

ECHO



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Contents

Blurb

Prologue: Jace

1. Chapter One: Sofia

2. Chapter Two: Sofia

3. Chapter Three: Jace

4. Chapter Four: Grayson

5. Chapter Five: Grayson

The Everglades Viper Part I

6. Chapter Six: Sofia

7. Chapter Seven: Sofia

8. Chapter Eight: Sofia

9. Chapter Nine: Grayson

10. Chapter Ten: Grayson

11. Chapter Eleven: Sofia
 12. Chapter Twelve: Sofia
 13. Chapter Thirteen: Grayson
- The Everglades Viper II
14. Chapter Fourteen: Sofia
 15. Chapter Fifteen: Sofia
 16. Chapter Sixteen: Grayson
 17. Chapter Seventeen: Sofia
 18. Chapter Eighteen: Sofia
 19. Chapter Nineteen: Teo
 20. Chapter Twenty: Grayson
- The Everglades Viper III
21. Chapter Twenty-One: Grayson
 22. Chapter Twenty-Two: Teo
 23. Chapter Twenty-Three: Sofia
 24. Chapter Twenty-Four: Sofia
 25. Chapter Twenty-Five: Grayson
 26. Chapter Twenty-Six: Sofia
- The Everglades Viper IV
27. Chapter Twenty-Seven: Sofia
 28. Chapter Twenty-Eight: Grayson

29. Chapter Twenty-Nine: Teo
30. Chapter Thirty: Sofia
31. Chapter Thirty-One: Sofia
32. Chapter Thirty-Two: Grayson

Blurb

I rule the ruthless world of the Mercy Blades, but she has stumbled into an even darker game.

Sofia knows I would burn this city down to protect her. Dealing with death is part of the job. Dealing with a serial killer isn't, but I could manage that.

But then she walked into our lives — the beautiful journalist who changed everything — and I would do anything to make sure nothing happens to her. But it isn't enough.

To keep her safe, **I need to claim her**...to possess her, body and soul. And I thought I did.

But now, the man who's supposed to be my greatest ally and closest friend tells me wants her just as much as do. Grayson wants her, and she wants him...and it makes me sick, but **I want to see them together. To watch them. To command them both.**

She's not just the key to our redemption. She's the catalyst that will either strengthen our unbreakable bond or shatter it forever.

As the walls close in around us, I discover a chilling truth: the serial killer from our past is just a pawn in a much larger conspiracy, and Sofia and her brother are in grave danger. There's a bounty on their heads, and shadowy figures will stop at nothing to see them dead.

I'll have to decide what role Grayson plays between us, but now, it's not just about our desire for her. It's about keeping her and her brother alive.

I need to remind her that she's mine...and I don't like sharing, especially when the price of sharing could be their lives.

Prologue: Jace

My head pounded as I pried my eyes open, the world around me a blur. The cold metal beneath me sent shivers up my spine. Where the hell was I? The thought was barely there before panic seized my chest.

“Shit,” I mumbled, trying to sit up and get a grasp of my surroundings. I couldn’t see anything. In the distance, I could hear something dripping. When I touched the wall behind me, it felt like stone; it was cold and bumpy under my fingertips.

My voice sounded foreign to my own ears, echoing back in the dungeon I found myself in.

This ain’t good. Not good at all.

“Finally awake, Jace?” A voice echoed through the room, making my blood run cold. My heart raced, and I forced myself to focus on the speaker. In the shadows, I could see nothing; the face might’ve been more familiar than the voice, but I wasn’t able to tell.

All I could see were a pair of bright white eyes in the darkness of the room, which I still hadn’t managed to come to grips with.

“Didn’t think anyone could catch you, huh?” the voice taunted, the sound nails on a chalkboard.

“Who...what do you want?” I demanded, my voice shaking despite my best efforts to sound strong. I could think of a lot of things this person might want, and not one of them was good.

I was in a hell of a lot of trouble.

I was starting to get my bearings, so I tried to get up. I wasn’t bound, which was surprising. I must’ve been drugged, I managed to think, because I couldn’t remember getting here.

“Answers,” the voice replied, taking a step toward me. I looked up to see their face, clad in a balaklava that hid every single one of their features... except for the whites of their eyes. Too bright in the darkness, with the kind of stare you only see in a cold-blooded killer. “And you’re going to give them to me.”

“What answers?” I asked, certain I wasn’t going to give him any. I just needed to stall for time while I figured out how the fuck to get out of this situation.

“Everything you know about the Strangler, and where you keep your data,” the voice said. “You’re a smart guy. I know you’re not keeping things on the cloud. So just tell me and I’ll let you go.”

I had to stifle back the urge to laugh mockingly at this request.

“I’m not giving you shit,” I gritted my teeth, fighting back the urge to puke. I was not used to being this helpless; I’m usually the one in control, and certainly not having my electronics on me made me feel more vulnerable than ever.

“Feisty. I like it,” the voice sneered, stepping closer.

But I wouldn’t let them win.

I couldn't.

My fear turned into raw violence as I swung my fist at my captor, but I was too slow...too addled. He stepped out of the way, laughing like this was all some kind of game. I staggered forward, though, not giving him a chance to breathe as I swung another fist.

I was panting and sweating by the time I landed a solid punch to his jaw, sending him careening back. But just as it seemed like I might actually stand a chance, I felt something hard and cold pressed against my side.

A gun.

My heart sank as I realized that any chance of escaping my fate had been snatched away. I couldn't see my captor's mouth, but behind the mask, I could see the outline of a smile.

"Game over," the voice taunted, taking a step closer. I could smell whiskey and something else, something I couldn't place, dark and deep and oaky. The barrel of the gun dug into my flesh. "Any last words?"

No matter how much I wanted to fight back, I knew there was no way out of the situation. At least not right then.

The only choice—the one choice that would keep me alive, at least for the moment—was surrender, so I slowly raised my hands in defeat.

"Nice try, kid," he said, his voice deep, breathy. Definitely a man, I thought...and he was getting off on this. The adrenaline of our fight, the pleasure of having my life in his hands. He dug the weapon into my side as I resisted the urge to try and wrestle it away from him

There was a chance I could've won, but if I wanted to get out of this alive, I needed to be smarter than that.

"Go to hell," I said between gritted teeth.

He laughed. "Maybe someday," he replied, his voice icy. "But you're out of

your league here. For now, you're going to tell me everything I want to know."

"I won't tell you shit," I said.

"We'll see...after all, we've got plenty of time to spend together," he replied, walking away from me, the gun still pointed toward me as I held my hands up my side. "Good night, kid."

He opened a door and disappeared, light pooling into the basement, bright enough to blind me for a second but not enough to give me any information about where I was.

I felt weak. I was injured, too; I was certain of it. I didn't know where I was or how I had gotten here, and while I wasn't outmatched, it was clear that whoever had done this had gone to great lengths to make sure I was trapped and cornered.

But I wouldn't give up.

I would find a way out of this mess.

Somehow.

For myself, and for the Mercy Blades. Because I'm Jace Roman, and I don't fucking quit.

Chapter One: Sofia

The memories still haunted me, like ghosts lingering in the shadows of my mind. Kidnapped by the Mercy Blades gang, I had spent days in a world of darkness and fear. But amidst that chaos, I found something unexpected—a connection with Teo, the enigmatic leader of the gang.

I hadn't intended to do any of this. I was only investigating a serial killer who targeted vulnerable populations. Unfortunately, he was much closer to home than I had anticipated.

My brother had been involved.

The memory of it sent a shiver down my spine. The way Sam had grabbed the gun, emptying the clip into Archer's face—I could see it every time I closed my eyes.

Despite everything, Teo had become my savior, and bit by bit, we forged a bond that neither of us saw coming.

But now things were fucked up and I had no idea what was going to happen next.

A few hours had passed since Victor had burst into HQ and announced that Jace was missing. Things still felt unsettled. Grayson had gone to speak to Victor and I was sitting on the couch, the scent of sex hanging around us as Teo tried to pace around the living room of HQ.

Tried.

He wasn't doing a very good job.

His face twisted in pain and worry as I bit down on my bottom lip, trying hard not to tell him to cut it out. I didn't want to hurt his pride when he already had so much to worry about. The gunshot wound had left him with a bad leg and he still refused to deal with it properly. "You should probably see a physical therapist about this or something," I said.

"Yeah, great timing," he replied, his voice low and rough. "Enough."

He tried to brush off my concern but I could see a tinge of fear in his dark eyes.

"Teo," I said. "Come here. Let me help you."

He hesitated, his gaze locked into mine. "Fine," he said. "But not now. We have more important things to focus on."

I nodded. I knew better than to push him further, though my heart ached with worry for him. It wasn't just the physical pain. I could tell this was getting to him mentally. He was always imposing and commanding, and while he'd gone to great lengths to make sure his pain wasn't visible to anyone, I could tell that it slowed him down.

And now Jace was missing.

"Are you okay?" Teo asked, his hand resting on my shoulder. The warmth of his touch grounded me, reminding me why I fought so hard.

"Let's just focus on finding Jace," I whispered, trying to ignore the storm brewing within me.

“Look at me,” he said.

I turned my body so I could look into his face.

“It’s done,” he said. “It’s finished. The Strangler is dead. You can go home now. You don’t have to stay with me.”

I shook my head. “You heard Victor. Jace is missing,” I replied. “Whatever this is, it’s much bigger than one killer, and I have a feeling we’re only now just getting started.”

“Being here is dangerous,” he said softly. “I’m not...”

He rubbed his temple and sighed.

I put my hand on his good knee, squeezing it, hoping I could reassure him.

“I don’t know if I can protect you, Sof,” he said. “And if something happens to you because of me then I’m never going to be able to forgive myself.”

I took a deep breath. “And what do you think is going to happen to me at home, where I will definitely not be protected?” I asked. “Jace can defend himself...”

I trailed off. Whatever happened after this was all over, I knew I should probably get a gun.

And I hated that...but I’d fallen in with dangerous company, and my life had changed for good.

“I take your point. Let’s focus on finding him first. Then we can talk about what that means for you,” he said softly.

My heart sank. I didn’t realize until that moment, but I had wanted him to ask me to stay. After everything we’d been through—my multiple deadly encounters, Teo’s injury, and fuck...the sex, the *incredible* sex—I thought this was about more than my safety. But I quickly shook it off. He was right; there were other things we needed to focus on and figuring out how to get Jace back needed to be our top priority.

It was a miracle I'd managed to survive, and I didn't know what kind of backing the Strangler had if someone had simply whisked a member of the fucking Mercy Drive Blades off the street as if he was a defenseless child.

"You're right," I said, swallowing the knot in my throat. "So where do we start?"

Teo sighed, his shoulders dropping. "I don't know where to start. We have a lot of enemies, a lot of people who don't just want to see us fail, they want us dead."

"But why Jace?"

He shrugged as he straightened up. "I'd like to know that too."

We sat there in silence for a few seconds. Teo was clearly concerned, and as his worry grew, so did mine.

"Could we look at his devices?" I asked. "I mean, he lives most of his life online, right? So there's got to be a crumb there. Something that'll lead us to the right person."

"Sure, we could, but he's our tech guy. He's the one that can help us decode the entire thing."

I shook my head. "I might not be a boy genius level hacker, but I'm a journalist, and I'm good," I said. "Snooping in people's inboxes is my bread and butter. Just give me a chance."

Teo nodded and handed me Jace's laptop. "Just be careful," he warned. "I think there are a lot of people out there who would love to see you dead too."

A knot tightened in the pit of my stomach. He was right, but I hadn't even considered it. "Don't worry," I said dryly. "I'll be fine."

"You might see things you don't want to see."

"I'm a big girl," I said. "I know what you guys do for a living. I won't be shocked."

He looked at me for a long second, appraising me. For the briefest moment, I saw the affection I'd come to expect from him—the look that told me he did in fact want me to stay—but it faded just as fast.

Even after everything, Teo was still guarded...and so was I.

Anything between us wasn't going to be easy to navigate.

"Alright," he said. "But you won't find anything here, really. I think he has a device that's completely offline. Keeps that at home as a precaution."

"I'm not saying we have to break into his house..."

Teo smiled at me. "Don't worry, sunshine," he said. "We don't have to break into his house. I have a key."

Grayson walked into the living room with Victor behind him. They both looked worried. Grayson flashed me a small smile as he walked up to me. "I only caught the end of that conversation, but are we going to Jace's?"

"It's not a bad idea," Victor said, rubbing his chin. The sunlight behind him made his body cast a shadow that reached the end of Teo's toes. I thought he might shrink when he was upset, but it had made him stand taller, if anything. Teo nodded in agreement. "Right. We need to find out what we can about Jace's disappearance," he said. "And if his offline device is there, it's our best chance to track down any leads."

Grayson let out a low whistle. "Well, then let's go," he said, slapping his hands together. "The sooner we find Jace, the better."

It didn't take long for all of us to pile into Teo's car, the tension thick enough to slice through with a knife. I sat in the back, my fingers tapping nervously on my knees as we drove through Orlando. It was strange seeing the city from this perspective, as we drove through the empty streets, the buildings looming above us like giants. Everything seemed so much more real now that

Jace was gone. It felt like we were in some sort of twisted dream, one we couldn't wake up from until we found him.

It felt like I'd been trapped in a nightmare for a long, long time...and I had no way of knowing at the time, but that nightmare was just beginning.

Finally, after a drive that felt too long for comfort and too short for conversation, we arrived at Jace's apartment building. Teo parked the car and we all got out, making our way to the front door. Grayson kept checking over his shoulder, scanning the area for any signs of trouble. Victor had his hand on the hilt of his knife, ready for any unexpected attacks. I couldn't help but feel a sense of dread as we made our way up to Jace's apartment, a stone in the pit of my stomach turning over and over.

Teo pulled out a key and opened the door, leading us inside. The apartment was eerily quiet, with no signs of forced entry or any struggle. The apartment was clean and tidy. I could tell that Jace hated clutter and mess—which made sense for the guy whose job it was to collect and organize information. The only light was a fluorescent bulb in the kitchen, flickering with a life of its own. All we could hear was the faint sound of the fridge humming, and nothing else.

There was absolutely nothing that stood out about this place, other than the fact that it was gorgeous. His luxury studio was sleek and modern, with high ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a stunning view of the city below. The walls were painted in a soft, muted gray that lent an air of sophistication to the space, and the floors were made of polished concrete that gleamed underfoot. If it wasn't for the posters of classic movies and vintage video games on the wall, I wouldn't have guessed that anyone lived here.

The furniture was minimalist, with a low-slung gray sofa, a glass coffee table,

and a black leather armchair that looked more like a piece of art than a place to sit. The kitchen was outfitted with high-end stainless steel appliances and marble countertops, and there was a small dining table and chairs that looked like they had never been used. The bed was a king-size mattress on a low platform bed frame, with crisp white sheets and a fluffy gray duvet. In one corner, near the wall-to-wall windows, was his black L-shaped computer desk.

I booted the computer on and was greeted by a password protected screen... which I should have expected, but still presented me with an inconvenient stumbling block.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath.

Grayson walked up to me. “Tricky,” he said. I could hear Teo and Victor rummaging through the rest of Jace’s belongings, disturbing the perfect organization of his place. He would be pissed when he came back—*if* he came back.

I turned to Grayson in frustration. “Do you have any idea what his password might be?” I asked.

Grayson shook his head. “I’m not sure,” he said. “You could try Beatrice? That’s his mom’s name.”

“That’s not going to work. Try operationhuntbrainengine, one word,” Teo piped up from somewhere in the apartment.

“And that will?” Grayson asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s his laptop’s password,” Teo replied. “It should.”

I typed in the password and the computer whirred to life. The screen flickered on, revealing a sea of files and documents. My eyes scanned through the folders, searching for anything that might lead us to Jace.

“I can’t believe that worked,” I muttered under my breath.

Teo laughed, still moving around the apartment. “You seriously think he wouldn’t share his password with me just in case something happened? We lead dangerous lives, Sunshine...and failsafes like that are rules we live by.”

“Did he expect something to happen?” I asked, surprised.

Teo shrugged. “We always do. We have to.”

“And now we all know his password, too, which I’m sure he’ll be happy about,” Victor muttered.

“You say that as if one of us might not be next,” Teo said. “No more secrets between us. It’s too big of a liability.”

I clicked on the “Recent” folder, hoping to find something that he had been working on recently. My heart sank as I saw that the folder was empty.

Grayson noticed my disappointment and walked over to me, leaning down to look at the screen. “What are you looking for?” he asked.

“Anything that might give us a clue as to where Jace might be,” I said. “But there’s nothing here. It’s like he just vanished into thin air.”

“He didn’t vanish into thin air, though,” Victor said. “He went to speak with the police and then he never came back.”

“So maybe someone got him when he tried to go back to HQ,” Grayson offered.

“Yeah,” Teo replied, his voice hard. “Or maybe the cops just never let him leave.”

Chapter Two: Sofia

I closed my eyes tightly as I struggled to think of our next steps. Grayson's hand was on my shoulder, squeezing it gently. He didn't go as far as to ask me if I was okay, but he obviously knew I wasn't.

"I think you're right, Teo," I said, walking over to him. "We're going to need help."

Teo raised his eyebrows at me.

"I still don't have my phone, so I have to use yours," I said, extending my hand toward his.

He cocked his head, his eyes narrowing.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked softly.

"Do you have any better ideas?"

He shook his head. The memory of his bruised and battered body weighed heavily on my mind as I paced the floor of Jace's apartment and they all watched me. Something wasn't adding up; there was no trace of him, no clues to his whereabouts or why he had vanished. But my gut screamed that our search for answers was far from over.

My fingers hovered over the screen, but finally, with a resolute breath, I looked for Sam's contact card on Teo's phone and pressed my finger on it until it was ringing. I pulled the phone to my ear, dreading hearing my brother's voice after what had happened.

"Hey, Sof," Sam's voice answered, cautious but warm, as if sensing the tension in my call.

"Hey, kid."

"Still with Teo, huh?"

"Yeah," I said. "There's...there are things we need to talk about."

"I know."

"And I need your help."

He laughed, a little sadly. "Haven't I done enough to help you?" he asked, his voice strained.

"Kid, please," I said. "We don't have time for this. Someone's life is in danger."

"It always is with you lately..." he sighed heavily. "Okay—what do you need me to do?"

"Can we meet somewhere? I don't know if it's safe to talk over the phone," I said. I glanced around the apartment, feeling the walls close in on me, three pairs of eyes staring, probing into my soul.

"Somewhere like—"

"Somewhere normal! Like your place or a..."

"Or an active theme park?" he said. I couldn't tell if it was a joke.

"Let's stick to a restaurant."

He laughed. "Alright. You send me an address, I'll be there. I desperately need to get out of the house."

"Okay. I'll see you there."

I hung up and looked at the men around me. Teo had his arms crossed over his chest. He leaned back against the white wall of Jace's apartment. It looked effortless, but I wondered if he was doing it because he was in pain. Grayson's gaze flitted between my face and Teo, but he didn't say anything. Victor stared at me.

"I had to talk to him anyway," I said. "It wouldn't be outrageous if he helped us."

Teo closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"You want to involve your cop brother in our mission? That's risky," Grayson said before Teo answered.

"Sam saved my life," I said. "He was the one to kill Archer."

"He also put you in danger," Teo said. "He was the only reason you were there in the first place."

Victor nodded in agreement. "We don't know if we can trust him, and bringing him in could put all of us in danger. And need I remind you all we just floated the idea that Jace may have been apprehended by the cops...?"

Teo remained silent, but I could see the conflict written across his face. He didn't want to put me at risk by involving Sam, I knew that, but he knew we needed all the help we could get. This was a fight between his loyalty to his men and his feelings about me.

His eyes were full of concern, but also a fierce protectiveness that made my heart swell with gratitude. And concern, because *fuck*.

Talk about complicated.

"Guys, listen." My voice was firm, resolute, despite how shaky I felt. "I trust Sam. He's not just a cop—he's family, and more than that, he's my best friend. Right now, we need to take every chance we can get, and Sam is a safe bet."

“He needs to give you the real story. He hasn’t yet and he owes you that much. If he does, then we can think about hearing him out,” Teo finally spoke up, his voice low. “But we keep our guard up. If we feel like he’s not being genuine, we’ll cut ties immediately.”

“Agreed,” Grayson said hesitantly.

“Fine,” Victor added, his expression still filled with doubt.

I took a deep breath, trying to quell the fluttering in my stomach. I trusted Sam, but Teo was right. He still hadn’t given me an explanation and I worried about what that might mean.

We left Jace’s apartment with no clues, heading straight to the restaurant to meet with Sam. We were no closer to figuring out where he had gone, unfortunately, and the unease in the car was palpable. I sure as hell didn’t know what to talk about, and the guys clearly didn’t either. We were all still exhausted from dealing with the Orchid Strangler...and now this.

“Weather’s nice, huh?” Grayson said, his voice hollow.

Victor snorted. “Seriously, Sinclair? The weather?”

“Well, it’s better than talking about our abducted friend or the serial killer who wouldn’t stop leaving bodies behind our club,” Grayson muttered.

“Or, you know, the fact that we’re going to meet with a cop who might have had something to do with the murders...?” Victor added.

“Sam’s not a killer,” I cut in, glaring at them.

“He looked like a killer when he shot his boyfriend in the face,” Teo said.

“Sorry...but he did. I hate to say it, but it’s easy to tell ourselves that we know everything about our families, and we really just *don’t*. Who knows what Sam does in his free time?”

“He mostly sits on my couch and drinks wine,” I scowled.

“Or fucks psychopaths,” Victor mumbled. “Also that.”

I rolled my eyes, but then I spotted Sam as Teo parked the car at the restaurant we'd agreed on. He waited for us outside the restaurant, sitting on a long stone bench with iron arms. He was wearing sunglasses, but I didn't need to look at his face to know that there were deep dark bags under his eyes.

He looked horrible.

Probably just about as bad as I did.

"We're coming with you," Teo said before I even managed to open my mouth.

"I'd like to speak to him alone," I replied. "I especially don't want you three around him given the way you were talking—"

"Tough," Teo said. "I don't trust him. And he owes you an explanation that I'm dying to hear."

I wanted to lash out at him for being possessive—a trait that seemed to go hand in hand with that protectiveness I liked so much—but he was right. Without Sam's involvement, I would've never landed in the basement of Neon, the Blades' flagship nightclub.

I would have probably never been involved with the Orchid Strangler at all.

I shuddered as I thought about the man who'd broken into my house, about how close I'd come to death...and it made my stomach roil when I remembered that Sam had invited that man into his bed, told him things about me, and that he'd tried to help him cover it all up.

Teo was absolutely right.

I didn't know everything about Sam.

I shook it off, unbuckled my seatbelt, and opened the door with purpose. Sam looked up at me, taking his sunglasses off when he spotted me.

"Hi," he said softly. "I didn't know you were bringing company."

I gave him a small smile. “Sorry about that. They don’t trust you,” I said, motioning towards Teo, Grayson, and Victor, who were following behind me.

Sam’s eyes flickered over my shoulder, and I could tell he was tense. “I understand,” he said. “I haven’t exactly been forthcoming with information.”

“No,” I said. “You haven’t.”

He stood up and I noticed the way his shoulders hunched forward, as if carrying a heavy weight. “I’m sorry about that,” he said. “I’ve been dealing with some...stuff.”

That was an understatement.

“This is Victor and Grayson,” I said, gesturing at the two he didn’t know.

