "I took this back when I was looking into it for you, but I never noticed the link until I cross checked it online with photos. We thought he was an advisor, someone hired by Vlad, but I have another theory."

"Damien, spit it out."

He nods. "You said she was running away from her husband when you two met? Well, I imagine that he found her after she met you and decided to go to Vlad for help. Vlad was already wanting war, and this way he had a way to fund it while also fucking you over."

It makes sense. It still doesn't explain why Vlad was committing petty killings, but it explains everything else. Standing, I curse.

"This is good." Dante nods and it pisses me off.

Turning on him, I growl. "None of this is good. None of this is fine. This whole situation is fucked and if even a hair on her fucking head is missing, I will make every fucker in that family pay."

Dante nods. "Yes, *we will*." He takes hold of my shoulder. "Family. Remember?"

I nod and the rest follow.

Damien sinks back into his seat. "This gives us a place to start too."

Images of Kinsley, cold and scared and hungry assault me. Flashes of blood and bone and terrified screaming come in quick succession of one another, and it breaks part of me. I have not felt this ... terror in a very, very, long time.

But now, the terror is there, full, and fast and the storm within me crackles in response. "Where do we start?" I say, voice as black as the pits of hell.

"They wouldn't be so stupid as to keep her at their compound ..." Gabe's voice trails off as my phone beeps against my thigh. The *beep, beep ... beep, beep* like the call of a dove that spots land.

The world goes quiet.

The watch. The fucking watch.

Slamming my hand onto the table, I pull out my phone. I deactivated the daily tracking GPS weeks ago when she said she didn't feel safe with someone tracking her, not after ... him but I still kept the SOS feature and had it rewired to go to my phone only.

I didn't think she would carry it everywhere.

SOS, GPS LOCATION 40.7128N 74.0060W.

Laughter, relieved but bordering on the edge of insane, fills the room. I turn the phone to the others. "I forgot."

After explaining the mechanics of it, a tense silence fills the air.

"It could be a trap." Dante muses before shaking his head.

Damien pulls up the location on a map. "Yea, but this isn't their compound or any of the buildings I know them to own so if she is here, we would have had a hard time trying to find her." He looks me in the eyes. "I say this is the best chance we have. And we're not going in as blind as they think we are."

"We need a plan then." Dante crosses his arms.

Damien stands. "I'm going to go and scout the area." He squeezes my shoulder as he passes. "We'll get her back brother."

“Yes, we fucking are.” *And then, I’m going to burn every fucker who ever dared to try and take her away from me.*

“Okay, let’s get to work then.” Dante commands, and for the rest of the night we plan and plot and scheme until every avenue has been explored. Tomorrow I will get her back. Tomorrow, I will hold her in my arms in a sea of their dead bodies.

Tomorrow, I will *burn*.

Chapter 18 - Kinsley

It took me over an hour, and more than a dozen attempts to be able to manoeuvre my hands in a way where I could press the small, discreet button at the side of Arcan's watch. I can't believe I forgot about it.

The watch face is broken, a crack splintering through it, but I'm hoping with every ounce of my being that the mechanics inside, the SOS system, are still intact and working. Closing my eyes, I send a silent prayer, begging anyone who might listen, to just give me a bit of luck today. I can do without it most days, but today, I *need* it.

Shifting, I try to ease the ache in my shoulder. I've not been let out of my handcuffs for more than a few minutes at a time and only twice a day when they let me do my business in the bucket in the corner. Watching them clean it up is about the only sense of pleasure I get these days, that and my memories of Arcan.

They've kept me alive, and hopeful through the worst of it. Through all the beatings and the feelings of gnawing hunger, and thirst.

Swallowing hurts, breathing hurts, *living* hurts.

But I know he'll find me and that means everything.

An insane croak of laughter scratches out of my throat. Who would have thought that little old me, white trailer trash and snooping connoisseur would be in the middle of a war between two mafia families with my husband thrusting himself in the middle of it.

If I had a phone, I'd text Arcan a Godfather reference because that's what I'm fucking living in right now.

My vision darkens at the edges. I keep slipping in and out of consciousness and with every beating it gets worse. My head hurts too. If you looked into my brain right now, I'd bet my life on the fact that it would look like the interior of one of those tower bells, the loud clanging painful.

I hurt.

The door to the basement opens, the artificial lights from above flooding in. I don't know if its day or night but If I had to guess, I would guess night. The world above is quieter than earlier, though I might have just passed out for a day, and I would never know.

How long has it been? A day? A week? A month? Who knows.

His footsteps make the bells in my head go faster.

“Well look who's awake, sleeping beauty.” He coos, his voice so saccharine sweet that I can smell it. My head lolls against the wall as I watch him make his way towards me. He frowns, his hands on his hips. “A wife should greet their husband sweetly.”