“And I’m sure you remember Teo...”

“Yeah, I remember,” Sam replied. “And I know the other two from their mugshots.”

“Cool,” Grayson mumbled, ruffling his hair awkwardly and staring down at the ground. “Cool cool...”

“Let’s head inside, detective,” Teo said, his expression cool and collected.

Yeah. We were off to a great start.

We walked into the restaurant and were seated right away in a corner booth, the restaurant practically empty. I’d chosen it for just that reason—because we needed a neutral location where we could still have some privacy. I sat with Sam on one side and Teo on the other, knowing we might have privacy from the outside world, but that the others would be listening to every word I said.

I needed to get Sam alone...but it would have to be some other time.

“You said you needed my help,” Sam said after the waiter had taken our drink order.

“And I do,” I replied. “But before we get to that, I want to know the truth

about what happened with...”

I trailed off. What was I supposed to call him? *Your boyfriend?* The fucking Orchid Strangler?

“With Archer?” he asked. The rest of the guys watched us, none of them saying a fucking thing. Grayson sipped on his tea, Teo barely touched his water and Victor tapped his long fingers on the tablecloth, ignoring his drink in favor of surveilling us instead.

“Yeah,” I bit out. “*Archer.*”

Sam sighed. “What I told you at the hospital was somewhat true. We started sleeping together a few months ago. I didn’t know anything about him. Obviously I didn’t know what he did in his spare time.”

What a funny way to talk about murder—like it was a hobby, a passing interest. The Strangler had killed upwards of a dozen people, and Sam mentioned it offhand as if he was just finding a way to escape the tedium of an afternoon.

I waited for him to continue. He took a sip of his water, then hesitated, then took another sip.

“Anyway, when you told me you started to look into this serial killer, I had started to put the pieces together. That’s why I was so insistent that you stopped investigating...because I knew what you would find. But then he just, I don’t know, shared it with me. As if it was normal pillow talk. That’s when I *really* needed you to stop looking.”

“And you didn’t think about breaking it off then?” Grayson asked, an edge in his voice.

Sam looked at him for a long second. Aside from introductions, this was the first time they had spoken to each other at all.

“I did,” Sam said quietly. “But he had a way of manipulating me, making me

believe that he was in too deep to get out and if I left him he would take me down with him.”

I could see the pain in Sam’s eyes, and I felt a pang of sympathy. I knew what it was like to be caught up in something that seemed impossible to get out of. And Teo...he had killed people, too.

He hadn’t told me he had, but I was sure of it. Even if he didn’t get his hands dirty, he used these men—and other men—as weapons.

He had a reputation for being ruthless, and that reputation was well-earned.

Maybe me and Sam weren’t that different.

“But then something changed,” Sam continued. “I don’t know what it was, but he started getting more aggressive, more violent. He wanted me to be a part of it, to help him with his kills. I couldn’t do it, so I told him I was done. That’s when he attacked me.”

I gasped, reaching out to touch Sam’s arm. “Attacked you?”

“Yeah, but he made it seem...I don’t know,” he said, then mumbled something under his breath. “This is embarrassing. Do they have to be here?”

“We’re going to hear it now or we’re going to hear it later, but you owe us an explanation too,” Teo said flatly. “The Strangler was targeting us and there is a reason he tried to kill your sister in our club. And now one of my men is missing. So yes. We have to be here.”

Sam took another sip of water, blood rushing to his cheeks.

“Like it was foreplay, I guess,” he said finally.

I felt my stomach drop. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Sam had been attacked by Archer and he’d made it seem like a sexual advance? The thought of it made me sick. I couldn’t imagine what he must’ve gone through.

And at the same time...there was another parallel.

Because I thought about how Teo had choked me. How I’d asked him to take

me to the very edge.

How I'd liked it, walking that line between life and death.

"I'm sorry," I said softly, not knowing what else to say.

"No, I'm sorry," he replied. "I should've gotten out before he became a threat to you, but I guess he started looking into my family as we got more involved, and then I got drunk and I made a really fucking big mistake."

I waited for him, though I could tell just talking about this made him hurt.

"I told him he had to stop because you were looking into him. He said he'd think about it, but as soon as I said it, I knew you were in danger."

"That's when he broke into my apartment?"

"Yeah," Sam said. "I was following him by then. I thought he wouldn't be stupid enough to kill you in your own apartment, but I still made enough noise to spook him. That's when he took you to Neon."

His shoulders slumped as he looked past me.

"I attacked him. I tried to get him to stop. We got into a fight outside of the storage room that he was holding you in when he took you to Neon."

"That was you? I could hear you," I said.

Sam nodded. "I'm sorry if I scared you. I wanted to get you out, but he overpowered me. I just wanted to stop him, to protect you. When I came back to look for you, you were gone."

I felt a lump form in my throat as I realized how much Sam had risked for me. "Thank you," I said, meaning it with every fiber of my being.

"I'm sorry, Sof," he said. "I wish I had never gotten you involved in this. But I just...I didn't feel like I could stop him. He made it seem less like he was Ted Bundy and more like he was...I don't know. Batman?"

"Weirdly, there is very little difference between the two," Grayson muttered.

"I see that now," Sam said with a humorless laugh. "I hate it, though. And I

understand if you never want to talk to me again—”

I shook my head. “Maybe this was fate, kid,” I said. “Maybe there was no getting around it.”

He shook his head. I could see him biting the inside of his cheek. “So,” he said. “Let me make it up to you. What can I help you with?”

Chapter Three: Jace

A pounding headache jolted me awake, and my vision swam in the dim light. I tried to lift my arms, but they were locked behind me. Pain shot through my wrists as I struggled against the rough rope binding them together.

My mouth tasted like copper. I thought about the last time I saw my captor, the heavy weapon digging into my flank as he threatened me.

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath, wincing with each tug of the coarse fibers. The room around me was cold and damp, shadows playing tricks on my eyes. My heart raced.

Think, Jace, I told myself, trying to recall what happened before I ended up in the dungeon. But my thoughts were muddled, slippery, like a blood-soaked blade escaping my grasp.

I shifted my position, gritting my teeth against the pain that spiked through my body. With every movement, the ropes cut deeper into my skin. My captor must have bound me after knocking me out.

Of course he fucking did. Coward.

Beads of sweat formed on my brow, mingling with the dirt and grime coating my face.

“Get it together,” I whispered, the sound of my voice strangely reassuring. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my time with the Mercy Blades, it’s that panic never helps anyone. Turns out being in a gang is good for something. My focus narrowed, my mind racing to find a solution. The room was eerily quiet, save for my ragged breathing and the distant drip of water somewhere nearby.

“Okay, Jace,” I said to myself, “you can do this.”

I reminded myself that I had faced worse situations. A little dungeon captivity was nothing compared to what I’d faced before. To what I’d *had* to face.

Taking a deep breath, I braced myself and pulled hard against the ropes. The pain flared, but I ignored it, pouring all of my strength into the effort. For a moment, it felt as if my wrists might snap—but then, something gave.

“Come on...” I hissed, feeling the rope loosen ever so slightly. It wasn’t much, just enough to give me a sliver of hope.

“Almost there,” I thought, my determination growing stronger despite my weakening muscles. I wasn’t about to let these ropes keep me away from my life. I was going to fight until I was free, and then I would make absolutely sure they paid for what they had done.

My heart hammered in my chest, the memory of the attack at the police station crashing over me like a tidal wave. I’d been there for an informal interview about the Orchid Strangler—at least that’s how they had made it seem.

I was hesitant, but Teo and I had spoken about it, and he’d said that it was okay if I went provided I only spoke about the Strangler. It was a risky idea,

but it seemed fine, and the detective—a middle aged man with an easy smile and nicotine-stained fingernails—seemed to be satisfied with what I was giving him.

And then I'd walked out of the police station, and as I was rounding the corner to get to my car, someone had put me in a headlock and dragged me to the trunk of a car.

“Kidnapped,” I whispered, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. The realization hit me with full force, and my breathing grew shallow, panic threatening to take over. I couldn't let that happen. I had to stay focused, stay calm. It was my only chance of getting out of the situation alive.

“Think, Jace, think,” I murmured, forcing myself to concentrate on my surroundings. The dull light cast eerie shadows on the walls, making it difficult to discern any details. Still, I strained my ears, listening for any sounds that might give away my location. I'd always been good at picking up on audio cues...so I needed to rely on that now.

“Focus on what you can hear, what you can feel,” I told myself, trying to block out the fear and anger churning inside me. My wrists screamed in protest as I shifted against the ropes, testing their strength.

“Okay, so...the air is damp, and it smells musty,” I said aloud, forcing my thoughts into some semblance of order. I spoke just loudly enough so that I could hear myself. My own voice would ground me, and any echo I felt might provide some more information about my location. “That could mean I'm underground, maybe in a basement or a cellar?”

A sudden noise from outside the room made me freeze, my breath catching in my throat.

Footsteps? No, too irregular.

A drip, perhaps?

“Water,” I whispered, the sound of each droplet echoing through the silence like a gunshot. “Okay, so that’s nearby.”

The stench of mildew filled my nostrils, making me gag involuntarily. The air—damp and suffocating—clung to my skin like a shroud, making it hard to breathe. I strained my ears, trying to catch any other sound that could give me a hint of where I was.

“Please,” I whispered, the word barely audible even to myself, “let me find a way out.”

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The distant sound of water falling onto the cold concrete floor echoed through the room, each droplet landing with a dull thud. It was a constant reminder of how trapped I was.

“Basement,” I mumbled, piecing together the clues. “I must be in a basement.”

I remembered my captor’s exit and the way light flooded into the room...

A surge of adrenaline coursed through my veins, propelling me forward. My hands were still bound behind my back, but I forced myself up from the damp ground, struggling against the pain coursing through my body. I stumbled towards the door, each step unsteady and uncertain.

“Come on,” I coaxed myself, teetering dangerously. “Keep moving. You have to get out of here.”

My thoughts raced as I approached the door, dreading what might lie beyond it.

The door loomed before me like a gate to the unknown, cold and unyielding. My heart hammered in my chest as I forced my trembling legs to carry me towards it.

“Almost there,” I whispered, the words barely more than an exhale.

As my fingers grazed the rough surface of the door, a sudden wave of dizziness crashed over me, blurring my vision. My knees buckled, and for a moment, I feared I would collapse back onto the unforgiving floor.

“Damn it, Jace,” I hissed through gritted teeth, steadying myself against the doorframe. “Get it together.”

My heart pounded furiously, each beat echoing loudly in my ears as I took deep, deliberate breaths, willing the dizziness to pass. The smell of mildew threatened to choke me, but I refused to let it break my resolve.

“Whoever did this—“ I began, my thoughts racing, ”—won’t keep me here. I won’t let them.”

No one answered.

“Teo needs you. Victor needs you, Grayson needs you. Maybe even Sofia,” I reminded myself, clenching my bound hands into fists behind my back. I didn’t know why I had thought of Sofia, except that she had become something of a permanent fixture after Teo had been shot in the leg. She wasn’t part of the gang, exactly, and I had no idea what her relationship with Teo was. I just knew she was around and I liked having her around. Maybe I was imagining it, but I thought she liked me too. “They need you, Jace.”

The thought of their faces etched with worry strengthened my resolve. I straightened my spine, forcing my body to remain upright despite its protests.

“Focus on getting out,” I told myself, my mind zeroing in on the task at hand.

“Escape first. Revenge later.”

With newfound determination, I turned my attention back to the door, ready to face whatever was beyond it. My heart continued to race, but instead of fear, it fueled my courage, pushing me forward.

Casting my gaze around the room, I searched for anything that might have helped me escape or defend myself against whoever was keeping me there.

The dim light cast eerie shadows on the damp walls.

I closed my eyes tightly, my vision swimming. “Fuck,” I muttered softly. “Okay. Focus.”

My eyes landed on a stack of old newspapers piled haphazardly in one corner. They weren’t much use and it wasn’t as if I could read them—I knew exactly why they had been put down there—but maybe there was something underneath. I shuffled over, my bound hands making it difficult to keep my balance. Kicking the papers aside, I found...nothing.

“Damn it,” I hissed, feeling defeated. “Come on, come on. There has to be something here.”

As I continued my frantic search, a small glint caught my eye. A shard of broken glass lay on the floor, reflecting the scarce light from above. It was definitely not ideal, but also better than nothing.

“Okay,” I muttered, crouching down awkwardly. “This might work.”

With considerable effort, I managed to grab the shard between my bound hands, gripping it tightly despite the pain. I knew it was my only chance so I couldn’t afford to be picky.

“Alright,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Time to get out of here. You got this.”

Maybe if I say it enough times, I thought, I’ll start to believe it.

Chapter Four: Grayson

I watched as Sofia paced back and forth, her brow furrowed with worry. Teo stood by the window, his eyes narrowed in thought. The air was thick with tension, like a tightrope stretched to its limit.

Ever since Teo had been shot, she'd hardly left his side. They still hadn't really talked about how she had been brought into the gang, at least not as far as I could tell, and the three of us had definitely not spoken about the night we'd spent together.

We might have, if Victor hadn't burst in with the news that Jace was missing and the situation turned from delicate to dire.

Dinner with Sofia's cop brother had been informative about his motivations, but nothing beyond that. I wished that there was more, though I wasn't sure of what—I just thought that if we knew more about the Strangler himself, that might give us a clue about where Jace was. Sam had confirmed that Jace wasn't still being held at the police station, so that was at least something. We had a starting point.

Maybe that was just wishful thinking, though.

We had been targeted before, but none of us had ever been kidnapped. I knew Teo felt a degree of responsibility for Jace; the kid had a good head on his shoulders but he was the most vulnerable simply because he wasn't from this world and he was younger than the rest of us.

Sofia didn't have any of those concerns.

All she knew was that someone on the Orchid Strangler's side had Jace, and that he killed easily, without second guessing himself.

I watched as Sofia paced back and forth, her brow furrowed with worry. Her hair, dark with blonde ends, shook with every step she took, her black tank top clinging to her chest.

I told myself to stop staring. I knew Teo would be watching me.

Teo stood by the window, his eyes narrowed in thought. The air was thick with tension, like a tightrope stretched to its limit.

"Time's running out," Sofia said, finally stopping as she turned to look at us. Her voice strained, she crossed her arms over her chest, pushing her boobs together. I looked into her eyes as I reminded myself that I needed to get a grip. One of the Blades was missing and I was thinking about my boss' girlfriend's tits? Real mature. "We need to find Jace, and we need to find him now."

Teo nodded, his jaw set. "I know. And we will. We just need a solid plan." His determination was palpable, the fierce loyalty that bound our makeshift family evident in every word. That was what I should've been worried about too and I knew it. I had the decency to feel a little ashamed of myself...but just a *little* ashamed, because remembering how Sofia had tasted was getting me through this.

"Jace is in a vulnerable position, but I have to remind you all that he can take care of himself," I said.

“If Jace could take care of himself, he wouldn’t have let himself get taken,” Victor said plainly. He was sitting on the sofa next to Teo, drinking from the water bottle he always carried with him. Ice clinked around inside of it, grating my nerves.

“Right,” I replied. “But what can we do? We don’t have any information.”

“We have *some* information,” Sofia said. “They took him right after he went to the police station voluntarily, so it’s not a stretch to think it was another cop. They took his devices...”

“Which makes perfect sense,” Teo said. “Because that’s where he’ll have all the incriminating stuff.”

“Are we talking about the Strangler or something else?” Sofia asked, leaning against the sliding glass door that led to the balcony.

“We’re talking about everything, sunshine,” Teo said. “That man could blackmail the Pope with all the dirt he keeps on everyone.”

“Okay, so we have a motive. And we have a time. Now we just need a location...” she said, trailing off as she said that.

As if on cue, Teo’s phone vibrated on the coffee table, Sam’s contact card showing up on the screen.

She practically lept toward it, answering the call and quickly informing her brother that he was on speaker phone.

“Good,” he said. “Because I don’t want to repeat this. Look, this is crazy, but I think my chief...it doesn’t matter. I looked into the incident you told me about and I found a clue that I believe might lead to his location.”

“What did you find? Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he said. He sounded exhausted. “I’m just going to send you this picture, okay?”

He paused as he sent her an aerial photo of a large compound with high walls

topped with barbed wire.

“Where is this?” Sofia asked as we all looked at the phone. If Jace was there, he would’ve been able to tell us in an instant.

Sam was whispering when he spoke again. In the background, I could hear something that sounded like sirens. I thought he was probably at the police station, but I couldn’t be sure. “It’s not too far,” Sam said, his footsteps punctuating his words. “I think so, anyway. I don’t have an address for you.” The sound of a toilet in the distance interrupted his speech, so he was obviously hiding in the bathroom.

“Nice work, Sam,” Teo acknowledged, his voice strained but grateful. We all knew how important Sam’s information would be in our mission. If it did turn out that this was something after all.

A beat. “I’m not doing this for you,” he said. “I’m doing it for Sofia. Look, I fucked up, okay? But I know you’re important to her.”

“I’m right here, Sammy,” Sofia said softly.

He sighed. “You should go home, Sof. Now that the Strangler is gone, you can sleep in your own bed.”

Sofia’s eyes widened for a second, then she shook her head, almost imperceptibly. “I can’t,” she said. “I need to see this through. And so do you.”

“You’re right, but...I can’t be involved in this at all. You didn’t hear anything from me. This job...doing this is the only thing that’s keeping me sane right now. I don’t want to lose it.”

“If we get caught,” Teo said evenly. “And we won’t, but if we do, we promise we’ll keep your name out of our mouths. As far as Sofia goes, you don’t have to worry about her. I’ll protect her with my life.”

Sofia smiled at him, and my stomach panged with jealousy, though I didn’t

think I had any right to feel jealous.

“We’ll keep you in the loop,” Sofia said. “I promise.”

“Sam. Before you hang up, we could use an address, if you can look into it,” Victor said.

“I can’t help you with that. Good luck,” Sam replied, ending the call.

We all looked at the aerial photo for a few long seconds. “This is a compound—and it looks official, doesn’t it?” I said. “Which is...well, concerning, to say the least.”

“Yeah, what the fuck?” Teo replied under his breath. “Whoever has him must not want him getting away, but they’re not being all that secretive either.”

“What was it that he said about his chief?” I asked Sofia. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to just find this place but maybe that was a clue.”

She nodded. “Definitely a clue,” she said. In a few minutes, she was sitting on the sofa, squeezed between Victor and Teo, her laptop on her knees. She got busy focusing on whatever she needed to find as the rest of us spoke quietly amongst ourselves about where Jace was and how he was doing.

After what seemed like forever—but must have only taken a few minutes—Sofia looked up. “I have a lead,” she said. “So it looks like the chief was married to a woman whose father owns a lot of properties around the state. I did a little digging and found that one of the properties is in the panhandle. The landscaping has changed a bit, but I think this one is a pretty safe bet.”

She turned her laptop around so we could look at her screen. The compound was visible from the maps she was showing us, but she was right—it did look different. There was one large building in the middle with several sheds around, tall oak trees flanking the perimeter.

“So you’re saying the chief has him?” Teo asked.

“I’m saying that it looks like the whole damn police department is in on it

except for my fucking brother,” she muttered under her breath. “And that’s a huge issue. Puts him in danger, puts all of us in danger.”

Teo squeezed her shoulder reassuringly and I felt something akin to jealousy in my chest. I didn’t want to be jealous. I didn’t have a right to be jealous, really; this was my boss’ girl. One night didn’t mean anything.

“You’re right. Everyone, let’s go over what we’re up against,” Teo said, taking charge of the situation. He was staring at me so I forced myself to look into his eyes. We all gathered around the table, studying the aerial photo and discussing our plan.

“Getting in won’t be easy,” Sofia stated, examining the photo Sam had sent. “There are high walls and security cameras everywhere.”

“Plus, those guards are heavily armed,” Victor added, pointing at a few individuals patrolling the perimeter. The photo Sam had sent wasn’t very clear, but it was enough to identify that going into the space would be a nightmare, and we didn’t really have that much information about it. Only the picture and the little information Sofia had gathered for us.

“True, but we don’t need to take them all out,” I chimed in, my mind already racing with ideas on how to handle the situation. “Just enough to create an opening for us to slip through.”

“Grayson’s right,” Teo agreed, nodding thoughtfully. “We’re resourceful and strategic; we can do this without taking unnecessary risks.”

“Still, it won’t be a walk in the park,” Victor muttered, his eyes darting between the photo and our faces.

“Nobody said it would be,” I replied, smirking. “But that’s what makes it exciting, isn’t it?”

Teo rolled his eyes, a smile on his face. Victor didn’t seem quite as amused. Sofia looked at me blankly.

“Okay, here’s the plan,” Teo began, his voice steady and determined. “Victor, you are going to be in charge of disabling the security cameras. We can’t risk being caught on tape.”

Victor nodded. “And as soon as that happens, I’ll join you.”

“Grayson, you and I will take care of the guards. But remember, we don’t want to raise any alarms. Quiet and efficient is the name of the game.” I grinned at the challenge, feeling a thrill surge through me. This was what I lived for. I liked strategizing, sure, but this was far more fun.

“Sofia, you’ll stay in the van and monitor our progress, keeping us updated on any changes in guard patterns or unexpected obstacles,” Teo continued, glancing over at Sofia who sat hunched over a laptop, fingers flying across the keyboard.

“What? Absolutely not,” she said softly. “I want to go with you. None of this would be happening if it wasn’t for me.”

Teo shook his head. “If you go, I’ll be too worried about you,” he said. “I won’t be effective and I won’t be able to take him out. If you stay in the van and are able to drive away, I’ll feel much better about everything.”

Sofia looked at him for a long second. “Teo…”

“Please,” he said, taking her hands in his. “Your safety is the most important thing to me. If I’m worried about you, I’m not going to be able to do shit.”

Sofia’s jaw hardened as she looked into his eyes. It felt…weird. Victor and I looked at each other, neither one of us saying anything. “We’ll look after him,” I said. “Don’t worry, Sof.”

“Thanks,” she replied, her expression softening.

Teo’s gaze darted between the two of us, but he didn’t say anything about it.

“Once we’re inside, we stick together and search for Jace as quickly as

possible,” Teo emphasized. “We don’t know how long we have before they move him, so time is of the essence.”

“Understood,” Victor and I said, fully aware of the risks involved. There was no room for error; Jace’s life was on the line, and we’d do whatever it took to save him.

“Before we go, make sure you’ve got your comms in place and weapons concealed,” Teo instructed. “And above all, stay alert. We don’t know what surprises might be waiting for us there.”

We packed up and took one of the vans we left in the parking lot near Neon. It was white and unassuming. We had to make sure no one would spot us.

As we packed up the car, I stopped Sofia.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I promise you he’ll be okay.”

“His leg...” she trailed off. “Are you sure he’s going to be able to take anyone out?”

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure at all. “Yes,” I said. “And look, if things go wrong, I can always ask him and Victor to swap. Once we get Jace out, everything will go back to normal.”

She raised her eyebrows, flashing me a tight smile.

“Normalish,” I said. “As normal as they can be. Are you going to be okay in the van?”

“Yes,” she replied. “And if things go down, I can just drive away, right?”

I nodded and her smile widened.

“I’ll try to be here when you get back.”

“Good,” I said. “Because we have no backup plan.”

The trip didn’t take very long. We were nervous, sure, but Sofia seemed to be the one who was having a harder time with all of it. I wasn’t surprised—we’d

gone on missions like this before—but I didn't think they were in the scope of a reporter's job.

We parked around the corner of the compound. After night fell and we'd done some scoping of the perimeter, it was finally time to head out.

"Alright," Teo said. "This shouldn't take too long. We'll get in and out. Victor, what is the plan for the cameras?"

"I don't know shit about cameras," he said, shrugging. "But I do know how to use wire-cutters."

Teo laughed. "Perfect," he said, then gave Sofia one of the walkie-talkies we kept in the van. "If you see anyone dragging Jace out, let us know. Otherwise, we'll let you know if trouble is going your way. And if you hear gunshots, I want you to drive out of here."

"What about you?" she asked softly.

"I've gotten myself out of worse trouble," he said, shrugging.

"Right," I said. "And he's got us."

Victor nodded as readied himself to go inside.

I checked my earpiece and slid my knife into its sheath, a familiar sense of anticipation tightening in my chest. We were about to embark on a dangerous mission, but I knew we had each other's backs—and that was all I needed.

"Let's do this," I whispered, my heart pounding with a mix of fear and excitement. After a final nod from Teo, our small team was ready to set off into the night, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead in order to save Jace. The clock was ticking, and failure was not an option.

The compound sprawled before us, a collection of imposing concrete structures illuminated by harsh floodlights. A high chain-link fence topped with razor wire encircled the perimeter, and armed guards patrolled the area

with an air of ruthless efficiency. The place reeked of danger, but it was here that we'd find Jace—or so we hoped.

“Remember, everyone,” Teo murmured into his earpiece, his voice low and tense, “stick to the plan. We need to be quick and quiet.”

Sofia nodded, her dark eyes filled with determination. She had insisted on coming along, despite the risks, and now her gaze flicked from one guard to another, assessing their movements and searching for an opening.

Victor was the first one to get out. I didn't know how he did it—he was so big, it should've been hard for him to be as stealthy as he was. It only took him a second to find the wiring. We knew that because the lights flicked in the compound for a couple of minutes and something electronic whirred, indicating that the generator had been turned on.

That had to mean their WiFi was down.

After a few moments, Victor produced a pair of bolt cutters from his backpack and set to work on the chainlinks, easily snipping through the links. Within moments, he'd created a hole large enough for us to slip through.

“Grayson, keep an eye on the patrols while we move,” Teo instructed me. My senses were already heightened, adrenaline coursing through my veins as I scanned the area for any threats.

“Got it,” I replied.

“Be careful,” Sofia said, her voice a whisper.

I nodded. “I promise,” I said, slipping out of the car and joining Victor and Teo inside the compound.

“Everyone good?” Teo asked when we were inside.

“Yes, boss,” Victor replied.

“I'm fine,” I said. “Just can't see shit.”

“Give it a second,” Teo said. “We have to be slow, anyway.”

He didn't have to say it was because of his leg, though of course we all knew it. I opened my mouth to answer him, but Teo shook his head.

“Quiet,” he said. “I can hear someone coming.”

I felt the blow before I could hear them, too.

Chapter Five: Grayson

I slumped to the ground as the guard's batons crashed down on our heads. My vision blurred and pain pulsed through my skull as I struggled to stay conscious.

The guard loomed over me, his face twisted with cruel satisfaction. "Thought you'd sneak in here, did you?" he sneered. "Well, you picked the wrong night to try it. We're on high alert."

I tried to speak, to protest my innocence, but my tongue felt thick and useless in my mouth. The guard snorted in contempt and raised his baton again, ready to deliver another blow.

But before he could strike, a shadow flitted across the ground. Victor appeared from the darkness, swift and silent as a panther. In one fluid motion, he seized the guard's arms and twisted them behind his back.

The guard let out a choked cry of pain, but Victor didn't relent. He pressed his knee into the man's spine, immobilizing him.

It was just enough time for me to get up and strike the man hard enough to knock him out.

Teo sighed beside us. “I think we have to be a little quieter,” he said in a whisper. “Someone will come looking for him soon. We have to be careful. Nice work on the guard, Victor. Let’s keep moving. You okay?”

I nodded, rubbing my head. “Should’ve seen that coming. Don’t worry. I’ve got this.”

The further we ventured into the hideout, the more the air seemed to thicken with tension. Shadows danced along the walls lit corridors, and I couldn’t help but feel a chill run down my spine.

We pressed on, hearts pounding in our chests as we evaded guards and bypassed security measures. With each close call, the stakes seemed to rise higher, and the pressure mounted. It seemed like this was taking forever. Teo was being deliberately slow, which was maddening—or at least, he made it seem like it was deliberate, but I wasn’t sure if that was just a ruse because he was still struggling with his leg. We needed to make sure that we weren’t seen, and having him there...it might’ve been a mistake.

But I wasn’t exactly going to tell him that when he’d practically taken a bullet for me. And it wasn’t the first one.

“Wait,” I whispered, my eyes locked on something ahead as the landscape itself stirred. “There’s another guard coming.”

“Grayson, your turn,” Teo ordered, nodding toward the approaching figure.

The guard rounded the corner, his steps heavy on the ground. I held my breath and waited for him to turn his back toward me. He stopped in front of the door, a few inches from where I was hiding. Without missing a beat, I lunged forward. I grasped his neck and drove his forehead into the wall. He groaned. I heard something crack—it sounded like his shoulder, not his skull, because he’d been smart enough to turn away.

But he still slumped to the floor in a heap.

My heart pounded as I stepped back into the shadows, whispering, “He’s out.”

“Good job,” Teo said, clapping me on the shoulder. “Now let’s find Jace.”

“Agreed,” Victor responded. He opened the door next to the guard and we stepped inside. We were greeted by a tall dark wall, a corridor that went both left and right. The only light was the electricity flickering in from the outside of the compound, which felt like it was going in and out.

“Fuck,” Teo said. “Where do you guys think he is?”

“Hard to know,” I whispered back. “But it’ll be somewhere hard to get out of. He’s slippery so...”

“Okay,” Teo said. “So probably not a bedroom. Sofia said something about the house itself having a basement. Pretty uncommon around here. We could start there.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” I said. “Then we can work our way out.”

Victor and Teo both nodded. Teo took charge, walking to the left, and I could feel adrenaline coursing through my veins. My hands were clammy and my breaths shallow as we crept through the barely lit corridor.

Sofia had shown us pictures of the inside of the house—nothing that gave us that much information, a real estate listing that had been inactive for years. But we still vaguely knew where the door to the basement was, so when we went past the dining room, which was mercifully unoccupied, we knew we were getting closer and closer to the door.

Finally, we found it. The wooden door was old and heavy, with peeling paint and rusted hinges. Teo motioned for us to wait as he examined the lock. After a moment, he produced a set of lockpicks from his pocket and got to work.

I kept watch, my ears straining for any sound of movement. There was nothing but the sound of my own breathing and the creaking of the old house.

It was spooky...like the place was haunted.

I almost hoped Jace wasn't here.

I didn't like the idea of my friend trapped in this fucking basement.

The lock clicked open, and Teo pushed the door open. We descended the stairs, the air growing colder and damper with each step. The musty scent of old books and mildew filled my nostrils as we reached the bottom.

The room was large and dimly lit. It was cluttered with boxes and old furniture, and dust hung in the air. But our attention was drawn to the sound of someone breathing heavily, coming from the far corner of the room.

We approached slowly, our eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of Jace.

"Jace," Teo whispered, his voice echoing through the room. "We're here to get you out."

There was a rustling sound, and then Jace appeared from the shadows, looking disheveled and exhausted. "Thank god," he muttered, before slumping into Teo's arms.

"Let's go," Victor said, leading the way back up the stairs.

We moved quickly, but quietly. Jace leaned heavily on Teo, and I kept my hand on the small of his back to steady him. We were almost at the top of the stairs when we heard a commotion outside. Raised voices, a scuffle.

"Shit," I muttered.

We made our way to the top of the stairs and peered out the door. A group of guards had gathered outside, their weapons raised and ready to fire. We were trapped.

Teo's eyes darted around the room, searching for a way out. "We need to find another way," he said urgently. "There has to be a back exit or something."

Jace was so pale it felt like his skin was glowing even in the murky light of this godforsaken basement. When he spoke, his breathing was shallow.

“There’s no other way. I’ve looked and looked...”

Teo shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. We’ll get you out of here, no matter what.”

I could feel the panic rising in my chest. We were outnumbered and outgunned, and there seemed to be no way out. I worried about Sofia—if she was found, they would have immediately known that she was with us.

I took a deep breath and stepped forward, my hand gripping my blade. “I’ll take care of them,” I said, my voice steady. “You guys get Jace out of here.”

Teo opened his mouth to protest, but Victor grabbed his arm. “He’s right. Grayson can take care of himself,” he said, then turned to look at me. “We’ll draw their attention away from you. You go.”

Teo looked like he wanted to argue, but Jace spoke up. “Just go,” he said, his voice weak but determined.

I nodded, and we split up, each going in a different direction. I could hear the guards getting closer, their footsteps echoing through the hallway. I pressed myself against the wall, waiting for them to round the corner. As they appeared, I lunged forward, my blade slicing through the air. The first guard fell with a grunt, blood pouring from his neck. I turned to the next one, my movements quick and precise.

I took his gun out of his hand and pointed it toward the incoming guards.

The guards were good, but I was better. They never stood a chance. But as I fought my way through them, I couldn’t help but wonder if this was the end. For a split second, I had no idea how I was going to get out of here alive.

You’ve been through worse. You just have to make it out of here.

The words sounded hollow even in my own head, but something inside me refused to give up. Maybe it was the adrenaline, or maybe it was the thought of never seeing Sofia again. I had promised her I was going to be careful and

I intended to keep my promises to her. I wasn't sure how but I kept fighting. I took down guard after guard, each one falling before me. They fought dirty, but I fought dirtier.

Finally, I made it to the door, my heart pounding in my chest. I could hear the sound of more guards approaching, their footsteps getting louder and louder. I knew I had to move fast.

I burst through the door and into the night air, the sound of bullets whizzing by my head. I ducked and rolled, coming back up onto my feet and taking aim. I fired off a few shots, taking out a couple of guards.

But there were still more coming. I knew I couldn't take them all on my own. Just as I was about to give up hope, I heard the sound of a car engine revving in the distance.

I turned to see Sofia speeding toward me in our white van. She skidded to a stop beside me, and I jumped into the passenger seat. "You okay?" she asked, her eyes scanning my body for injuries.

"I'm good," I said, panting. "Let's get out of here."

Sofia hit the gas, the car lurching forward. We swerved around a corner, the sound of gunfire fading behind us. In the rearview mirror, I could see the relief on Jace's face as we drove away from the compound.

He sat between Teo and Victor, who were still holding him up.

"Fuck, I'm so glad you guys are here," he said, collapsing back into his seat.

"I thought I was done for."

"Not today," I said, my heart still hammering in my chest. "We got you out, and that's all that matters."

But it really wasn't all that mattered.

Someone had taken him, and we still didn't know why.

The Everglades Viper Part I

The warmth and stillness of the Everglades has always given me a sense of comfort. I like to spend my days here, breathing in the heady aroma from the wildlife, reveling in its serenity and solitude while I plan my next move.

It's hot and flat here, with plenty of alligators to eat my scraps if things don't go well.

I always thought Orlando was great practice grounds, but there's nothing quite like the Everglades. I know how best to lodge a bullet through bone with precision accuracy from long distances - all thanks to years spent practicing my shooting skills amidst this vast marshland, where creatures thrive without fear of detection or consequence. My formal training might have been a long time ago, and they say you never forget your first deployment, but the truth is, you do get a little less dextrous if you don't exercise those muscles.

Plus, when my competition is nature, I have to make sure I'm exceedingly sharp.

Because I'm not a creature. I'm an artist.

My canvas may be scattered and strange, but each stroke of my brush builds a beautiful masterpiece. I've made so many mistakes in the past - too eager to get results, not taking enough time to plan or prepare. And there are people who are almost as good as me. People I've tried to help, to protect.

Unfortunately, it never seems to work out. And this time, the killer was dumb enough to get too close...to figuring out who I was, thinking he was on my level. That problem took care of itself, but it reminded me of a sad truth: no one can really learn from me except myself, no one can keep up with the rigorous pace required to reach perfection.

I don't need help. I need resources and time to exercise the exactitude required of each mission, from learning my prey's movements - where they go and why - to strategically planning a silent attack on them before they have a chance to escape or retaliate. As you can see, I'm busy. I don't have time to clean up sloppy messes.

Luckily, money *can* buy you time, and I've made sure that this particular mess is tidied up quickly.

There is a certain symmetry when you make the police work for you. It's almost art.

Not quite, but almost.

There's something missing...

For now, I don't have to worry. For now, at least, the Everglades remain a haven for me. Here, I can fuel ambition instead of stifling it. Here, my art and skill reigns supreme among the shadows beneath saw-palmetto bushes hung heavy with moss curtains.

Because the Everglades aren't just art. They're practically magic.

Chapter Six: Sofia

The glow of the bedside lamp cast a warm, golden light over the room as I closed the door behind me. Grayson and I had just returned to headquarters after rescuing Jace from that hellhole, and I needed a place to decompress.

I still wasn't sure what we had stumbled into, but it couldn't be good. There were so many things to worry about. Who had taken Jace? Why? What did it have to do with my brother?

I thought about calling Sam then, but I still needed to calm down before I talked to him. If I was too upset, he would be able to detect it...and Sam already had enough to deal with.

My heart raced in my chest, not only from the adrenaline of our recent mission but also because everything felt like it was fucked up beyond belief.

Only a few months before this, I was thinking about writing an article about the Orchid Strangler to expose him for everything he was doing, and I'd watch my brother empty his gun into the killer's face.

Grayson knocked on the door. He walked in before I could tell him to.

“Do you mind company?”

I shook my head, sitting on the plush bed of what had become my bedroom. It'd been too hard to go back to my apartment, and in any case, I was worried about Teo, though he rarely let me spend the night at his house.

HQ is a fortress, and you're still in danger, he'd said. I would rather you sleep there.

Grayson put his hand on my shoulder, and I looked up to meet his pale green eyes.

“Jace was in bad shape,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I don't know how much more he could've taken.”

Grayson ran his hand through his messy hair, making it stick up even more.

“Yeah, it was tough getting him out. But he's safe now, thanks to you and your brother.”

“Thanks to all of us,” I corrected him. We were a team, after all. I glanced around the room, taking in the familiar surroundings of my new bedroom—my sanctuary from the rest of the gang.

Grayson was inches away from me. He'd barely gotten out of the rescue mission alive. If it hadn't been for him, I didn't know what would have happened. When Teo and Victor had dragged Jace into the van without Grayson, my stomach had dropped.

It wasn't until Teo was telling me to drive toward the compound that I realized what was happening.

“No, it was you,” he said. “It was you and your brother. We're just the muscle.”

I shook my head. “I was worried about you,” I said.

Grayson smiled. I noticed a soft blush on his cheeks. Damn, he was so handsome, it was hard to think about anything other than those piercing eyes.

Everything had been so hectic since that wild night we'd all spent together that I hadn't even had time to process it.

"About me or about Teo?"

"I can worry about both of you," I said.

He shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I wish you wouldn't say stuff like that."

"Why?" I asked softly.

"Because," he said, hesitation lacing his words. "It's...hard for me to talk about this. I don't even know if I should."

"Now I'm curious."

"Teo is my best friend," he said. "He has been for as long as I can remember. But ever since you've joined us, things have changed. You've made an impact in all of our lives, especially mine."

He paused, his eyes locked on mine as he seemed to search for my understanding.

"I think this might be a shit thing to do but I want you to know that I can't ignore the feelings I'm starting to have for you."

I blinked, my mouth dry. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say anything," he replied. "I'm aware that nothing can ever happen between us. One night is one night, and he was there, and..."

He trailed off.

My breath caught in my throat as I processed his confession. Conflicting emotions washed over me—fear, excitement, uncertainty. "I...I don't know what to say, Grayson. I feel it too, I guess. I think...it's really hard for me to wrap my head around my feelings when I was thrust into this world so suddenly."

"And Teo, right?" he asked.

“Yes,” I admitted, my concern for Teo overwhelming me. He was already dealing with hard enough shit. I didn’t need to add to it. “I can’t just...I don’t know what this means for us. We haven’t even talked about what we are since he was shot. It just seemed too hard. Adding you to the equation feels like it would complicate things a lot more.”

Grayson scooted closer, his hand gently touching my arm. “I understand your concern, Sofia. But we can’t control our feelings. That doesn’t mean we’re going to do anything. And Teo? I’ll look after him, make sure he’s okay. You’re not the only one who cares about him.”

The sincerity in his words...the way he obviously cared and wanted to protect his friend—it stirred something inside me, making Grayson even more attractive than before, which felt impossible only a few seconds ago. My heart raced as I considered the implications of our growing connection and what it meant for my relationship with Teo.

As we sat there, in a tangled web of emotions and loyalties, I knew one thing for certain: our lives were about to become even more complicated.

The atmosphere was charged between us, as if an electric current surged through the air. Our eyes locked, and I could see the intensity and vulnerability in Grayson’s gaze. My heart raced, pounding in my chest like a caged animal desperate to escape.

Like me, only a few months ago.

“Grayson,” I whispered, my voice barely audible as I struggled with my emotions. I thought about the way he had touched me, his rough hands on my skin, his lips against mine as Teo fucked me...

“Let’s not think about anything else right now, Sof,” he murmured, his breath warm against my face. His hand moved from my arm to cup my cheek gently, his thumb tracing the line of my jaw. “Just this moment.”

As Grayson leaned in closer, the space between us grew smaller and smaller, until there was nothing left but our shared breaths. My pulse raced, and my mind filled with doubts and questions, but they were drowned out by the anticipation that thrummed through my veins. The world seemed to fall away around us, leaving only the heat of our connection.

And then his lips met mine.

The kiss was like a wildfire, consuming everything in its path. It was a clash of desire and desperation, a connection forged in fire, captivity, fear, passion. His lips were warm, firm, and insistent against mine, igniting something that had been simmering beneath the surface for too long.

My hands found their way into Grayson's hair, pulling him closer, deepening the kiss as I surrendered to the storm of emotions swirling within me. A part of me feared the consequences of giving in to these feelings, but another part—a stronger, more daring part—craved the taste of him once again, even if it was only for a fleeting moment.

Grayson's arms wrapped around me, pulling me flush against his chest, and I reveled in the feel of his strong, protective embrace. We were lost in each other, our bodies entwined like vines seeking to anchor themselves to a stable surface amid the chaos of our lives.

As we broke apart, breathless and flushed, I knew that this kiss had changed everything.

Fuck.

As if things weren't already complicated enough.

The sound of a door slamming open shattered the fragile moment between Grayson and me. We broke apart, our breathing ragged as we turned toward the door.

Teo.

My heart sank at the sight of him standing in the doorway, his eyes blazing. With jealousy and...and with something else.

I couldn't figure him out.

"Teo..." I started.

"Don't," he said, holding his hand up. "I don't want to hear it. You should probably come out here. Jace has some information for you. Then you should write your article and figure a way to get the fuck out of here. And you..."

He turned to Grayson. Any hurt from his eyes was gone, replaced with fury.

"You have saved my life enough times that I'll spare you," he said. "But I don't want to see you around here again."

Grayson didn't flinch, his eyes meeting Teo's with a steely resolve. "I understand," he said, his voice firm. "But know that I'll always be here for you, no matter what."

Teo scoffed, his expression one of bitter anger. "Save your platitudes," he spat. My gaze darted between the two of them. They were obviously family and I would have never forgiven myself if I was the one who had torn them apart from good.

Plus Teo wasn't being reasonable. Yes, Grayson and I had gotten carried away, but the plan had always been to tell him.

And he was the one who had gotten this started in the first place.

"Really?" I asked, getting up from the bed and approaching him. "You can't be this hurt about this when you were the one that was dangling me in front of Grayson like some sort of carnival prize. You wanted us to kiss. You got off on it. Is it only a betrayal because it's not getting your dick hard?"

Teo's eyes widened. "That's not fair."

"Fair?" I said, my jaw dropping at his audacity. "You're upset that I kissed Grayson and you got off on it? Do you have any idea what this is like for me?"

You're the one who brought me here, you're the one who threatened to kill me if I didn't go along with everything. You want me to forgive you because of some stupid code, but you're mad at me for having feelings? I was a fucking captive here, you made me fall for you, and you haven't even spoken to me about that. Then you fucked me while your best friend touched me and we haven't even talked about that yet and somehow this kiss that I just shared with him is the part that's a betrayal. You're being a fucking child."

Teo didn't say anything and his silence was making me crazy.

"You two can do whatever you want but I'm not a pawn in your games. I get to have a say in my own life. So you're *lucky* I'm leaving here after I speak to Jace to write my goddamn article." I started to walk out of the room, stopping for one last thing. "You want to be alone? Go for it. There's no reason for me to stay here. And if you try to keep me here, I'll go to the police."

I don't know what I was expecting, but I wasn't prepared for Teo to grab me and pull me into a searing kiss. His lips were so soft and firm against mine, I was taken aback by the sudden invasion. He pressed me against the door frame, his hand on my chest, then slowly toward my throat.

"You're so fucking sexy when you get mad," he said.

I gasped as he squeezed my throat, his fingers teasing just tightly enough to be painful. My body tingled with desire, but I forced myself to pull away from him.

"Stop it," I said. "I'm serious."

"Oh, I'm not stopping until I've shown you exactly what you mean to me," he said. "If you want to go, you're going to have to fight me off."

Chapter Seven: Sofia

“Grayson, get over here and show her who she belongs to. If you two want to stay...you’ll do exactly as I say.”

I gasped, my mind filling with questions about what he meant. Grayson walked over to us, his shoulders tense, his eyes glazed over with desire.

“Get on your knees and lick her pussy if she wants it so bad,” Teo growled.

“But I want her looking at me while you do it.”

I gasped, my breath still constricted by Teo’s hand.

“Are you okay with this?” I asked Grayson, my eyes wide. I was already losing myself,

“With tasting you? Fuck yes,” he replied. “I’ve wanted this ever since the first time.”

Grayson came up beside me, his hard cock pressed against my hip through his pants as he pulled down my panties from under my skirt. Teo grabbed my hair and pulled me against him, hissing as he kissed my neck.

“Remember, sunshine, I decided to let you live, “ he whispered in my ear, his hand around my throat. “But now you’re mine. *Mine*. I decide whether to

share you or not. Do you understand?”

I nodded, moaning as desire coursed through my veins.

“Grayson, be a good boy and lick her pussy while I fuck her,” Teo said.

A moan escaped my lips as Teo picked me up and threw me on the bed, his hand running over my body.

“Let’s see how bad you want this,” he said, unzipping his pants. “Sofia, you spread your legs for him. Now.”

I cried out, my body coiling with desire as Teo slid my skirt down my legs, leaving me exposed to both of them. Grayson’s hands were running up my legs until he stopped in between my thighs.

Grayson kissed up toward my pussy as Teo kept capturing my mouth in deep, passionate kisses, his hand knotted in my hair.

I moaned as Teo stared down at me. He was braced against the headboard of the bed, his cock rock hard in his jeans, and he seemed to really enjoy that his best friend was about to go down on me.

“You’re so wet,” Grayson said, his tongue running up my pussy lips. “You taste so fucking good.”