He places a hand, cupping my face, and I want to shove him away. I want to spit and bite and fight but I don't have the strength. Everything hurts too much to fight.

He smiles. “At least you've learnt *some* manners.” His eyes drip down, his leering gaze taking in his work, desire pooling in like the blood pooling around me. “You see, honey, I do this for you, *for us*. I can't have my wife running wild with some thug.”

A sharp twist of anger zaps through me at the mention of Arcan, at this piece of shit calling him a thug. With my last bit of strength, I huff out, my words slurred and heavy as fog. “How does it feel ...” I take a breath. “... H-how does it feel that ... that a thug has made me c-cum more times in a few weeks than y-you ever did in *years*.”

I barely feel the slap he rocks against my head, the pain long faded, cushioned by the shock and cold. Laughter spills from me like ink, dark and sticky and I watch as his face scrunches, his control to be unfazed disappearing faster and faster with every day.

“You little bitch.” He reaches for something, for some torturous tool, but before he can grab it, the air fills with noise.

Shots whistle from above, piercing the quiet with their chaos. *Arcan.*

Jack swears and reaches for a rag before shoving it into my mouth. The rag is damp and a sour taste floods my mouth as I gag, my tongue pushing helplessly at the damn thing. I need to calm myself, I've made it this far, but with the darkness pressing in, everything feels final.

But it can't be. Arcan is here, it has to be him, he has to be here. He'll always come for me.

I just hope it's not too late.

The thought whispers through just as the darkness pulls a cloak over me.

*

My eyes blink back open, tugged by some invisible thread.

I can still hear the shots. I can't have been out long. Jack is tugging on my hair, dragging me through the decrepit house that the basement belongs to. He's swearing under his breath, and for the first time, he sounds ... worried.

Worried like he thinks he might not win.

I smile and he must feel me tense because he tugs me up by my hair and pain shoots across my skull.

"You. Fucking walk." He whispers. "And stay fucking quiet."

I don't have the energy to run, or fight, or do much of anything so I listen. For now. He leads me away from the kitchen we were in and into the living room where the front door stands. Bullet holes pierce the wood, and half of the windows are broken, smashed apart by bullets.

The sounds of shots are slowing, slowing, slowing ... until finally, they stop. Jack tenses.

I take my chance. With everything I have left, I scream. "Arcan!" Jack claps a hand over my mouth a second too late as the door slams open, cracking against the wall with a resounding clap.

Arcan, heavy, angry breaths heaving out of him, takes in the scene, his gun pointed at Jack. The minute he sees me, those perfect, stormy greys crackle and turn black and the room turns thick and inky with anger.

He's beautiful and devastating, like a god who's about to unleash terror on the world.

Jack presses me harder against him and something cool and hard presses into my head.

A gun.

He's pressing a fucking gun against my head.

The air turns electric. "Move the fuck away from her."

"Now you're not in a position to make demands." Jack levels, but his words wobble. "Now be a good dog and leave."

Arcan smiles a soft, terrible smile that could send armies trembling. "I'm going to make you beg for your death."

Chapter 19 – Arcan

The minute the words pass my lips, I nod to Damien. I told him to find another way in, to be there and like always my brother comes through for me. With a quick, effortless manoeuvre he's stolen Jack's gun, leaving him defenceless.

Leaving him to my mercy, of which I have none.

I thought that the sight of Kinsley, bruised and bloody and barely conscious would send me reeling. I thought it would have that brutal, primal, animal inside me taking over. But instead, I find a calm so cold, so intense, filling me. The storm still brews, crackling and moving like a living thing, but it's waiting. Waiting for when I can unleash it on the fucker that hurt my girl.

With two long steps, I'm before them. I rip Kinsley out of his grip and Damien wrestles him into submission. The minute my skin touches hers, I feel everything slip into place. Holding her close, I cup her face, the bruises splattered there like a knife to my heart.

"My little thief." I whisper, pressing a soft kiss on her brow.

She sobs against me and my heart breaks. "I knew you'd come." She trembles. "I knew you'd save me."

"Always." I nod, holding her tight.

"Arcan?" Her eyes blink slowly. "I really don't feel good." She slurs just as she passes out.

Sinking to the floor, panic floods me. "Kinsley? Kinsley wake up!"

Dante appears at my side, his face splattered with blood. "Let me see." He tries to take her to me but a rough, animalistic growl bubbles up. "Arcan, for god's sake, I need to check her."

Reluctantly I let her go and Dante presses his finger to her throat before checking her eyes by pulling up the lids. His jaw

clenches and something like worry darkens his eyes. “We need to get her to a hospital.”

“What’s wrong with her?” I cradle her face.

“She has a concussion, and it clearly hasn’t been treated. We need her checked out immediately.”

“A normie hospital?” Gabe breathes, confused. We have our own doctors for situations like this, doctors we pay to stay silent but we’re too far out.