I closed my eyes as I felt his mouth on me, my pussy growing even more wet as he lapped at me, his tongue sliding into me. Teo’s hand pushed me back against the sheets, his mouth capturing mine as Grayson’s tongue moved over my clit.

I moaned, my body twisting on the edge of orgasm.

“Are you close, sunshine?” Teo asked, breaking off a long, passionate kiss.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Yes.”

“She wants to come, Grayson. How does she taste?”

“So sweet,” he said, his tongue flicking against me. “I could eat her all day.”

Grayson’s lips wrapped around my clit and he sucked on it, my fingers

pulling on the sheets as his tongue did magic with me. I moaned, my back arching as the orgasm finally crashed through me. I gripped Teo's hands, pressing them to my chest as I begged Grayson not to stop.

Teo moved my head back as I came and kissed me hard, his tongue plunging into my mouth. I moaned, my body twisting as every nerve ending was on fire with lust.

"Are you ready for me now, sunshine?" Teo whispered in my ear.

I nodded, grinding against Grayson who still was not moving away from my pussy.

"He's going to keep licking you while I fuck you. Do you like that?" Teo asked.

I groaned, my senses so overwhelmed with desire and need I could hardly think.

"That's a good girl," he said. "You've always liked doing dirty, naughty things, haven't you, sunshine?"

"Yes," I gasped. "I love it."

Teo grabbed me and turned me around, moving my body as if I weighed nothing. I was on my back on the bed, wearing my shirt and bra and nothing else, my panties long gone, taken off with Grayson's adept touch. I guessed, at this time, Teo also took the opportunity to unzip his pants and slide them down his legs.

"Are you ready for my cock, sunshine?" Teo asked.

I nodded.

"Good. Because I'm going to fuck you so hard you won't be able to walk for days. Grayson, don't you dare fucking move. You keep her nice and wet for me while I fuck her. Got it?"

I watched Grayson's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed hard. "Yes," he said,

his voice coated with desire.

Teo positioned himself at my entrance and slid inside of me, his body moving slowly, so slowly I was gasping for air. I closed my eyes, delighting in the feeling of his hands on me, his mouth on my neck. I moaned as he slid into me, the feeling of having Grayson's tongue on my pussy as I was fucked by Teo too much to handle. I could barely breathe, let alone think, as an orgasm began to build.

"Now that's what I like to see," Teo said, his hand running over my breasts before he leaned down and sucked them. "You like to be fucked and licked at the same time?"

"Yes," I moaned, the orgasm right there.

"This is really filthy," Teo's whispered in my ear. "Having your pussy licked while I fuck you. You like it?"

"Yes," I moaned.

"Grayson, you're doing so good, keeping her nice and wet for me while I fuck her. You keep doing that. Got it?"

"Yes," he muttered, his breath against my clit, his voice muffled.

"Good boy," Teo said, his hips rocking harder. "You're mine. My beautiful, dirty girl."

"Yes."

"Good girl," he said, his cock sliding into me. "Such a good girl. You're mine, Sofia. And you're both being so good for me."

"Yes," I said, my voice rising. "Yes."

The pleasure was too much to bear as I felt Teo's thrusts begin to pick up speed inside of me. He moved faster and faster, his hips rocking in perfect rhythm with Grayson's tongue. I cried in pleasure, my body trembling with anticipation as I neared my climax.

Teo leaned down and sucked on my neck, his hands caressing every inch of me as he drove himself deeper into me. I gasped at the sensation, my orgasm building to an incredible peak before finally cresting over me in a wave of intense pleasure.

I screamed in ecstasy as the sensations overwhelmed me, my body shaking and my heart racing.

“I’m going to keep fucking her while you lick her, Grayson. I want you to make her come again. You have one minute.”

“Yes, boss,” Grayson said, his voice shaking with desire.

Teo moved away from my body to give him some space and Grayson moved on top of me, his mouth still on my pussy. There was no way that his tongue wasn’t catching the shaft of Teo’s thick uncut cock and the thought of it made my head spin...the thought of Grayson tasting both of us at the same time.

I groaned as I felt his tongue on me, Teo’s hard cock inside of me. My pussy felt wet and sensitive. I was so close to another orgasm.

“Hurry,” I moaned. “Grayson, hurry.”

“Wait,” Teo said. “I want to come too and my balls aren’t getting any attention. Sofia’s hands are too far away so...”

“So what?” I asked, my voice shaking with desire.

“Grayson, do you want to help me come? You can help make me come with your beautiful tongue in my girl’s pussy.”

Grayson pulled away from me, his eyes meeting Teo’s for a second. “Fuck, really?” he said. “That’s what you want?”

“She seems to think you’re really good with your tongue. Let’s see how good you are with your hands. Use them on me. You want to see that, right, Sof?”

Fuck, I hadn’t even considered it, but I absolutely did want to see that.

“You want him to jerk me off into you?” Teo asked, a half smile on his face as he thrust slowly, maddeningly slowly, into me. “I’ll fill your pretty pussy with cum, and then, because he’s been so good, I guess he can finish in your mouth. What do you think, Sunshine?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice catching.

“You want me to come?” he asked, his cock falling out of me.

“Yes,” I said.

Teo pulled out of me, his cock throbbing again as it came out of my pussy. Grayson cheeks were red, his mouth half open, his eyes glazed with desire. Grayson’s hands went to work on his shaft, his tongue moving over my clit and across my pussy. I could feel his fingers circled around Teo’s hard cock as he thrust back into me. Teo moved to my side and leaned down, one hand going to my breasts, a grin on his face.

“That feels nice, doesn’t it?” he asked.

I nodded, my eyes on his face.

“Are you going to come for me, Sunshine?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, my voice low and raspy. It was hard to speak then, my orgasm so fucking overwhelming.

“You should know,” he said before he leaned down to kiss me again.

“Grayson is just as good with his hands as he is with his mouth.”

I gasped at the words, the pleasure of them intensifying my experience.

“You hear that, Sunshine?” he asked, his hips moving faster. “Your pussy is so fucking tight and wet and he’s really good with his hands. Is he good with his tongue?”

“Yes,” I moaned out. “He’s so good.”

“You’re so fucking wet, Sunshine. You want to come?”

I nodded. “I do, so much.”

“Good girl. I knew you would.”

He closed his mouth over my nipple, sucking on it as I moaned in pleasure.

“That’s it,” he said. “You’re so fucking close. I can feel it.”

I moaned in response, my hands clenching the duvet. I was so close.

“You’re a good girl, Sofia, and good girls get to come,” he whispered, his mouth on my neck again. “Come for me, sunshine. Let me feel it.”

Fuck. I was so close. He was so deep inside of me, Grayson’s knuckles grazing my lower lips, Teo’s cock throbbing in perfect rhythm with the tongue that was still swirling around my clit. I was so close. I could feel it.

“Come for me, sunshine,” he said, his voice a low whisper. “I want you to come.”

I fell apart then, my orgasm crashing over me. My body shook under Grayson’s mouth, my moans filling the room, my hips moving in rhythm with Teo’s thrusts. I let out a cry. My voice was so hoarse with pleasure. It was so fucking intense.

Then I felt it, Teo’s cock beginning to throb and twitch inside of me. I felt him begin to come. He moaned in pleasure, his body trembling with the intensity of the moment. My pussy tightened around his cock, my orgasm intensifying as I felt him filling me. It was the most intense orgasm of my life and it was made even better by Teo’s voice, his moans of pleasure.

And Grayson’s tongue on my pussy. Even though I was on the verge of passing out from the intensity of the moment, I could feel that I was still coming, my body feeling Grayson’s slick wet tongue. I could feel him licking up Teo’s cum from my pussy.

It was so fucking hot.

And then Teo was moving out of me, his cock slipping out and glistening with my wetness.

“Good boys get their reward too,” Teo said, flashing Grayson a half smile. “You want him to use your mouth, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“Show him how good your mouth is,” Teo said, grinning at me.

I nodded again, my whole body trembling with the intensity of the orgasm that never seemed to end. Teo moved away from me and I got up onto my hands and knees. Grayson, who up until that moment had still been wearing his clothes, quickly unzipped his pants and slid them down his long, slender legs.

I got up onto my hands and knees so I could suck him off.

I didn’t have to wait long, Grayson’s cock sliding into my mouth. I opened my mouth wide to catch it, my lips stretching around the thick girth of his cock. He let out a low groan and I closed my eyes, loving the taste of him. He was so hot, so hard. I loved the sensation of his cock in my mouth. I loved the way he moaned as I sucked on him.

I was still trembling, still experiencing the aftershocks of the orgasm, and what I was doing seemed to intensify that. I imagined what I looked like on my knees sucking Grayson off while my pussy throbbed, Teo’s cum still inside of me. It made my pussy throb more, made my desire more intense. I wanted Grayson to come in my mouth. I wanted to swallow his cum and know that I had made him come.

As I sucked him, he moaned in pleasure, his hands going to my head, his fingers tangled in my hair. He began to thrust into my mouth, his voice rumbling in a low growl “Fuck,” he groaned, and I started to lose myself, overwhelmed by the sounds of Grayson and Teo and *me* together.

“That’s right, Grayson,” Teo said, a grin on his face. “Show Sofia how much you like that cock in your mouth.”

“Suck him off, Sof,” he added. “Make him shoot that hot load in your mouth.”

Grayson’s moans were getting louder and I sucked harder as if my life depended on it. I could feel myself getting ready to come again from just the sensation of his cock in my mouth. He was close and I wanted to make sure that he came before I did. I’d never finished from sucking a guy off before, but this was clearly the time for it.

“Oh, fuck, Sof,” Grayson shouted as his hips bucked one last time and I felt the warmth of his cum hitting the back of my throat. He pulled out of my mouth with a satisfied sigh and I swallowed it all down, licking around my lips to make sure I got every drop of his cum.

Grayson stood there panting for breath after his orgasm, Teo’s fingers slowly stroking my pussy as he sent waves of pleasure through me every few seconds—not enough to give me another orgasm but enough for me to enjoy the aftershock.

“That was pretty good,” Teo said, his voice low and raspy. “I think we need to do this again soon.”

“I think you’ve made your point,” Grayson said, his voice slightly pained.

“I’m not sure if I have yet,” Teo said. “You guys can do whatever you want. Just remember, you don’t get to fuck her.”

He pressed a finger into me, then another.

“This pretty little pussy is mine. Mine. You two got it?”

I moaned in pleasure as he thrust his fingers in and out of me.

“We got it,” Grayson said, his voice deep and laced with desire. “I don’t get to fuck her.”

“I’m glad you’ve learned your lesson,” Teo said, his fingers moving faster inside of me. “I bet your cock is twitching just thinking about what you’re

missing. Even though you've just come, I can see you getting hard again."

Grayson nodded, his brow knitted, a grin on his face. It was as if he wasn't sure what he was supposed to feel.

"You want to fuck her, don't you?"

"I..."

"Don't lie to me," Teo said. "You could fuck her right now if you wanted to. I know you could."

Grayson shook his head, a pained expression on his face. "I can't. I won't."

"Good boy," Teo said, pulling his fingers out of me. "Because if you ever touch Sofia again and I'm not fucking there, I swear to god I'll kill you."

Chapter Eight: Sofia

Grayson left before Teo did. Teo smiled at me, his brown eyes twinkling. “You smell amazing,” he said. “I love the way you smell. Clean up, though, you don’t want the rest of the guys to smell the sex on you. Or maybe you do.”

He was getting dressed as he said this, and I watched him intently as the reality of what had just happened slowly crashed in on me. What the fuck had I been thinking? I needed to talk to Grayson, to make sure that we were fine. Teo and I were clearly not okay, and it was something we needed to talk about, but he closed the door softly behind himself before he left. He walked away with an almost imperceptible limp, made worse by the workout the three of us had just gotten.

I tried to ignore the knot at the pit of my stomach and put my clothes back on. When I went to the bathroom, I noticed how red my cheeks were, the afterglow clearly visible on my face.

I tried to wash it off before I went back out there, but there was no way. When I walked out into the living room again, everything felt weird,

maddeningly, normal.

I closed the door behind myself and picked up my laptop, trying to regain my composure.

“Looks like someone had a good time,” Jace teased when I entered the living room, a knowing smirk on his face as he glanced between me and the retreating figure of Grayson. He looked like shit. There were dark circles under his eyes, his hair was wet from a recent shower...but he was covered in cuts and bruises, looking like he’d run the fucking gauntlet...and he still had time to test my patience.

“Shut it,” I warned, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks.

Victor chuckled, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Leave her alone,” he chastised Jace, though his tone held no real malice. I tried to focus on the screen, but my concentration was shattered when I saw my desktop wallpaper.

A message, white letters on a black background.

WE KNOW YOU TOOK HIM. PREPARE FOR THE CONSEQUENCES.

The words felt like ice against my skin, chilling me to the core. The menacing message stared back at me, its implications echoing through my mind. Fear clawed at my throat, threatening to choke me, but I couldn’t let it win.

There was nothing else.

How had they gotten into my computer? How had they managed to turn my desktop background into this?

It made no fucking sense.

I couldn’t think about it. All I could think about was the fact that it was happening, no matter how I felt about it.

“Guys,” I whispered, my voice barely audible as I beckoned them over. They glanced at each other before gathering around the laptop, their expressions

turning grave as they read the message.

“Who sent this?” Victor demanded, his brows furrowed in concern.

“Whoever it is, they’re clearly not happy,” Jace muttered under his breath.

“They’re watching us.”

“Watching you,” I corrected, swallowing hard as I tried to steady my shaking hands. This was more than just a threat; it was a promise, a cold reminder that danger was never far away.

“Not for long,” Jace said. “I’m going to find him and I’m going to kill him.”

“Who do you think did this?” Grayson asked, finally, crossing his arms over his chest. His hair was disheveled from our recent encounter, and while I could smell the soap on him, I could also smell sex.

Teo leaned against the glass door leading to the balcony, the sunlight illuminating his outline like a halo.

“Orchid Strangler accomplice?” I asked softly. “I mean, it’s the only thing that makes sense. Someone wants to scare us. Archer is dead so...”

“She’s right,” Teo said. “This is the only thing that makes sense. Another cop.”

“Someone had to know,” Grayson said. “Like, sure, everyone must have known Archer was a little weird at work, but someone had to know that something was weird about him. Otherwise they’re all useless detectives.”

“I think there’s a good chance that it’s both,” Teo said. “Maybe they didn’t want to know, and well, now it would make them look really bad if one of their own was a serial killer, right?”

“So an accomplice,” Victor said. “That tracks. Do you know who you spoke to at the station, Jace?”

Jace shook his head. He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt that was a little too big for him, his blond hair dark now that it was wet. He had obviously

cleaned himself up, but his hands and his arms were full of cuts and bruises, and I noticed just how much Teo was trying to avoid looking at him.

“Okay, we need a plan,” Teo said, determination replacing the concern in his voice. How did he have it in him to always have a plan? I was so tired and I hadn’t even been the one to be shot.

I supposed this was what made him a good leader.

“First, we need to figure out who sent this,” I suggested, forcing my voice to sound steadier than I felt. “If we can find the accomplice, we’ll be one step closer to stopping the killer...whoever it is.”

“Agreed,” Grayson nodded. “We should also tighten our security, make sure no one else gets hurt.”

“Good idea,” Teo replied, his gaze flicking to me for a brief moment. They were having this conversation as if what had happened in the bedroom hadn’t happened at all and it was driving me crazy. “Sofia, are you okay?”

I hesitated, debating whether or not to reveal just how scared I was—or just how annoyed I was that I was clearly having a relationship with a guy who had no fucking clue how to communicate. But I wasn’t going to let them win, no matter how confused I was. Someone had tried to scare me before and I wasn’t going to let them do it again. “Not really,” I admitted softly. “But I won’t let them win.”

“None of us will,” Grayson said, his eyes fierce and determined. “We’ll do whatever it takes to protect you, Sofia. That’s a promise.”

Teo glared at him, his jaw hardening, but he nodded. The rest of the guys muttered their assent, too.

I stared at the threatening message on my laptop, anger and determination bubbling inside me. I refused to let these psychopaths dictate what I did with my life—especially when so many innocent lives were at stake.

Especially when my brother was one of the people in their crosshairs.

I wasn't going to let that fucking killer and his little sycophants get him again.

The Orchid Strangler had gone unexposed for far too long, and I could just let him get away with staying anonymous. Even though he was dead, he was still *here*—and that didn't sit right with me. I thought Sam had ended this when he emptied a clip into Archer Holden's mouth, but that clearly hadn't been the case.

I knew I needed to do what I had been dreading for months.

The rest of the guys started to plot, talk to each other, pitch ideas. But I knew exactly what I had to do.

"Guys," I said, turning to face Teo, Grayson, and Victor. "I think...I'm going through with the article. People need to know the truth about the Orchid Strangler. They need to know he was a cop, and the Orlando PD needs to be held accountable. Anyone who knew needs to be outed. *Now.*"

The only response was thick, tense silence.

Grayson caught my gaze, cocking his head for a second. "Are you sure, Sofia?" Grayson asked, his brow furrowed in concern. "It's dangerous, and they already know about Jace. There's no need for them to know about you too."

"Let's not kid ourselves," I said, closing my laptop and setting it down next to me. I stood up and started to pace. "You guys know as well as I do that the guy who took Jace could have been one of the Strangler's accomplices...and that if they are, they absolutely know about me. And they know about Sam, too. Sam is in danger, guys, and I'm not going to let anything happen to him."

"You can let us take care of that," Teo said.

I glared at him, then my gaze darted toward Jace. “I appreciate the help, but I don’t want anything else to happen to you guys. Someone has to do something, and I won’t let fear control me. You guys can do whatever you need to do in the shadows or whatever, but the truth is, people like Archer only thrive because no one has exposed them. If I’d managed to do my investigation before Sam was involved, none of this would’ve happened.”

“You can’t blame yourself for that,” Grayson said. “How were you supposed to know?”

“I’m with Sofia,” Victor chimed in, slamming a fist into his palm. “We can’t let them win. She has tools we don’t. We should let her use them.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice wavering slightly despite my resolution.

“Are you sure about this?” Teo asked, straightening up and looking into my eyes. He was so tall, he towered over me, and I could tell that his concern was tinged with anger, though I wasn’t sure what he was angry at exactly.

“I’m absolutely positive,” I said.

“Hey, Sofia,” Jace said softly, placing a hand on my shoulder. “I know you’re scared, but remember—they’re just trying to intimidate you. We won’t let anything happen to you. And as for us? You don’t have to worry about us. We have each other’s backs, which means that we have your back.”

My gaze met his, and I saw the sincerity in his eyes. “You promise?”

“Promise,” he confirmed, a steely determination in his voice.

With that assurance, I took a deep breath and steeled myself for the battle ahead. I would publish the article, expose the Orchid Strangler and anyone who supported him, and protect my family at all costs. The risks were high, but I couldn’t stand idly by while evil went unchecked.

It did mean I was going to have to talk Sam into doing it—which was a little concerning. But this was what I did. The Blades operated in the shadows, but

I was all about shining a light into the darkness, no matter how scary it was.

“Let’s do this,” I declared, my voice resolute and unwavering. “Together, we’ll bring the Orchid Strangler to justice.”

My decision was made. Publishing the article meant facing the danger head-on, but I refused to let fear dictate my actions. It was time to fight back. I’d been working on it for months, starting with the horrible confrontation we’d had with the killer himself in that abandoned theme park.

I’d told the guys that I needed to call my brother and I was standing outside, pacing on the balcony, when Sam answered the phone.

“Hey, Sof,” he said. “How did it go?”

“We got him back,” I said. “How are you?”

There was a moment where it was clear he wasn’t sure how he was going to answer me. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’ve been thinking about quitting.”

“Really?” I asked. That genuinely surprised me. Sam had wanted to be a cop ever since we were little kids, bring the bad guys to justice, do good in the world. He’d managed to do that. I didn’t trust cops, but I did trust my brother. He’d done enough things to make me feel like he really was looking out for me.

“There’s an internal affairs investigation about Archer, and Sof, I should’ve known better. I mean, I definitely shouldn’t have been having sex with a coworker.”

“He manipulated you,” I said. “You didn’t know what he was.”

“I’m an adult,” he replied. “He might’ve manipulated me later but he wouldn’t have needed to manipulate me at all if I hadn’t wanted to sleep with him. I could’ve just kept it in my pants.”

“Could you?” I asked, then clamped my hand over my mouth. I really should have thought about what the fuck I was saying before I said it. “I didn’t mean

it like that, I mean...obviously I can't keep it in my pants either."

That didn't seem to help, the silence on the other line deafening. But after a second, Sam let out a tired laugh. "My point is, I don't know what the investigation will uncover and while I'm not worried about whether I'm going to be exonerated after I go back to work, I do worry that people are going to hate me after they realize that it was me who killed Detective Holden."

"They should be singing your praises when they realize that you killed one of the most prolific serial killers that the city has ever had. Maybe ever."

"They won't. They'll try to keep it quiet instead."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose as I stopped pacing and leaned over the railing. There was an ashtray next to me which had recently been emptied, the scent of nicotine mixing with the large oak trees and the traffic below us.

"This is fucked, kid," I said. "I have to do something about it."

"What are you going to do, Sof?" he asked. "What *can* you even do? You're putting everyone in danger. And look, I never thought I'd say this about a fucking gang, but you might be putting them in danger. They're not good people, but then, what right do I have to say a fucking thing?"

"Sam," I said into the phone, my voice steady despite the knot in my throat.

"I'm going forward with the article on the Orchid Strangler. I'm going to talk about what happened to us. Because I'm going to name myself, I'm likely to be naming you, too. Are you okay with that?"

He sighed. "Fuck it. What do I have to lose at this point?" he asked. "But you have to be sure. You know what's at stake here, Sof."

"I know," I replied, swallowing hard. "But if I don't do this, I'll never be free of the fear. I have to confront it, Sam."

"Okay," he sighed, a mix of worry and understanding in his words. "Just

remember, you're not alone in this. I've got your back. Anything you need, let me know."

"You too," I said. "I love you, kid."

"I love you too," he said.

"Maybe you should come and stay with us, where it's safe?"

"At the Mercy Blades HQ?" he said, a smile in his voice. "That'll give me lots of credibility with internal affairs."

I sighed, my shoulders slumping. "I take your point," I said. "Don't worry. We're going to put an end to this nightmare."

"Stay safe, Sof," he cautioned. "And keep me updated."

"Will do," I promised before hanging up.

And sure, promises were one thing. I could make promises to my kid brother all day long. But we were dealing with monsters...and monsters didn't play by our rules.

Chapter Nine: Grayson

As I watched Sofia hang up the phone, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy towards her brother. He had a close relationship with her that I could only dream of having. It wasn't that Sofia didn't care for me, but Sam was her blood, her family. I knew that I could never replace that connection.

It was misplaced. I knew that immediately.

No...this wasn't about Sam at all.

It was about Teo.

I was avoiding Teo's gaze as he continued to stare at me, his arms crossed over his chest. We needed to talk. All of us obviously needed to talk. But right then, I didn't have time to dwell on my thoughts. Sofia had made her decision, and it was time to make a plan.

"Okay," I said, standing up from the couch. "We need to figure out how we're going to release this article without getting you killed."

Sofia nodded in agreement, her eyes focused. "Easiest solution would be to give it to my editor at work but I did, uh, ghost them for months. I don't think

I'm still employed by them."

Jace nodded. "What if you contact a journalist friend of mine who works for a rival newspaper? You don't have to publish for the Sentinel. They would probably be very interested in your story."