I growl but Dante answers before I can bite Gabe’s head off.

“Yes.” He shoots Gabe a look. “The compound is too far out and we don’t have the time to wait.” He turns to me. “Let’s get her in the car.”

Nodding, I clutch her tighter to me, and her gentle breaths soothe my soul. She will be fine. She will be okay.

I have to believe that.



I don’t ever make promises that I can’t keep and making that sneering little fucker beg for death is one I intend to keep and yet ... leaving Kinsley was hard. She’s still unconscious and the doctors said she probably won’t wake for a few more hours at least which is Just enough time for me to get rid of her little pest problem.

Slamming the door to the Pit, I pause. I want to make him feel the kind of fear that he subjected Kinsley to for years. I want him to feel his stomach knot with all the possible horrors he knows I can inflict on him.

I want him to suffer.

I keep my pace even as I head deeper down the long corridor of rooms, aiming for the one at the end.

A smile pulls at my lips when I see him.

He glares at me from behind the steel bars, his body slumped on the floor. He looks like shit, his face swollen and

purple, throbbing under the florescent lights. He doesn't say a word as I open the bars, his hand falling uselessly at his sides – possibly broken. Damien gave him a hell of a good beating.

I'll have to thank him for that.

Pulling a chair up, I sit. "I see you met my brother."

He spits out blood, his teeth-stained crimson. "Fuck you."

"Not very well-mannered, are you?" I grin and the sight must be feral. I feel so close to falling off the ledge, dipping down into a place of insanity, a place of no control. This man *hurt* Kinsley. For years, he subjected her to pain and manipulation, and I want him to pay.

I want him to feel the consequences of what he did to her.

Jack opens his mouth to speak once again but I silence it, slamming my hand against the table of tools at my side.

"No. You don't get a voice anymore. You don't get to speak or whine or fucking whimper." I growl, images of Kinsley's bruised body flashing before me like lightning, electrifying my anger.

He doesn't get a voice when he stole hers for so long.

Gripping the surgical scalpel, the make a move towards him. Gripping his jaw, his mouth gaping open like a fish, I grip his tongue between my fingers and pull. His eyes go wide when he realises what I'm going to do and his body writhes in fear.

His fear tastes sweet like candy. I want more.

Laughing, I press the scalpel to his tongue, and get to work. Never again will he invoke fear in anyone. I'll make sure of that.

I don't stop until the sun has risen.

Chapter 20 – Kinsley

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Groaning, I reach a hand out to whack my alarm clock. I want it to stop making that god awful noise. Why does it hurt so much? Better yet, why does *everything* hurt. Blinking open my eyes, I wince as the throbbing in my head intensifies with the light that floods in.

And that's when it all comes back to me.

Jack kidnapped me. He hurt me. Arcan saved me.

Arcan.

Bolting up, I clutch my head. God that hurts so much more than I expected it to. Pushing past the pain, I manage to open my eyes. I'm in a hospital bed. An IV is sticking out of my wrist and I have enough bandages to classify as a mummy. To the side of me is a monitor. So that's what the beeping was.

The door clicks open and Arcan appears. His eyes go wide when he sees me and a second later, he's there, at my side, his hands urging me back into a horizontal position. "Whoa! Be careful!"

Smiling, I cup his cheek. "Arcan."

His eyes are flickering over my face, checking over every inch of me. There's still a darkness there, the same darkness I saw in that decrepit house when Jack had me held by gunpoint, but for the most part, there's clear skies.

"Arcan." I say again, gripping his face tighter so he'll look at me. Finally, he does and his eyes soften to a shade of silver. "I'm okay so you can stop fussing around me like a mother hen."

Pressing his head against mine, he lets out a deep, relieved sigh. "I'm going to fuss, whether you like it or not. Fuck Kinsley, I'm going to fuss over you for the rest of our lives."

I roll my eyes but inside I feel a deep, satisfied, curl twine around my heart. I *like* his fussing. I like that after everything,

after all the pain and worry and trauma I can settle in to him and know his main priority is me, my safety.

I open the blanket I'm wrapped under and pat the space to my right. He looks at me dubiously as if I'm some fragile egg who needs to be kept safe, but after a moment the pull is too tempting. He slips in beside me, his warmth seeping into mine, and wraps his arms around me. He's careful not to touch any of the wires protruding from me.

We sit like this for an age, settling into each other's silence until a thought embeds itself in my brain like a splinter under the skin.

"What did you do to Jack?" I broach the subject carefully, my brain not even sure it wants to know.

"He's gone." Clutching me tighter, he looks down, a careful thought held between the grey. "I can elaborate if that's what you want. But no matter what, he's won't ever be an issue for you again Kinsley."

I nod, grateful that even with this, I have a choice. "I don't want to know any more."