I frowned. "That could work, but it's still risky. It's not like the Orchid Strangler's accomplice won't know that we're talking about them. And only Sof is a journalist..."

Teo spoke up, his voice grave. "We can't afford to have any loose ends. What if we take matters into our own hands and release the article ourselves? That way we can control the narrative and make sure that our message comes across loud and clear."

Jace looked skeptical. "That's a lot of work. And it's dangerous. What if something goes wrong?"

"It's a risk we have to take," I said firmly. "We've come too far to back down now. We need to expose the truth and bring these assholes to justice."

Sofia rubbed her temples, thinking. "Okay," she said finally. "I have an idea. I can release the article online. That way we can control the message and stay safe."

Jace nodded. "That could work. We'll need a secure platform, though. Something that can't be traced back to us."

"One issue with that," Sofia said. "I'm going to have to link sources. Including...well, you guys. I would be exposing the gang."

Teo snorted. "As if we haven't been exposed before. We're not exactly a secret organization, sunshine."

"I know, but it's still a risk," Sofia replied. "And we need to make sure that we have measures in place in case the Strangler's accomplice comes after us."

“And, to be clear, the Strangler’s accomplice might be the entire police force,” Victor said. “I guess except your brother, Sof.”

I nodded grimly. “That’s a possibility we can’t ignore. We need to be prepared for anything.”

Sofia leaned forward, grabbing a pen and paper. “Let’s start making a list. We need to create a secure platform for the article, gather our sources, and figure out a plan in case of retaliation. Jace, you can take care of creating the platform, right?”

He nodded. “Absolutely. Shouldn’t take too long.”

Teo sighed. “And I’ll talk to you, Sof,” he said. “On the record.”

Sofia’s head snapped to look up at him. “Wait, really?” she asked. “It might put you in the crosshairs of the police.”

Teo smiled, walking over to where she was. He sat on the sofa next to her, their legs touching, and my heart beat so hard in my chest that I actually felt a little dizzy. With jealousy and with...fuck, desire.

This was so fucked.

“I’m always in their crosshairs,” Teo laughed like he wasn’t driving me crazy. “That won’t be anything new.”

Sofia smiled back, the tension in the room momentarily easing. “Thank you, Teo,” she said. “That means a lot to me.”

Victor cleared his throat, drawing our attention. “While we’re on the topic of safety, I think we should talk about what to do in case of an attack.”

I felt a chill run down my spine at the thought. We had all been in danger before, but this was different. This was something bigger, something scarier. The police had never liked us, obviously, but before they’d been somewhat bound by law and procedure. Now that they had been unleashed, things were about to get a lot trickier.

Jace nodded in agreement. “We should have a plan in place. Weapons, escape routes, safe houses. I mean, not for nothing, but I don’t want to get caught again.”

Teo looked thoughtful. “We have a few safe houses we could use that we haven’t used before. And I can get us some more weapons, too.”

Jace clasped his hands together, his eyes shining. The work seemed to let him forget what had just happened and I knew he would fall right into it, he might even find it healing. “Okay. Let’s start making a list of everything we need. And we’ll need to keep this all off the grid. No paper trail, no digital trail. We’ll burn the list at the end.”

Sofia’s eyes scanned the group, taking in the seriousness of the situation. We were all in danger, and we needed to be vigilant.

“I’ll make the list,” she said finally. “I’ll reach out to my contacts and see what we can do about getting some weapons as well. If the police are involved, we need to be prepared to defend ourselves.”

Jace nodded. “And I’ll make sure we have access to some secure communications channels. We can’t be too careful.”

Victor sighed. “If we have to move quickly, tell me. I need to figure out what to do about Midnight.”

“What’s Midnight?” Sofia asked.

“My cat,” Victor said.

I couldn’t help but let out a small laugh at the absurdity of the situation. Here we were, talking about weapons and safe houses, and Victor was concerned about his cat. But then again, I knew how much he cared for Midnight.

And that was absolutely on brand. He was always more worried about the cat—and us—than his own life.

“Don’t worry,” Teo said, a smile on his face. “We’ll make sure Midnight is

safe too.”

Victor smiled back, relief evident on his face. “Thank you.”

The room was quiet for a moment as we all took in the gravity of the situation. We were going up against some powerful and dangerous people. But we had each other, and that was something.

“Okay,” I said, breaking the silence. “Let’s get to work. We have a lot to do.” And with that, we began to plan. We listed out weapons we needed, escape routes, and safe houses. We gathered sources for the article and Jace made sure we had a secure platform to publish it on.

It took days.

Sofia was like a machine, coordinating everything with precision and care. Teo and Jace were working on securing the platform and communication channels. Victor was getting his cat to safety. He was making sure we were all safe—he was our muscle after all—but he would have never forgotten Midnight.

She was family too.

And I was making sure everything was coming together.

Days went by as we worked tirelessly, fueled by a mix of adrenaline and coffee. It wasn’t until Monday that we finally finished everything we had set out to do.

“I think we’re ready,” Sofia said, looking around at all of us. “As ready as we’ll ever be.”

I nodded in agreement. “Let’s do this.”

“We’re in this together,” Teo said, his hand on Sofia’s shoulder. “No matter what happens, we have each other’s backs.”

Sofia grimaced, her finger hovering over the post button on the site. “Are you guys all sure?” she asked. “There’s no coming back after this.”

“Fuck it,” Jace said, reaching over, his hand hovering over hers. “Let’s do it. Watch them come after us. They’ll see what fucking happens.”

Chapter Ten: Grayson

I don't know what we expected to happen...but I know none of us expected nothing.

And that was exactly what happened.

When Sofia pressed the post button, there was no immediate reaction.

Which is what we should all have expected, but it wasn't.

We had all been on high alert for so long that the lack of response was almost unsettling. It was like waiting for a bomb to go off...and then it didn't.

"Well, this tracks," Sofia said. "We have to wait a bit to make sure that all the other outlets pick it up."

"What about the threat?" Victor asked.

"I expect they're only going to get angrier when they realize they've been exposed," Teo said. He looked worse for wear, his normally perfectly trimmed beard messier than usual, dark shadows under his eyes.

"Everything is in place," I said, resting my head against the back of the couch. It felt like I had braced for a fight...and now we just had to wait. I hated it. "But I do have one more suggestion."

Teo looked up at me. “What?”

“Don’t hate me for this, but I think we should split up,” I said.

“Have you never seen a horror movie?” Sofia asked. “That’s a terrible idea!”

“It’s not,” I said, leaning forward. “Look, from what we know they want all of us...”

“And they can’t get us here,” Teo said. “HQ is designed to be a fortress for a reason.”

“Yes,” I replied. “But think about it—if they somehow manage to breach our defenses, and it seems to me like whoever is behind Jace’s kidnapping has enough resources to at least attempt that, then the five of us here? We’re sitting ducks. And I’m afraid...”

I looked up at Sofia for a second, who was watching me curiously, her head tilted and her ears peeking out of her curls.

“That we won’t be able to defend ourselves, really, and that includes you, Sof. We *might* be able to hold them off but it would be taking on a risk we don’t have to take, so spreading out is another line of defense we should consider.”

Sofia looked hesitant. “Right, okay. I guess we could be alone. Then whoever is after us can decide which one of us to target.”

“I don’t think Grayson finished explaining that,” Teo said with a lopsided smile. “Wherever I go, you’re going, Sof.”

“What about Jace and Victor?” she asked. “What about Grayson?”

Teo grinned that time. “Well, Sof, Grayson is coming with us too.”

“Fine. But what about Jace and Victor?” Sofia asked, looking meaningfully at the first one. She probably didn’t realize that Jace needed his independence to feel like he was useful and the easiest way to make him regain confidence in himself was by letting him work from afar.

I would explain all of that to her once we weren't within earshot of him.

Jace put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "We won't be alone, Sofia. We'll still be working towards the same goal, just from different locations."

"I don't like this," she said. I didn't think she wanted to admit it to herself, but she had obviously gotten used to the comfort of being in one of the most secure apartments in the entirety of the city. She hugged herself and shivered. "What if something happens to one of you? You're only splitting up because I'm here."

"No, we've done this before," Teo said. "Grayson is right, it's a first line of defense sort of thing. Yes, we're weakened by it somewhat, but the truth is, it's harder to kill if you don't know where to shoot."

I gave him a dirty look. He didn't have to put it like that.

Sofia threw her arms up in frustration. "I'm not going to win this argument, am I?"

Teo shook his head. "Sorry, but this is Grayson's job," he said. "He's been doing it for a long time, and he's the reason we're even having this conversation right now. If it wasn't for him, then we'd all be dead. But don't worry. Just because we split up doesn't mean we're not going to communicate. We talk every single day."

Sofia thought about that for a second. "Do you really know what you're doing?"

I winked at her. "Like he said, we're all still alive," I replied. "Once you came into our orbit, it became my job to keep you alive too, Sof."

"Fine," she replied after a beat. "But for the record, I don't like this."

"We'll make sure to tell

After some more discussion, we finally agreed to split up for a few weeks. We would still communicate regularly and have a plan in case of

emergencies.

While Victor, Teo and Sofia spoke about the intricacies of our plan, I looked down at Jace, who was sitting quietly on his phone.

“You good?” I asked him.

“Monitoring traffic to the site,” he said. “Ever since I posted that link on Reddit, it seems to be getting some traction.”

No one else appeared to have heard him and I knew they would be interested. Jace was better at handling tech than giving reports, so I tilted my head toward the stairs and flashed him a look.

“Let’s talk,” I said.

He nodded, pocketing his phone and getting off the sofa.

We made our way up the stairs to the second floor of HQ, where Jace’s makeshift room was located. Ever since we had rescued him from his captor, he hadn’t wanted to go back to his apartment. I supposed I couldn’t blame him for that.

I closed the door behind us and leaned against it, looking at him closely.

“How are you really doing?” I asked him.

Jace shrugged, his gaze darting away from me. “I’m good. Just trying to keep busy.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You know you don’t have to pretend with me, right?”

He swallowed, and I watched his throat work. Sometimes, it was easy to forget that he was the youngest one of us, but not right then. In that moment, he looked vulnerable.

I hated that too.

There wasn’t much about this situation I enjoyed.

“I appreciate everything you guys did for me,” he muttered. “So thanks—”

“I don’t give a shit about that,” I said. “Just tell me what’s going on.”

He let out a sigh and ran a hand through his hair. "It's just...tough. I mean, I'm one of you guys. I'm a Blade. I should be dangerous. Instead, I'm getting taken off the street like a damsel in fucking distress and then you guys have to mount an operation to find me? That's fucked."

"You would've done the same thing for us."

"I wouldn't have needed to do the same thing for any of you," he said between gritted teeth. "You would have never been in that position."

"I...yeah," I said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Step into my office. Let's talk about this."

He rolled his eyes, but did as I told him.

"Teo, Victor and I, we all grew up running away from the police whenever we saw them. I don't want to assume anything but I can make a pretty educated guess that your upbringing wasn't like that."

Jace hesitated for a moment before finally nodding. "Yeah, you're right. I never had to worry about things like that. My parents were pretty well off."

"But that's not your fault," I said, trying to reassure him. "We all come from different backgrounds, but that doesn't make you any less of a Blade. You've proven yourself time and time again. You're a great criminal, Jace. Just like the rest of us."

He laughed, rolling his eyes as he did. "Yeah, great criminal. I got kidnapped and almost got killed."

"Hey, you're alive, aren't you?" I said, trying to lighten the mood.

Jace chuckled. "Yeah, I guess. But still, I feel like I need to prove myself."

"You don't need to prove yourself to anyone," I said firmly. "You're one of us, and that's all that matters. We've got your back."

He nodded, a small smile appearing on his face. "Thanks, Grayson. I appreciate it."

“If you need to talk about what happened, you know I’m here to listen.”

“There isn’t much to say. I kept my mouth shut, gave the cops nothing, and someone grabbed me when I was leaving the station. I was smart enough to leave all my devices at home and there’s a self-destruct that activates when someone steps into my apartment and wipes all my data, so at least I’m pretty sure whoever kidnapped me didn’t get anything even if they went to my place,” he said. “It’s kind of sad. I spent ages collecting that data, to be clear, so I’m going to be upset when it’s not there, but it’s better than the police finding records about everything the Mercy Blades do.”

I nodded, understanding the need for caution. “Well, we’ll make sure to keep you in the loop with everything that’s happening. And if you need to take some time to recover, that’s okay too.”

Jace shook his head. “No, I’m good. I need to prove to myself that I’m still capable of doing this. That I’m still a Blade.”

I shook my head but I knew I wasn’t going to get through to him, at least not right then. “Like I said, Jace, you don’t need to prove anything. But if that’s what you want, we’ll make sure to give you opportunities to show off your skills.”

He grinned at me. “Thanks, Grayson.”

“Sure,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder. For a second, I thought about how young he was, how maybe I should’ve insisted that he stay behind. But I did no such thing. I didn’t want him to feel worse than he already did, and making him

We sat in comfortable silence for a few moments before Jace spoke up again.

“Hey, Grayson? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

He looked at me, his expression serious. “Do you ever think about leaving

this life behind? Starting over?”

I frowned, not expecting that question. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, we’re criminals, Grayson. We’re always looking over our shoulders, always on the run. Do you ever wish you could just...stop? Most people don’t get kidnapped and held in dungeons. Most people don’t have to split up with their friends when they publish a blog post. Most people don’t share a girl with...”

He trailed off, his cheeks crimson red. He obviously felt like he’d crossed a line, but none of us had been quiet, and I had expected someone to address what happened at some point.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

I know he didn’t, but it definitely reminded me that I needed to talk to Teo about all this. It couldn’t just be something the rest of the men thought they could throw in my face. Even just thinking about having this conversation made me uncomfortable, but I had to do it.

“It’s okay. It’s not a secret. As for your question...” I thought about it for a moment, considering his words. “Sometimes, yeah. But this is who I am, Jace. It’s all I know. And I don’t think I could just walk away from it all.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, I get that. I don’t think I could either.”

There was a pause before he spoke again. “Thanks for talking with me, Grayson. It means a lot.”

“Anytime, Jace. We’re all in this together, remember?”

He smiled at me before standing up. “Yeah. Together.”

I flashed him a smile. Maybe, before Sofia, I would have believed that. Now I couldn’t be so sure.

Chapter Eleven: Sofia

“Ready?” Teo’s voice was low and tense, his honeygold eyes meeting mine.

I wasn’t really ready. I’d barely gotten to grips with the fact that HQ had become my de facto home, and now we were going to leave again. It seemed unfair, but I couldn’t exactly complain about it. I was the one who had gone through with the article in the first place.

And the gang had certain procedures for making sure they were safe, so I had to follow them. I had accepted their protection after all. If that involved splitting up—even though I still didn’t think it was a great idea—then I was going to follow along.

“Let’s do this,” Grayson chimed in, his hand gripping mine tightly for a brief second, as if grounding himself through me. His charismatic smile was absent, replaced by a look of sheer focus.

As we prepared to leave, Victor shot me a look that spoke volumes. The muscle of the gang, he’d been cautious around me from the start, but there was something in his eyes now that told me he was beginning to trust me. It

made me feel more confident in myself, knowing that I had earned his respect. I wondered how much the article had to do with that.

With only a few words exchanged between us, it was time for us to split up. Teo and Grayson would be taking me to a luxurious hideaway in a fancy part of Orlando—a place where we could lay low and regroup while still keeping an eye on the unfolding events. The thought of being alone with them sent a shiver down my spine; after we'd all had sex, we still hadn't cleared the air, and I wasn't sure how the dynamic would play out.

Jace had his head down, working on something on his computer. He barely looked up at us, flashing me a smile that didn't translate to his eyes. "I think you'll be very pleased when you come home," he said.

The word home made me feel all sorts of things, but there wasn't much time to worry about it right then.

Teo placed his hand on the small on my back and led me toward the hallway that had first brought me into this apartment. It had only been a few months, but it felt like it was so long ago.

I barely noticed how hot it was as we walked out to Teo's car. As we climbed into the sleek black sedan waiting outside, the engine hummed to life, Teo in the driver's seat and Grayson in the back. The sun was setting, casting a golden glow over the streets as we drove through the city.

It didn't take as long as I thought to get there. The hideaway was in the city, and while we made conversation about the weather and the news, I paid attention to where we were going. I knew the guys wouldn't tell me the address, but there was a part of me that couldn't resist knowing.

Teo steered the car into a private driveway, hidden by tall hedges and iron gates that swung open as we approached thanks to a remote on Teo's keys. The house itself was a sprawling modern marvel, with sleek lines and floor-

to-ceiling windows reflecting the dying light of day. I couldn't help but be awestruck by the sheer luxury of it all, feeling a pang of guilt for enjoying the opulence in the midst of our mission.

"Welcome to our sanctuary," Grayson murmured from behind me, his eyes fixed on my face as he gauged my reaction. "It's not much, but it'll do."

"Grayson, this place is incredible," I breathed out, trying to keep my voice steady. He grinned at my response, a hint of his usual charm flickering back to life.

Teo laughed. "Yeah, we like it too," he said. "It's a shame we never get to use it."

"Why not?" I asked. "If this place was mine, I would never leave."

Teo gave me an odd look...like maybe it *could* be mine one day, but he didn't say that. "Turns out running a gang is a full-time job," he shrugged. "We work so hard it's usually easier to stay at HQ or in one of our apartments close to Neon. No time to hang out here and lounge by the pool, except when we need to lay low."

"But we'll be laying low in style," Grayson grinned.

We pulled into a garage with three other luxurious sports cars parked inside, and then we went through a side door...and it took my breath away. I felt like I had stepped into an alternate universe where only the wealthiest could ever go.

I was one of them now.

And even if Teo hadn't said it, this place was, in a way, mine.

I could see it from the way that he was looking at me, and it made my heart flutter in my chest.

Teo gave me a tour of the palatial estate, pointing out each detail with pride. The floor plan was open, laid out in a way that took my breath away. The

living room had a panoramic view of a gorgeous lake, palm trees just tall enough to cast shade in the living room swaying softly outside the windows. The furniture was rich mahogany, with plush leather seating and intricate details etched into each piece.

As we continued the tour, Teo led me to a grand staircase that led to a second-floor balcony overlooking the living room. The walls were adorned with priceless artwork, and the floors were made of rare marble imported from Italy, or so he said.

“Marble,” Teo said softly. “When I was a kid, every foster home I stayed in was linoleum. Not even carpet.”

“And juvie was all concrete,” Grayson chimed in.

I didn’t have time to delve into that before Teo was leading me away again. “I bought all the artwork for this place myself,” he said, winking at me. “Tax breaks.”

Grayson laughed. Before I could ask what that meant, Teo kept talking about this piece or that piece. This wasn’t at all like his house, but it was clear he’d put plenty of thought into it. I noticed that Grayson stuck by me, pointing out details that Teo wouldn’t think to mention. Despite how weird and tense things were between us, I could tell how well they got along and how well they worked together from this simple interaction.

I hated that I felt like I might have gotten between them, but we could talk about that later. I was too taken by the opulent luxury that surrounded me to think about it much then.

All the rooms were decorated with expensive furniture, paintings, and sculptures, some modern, some antiques. Teo showed me the library—filled with rows and rows of books—and his cinema room, equipped with state-of-

the-art technology. I felt like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, gifted a library and a classic theatre of my very own...even if this was all a gilded cage.

As we walked through the house, Grayson's hand brushed against mine, sending a jolt of electricity through my body. I tried not to think about how much I wanted him, how much I wanted to explore this luxurious space with him.

But then, as if reading my mind, he leaned in and whispered in my ear, "I know this is a lot to take in. But we'll keep you safe here. And maybe we can have a little fun while we're at it."

My breath caught in my throat at his words, and I couldn't help but feel a thrill of excitement mixed with fear. It was a dangerous game we were playing, but for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to care. Teo had said that he would kill Grayson if he ever touched me again, but then he'd fucked us both...and I lived on that danger. I was riding the high, and I couldn't wait to be with them again. Maybe that made me fucked up, but at this point, I didn't give a damn.

Teo interrupted our moment, calling us over to the kitchen. "Dinner's ready," he announced, gesturing towards the table that had been set with an exquisite meal.

I had no idea who made it or when it had happened, but I wasn't going to ask. "I had this set up before we arrived," Teo said. "People on our staff. They don't know we're here, but this house doesn't keep itself clean."

"Right. That makes sense," I said, looking down at my plate of food. I understood that they needed a staff for upkeep, but I couldn't shake the feeling that no one could be trusted. "Are you sure it's safe...?"

"Absolutely," Teo replied. "We vet our people completely and thoroughly—most are folks we've helped out over the years. They have more loyalty to us

than their own families. So eat up and try not to worry.”

It was a delicious meal, one that I savored every bite of despite my nerves. The tension between the three of us—about our relationship and the situation—remained, but the delicious food and the luxurious atmosphere made it feel almost surreal. It was hard to believe that just a few months ago, I had been living in a cramped, dingy apartment, struggling to make ends meet.

Now, I was a kept woman...a mafia princess.

And I didn't mind it at all.

As we ate, Teo and Grayson talked in hushed tones, making plans for the coming days. I tried to follow along, but their voices were too low for me to make out everything they were saying.

It was annoying, but I knew there were things that needed to be hashed out between them.

Finally, the meal was over and Teo excused himself to make a phone call. Grayson and I were left alone in the kitchen, and the tension between us was almost unbearable.

I already felt so comfortable with him that I wanted to touch him, hold him... and I knew he wanted the same thing. But there was that lurking presence behind us, looming over us both.

I didn't know if Teo would tell him to make me come, or if he would threaten to kill him if he touched me.

But that was what I'd come to expect from the leader of the Mercy Drive Blades.

“I know things are weird between us,” Grayson said, breaking the silence.

“But I want you to know that I'm here for you. Whatever you need.”

I looked up at him, meeting his intense gaze.

“I appreciate that,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “But things are

complicated right now. I don't even know where we stand."

Grayson stepped closer to me, his hand grazing my arm. "I know it's complicated. But I can't deny the way I feel about you." His voice was low and husky, sending a shiver down my spine.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. "And how do you feel about me?"

His eyes locked onto mine. "I feel like I'm going crazy when I'm around you. I want you so badly it hurts."

The air between us crackled with tension, and I knew that I wanted him just as badly. Instantly, I closed my eyes and thought about Teo. He'd been there from the beginning, and my attraction for Grayson hardly affected how I felt about him.

If anything, I wanted him more. "I don't want to come between you and your best friend."

He wrinkled his nose. "I can think of fun ways you can come between us."

I shook my head, despite not being able to hold back a smile.

"That's not what I meant, Grayson. I'm serious," I said, taking a step back from him. "I need to figure things out and be sure of what I want."

"Don't kid yourself, Sofia," he said, his gaze raking over my eyes toward my lips. "You know what you want. You want both of us, right?"

I swallowed, blood rushing toward my cheeks. "But what about the two of you? Your relationship...it matters to me."

"I'm a big boy, Sofia," he replied. "I can take care of my own problems. And so can he."

"I just don't want Teo to become a problem."

"He's not a problem for me if he's not a problem for you."

"I think you guys need to sort things out between the two of you before we

pursue anything else,” I said, despite how much I wanted to jump his bones right then and there.

Grayson sighed, running a hand through his hair. “You’re right. We need to talk about this first. But just know, Sofia, that I’m not going to stop wanting you.”

I nodded, feeling a flutter in my chest at his words. “I know. And I want you too.”

He leaned in closer, his lips just inches from mine. “Then let’s make a deal. We’ll figure things out with Teo, but until then, we can still have some fun.”

Before I could respond, he closed the distance between us, his lips meeting mine in a searing kiss. My body responded instantly, my hands tangling in his hair as we deepened the kiss.

It was a dangerous game we were playing—Teo was just in the next room, after all—but at that moment, I couldn’t bring myself to care. All I wanted was Grayson, and the luxurious hideaway that surrounded us only made it more exciting. Grayson’s hands encircled my waist, pulling me into him as his mouth roamed over my skin. I let out a little moan as he licked and bit my neck, wanting to feel him inside of me.

He started to move me toward the living room, but I hesitated. “Should we really?” I asked. “What if Teo comes back?”

“Then he’ll have to join in, won’t he?” he asked, and before I could answer, he was nibbling on my lower lip. “I’m not going to fuck you...and those were his rules, right? I can do all kinds of other things.”

“Mmm,” I let out a moan, loving the way he was making me feel. Teo, like Grayson, was a big boy. I was sure he could deal with it, too.

Grayson led me to the living room, which was done up in a luxurious, modern style. He sat me down on the couch, kissing his way down my body

as he unbuttoned my shirt. He slipped it off of my shoulders, exposing my bra and letting his rough hands trail over my body. I heard the sound of footsteps, which made Grayson pause for a second.

He hovered over me. I watched his gaze lock on to Teo's, who stood by, his arms crossed over his chest. When I craned my neck to look back at him, he flashed me a lopsided smile. "Well, don't let me stop you," he said. "I want to see where this goes."

Grayson smiled. "He likes to watch," he whispered in my ear, just loud enough for Teo to hear.

"And I like it when you get her ready for me. Once you're done with him, Sofia, I'll be waiting for you in my bedroom."

I turned back to Grayson, feeling the tension rise between us. He slowly moved back towards me, slipping one strap of my bra over my shoulder. He kissed up my neck, his touch gentle but firm. I let out a little gasp as he nibbled on my earlobe, my body melting under his touch.

"Tell me what you want, Sofia," he whispered, his voice low and husky.

"Tell me what you need."

It was a decision that I could easily make. Grayson had been right.

I wanted Grayson. I wanted Teo.

I wanted them both.

And I was going to have them.

Chapter Twelve: Sofia

“Tell me what you want, Sofia,” Grayson whispered in my ear, his hot breath tickling me as his fingers danced over my skin.

I was sure that Teo could hear us, but I didn’t care. I wanted him to watch, to know that he was turning me on and making me feel so good. That I was glad that he was allowing this, because I was under no delusions.

This was only happening because Teo wanted it to.

My skin tingled with excitement as Grayson’s fingers caressed my skin, and I felt my breath catch in my throat as Grayson leaned in closer, the stubble on his chin grazing my shoulder.

“Grayson,” I murmured.

“Tell me,” he whispered, pulling away slightly. “Say it.”

I bit my lip, my pulse racing. Teo was watching, and I was so turned on that I wanted to scream. I wasn’t sure where the line was, but I knew that I wanted to step over it.

“I need you,” I whispered, my eyes glancing up at Teo.

He smiled at me, his eyes raking over my body. “Say it,” he said. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you,” I replied, my voice a little louder. “I want both of you.”

The air crackled with tension, and for a moment, I thought that Teo was going to take off. The last time this had happened still hung in the air, weird and tense, and it had made things strange between them.

Maybe it had been a fluke.

But Teo took a deep breath, and nodded. “Good girl,” he said, and I shivered. “Now, open your legs for Grayson.”

I couldn’t believe it—the command in his voice, the way it made me feel. I was still confused about where we were headed, but I knew that I didn’t want to stop. I did as he said, spreading my legs and leaning back on the couch.

Grayson kneeled on the floor in front of me, his lips meeting mine in a slow, sensual kiss.

I moaned into his mouth, my hands tangling in his hair as he kissed me. I could feel his tongue teasing my own, his hands sliding around to my back. He unhooked my bra, and I felt the straps loosen as he pulled it away from me. The cool air tickled my skin, and I let out a soft shiver.

It felt so good to have him exploring my body with his mouth, my legs open wide for him. His fingers slipped beneath the waistband of my pants, and I moaned as his mouth moved down my neck.

He slipped my pants down my hips, his fingers brushing the skin beneath my panties. They were already soaked, and I let out little moans as he moved his fingers across my clit.

“Perfect,” he whispered, and I heard a soft whistle. “I’ve desperately missed the way you taste.”

I whimpered as he slipped me out of my panties, his wet, probing tongue

finding my clit.

I arched my back, my eyes rolling back in my head as he began to suck and lick at my body, his teeth nipping at my clit and sending chills down my spine. He slipped a finger inside of me, and I moaned, my body coiling around him and wanting more.

I could feel Teo's eyes on me, watching, and I couldn't stop myself from looking back. I saw his face, the way his eyes were focused on the way Grayson's tongue teased my clit. He looked at me like he owned me, like he knew that he had a hold over me. It made the pleasure even greater, and I squirmed in my seat as Grayson's tongue became more insistent.

It was like he was starving for me, my wrists against his shoulders and my body pinned down by his strength. His hands held me down, and I could feel his tongue working me, his fingers sliding in and out of me and making me feel so good I could only focus on my pleasure.

He chuckled, the vibrations of his lips against my skin echoing through me. "If I had my way," he said, "I'd never stop."

"But you don't," Teo said authoritatively. "Thank you for getting her ready for me."

I was so overwhelmed, I genuinely didn't know what to do; when Teo extended his hand and Grayson gave him space to pull me toward him, my brain felt like it was short circuiting and I could do nothing but follow him.

When he pulled me to my feet, I melted against him, my eyes closing and my mouth finding his in a hungry kiss. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close to him and in a moment, we were upstairs, his lips on me and his hands lifting my shirt over my body. I was surprised, like I was every time, at how easily he held me in his grip, lifting me up and carrying me to his bedroom even with his injured leg.

Teo pushed me down on the bed, my bare skin against his sheets and a pang of something like sadness in my chest. Yes, I wanted him...but I wanted Grayson here too.

Teo leaned down, kissing me slow and deep, his hands sliding down my body to the waist of his pants. He slid my jeans the rest of the way down my legs, leaving me in my panties. He turned me over, leaning down and biting my neck.

It was like he was preparing me, and my mouth went dry with anticipation. I could feel myself getting wetter, my breath already coming out in short, fast gasps.

I felt his finger slide out, and I gasped as I felt the tip of his cock press against me.

“Sofia,” he whispered, kissing my shoulder. “Just relax, and let me take care of you.”

I let out a soft moan as he pushed inside of me, filling me up, slowly working his way inside of me. I arched my back as he sank inside of me, my body slowly growing used to his girth.

I could feel him moving inside of me, his body pushing against mine as he worked his way deeper until he was finally buried inside of me. Teo was panting, his hand gripping my shoulder tightly. “God, you feel so good,” he whispered, biting my neck.

I couldn't help but let out a soft, almost inaudible moan that turned into a whimper as he slowly pushed himself out, making my body open up and adjust to his size. All the while, he was watching me, his fingers stroking my skin. He pushed in again, his fingers trailing over my neck and his eyes locked on mine.

With him inside of me, I could feel my body slowly unraveling. I whimpered,

my body shivering with pleasure. My breath caught in my throat as I felt him sink inside of me again, slowly, until his hips were tight against my ass.

He started moving then, slowly at first. My eyes fell closed as I felt his body push inside, his fingers tangling in my hair. He moved faster, his breath against my ear and his body never leaving mine.

I let his rhythm push me over the edge of pleasure, my body moving against him and my throat open as I moaned. I fell back, my skin heavy in his hands, his fingers slipping over my breasts and teasing my nipples. He moved faster, his rhythm picking up in speed and depth, and I could feel myself getting wetter with every thrust. His cock brushed against me and I could feel the pleasure of his body trying to overcome my sanity.

“You feel so fucking good,” he whispered, his voice strained with desperation. I could feel every inch of him inside of me, his hips pushing into me as the rest of his body just barely kept up. I whimpered, my voice almost gone. “You’re so hot, so wet,” he murmured in my ear, his breath hot. His fingers were gripping my arms where he was holding me, and his hips were moving faster. “You are so. Fucking. Beautiful. And you’re all mine.”

I arched my back, my body opening up to him as I felt the pleasure wash over me. I felt my muscles tighten around him as he moved inside of me, his dick moving faster and faster. I cried out, unable to keep in the sound as the pleasure started to overcome me.

“Tell me who your pussy belongs to, sunshine,” he said.

“You,” I said, my mouth dry, stars exploding in my vision. “My pussy belongs to you.”

“Fuck,” he said, his voice suddenly harsh and urgent, and I knew he was close. “God, fuck, Sofia.”

He moaned, his hips faltering as he pushed into me. I felt the heat of him

explode inside of me, his cock thrusting to the hilt as he let out a deep, guttural moan. I shook and trembled under his expert touch, my core clenching as another orgasm rocked my body.

He pulled away, slowly and carefully, and then collapsed on the bed beside me. “You are so fucking good,” he whispered, his voice hoarse. I felt his hand on my leg, trying to control his shallow breathing.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked—and it seemed like he was genuinely worried, softer now, caressing me like a lover and not like his possession.

“No,” I said, letting him pull me close to him. He pressed a kiss to the top of my head as I lay in the crook of his arm, his skin warm against my own. “We need to talk, don’t we?”

He shook his head. “As long as you’re with me, I will give you anything you want. Anyone you want. I promise.”

I sat up, pulling away from him and looking at his face. I wasn’t sure how to feel about his offer. It wasn’t what I expected from him.

“What if I want you and only you?” I asked. He gave me a lazy smile, his eyes searching my face.

“Then you’ll have me,” he said. “But you don’t. I can see the way you look at Grayson, sunshine. I’m not an idiot. I get it. He’s handsome, and you’re right here, looking like meat for the slaughter. You deserve to be worshipped by everyone who meets you.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “I am. I’m going to make you the happiest girl in the world, Sofia. You have my word.”

I leaned down, kissing him gently on the lips. He let out a moan, wrapping his arm around me and holding me tight against him.

“Won’t this affect your friendship?” I asked. “I don’t want to come between

the two of you.”

“The relationship between Grayson and I is our business,” he said. “And Grayson...he’s always wanted what I have.”

I frowned. “He told you that?”

“It’s not something he could possibly hide,” Teo said. “We’ve always been good friends. And it would be hard not to fall for you.”

“But you’re jealous.”

He frowned, his forehead wrinkling when he did. “I am,” he said. “That’s why I want a part of you all to myself.”

“That’s why you won’t let him fuck me.”

“As long as your pretty pussy is all mine, he can have the starter,” he said.

“As long as I get to have the entrée, I’m all good.”

I frowned, and he looked away.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m not trying to make light of how awkward this situation is. It’s just...” He reached for my hand, his fingers curling around it.

“I’m not fucking sorry that you’re mine.”

“I am yours,” I whispered. “And I’m sorry I’ve put you in this position.”

“Don’t be,” he said. “I like watching you. It’s hot. I just have that one condition. If you’re okay with it, I’m okay with it.”

I nodded. I guessed, all things considered, I was okay with it. Teo was right, their relationship was their business. He traced his fingertips along the side of my arm, his gaze following his hand. “I have something for you,” he said.

He leaned over and opened the drawer of the nightstand next to him. For a split second, I wondered if he was going to give me a ring, but instead, he handed me a small plastic object.

“What is this?” I asked him.

“A vibrator,” he replied. “It’s something I can control from my phone. You

can, too, obviously.”

I frowned, looking between him and the vibrator in his hand.

“Why are you giving me this?”

“So that you remember who you belong to,” he said. “No matter who you are with, you’re mine. Those are my terms, sunshine.”

I took the vibrator and set it down next to me.

“You’re going to use it on me, aren’t you?”

He smiled at me. “Every chance I get.”

“What if I want to use it?” I asked. “Like, without you.”

He grinned. “I’ve already told you, Sofia. I know you. You’ll want to try it. I’m not going to stop you.”

“As long as you sort things out with Grayson, I’m in.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I got that handled.”

And we stayed there, talking, as if we hadn’t just dropped a bomb on the world, as if we hadn’t just set the gears in motion for people to hurt us.

Right then, I didn’t care if it was selfish. All I cared about was the way it felt when Teo held me close.

And I might not have known much, but I knew that as long as Teo was around, I felt safe.

I was safe.

And for a second, that was all that mattered.

Chapter Thirteen: Grayson

I stood on the balcony overlooking the lake behind the house, drinking my second double-shot of whiskey neat as the city got darker around me. I'd been playing the last few days over in my head and I was no closer to any answers. Everything felt like a blur, from the moment Teo had called us into the storage room to ask us if we had been the one to kidnap Sofia to the moment he had grabbed her hand and pulled her off the sofa. He'd claimed her at that moment, before anyone else could take her...and yeah, I was jealous. I wanted her too.

Maybe I'd always wanted what Teo had. And Teo didn't like to share.

I drank my lust down with the whiskey and told myself to get a grip. The mansion was big enough that I shouldn't have been able to hear them fucking, but I was paying attention despite myself.

After several minutes of silence, footsteps approached me. I didn't need to look back to know that it was Teo; I knew him so well that I could tell his walk from the sound of his gait.

And of course, the limp.

I was still getting used to that part.

He opened the sliding door and took a step so he stood beside me, his hands in the pockets of his sweats. He'd changed, but hadn't showered, and I could smell Sofia on him...and I knew he'd done it on purpose.

Asshole.

"You're drinking?" he asked. He sounded neither approving nor disapproving, just like he did whenever a situation presented itself where my drinking was concerned.

"Yeah," I replied. "I'm drinking. Do you want a cigarette?"

"You have some?"

"Yes," I replied, putting down the glass and taking the packet of cigarettes out of my pocket. I handed one to him, lighting it for him before he held it between his lips.

"Thanks," he said.

I nodded, grabbing my glass again and taking a swig of whiskey. The alcohol burned the back of my throat.

It was lovely—enough to distract me from the lasting sensation of Sofia's taste still on my lips.

"So," Teo said. "We're going to have to talk about it."

"I know."

He took a long drag, leaning against the railing and looking down at the still lake. When he spoke, he did so quietly, from the side of his mouth, barely looking at me. "Grayson, what the fuck? Do you want me to beat the shit out of you?"

I unscrewed the lid off the whiskey and took another swig. The amber liquid burned its way down and I winced. "No," I said. "I don't want to have a fight."

“I don’t fucking believe you,” he said. He held up his hand, the cigarette in between his fingers, and pointed a finger at me. “Don’t lie to me, Grayson. Were you planning this?”

I laughed bitterly. “No, Teo. I didn’t plan to fall for my boss’ girl.”

“Bullshit,” he said. “You had a fucking thing for Sofia from the moment I brought her to HQ. Admit it.”

I turned to him. “I did,” I said. “I admired her from afar and I was jealous of you. But I didn’t plan for all this shit, Teo. You’re my best friend. You know that. Why the fuck would I plan to fuck you over?”

He waited for me as I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“She’s clearly in love with you,” I said. “I’m just...entertainment. Look, I’m not deluded, I know where I stand, with her, and with you. But if you actually want me to stop, I’ll stop.”

He considered that for a few seconds, then shrugged. “I think it’s hot how wet you make her.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “You’re an asshole, Teo.”

“Duh,” he said, grinning at me. He leaned against the railing, flipping the cigarette between his fingers as he let the smoke coil around his head. “Tell me about it.”

“I know how you operate, boss. If this is what you want, then I’m happy to go along with it.”

Happy wasn’t the right word, exactly. But I was okay with it. I thought.

He considered that for a few seconds, taking a long drag of his cigarette. This wasn’t the first time we’d shared a girl, but it had always been a one-night stand thing, and it had never been a woman he had feelings for.

We had been together a long time. We had shared almost everything.

But a woman we were both in love with? Yeah, that had never happened

before.

He dropped the cigarette on the ground and stubbed it out with his unlaced boot.

“I’m okay with it,” he said. “I just want to make sure you know that she is mine. Personally. And that means...”

He trailed off, letting the silence hang in the air, tense and cold.

“As long as you want to do this with her, you’re mine, too. Even though you’re going to be fucking her. Those are my terms.”

I didn’t know what I had been expecting. Yes, Teo and I were friends, but we weren’t exactly equals, and if I wanted to fuck his girlfriend, then there was going to be a price to pay.

I didn’t want to tell him that I liked it. It was better if he thought I didn’t, though from how hard I was when he was essentially commanding me to do stuff to her, I knew that he could tell I wasn’t exactly averse to it.

Teo was aware of my preferences, or rather, my lack of preferences. But I had never told him how I felt about him.

He’d earned my loyalty through deeds and actions, things that he had done since we were kids.

But he had first come into my orbit because I hadn’t managed to take my eyes off him. He didn’t share my proclivities. At least, I hadn’t thought so.

Not until now. Not until that very conversation.

I was going to play my cards close to my chest, though the idea of continuing down this path both scared and enticed me.

“I know,” I said, looking at him. “I know, Teo. She’s yours. I’m yours. That’s how it’s going to stay.”

He nodded. “Do you feel anything for her?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to answer that question. I didn’t know what I felt for

Sofia yet, and I was sure that trying to describe it would just make it sound even more fucked up than it already was. “Yeah. Something. I’m not sure what,” I said, leaning against the railing. “What about you?”

“I’m really fucking crazy about her,” he said, finishing his cigarette and throwing it on the concrete floor next to him to stub it out. “Try not to finish that entire bottle of whiskey. You know how you get.”

He turned to go back into the house, and I grabbed his wrist, stopping him.

“I love you,” I said.

He stopped in his tracks, and took a second to turn back around. “What?”

“Sorry, that...was weird,” I said, dropping his wrist. “The Blades are more than just a job to me. You’re family. You’ve always been family. I don’t want to fuck it up.”

He furrowed his brow. “You won’t fuck it up,” he said. “We’re not kids anymore, Grayson. We can take care of ourselves, and each other. But when you get your head out of your ass, you’re right. This isn’t just a job for me. You’re my best friend. She’s my girlfriend. We’ll get through this. And Grayson?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you, too, man,” he said.

He turned and walked into the house, and I breathed out a long breath, suddenly exhausted.

I turned back to the lake, leaning on the railing, and looking at the calm water. The reflection of the moon was broken by the ripples my glass created as I swirled the whiskey at the bottom. I took a sip, and the alcohol burned my throat.

Maybe he was right, I thought as I finished my drink.

Maybe we could all take care of each other.

The Everglades Viper II

The thing about art is that you can't really outsource it.

You can ask people to do other parts—get your canvas ready, buy paint, even commission paintings—but the truth is, if you're not the one holding the paintbrush, even if you're giving thorough directions, it's going to fall short. I gave up painting a long time ago. My design had leaned a bit too much towards the abstract anyway, and figuring out how to express exactly what I wanted was tough.

So I chose the most flexible of canvases.

The human body.

In order to keep doing that, I needed to make sure that anyone standing in my way was taken care of. I thought that Jace Roman wouldn't be a problem—he was the weakest link in the Mercy Blades, the one who hadn't spent his life designed to be part of a gang.

And yet they had failed me, even with easy pickings.

So I needed to go to the source myself.

I knew the young cop would be a problem from the beginning, which was why I had asked Archer—sweet, useless Archer—to take care of him.

But he had dropped the ball, and I thought maybe shifting my priorities would allow me to continue operating unaffected.

It hadn't. The kid was relentless and I needed to make sure that he knew his place.

I didn't want to leave the Everglades, though. Being there didn't seem important, not yet.

So I did the next best thing.

I got the ball rolling.

After all, it didn't matter if they prepped the canvas for me as long as I got to finish the work.

Chapter Fourteen: Sofia

The smell of sex and sweat clung to the sheets, reminding me of the night I had just spent with Teo. And with Grayson. It might not have been at the same time, but I had definitely spent my night with them both. My heart raced as I recalled their hands on my body, the taste of their kisses. It was a whirlwind of passion, but now a sense of dread settled in my chest. There was no pleasure to be had when we were all still in danger, when we were in hiding because *I had put us in danger*.

There was a spread waiting for me in the dining room, lemon curd and little butter squares next to croissants, a fruit bowl with honeydew melon, grapes and watermelon pieces next to it, champagne flutes next to orange juice and uncorked champagne.

It was a lot, and I noticed that Teo straightened up while Grayson rested his head on his hand, rubbing his temple hard with his forefingers. His normally perfect skin looked slightly red around his cheeks and dark around his eyes, which were tightly shut.

“Good morning,” I chirped.

Teo shot me a look, shaking his head. “Quiet down, sunshine,” he said, his soft voice sending a shiver down my spine.

“No, don’t,” Grayson said, waving him off. “I deserve this. I don’t know why I think I can go as hard as I did when I was twenty-five. This happens every time.”

“Did you go hard?” I asked, walking up to Teo, who wrapped an arm around my waist and brought me close to him. “I don’t remember that.”

“You were already asleep,” Grayson said, standing up and walking past us so he could refill his coffee cup, which was only half-empty. I wondered how many times he’d already done this this morning. “Teo tired you out.”

There was lightness in his voice, but there was also something else there, an edge that I usually didn’t detect with him.

After I was done serving myself breakfast and we all sat around the table, Teo took a long sip of his coffee and looked right at me.

“I have something for you,” he said.

“Something else?”

He laughed as I blushed, Grayson’s gaze never quite leaving my face. Teo motioned toward a little accent table next to a large plant that decorated the entrance toward the hallway.

My eyes widened as I saw a phone—much nicer than the phone I’d lost—sitting atop a stack of thin poetry books.

“I had Jace preload a bunch of things on it, and as much of your address book as he could find, but without your old phone, I was told it was too hard to put everything in it.”

I grabbed it, feeling the cool sleekness of it against my hand. “You didn’t have to do this.”

When I turned, Teo was staring at me. “I want you to stay because you want

to stay. Not because you don't have other options. I want you here because you want to be here. And you should have your privacy. After everything you've been through, you deserve that."

I looked up at him, my eyes welling up with tears despite myself. "Still. You didn't have to do this."

"I know," he said. "But it'll be easier to get a hold of you if you have your own phone, so consider my motives entirely selfish."

I felt Grayson's hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," I said as Teo stood up. "I'm tired, I guess."

"You have goosebumps." Grayson's thumb moved over the back of my shoulder, back and forth. "Are you cold?"

"No." My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat. "I'm not cold."

"Come here." He helped me up from my chair and wrapped me in his arms. I hugged him back as tightly as I could. I didn't cry, but I felt my throat closing and was sure that if I opened my mouth, it would be a mess. I buried my face in his chest and let him hold me, and for a few minutes I was okay, despite everything. I was safe. I truly believed everything was going to be alright. Teo's gentle voice echoed from behind me.

"Eat your breakfast," Teo said from behind me. "Jace got in touch to give us a progress report on the article."

"And?" I asked, taking the plate he was handing me.

"It's been spreading, and it looks like the local news is going to pick it up," he said. "I have a contact at the TV station if we want to blow it up. I assume I don't need to tell you the repercussions of what will happen when they realize that it's you, a reporter from the Sentinel, who wrote it."

"I knew the risks going into it."