Arcan nods and presses a kiss to my brow. Whatever happened to him, whatever Arcan did, will never matter. The only thing that does matter is that he's gone and for the first time in a very long time, I'm safe.

There is one thing I want to know thought.

Sitting up, I turn to face him. "Did anything happen with Vlad? I never saw him while I was ... there but I know it was him who helped Jack take me."

Arcan strokes a thumb along my wrist. "He wasn't there but the men who were guarding you were his men. There's nothing concrete yet but I'm almost certain that this was just one step in his over-arching plan." He shakes his head. "But that's for another day. For now, focus on getting some rest and healing."

I nod but hold his hand fast. "I'm in this with you Arcan."

A small smile lights his darkened expression. “And I’m in everything with you my little thief.”

Grinning, I let out a laugh. Who would have thought that a failed pickpocket attempt would lead to all this.

Epilogue 1 – Arcan Eight Months Later

The minute I open the door, I'm surrounded by the steady beat of Taylor Swifts newest single accompanied by my Wife's off-key belting. My wife – we've been married six months now, after I carried her down the aisle the minute she recovered from her concussion. I didn't want to be parted from her for a second longer, not even legally.

Stepping inside, I drop my keys onto the side table and slip around the corner. My cock hardens instantly at the sight before me. Kinsley, a bowl held up against her bulging belly, clothed in nothing but one of my t-shirts, is dancing as she whisks, completely oblivious to the world around her.

I didn't think I could find her any more attractive than I already did when I married her but then we found out she was pregnant and the sight of my wife, round with our child, her breasts bulging, swollen with hormones, well ... it hardens my cock faster than anything

With a throbbing pulse, it tenses against my zipper, desperate to be inside her. I lean against the wall, ignoring the incessant twitching, and watch her until she spots me. The minute she does, she smiles and my cock aches in return.

“Hi.”

I smile. “What are you doing?”

She whisks faster, her breasts jiggling faster with the motion and my eyes zero in. She lifts the bowl. “I'm making Damien a birthday cake. He likes chocolate, doesn't he?”

“He does.” I whisper, stalking closer towards her, my eyes still zeroed in on her luscious mounds of flesh.

“I was thinking chocolate with sprinkles.” She continues, oblivious to my stalking. “Everyone likes sprinkles.” She turns to me, holding out the whisk. “You want a taste?”

Slipping my hands onto her waist, she yelps as I lift her up and place her firmly onto the edge of the counter. I run my hands down her bare thighs, smiling as goosebumps raise in the wake of my touch. She's so goddamn fucking beautiful.

Bending to my knees, I look up at her. Her eyes have darkened, her hair, like ink spilling down her shoulders, frames them in shadows. I can *feel* the heat coming from her core. Slipping a finger under her shirt, I tease her gently, lightly touching her flowering lips, wet with need.

Growling, I spread her legs. "The only thing I want right now is the taste of you on my tongue."

Her mouth gapes open as she slides the bowl away, forgotten. Leaning back on her hands, she tilts her core up to me, a feast offered up on a gilded plate. Licking my lips, I spread her legs wider, wide enough to see the glistening wetness that's gathered between those pink lips.

Trailing my fingers through it, I smile. "So beautiful." Her answering mewls cut through me, severing any shred of control I had. "Mine." I growl as I descend, swooping down to feast.

Her moans slip free like water, drowning me in a sea of her need, her want, her pleasure. Her fingers become tangled in my hair, tugging and urging with need that's only become more desperate with her pregnancy.

I'm drunk on the taste on her.

Her hips roll against me, faster and faster as she gets closer and closer. I wrap my lips around her clit and *suck*. The minute I do, she *explodes*. Screaming, a flood of her pleasure squirts out, soaking my hair and drenching me in her essence.

I fucking *love it*.

Groaning, I stand and a second later, I'm inside her, my height giving me easy access to her in this position. She pants and groans as I thrust, her energy spent.

"I love you." The words are stumbling and drunk on need, but I hear them, and they send the beast in me roaring.

Mine, mine, mine.

“Fuck, I love you too.” I growl out, thrusting faster and harder, her love drunk eyes urging me towards my end.

From the moment I saw her, beautiful and panting with a wild need to survive in her eyes, she’s been mine. There wasn’t a chance in hell I was going to let her slip away.

Mine, mine, mine.

I’ll forever be grateful for my little thief. My angel who saved me.

Mine

The thought plays on repeat as I roar out my finish.

The end

Do you want to read more?

*Keep a close eye on my socials for
information on the next installment -
Damien and Camilla's story.*

About the Author

Tessa Winters is an author with a passion for smut and possessive men. When she isn't reading or writing about sexy men who will do anything for the girl they love, she spends her time exploring her home in London with her husband and border terrier - Alfie. She believes looking at half-naked men counts as research and that love at first sight is absolutely a thing.

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