"Still," Grayson said. "Someone's going to pull your life apart. I expect

Archer's accomplices were—*are*—powerful men. They're going to try to make your life hell and dig into your past in the worst ways. You have to be ready for that."

I bit on my sweet, buttery croissant, which crunched under my teeth and in my skull. The idea of it made me shiver with dread, but I was trying to keep myself centered. "Whatever. You guys will protect me, right?"

Teo nodded. "With our lives," he said. "I promise."

I took a swig of coffee and immediately landed back in reality. "What about my brother?"

A shadow passed over Teo's face. "Jace is still trying to locate his phone."

Dread coiled itself around my stomach, tightening it. "What?"

Teo looked at me with a pained expression. "We've had no luck so far. But we're not giving up."

I felt like I was going to be sick. My brother's phone was his lifeline, the only way we could stay in contact. I couldn't imagine what would happen if something bad had happened to him. Panic rose in my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

"We'll find him, Sofia," Grayson said, his hand on my back. "We won't stop searching until we do."

I nodded, but I didn't know if I believed him. The world was a dangerous place, and my brother had always been reckless. What if he had gotten caught up in something he couldn't get out of? What if he was hurt or worse?

"I need some air," I muttered, pushing my chair back.

Teo's eyes followed me as I walked through the door and onto the patio. The warm sun felt good on my skin, but it did nothing to relieve the anxiety that was building up inside of me. I walked over to the railing and leaned on it,

staring out at the view. It was beautiful, but my mind was too preoccupied for me to truly appreciate it.

A hand landed on my shoulder, and I jumped, turning around to see Teo standing behind me. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s okay,” I said, taking a deep breath and trying to calm myself down. “I’m just...worried about my brother. I wouldn’t have agreed to come with you and Grayson if I thought there was any chance that Sam wouldn’t be okay.”

“You’re not responsible for his well-being.”

“You’re wrong, Teo,” I said as wind swept past us, a swaying palm tree casting a shadow on the bottom of his face that made him look like little more than a skull. “I was the one who decided to publish the article. I knew what was on the line. I thought you guys would protect him too but I didn’t ask because I’m...selfish. Because I’m selfish. I wanted to come here. I was getting laid while my brother was going missing.”

“Okay,” Teo said, grabbing me by the arms and looking into my eyes. “Take a deep breath, Sofia. Jace had been keeping an eye out on Sam’s devices all day and night. I told you I would make you happy, and that meant keeping your brother safe. I knew that from the jump. We couldn’t exactly go in guns blazing because we’re notorious and your brother’s a cop. Think of the optics—not just for us, but for him. That would have put him even more in danger. Jace just told me that he couldn’t ping Sam’s phone this morning during our debrief, and now we’re working on finding out where he is. It’s all hands on deck. You don’t have to worry about anything.”

I let out a shaky breath, feeling a bit better now that Teo had explained the situation to me. “Thank you. I’m sorry, I’m just...I’m scared. I don’t want anything to happen to him.”

“I know,” he said, rubbing my arms soothingly. “We’ll find him. We’ll do

everything in our power to make sure he's safe."

I nodded, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I didn't want to cry, but I couldn't help it. The stress and worry of the past few days had caught up with me, and I felt like I was on the verge of breaking down.

"I want to be involved," I said. "I know you're going to be like, oh, this is dangerous, all that shit, but can we just cut through it? I won't just sit in this mansion like I'm in a gilded cage while my brother is in danger."

Teo moved away from me, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Sofia," he said with a sigh. "You know I can't just let you walk into danger like that. You're not trained for it."

"And you are? Who trained you, Gang University?"

I saw a smile play at the corner of his lips as he shook his head. "I have experience," he said. "You're a reporter, but this is my life. Danger is part of my job."

I stared him down, feeling more resolved than ever. "Well, it's part of my job now too. I won't just sit here while my brother is out there somewhere, and Archer's goons could be closing in on him as we speak. I need to do something."

Teo looked at me, his eyes flickering with something that I couldn't quite read. "Okay," he said after a moment. "We'll figure it out. But you have to promise me that you'll listen to me. You have to trust that I know what I'm doing."

"I promise," I said, my heart racing with excitement and fear. "I'll do whatever it takes to find my brother, Teo."

He nodded, and I could see the gears turning in his head. "Okay," he said. "First things first. We need to figure out where he is. Jace is on it, but we

need to be proactive too. We can't just sit around and wait. Do you have any idea of where he might be?"

I closed my eyes tightly for a second, trying to figure out any clues of where Sam might have gone.

I could only think of one thing. It was unlikely, but it was a place to start.

"He sublets this place in The Willows," I said. "My parents were going to remodel it and rent it out before they died, and he's just been the de facto landlord since. Sorry, I should try to say, he attempted to sublet it. No one wanted it, and neither one of us was super interested in it. The building is practically condemned now, we haven't managed to sell it, but if he's hiding, it's certainly another place he could go."

"It's worth a shot," Teo said. "Get dressed. We'll go. I promise you, Sunshine. We'll find your brother."

I swallowed, my throat dry. I really, really hoped he was right.

Chapter Fifteen: Sofia

Within minutes, we were in the car, speeding through the city streets toward Sam's last known location. The buildings grew more dilapidated as we drove, and I couldn't help but worry about what we might find there. My heart seemed to echo with every beat against the car's floor.

"Here," I whispered as we pulled up to an old brick apartment building, its windows boarded up and graffiti staining the walls. The air tasted stale, like rotting wood and damp earth.

"Stay close," Grayson warned, placing a hand on my shoulder as we cautiously approached the entrance. The door creaked open, revealing a dimly lit hallway.

"Sam? Are you here?" I called out, my voice echoing through the empty space.

No response.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*...

"Look at this," Teo said, pointing to the floor. I noticed that he was walking slowly. I wondered if he was doing it because he wanted to be sneaky and

careful or if it was because his leg was bothering him. Maybe it was a combination of both. Either way, this wasn't the time to ask him. I cast my gaze to the place he had pointed out. A broken lamp lay shattered nearby, its pieces scattered across the dusty ground. "Someone's been here recently."

"Shit," I muttered, my stomach twisting in knots. "This isn't good." Images of Sam, injured or worse, flooded my thoughts, and I struggled to push them away.

"Come on," Grayson urged, leading us further into the building. Each step felt heavier than the last, anticipation and dread rising in my chest.

"Watch your step," Teo warned, shining the flashlight on his phone around the dark corners. "We don't know what we're walking into."

God, Sam, where are you? I thought, my throat tight with fear. I didn't know how much longer I could keep it together. Maybe Teo had been right, this was only my second rescue mission and I was already falling apart.

"Look at this," Grayson hissed, motioning for us to come closer. Scuff marks marred the floor, and drops of blood stained the walls. Teo flashed him a meaningful look and neither one of them said a thing.

They didn't need to. I knew exactly what that look meant.

"Sam," I choked out, my voice barely audible. "We need to find him. Now."

"Stay focused," Teo said, his voice steady despite the fear in his eyes. We needed to be smart, precise, and determined if we wanted to have any chance of saving my brother. Intellectually, I knew all of those things. In actuality, knowing them didn't help me at all.

"Let's keep moving," Grayson urged, and we pushed forward through the darkened hallways.

The air in the sublease was heavy with a metallic tang, and my heart hammered against my ribs. I could feel the fear thrumming through my veins;

every sound had me on edge. Teo and Grayson moved cautiously beside me, their eyes sharp as they scanned our surroundings.

“Wait,” Teo hissed suddenly, grabbing my arm and pulling me back just as I was about to step forward. My breath caught in my throat, an icy shiver running down my spine. “There’s something off here.”

I squinted at the floor where he was pointing, and my blood ran cold. A thin wire stretched across the hallway, barely visible in the dim light. It was a trap—one wrong move, and we’d be caught like flies in a web.

“What the fuck?” I asked. “Who would rig this place up? That’s ridiculous.”

“Someone with a lot of resources. And a lot of time,” Grayson said.

“And someone who is very, very angry,” Teo added. “Whoever took Jace must be responsible for this. You remember how huge the compound was? They must have known we were coming.”

“What about Sam?” I asked, my voice catching in my throat.

Teo’s gaze darted away from me. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Let’s deal with the here and now. Teo?” Grayson asked, his voice cutting, urgent. I didn’t think I had heard him sound scared before. Right then, he was definitely scared.

“Hard to know,” Teo said, his brow furrowed in concentration. “Explosive, gas, poison... We need to figure out how to disarm it without setting it off.”

“What?” I heard myself say, my voice shaky.

“Just stay put,” Grayson said. “You don’t do anything except what we tell you. Got it?”

I tried to answer him, but all I managed to do was nod. As we followed the wire, my heart felt like it was lodged in my throat, each beat sending a tremor of dread through my chest. The sublease seemed to close in around us, the

shadows stretching like grasping fingers. Every creak, every rustle amplified my fear.

“Looks like it leads to that panel over there,” Grayson murmured, his eyes narrowed as he studied the wall.

“Okay,” I said, swallowing hard. “So how do we disarm it?”

“First, we need to understand its mechanism,” Teo replied, taking a deep breath. “If we can figure out how it works, we might be able to find a way to bypass it.”

“By we, he means himself, Sof,” Grayson said. “Don’t worry. Teo’s got this.”

“You do?” I asked.

He flashed me a lopsided smile, his canines shining in the darkness. “You didn’t think I got this far just on looks, did you?”

“Guys, now’s not the time,” Grayson scoffed. “Teo, you can disable it, right?”

“As soon as I find it.”

“I see something,” I said. I pointed out the small, almost imperceptible switch that I had noticed on the panel. Teo leaned in to examine it, his brow furrowing with concentration. “This looks like the trigger,” he whispered, and my stomach clenched at the thought of how close we’d come to setting it off. Teo patted the pocket of his jeans and grabbed a Swiss army knife, which he then hovered over the switch.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“Shh,” he said. “Trust me. Grayson, hold this, and don’t move.”

He handed Grayson his phone, the flashlight illuminating his handiwork.

“Okay. This shouldn’t take too long, alright? But I need to focus.”

His voice was steady even as his hands trembled slightly. I knew he was good

with his hands, I obviously knew he was good with danger, I just hadn't expected him to be good with explosives, too. With his left hand, Grayson grabbed mine, holding it so tightly I could feel his heartbeat against my palm. Teo's hands were steady as he worked on disarming the trap. My heart rate sped up with each passing second. I tried to remain calm and not to disturb Teo's focus. Grayson kept a close eye on our surroundings, searching for any potential threats. The atmosphere was thick with tension, and my mind raced with thoughts of what might happen if Teo made a mistake.

I watched as Teo carefully pulled out a small screwdriver from his Swiss army knife and began to work on the switch. Each twist and turn of the screwdriver brought us closer to either safety or certain doom. As he worked, I noticed beads of sweat forming on his forehead. He was taking his time, and I tried to stay patient despite the anxiety boiling inside me.

With a gentle click, Teo disarmed the trap, and we all let out the breaths we had been holding.

"This place is rigged," Teo said. "All of it. I would ask you to go back, Sofia, but I'm not unconvinced there's someone watching us from the outside."

"I'm not going anywhere until we find Sam," I said, the stubbornness in my voice a surprise to even myself.

"She shouldn't be out of our sight," Grayson said.

Teo's jaw hardened. "He's right," he said. "But this is a trap. All of this. Keep your eyes peeled for anything else."

He was right. "Watch your step," I whispered as we rounded a corner, my breath catching in my throat when I spotted another wire stretched across the floor. We stepped over it carefully, our movements slow and deliberate.

For a second, it looked like Teo might lose his balance.

My breath ran ragged, my pulse pounding so loud that it drowned out every

other sound.

But he held his palm against the wall and steadied himself. “Are you okay?” I asked him under my breath.

“Fine,” he said. “Stay close, and let’s keep moving.”

A stale, moldy odor permeated the dark, narrow hallway. I wiped away beads of sweat forming on my forehead and swallowed hard, trying to breathe deeply so I could ignore the rising panic in my chest, my heartbeat so fast and hard I could hear it behind my ears. This abandoned brick apartment building felt like a tomb, and I prayed we wouldn’t become permanent residents.

“Damn, it’s hot in here,” Grayson muttered, tugging at his shirt collar. “Feels like hell.”

“Focus,” Teo warned, his voice strained. “We need to stay alert for traps or anything else that could be dangerous.”

“Right.” Grayson nodded, his gaze scanning every inch of our surroundings as we ventured further into the shadows. Their unwavering support bolstered my courage, but the oppressive heat and suffocating darkness threatened to choke me. “Which unit is the sublet, Sof?”

I swallowed. “2C, but I don’t think it matters now,” I said. “This entire place is a write-off. I didn’t realize how bad it was. My brother wouldn’t have come here by himself if he’d known.”

“I don’t think the Strangler targeting Sam was an accident,” Grayson said. “He probably looked into him and whatever he owned. Including this. And including...”

He let that one hang in the air, though the three of us knew he meant me.

“Fuck. Poor Sam.”

Grayson squeezed my hand. *No, not poor Sam. Poor you.* He didn’t have to say it. I got it.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “Over there. Look, that cracked door. We should check it out.”

I pushed the door open and found a room filled with junk—broken furniture, discarded clothes, and rotting newspapers. My heart pounded in my ears as I sifted through the debris, searching for any clue connected to Sam.

“Look at this,” Teo said, holding up a small, torn piece of fabric. “Is this something you recognize, Sofia?”

“It’s from his shirt,” I said, my mouth dry.

“Good find,” Grayson said, then looked at me. “We’re getting closer, Sof. We’ll find him.”

“Thanks, Grayson,” I replied, forcing a weak smile. But the knot of fear in my stomach only tightened.

The hallway darkened around us, and Grayson’s words echoed in my ears.

We’re getting closer, Sof.

We’ll find him.

As we went deeper into the belly of the beast, I realized that I wasn’t so sure we would, after all.

And that scared the shit out of me.

Chapter Sixteen: Grayson

The darkness seemed to swallow us whole as we made our way down the narrow hallway. I could hear my heart pounding in my chest, and my hands were slick with sweat. The air was thick with the stench of mold and decay, making it difficult to breathe. It was like the building was alive, and it was trying to suffocate us.

Suddenly, I heard a sound. It was a faint scratching noise, like something dragging across the floor. I froze, and so did Sofia and Teo. We looked at each other, fear etched on our faces.

“What was that?” Sofia whispered, her voice barely audible.

“I don’t know,” Teo said, his eyes scanning the darkness. “But we need to keep moving. We’re sitting ducks here.”

We took a few more steps forward, and that’s when I heard it again. This time it was louder, more frantic. It was coming from the room to our left.

“Someone’s in there,” I said. After everything that had happened, it felt strange that Sam would just be in the middle of a room in this godforsaken

building, but it made sense. Sam Reyes was the perfect bait for Sofia Reyes, and the leader of the Blades would have done anything for her.

And I would have, too.

But that wasn't the time to think about that. I leaned down so I could brush my lips against Sofia's ear, speaking softly, making sure to pronounce each word properly. "Tell me you've shot a gun before."

She froze. "Never."

"Now's a great time to learn how to use one," I said. I was packing, of course; and I'd made sure to bring a spare revolver just in case.

Teo nodded in agreement. "I've got your back," he said, pulling out his own gun.

Sofia nodded, her hand shaking as I handed her the Beretta. I could feel the tension in her body as she took the weapon from me. I placed a hand on her back, trying to calm her down. "Deep breaths, Sofia," I said. "You've got this."

"How do I use it?" she asked.

"This piece? So easy," I said. "Just aim and shoot. Don't hesitate. If someone seems like they're going to shoot at you, you shoot first. That's it."

Sofia looked at me.

"You got this. I promise," I said.

"He's right," Teo said.

Sofia nodded, visibly trying to steady her shaking hands. It was hard to watch her struggle, but I knew that she was strong. She'd been through hell and back, and she was still here, fighting to find her brother.

She was so hot with the gun in her hands, I could hardly pull my gaze away from her body.

Teo led the way, his gun raised in front of him as we crept towards the door

where the sound was coming from. The scratching had stopped, and now there was only an eerie silence.

Teo signaled for me to stand to the side of the door, ready to burst in if necessary. Sofia stood behind me, her gun pointed towards the floor, her knuckles turning white as she clutched the weapon.

I signaled for Teo to stand to the side of the door, ready to burst in if necessary. Sofia stood behind me, her gun pointed towards the floor, her knuckles turning white as she clutched the weapon.

Teo peered in. “All clear,” he said. “Stay behind me.”

He walked ahead of us, his gun drawn, scanning for any signs of danger. I clenched my fists, adrenaline coursing through my veins, ready to protect my makeshift family at all costs.

“Over here.” a weak voice came from behind a rusted metal door.

Sofia’s eyes widened. “Sam?”

“Yeah...in here...”

We rushed towards him, the sense of urgency only heightened by his frail tone.

“Stand back,” Teo warned, as he kicked the door open. There, slumped in a corner, was Sam—bruised and battered but still alive. His eyes widened in relief upon seeing us. I wondered when the door to what looked like a storage closet had been changed to a metal door, but right then, it didn’t matter.

Sofia dropped to her knees in front of her brother, my gun clattering next to her. “Sam, oh my God, you’re alive,” she whimpered. “I was so worried about you.”

He shook his head, his eyes wide and brimming with tears. “I’m so glad you found me,” he said, then looked around at us, his eyes widening, fear written all over his face. “But you shouldn’t be here. None of you should be here.”

“He’s right,” Teo said. He extended his hand toward Sam, who took it, and lifted him to his feet. “Let’s move.”

He knew, as well as we did, that danger lurked in every shadow. And whoever had done this had put a lot of effort into it.

They wanted to take us out, and they would play dirty to make it happen.

Time seemed to slow as we made our way back through the decaying building, each creak and groan a reminder of the precarious situation we were in.

“Stay close,” I whispered to Sam, my senses on high alert, ready for anything. He nodded, his jaw hardening. He looked a lot like Sofia, with the same jet black hair and wide brown eyes, though he was obviously the youngest of the two. He wasn’t quite as tall as either Teo or I, but he wasn’t short, either, and he looked like he could carry himself in a fight.

Suddenly, a group of men burst out of a nearby room, guns drawn. They were dressed in all black, their faces obscured by masks. I counted four, maybe five of them, and they looked more than ready to kill us.

Without hesitation, Teo fired the first shot. It hit one of the men in the chest, and he crumpled to the ground. The others scattered, taking cover behind overturned furniture and debris.

Sofia fired off a few rounds, her aim surprisingly accurate for someone who had never shot a gun before. At some point, Teo had obviously given Sam a gun, because he was firing at our attackers.

I could hear the sharp crack of gunfire echoing through the hallway, and the smell of gunpowder filled my nostrils. It was a frighteningly familiar scent for me, but I didn’t let it distract me. I aimed carefully, my finger hovering on the trigger.

One of the attackers peeked out from behind a table, trying to take a shot. I

fired off a round, and it hit him in the arm. He let out a cry of pain and fell back, clutching his wound. Another attacker tried to rush us, but Teo was quick to react. He tackled the man to the ground, and they grappled in a frenzy.

It was chaos, and I had to take a moment to catch my breath. We were outnumbered, but we were holding our own. Sofia had taken cover behind a large cabinet, firing off shots whenever someone came into view. Sam fired his gun with a ferocity that surprised me before I remembered the way he'd emptied the clip of his boyfriend's gun right into his mouth. Teo was still wrestling with the man on the ground, trying to disarm him.

I stood back for a moment, watching the scene unfold. There was something thrilling about this kind of danger, something that made my heart race and my blood pump faster. I knew it was dangerous, but I couldn't help feeling exhilarated by the chaos around me.

And watching Sofia...when we all got out of this, I knew what we were doing next.

I didn't think about it for too long. Teo had looked like he was winning that fight only a few seconds ago, but it was clear that his leg made him more vulnerable than ever, because a quick kick to his knee had doubled him over in pain and made him vulnerable to this attacker.

Which meant that they knew exactly what had happened.

But how? We hadn't publicized it anywhere.

They knew who we were, what we were up to. They knew more about us than I ever could have imagined.

There was no time to think about it; after making sure that I wouldn't hit Teo, I fired my revolver into the arm of the man that had pinned him down.

He let out a scream of pain, and his grip on Teo loosened. Teo took the

opportunity to punch him in the face, sending him sprawling backwards. I rushed over to help Teo to his feet, keeping my gun trained on the remaining attackers.

But they were retreating, backing away towards the door. I felt a twinge of relief mixed with unease. Why had they been so easily defeated? It had felt too easy, almost like they had wanted us to win.

At this point, I was starting to feel like they were just playing games with us—drawing blood for fun, making us suffer, playing with their prey. It made me sick.

“We need to go,” Teo grunted, limping towards the door. “Now.”

We quickly made our way out of the building, keeping our guns at the ready. But there was no one waiting for us outside, no one to stop us as we made our escape. We piled into the car, Teo in the driver’s seat, Sofia in the front, Sam next to me in the back. It wasn’t until we were a few blocks away, driving down an alleyway, that I finally spoke up.

“What the hell just happened back there?” I demanded. We hadn’t spoken at all, all of us so pumped up on adrenaline that talking had seemed entirely pointless.

Teo caught my eyes in the rearview mirror, shaking his head slightly. “Is anyone hurt?”

I looked around, taking in the group. Sam had a few scrapes and bruises, and Sofia seemed to be in shock, but other than that, we were all relatively unharmed. “No. We’re all okay back here. Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he said, catching my eyes in the mirror. “Thank you.”

He didn’t need to thank me, but I smiled at him anyway. This wasn’t him being polite. He was just buying himself a second to think. Soon, his jaw tightened, and he let out a frustrated sigh. “What the fuck was that about?”

“I have no idea,” I said, shaking my head. “But I don’t understand. Why did they just let us go like that?”

Sofia snapped her head to look at me. “That was them letting us go?” she asked, her voice shaky.

“They outnumbered us, and they were waiting for us,” Teo said. “Yeah, they let us go.”

I could see the fear in Sofia’s eyes. I wanted to reach over to touch her hand reassuringly, but Sam beat me to it. “I’m so sorry you were there.”

“Don’t be,” Sofia said. “Whatever you need, I’ll be there. Just...stop getting kidnapped, okay?”

Sam laughed, no humor in his voice.

“Don’t worry, Sof,” I said. “We’ll figure this out.”

But as we drove through the deserted streets, I couldn’t shake the feeling that this was just the beginning.

Whoever had attacked us had put a lot of effort into it, and they clearly knew what they were doing. Whatever the fuck Sofia and Sam Reyes were involved in, they were in over their heads.

And, for a change, that meant that we were too.

For the first time since I’d been part of the Mercy Blades, I knew in my bones that we didn’t have a handle on this. And things were about to get a lot worse before they got better.

Chapter Seventeen: Sofia

The air hung heavy as Teo, Grayson, Sam, and I stood in the safe house, our brows furrowed and jaws clenched. Our bodies were tense, adrenaline coursing through us like electricity on high alert. This was, I had thought, just a luxury mansion when we had first arrived.

But I had been wrong.

As we stood in the living room, glancing around, I realized that it was far more than that. The walls were made of thick concrete, reinforced with steel beams, and the windows were open, but there were thick metal shutters that were rolled up. As soon as Teo pressed a button, they would ensure no one could see in or out. Despite the security measures, the room still exuded elegance, with plush velvet couches, marble floors, and an intricate chandelier casting a warm glow over the space.

It wasn't until now that I realized just how secluded the safe house was, nestled deep within the woods, a lake flanking the entire property so it was far away from prying eyes. It certainly gave me a sense of security, but the

isolation also filled me with unease. It was a constant reminder of the danger we faced.

“Damn,” I muttered under my breath, feeling the weight of our situation pressing down on me.

“You did so good, Sof,” Grayson said.

Teo smiled at me, that damn lopsided smile that made me go weak at the knees regardless of the situation. “He’s right, sunshine. You did great.”

Sam, who had been silently observing, finally spoke up. “Thank you,” he said, his voice practically breaking. “All of you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate everything you’re doing for me.”

As I looked at the faces around me—Teo’s dark determination, Grayson’s unwavering loyalty, and Sam’s gratitude and, more importantly, safety—I couldn’t help but feel a surge of hope amidst the fear. We were trapped in a dangerous game, but we had each other. And maybe that would be enough.

I studied Sam as he sat heavily in one of the plush armchairs, his face pale and drawn. The ordeal he’d been through was evident not only in the dark circles under his eyes but also in the raw determination that burned within them. He clenched his fists tightly, his knuckles turning white.

“Here,” Grayson said softly, offering Sam a glass of water. I hadn’t even heard him go to the kitchen. “You need to stay hydrated.”

“Thanks,” Sam murmured, accepting the glass with trembling hands. He took a long sip, then set it down on the table where remnants of our forgotten breakfast remained without being cleaned up...which I guessed meant the staff was staying far away while we worked this out. The smell of pastries, coffee and eggs mixed with the air of tension that hung thickly around us.

I sat down next to my brother. “Sammy,” I said. “You’ve been around Grayson and Teo before, and you know that I trust them with my life. I trust

them with this, too. I need you to be as forthcoming as you can be about everything that happened to you, okay? The Blades can help us.”

Sam swallowed. “If you think they can help, I trust them,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “This is so much more complicated than I ever thought. Once I killed Archer, I thought this would all be over. Turns out it’s just fucking starting.”

“Sam,” Teo began, his voice low and steady. “What happened? How were you taken?”

“I was at home,” he said, then shook his head. “No, that’s not right, I went to get coffee and get some groceries at the Asian market across the street from my apartment building and I never got home.”

Teo’s brows furrowed. He moved a chair next to the dining table for me and motioned for me to sit down. He leaned against the dining room table, his hair wet from the humidity, his skin clammy. Despite his obvious concentration, and how even-keeled he was, I could tell he was in pain.

I slid my hand above his, squeezing it softly. He smiled, just for a split second, before he addressed my brother again. “Do you remember anything unusual happening at the market?”

“It’s hard to pinpoint, but I felt like I was being watched,” he said. “When I left the market, I was attacked from behind. I could normally handle myself, but it was more than one guy. They waited until I was in a secluded alleyway so they could do it without arousing any suspicion. They didn’t hurt me except to put me in the back of a van or a car or something; honestly, I wasn’t sure, I couldn’t see very well. They put a bag over my head at some point.”

My stomach dropped. Sam had been through so much already. I should’ve been there, protecting him from the get go, not making him a target with a stupid article.

“Stop looking at me like that, Sof,” he said. “I don’t want your pity.”

I frowned, pulling my hand away from Teo’s. “It’s not pity, Sammy. It’s anger. This should never have happened to you.”

“We’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again,” Teo said authoritatively, and I absolutely believed him. “What happened after that?”

“I couldn’t tell where they drove me to,” Sam said, running a hand through his disheveled hair. “I was blindfolded and driven in circles. I couldn’t see anything, but I heard them talking...and I think they plan to frame me for Jace’s murder.”

Teo and Grayson looked at each other. “Jace is alive.”

“I know,” Sam said. “I don’t think that was the plan, though.”

We all went silent as we tried to process what Sam had just said. Framing him for Jace’s murder? That was a new level of messed up. And it meant that whoever was behind all of this had some serious resources.

“Fucking assholes,” Grayson spat, slamming a lone fist onto the table, making the plates rattle. My heart raced at the sudden sound, fear prickling up my spine. I picked up my head to look at him. Grayson cleared his throat.

“Sorry, sorry. Sam, go on.”

“They were going to plant evidence and use their connections to make sure I went down for this.”

Teo and Grayson exchanged a glance, and I couldn’t quite make out what that was supposed to mean.

“But Jace is alive,” I said.

“Yeah, Jace is alive right now,” Sam replied. “And to be clear, I don’t think they were going to try and frame me with the authorities. I think they were going to try and frame me with...”

He looked around for a second, his gaze finally stopping on Teo’s face.

“Well, with you.”

“Makes sense,” Grayson said. “The Blades are known for being violent, and Teo isn’t known for his patience. If someone wanted to get rid of you, putting you in Teo’s crosshairs isn’t a bad move.”

Teo released an angry breath. “We’re going to make sure they don’t have the opportunity to hurt Jace or frame you for anything,” he said, addressing Sam through gritted teeth. “Go on.”

“After we got there, I woke up in a room I didn’t recognize. It smelled damp. It was dark, and they kept me blindfolded most of the time. But I could hear...water. Like we were near a river or something.”

“Anything else?” Grayson probed gently, trying to jog Sam’s memory.

“Footsteps echoing...it felt like a large, empty space. Maybe an abandoned warehouse,” Sam added, his brow furrowing as he pieced together the fragments of information.

“Not a warehouse,” I said. “The sublet.”

Sam’s gaze shot to my eyes, his brows creased. “Fuck, really?”

I nodded. “It’s so messed up, kid.”

Teo cut in. “Did you see or hear anything?”

“I didn’t really see anything,” he said. “They kept me blindfolded for most of the time. I could see a little bit when they took it off to give me water.”

“Wait, how long were you there?” I asked, my mouth dry.

“Not long. Maybe five hours?” Sam offered. “I didn’t see anything, but I did hear something. Someone...from the station. His voice, it’s unmistakable. Captain Monroe.”

“Your boss?” I asked, my jaw dropping.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Looks like Archer wasn’t the only bad guy. We’re not just dealing with one bad cop—there’s a whole network of them.”

A heavy silence settled over the room as we absorbed the gravity of Sam's words. Suddenly, our world seemed much smaller, more confined, and I felt like I was suffocating. He had mentioned something about the chief when he told us about the compound and immediately dismissed it.

"Those bastards," Grayson muttered, his eyes narrowing with anger. "We'll make them pay for what they've done to you, Sam. And what they're trying to do to Jace."

"Agreed," Teo said, his voice firm and resolute. "But we need a plan. We can't just go in guns blazing—that's exactly what they want us to do."

"We have to be smart about this," I added, my mind racing with possibilities. "Expose them from the inside out...bring their corruption to light."

"Exactly," Sam said, determination hardening his features. "I may not have seen much during my captivity, but I did pick up on one thing: they're getting sloppy. They think they're untouchable, and that overconfidence will be their downfall."

"Assholes," Grayson said under his breath. "It doesn't surprise me that they're scrambling now, though. I have a pretty good feeling that they had to accelerate their plans after you published your article, Sof."

"I know," I murmured, guilt tugging at my heart. "And I've felt like shit ever since."

"Don't," Sam said, his eyes pleading with me. "It doesn't matter, not now. We have a lot to do and not a lot of time to do it."

"True," Grayson chimed in. "And you know what, I think they're so busy scrambling to get their shit together that's why they didn't hurt you, Sof—they didn't have time. But I also think you're probably the target, too."

I swallowed. "Yeah, I figured as much," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "But I'm not going to let them intimidate me."

He was right. That was something.

“And I have you,” I said, looking at Sam. “That’s more than enough.”

The corners of his mouth curled up into a subtle smile. “Thanks, Sof. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you. I really...I should have been the one protecting you from the beginning.”

“I’m your big sister. You took plenty of care of me when our parents died. Now it’s my turn. And Sammy, you’d find a way, just like you always do. You’re a survivor, Sam. That’s what you do.”

“Maybe so,” he said, looking away from me. “Nowadays, I’m not so sure.”

Chapter Eighteen: Sofia

Rain pattered against the windows of the safehouse as if trying to get in. The golden light from the chandelier flickered above us, casting eerie shadows on the walls. The mansion itself appeared less modern around us, as if it had aged hundreds of years in the span of a couple of hours.

I couldn't tell if the house was haunted, or if I was.

My head pounded. My ears still rang from the firefight earlier as I suddenly, slowly, began to get to grips with everything that had happened to us just that fucking day. Now that we'd settled in and were making plans, I realized I had been running on pure adrenaline, and the comedown was rough.

Teo paced back and forth, his hand gripping the back of his neck, muscles tense. He stopped every now and then to take a break, leaning his entire weight on his good leg.

This had to be hurting him.

"Listen up," he finally said, stopping in front of us. "We need to stick together. There's too much at stake, and we can't risk being framed or turned against each other."

At any other time, I would've called him out. It had been their idea to split up in the first place.

"We didn't think they would target Sam," Grayson said, his gaze landing on me. "We should have considered that. With how tense things were, I also thought it might be nice to get away from HQ for a bit."

His look turned from focused to apologetic. It wasn't just a strategy move, we'd been here so we could fuck in privacy without Jace and Victor in the way. I didn't have it in me to be mad, I was too relieved about rescuing Sam, but it did make me think that their plans weren't nearly as thought through as Grayson and Teo acted like they were.

I glanced around the room, my eyes landing on my brother. His jaw was set tight, a clear sign that he had more on his mind than he was letting on. He looked up, meeting my gaze, before speaking up.

"Monroe...I think he was involved with the Orchid Strangler from the beginning," Sam said, his voice barely above a whisper. I noticed he hadn't used the killer's name, and I felt for him. "I didn't want to see it when I was...involved with Archer. Fuck..."

My heart clenched at the pain in his eyes. He'd been so close to that monster, blinded by love. But now the truth was seeping out like blood from a wound, and there was no going back.

The truth was supposed to help, not trap us in this nightmare.

"Are you sure?" I asked, my voice trembling.

Sam nodded, the weight of his guilt heavy in his expression. "Yeah, I'm sure. But I'll do whatever it takes to make things right."

Teo stepped closer to Sam, his eyes filled with determination. "We'll figure this out together. We're a team, after all."

I had to hold back the urge to flash him a grateful smile. Teo said he would

do anything to make me happy, and that included keeping my brother safe, but I didn't expect him to actually welcome Sam into the fold.

"Thanks, Teo," Sam said softly. "You're not at all how I expected you to be." Teo flashed him a crooked smile. "Trust me," he said. "I can be very unreasonable."

As they spoke, I stared down at my hands, feeling the fear coil tighter around me like a snake. I was trapped in this darkness, unable to escape the danger that lurked around every corner. And as much as I wanted to believe that we could overcome this, a part of me couldn't help but feel like a bad luck charm, drawing danger to everyone I cared about.

Sam had told me to drop it. If I had dropped it, would he still be in danger? Would he have been able to bring Archer to justice by himself? The possibility existed, and it made my stomach turn.

"Alright," Teo said, clapping his hands together. "We'll stay here tonight and figure out our next move in the morning."

I looked up at him, nodding. There was no other choice. The storm outside raged on, the wind howling like a trapped animal. But inside this mansion, we were all prisoners—trapped by fear, haunted by the ghosts of our pasts, and bound together by the hope that somehow, we could make things right again.

The rain beat against the window, each drop a chilling reminder of the storm brewing outside as well as within our group. The air was thick with tension and uncertainty, suffocating me like a heavy blanket. I glanced around the dimly lit room, taking in the faces of those I had come to care for so deeply.

And we were all in mortal danger.

Because of me.

I had done this.

"Sam," I said softly, placing a hand on his arm. His eyes met mine, their

usual warmth clouded by the burden of guilt. “We’ll find a way out of all this shit. We’re in this together, remember?”

He nodded, forcing a weak smile. “I know. Thanks, Sof.”

As we shared a moment of quiet understanding, Grayson cleared his throat, drawing everyone’s attention. “We should ask Victor and Jace to join us. Right now, with these people targeting us...I don’t know. I don’t think we should be apart.”

“Absolutely,” Teo decided, clapping his hands together. “Make the call and have them join us. We’re better off tackling this head-on, together. I can’t believe I didn’t see it...”

There was nothing else to say.

It felt like we couldn’t stop making mistakes...or maybe that was just because the forces working against us were impossibly powerful.

We all said good night, Grayson told Sam he would show him to his room, and I made my way toward the room that Teo had given me. For the first time since getting there, it didn’t escape my notice that I was in the furthest room in the back, probably in case of a security breach.

I sighed, leaning against the door as I closed it. Ever since that man had broken into my apartment, my life had felt non-stop, and I hadn’t had a second to take a beat. But everything was happening so quickly; my relationship with Teo and with Grayson, the fact that my brother still seemed to be in danger, the weight of a gun in my hands...

Too much to bear. Too much to think about. My stomach turned as I thought about it.

I made my way toward the bathroom and turned the faucet in the shower to be as hot as possible.

As I stepped into the steamy shower, I closed my eyes, letting the water

cascade over me. The heat was almost unbearable, but it felt good against my skin, soothing my sore muscles. As I ran my fingers through my wet hair, I couldn't shake off the feeling of dread that had settled in my stomach.

I tried not to let my thoughts wander too much. It was useless to think too much about it when there was absolutely nothing I could do.

I stepped out of the shower with a fluffy white towel wrapped around me, my hair dripping down my back. I was ready to have some time alone—to take a breath and figure out what to do next, who I was without the Blades if it came down to it.

“Hey,” Teo's voice startled me, and I looked up with a gasp to see him standing by the window, his silhouette framed by the moonlight. “You okay?”

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Not long. I can leave. I'm sorry if I scared you.”

“You didn't scare me,” I said. “And I'm not, you know. Okay.”

He tilted his head, a loose strand of hair falling between his eyes. “Come here,” he said. “Let me see how you're doing.”

I took a step toward him, and he slowly slid his hand down my shoulder, toward where I'd folded the towel. The electric light of the bedside lamp barely illuminated Teo's face, but I could see the concern in the furrow of his brow, the muscle twitching in his jaw.

And...well, I could see the pain.

He was still hurt, but he was asking me if I was okay.

His hand traced the outline of my skin, down my side, toward the juncture of my thighs. But he didn't touch me there; no, he just kept looking at me for injuries, as if it wouldn't bother him if I was covered in blood.

“You're not bleeding from anywhere,” he finally said softly. “You have some

scrapes and bumps, though. Are your ears ringing?”

I nodded.

He tutted. “Yeah, that happens,” he said. “Guns are loud.”

I leaned my head back, letting out a shaky breath. Teo’s touch was soothing, his concern almost overwhelming. But as I looked up at him, silhouetted in the moving silver light from the rain, all I felt was raw desire coursing through me.

Right then, I didn’t want to think about the danger that surrounded us. I just wanted Teo—all of him.

Without a word, I reached up and took his face in my hands, pulling him down to meet my lips. His mouth was warm and soft, and as I ran my tongue along his lower lip, he groaned, deepening the kiss. I wanted to feel the heat of him compared to the cool rain outside—to feel safe for the first time since I’d been taken from my apartment.

Teo was a killer, I knew that. But he made me feel like nothing could touch me.

Nothing except him, of course.

His hands roamed over my wet skin, his caress igniting every nerve in my body. I moaned into his mouth as he scooped me up in his arms, carrying me to the bed.

He laid me down gently, his eyes dark with desire as he hovered above me.

“Teo—” I began, but the words got stuck in my throat. I needed him so much right then. I needed his hands on my skin, his lips on my neck.

With everything that had happened, I needed him to feel alive. I wanted to be close to him, feel his warmth on my skin.

Everything that had happened between us...it didn’t matter. This man could read my body like a second language, and I wanted him to set me on fire,

because when he did, I didn't worry about a fucking thing.

All I worried about was the way his expert touch made me feel.

"This seems unfair," I said. "You're wearing clothes and I'm not."

He flashed me that gorgeous lopsided smile, the lamp illuminating only one side of his face, and then pulled his shirt off, revealing the lines of his muscles beneath.

"Better?"

I nodded.

"Good," he said, dipping his head down for a quick kiss. He ran his hands down my sides, his fingers tracing the curve of my waist. I shivered at his touch, my skin prickling with need.

"You're so beautiful," he said, his voice soft. "I'll take care of you tonight."

As he leaned down to kiss me, I looked up at him. His eyes met mine, and I felt my breath coming faster as he ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

I needed his hands on me.

I tugged at his pants, working them off of him quickly as he pressed his lips to my neck. I felt his hips between my legs as he rocked against me, his hands skimming over the curves of my breasts.

"Teo," I moaned, closing my eyes. "Please, I need you..."

He moved quickly, his hands brushing aside the tiny bit of towel that still covered part of my body. He slipped his fingers between my lips, his thumb tracing the outline of my clit. He was so good at this. He watched my face, his gaze never leaving it, following each silent cue I gave him.

Not that I could think much about that. All I could think about was how much I wanted him.

I was already soaked just kissing him.

I felt my muscles tightening as he stroked me, my nerves on fire as he moved

his mouth down to my breast. He rolled one of my nipples between his lips, teasing me as he continued to stroke my clit.

I moaned as he moved his fingers in slow circles over me, my body tingling with pleasure, spreading from my core to the tips of my fingers and toes.

“Does that feel good, sunshine?”

I nodded. I couldn’t even speak, the pleasure was so overwhelming.

“I love how wet you get when I touch you,” he said, his voice low.

“Teo, please...” I moaned, reaching down to run my fingers through his hair.

“Are you ready for me?”

I nodded, looking into his eyes as I did. He looked down at me, eyes filled with fire, and then he slid inside...inch by devastating inch. He stilled for a second, letting me get used to his impressive girth.

His voice rumbled in his chest, groaning with pleasure. I could tell he wanted to go crazy—to rut like an animal—but he paused. “Are you okay?” he asked.

I nodded, my mouth dry. “Are you?”

“I have to pace myself with you,” he said. “You’re so fucking gorgeous that I feel like I could come as soon as I’m inside of you. But I...”

He gripped my hips and thrust deep inside of me, his eyes never leaving mine as he moved in and out.

“Does that feel good?” he said, his voice low.

“So good.”

“Fuck, you’re so wet,” he said softly. “I love your pussy.”

I felt my body beginning to tighten around him. Teo’s hands gripped me tighter, his hips moving faster. He worked a finger on my clit, hard, soft, moving along with the rhythm he’d found while he was fucking me.

It was too much. He was too much.

“Fuck, I’m going to come,” I managed to say between moans.

“Do it,” he said, his voice low. “Come for me.”

I met his lust-clouded eyes and he let out this low, deep, guttural moan that made me unravel. The pleasure ripped through me, my body tightening around his cock as he moved deeper inside of me. He pressed his lips to my neck, sucking and tracing the outline of my collarbone with his tongue as he thrust his cock in and out of me.

I pulled his head closer to me, our eyes meeting.

“Teo,” I moaned, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“I got you, sunshine,” he said. “I got you.”

He kept moving, his thumb working my clit in time with his thrusts. I gripped the sheets in my hands, my muscles tight with pleasure as he moved inside me.

“That’s right,” he said, his muscles straining as he tried to hold himself back.

“Do you think you can come for me again?”

“Yes,” I said breathlessly. “Yes.”

I reached my arms around his neck, pulling him down to kiss me. His tongue worked its way into my mouth, and I fought to catch my breath as he kissed me, our bodies moving in time with one another.

He slowed, moving in long, languid strokes as my body came down from its high. Every inch of me was throbbing with desire; every nerve was cradled in pleasure, and my skin felt like it was on fire.

I was riding the peak of my orgasm again, fireworks exploding behind my eyelids as my core tightened around his cock.

He grunted in my ear as he came inside of me, turning my name over like sticky brown sugar in his mouth.

Teo fell to the side, bringing me with him as he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me close to him. I buried my face in his neck, breathing in his

warm scent.

We were both covered in cooling sweat, the AC barely keeping up with the heat of our bodies. I ran my hand over his bare chest, tracing the outline of his muscles with my fingertips.

“Good?” he said, his voice soft. I could hear the smile in it.

“Good,” I said, smiling back at him.

“I think I finally got the hang of this whole boyfriend thing.”

“What?” I asked, my heart leaping in my chest. Boyfriend thing? That sounded like something we needed to discuss.

Blood rushed to his cheeks. “Doesn’t matter,” he said. “You said you weren’t okay before this. Do you want to talk about it?”

Now that we were winding down, and my heart was slowing, I settled into the crook of his arm.

And I talked.

Chapter Nineteen: Teo

Sofia curled up in my arms, and I felt the warmth of her skin on mine as she took a deep breath. Her hair was still wet from the shower and the room smelled of sex, sweat and soap now.

She wasn't looking at me when she spoke, her voice so quiet I had to strain to hear her. She seemed more like herself when we were having sex, but I'd gone and messed it up by calling myself her boyfriend.

She had bigger problems. We all had bigger problems.

I kissed the top of her head. "I'm here, Sof," I said.

She sighed, curling up even tighter. "I think this is all my fault, Teo," I said. "I'm the one who made all of this happen. The one who made it so someone kidnapped Jace, the one who put my brother in danger."

I shook my head. "This isn't your fault," I said. "Not in any way, shape or form."

"Isn't it?" she whispered. Even though I couldn't see her face, I could tell she was holding back tears. "Ever since I got involved with you guys, things have

only gotten worse. I feel like a bad luck charm, bringing danger to everyone I care about.”

I shook my head, gently guiding her face up so I could look at her. She didn't respond. “Come here,” I said. “I want to look into your eyes while we talk.”

She didn't say anything and she didn't move, so I swept her into my arms, cradling her body against mine. She rested her head on my chest, her arms around my shoulders as I wrapped her in my embrace. I was covered in sweat, but I didn't care. “You aren't a bad luck charm,” I said. “Without you, the Orchid Strangler would still be killing people.”

“I should've known he was hurting Sam.”

“There was no way for you to know, Sofia,” I said. “People like that...their talents lie in making sure that you feel crazy. Your brother is a smart man, and yet, he was scared of Archer, and for good reason. Without you, Sam would still be getting hurt by the Strangler.”

She finally rolled off me, her head hitting the pillow, her black-blonde hair around her face like a halo. “What if it's not enough, Teo? What if I'm the one responsible for all of this?”

“You're not. You've helped us more than you know. Without you, we would have never killed the Strangler, and that article that you published, the one that has them so afraid? It would have never happened. You're brave and resourceful, and we need people like you.”

“But what if it's not enough, Teo?” she repeated. Her voice cracked and she sounded like she was on the verge of crying. “What if I can't protect the people I love? What if I make things worse?”

There was a part of me that was surprised Sofia was this naïve, though I shouldn't have been; of course she wasn't used to this world the same way

that we were. Murder, blood, danger...they were all a currency I was deeply familiar with.

Sofia was a nice girl from a nice family. She shouldn't have thought that she was the one responsible for any of this.

I was thinking about how to tell her that when her dark eyes met mine, her pupils expanding and her eyes brimming with tears. "I'm so sorry for dragging you all into this mess."

"Hey, now," I said gently, a crooked finger stroking the outline of her face. "You didn't drag us into anything. We were already neck-deep in crime before you came along. I did kidnap you and everything, remember?"

She swallowed, then flashed me a thin smile. "That feels like it happened so long ago."

I smiled back at her, my thumb brushing the tears out of her eyes. They slid down her face, warm and wet as they disappeared into the pillow. "You're not alone in this, Sof," I said. "Whatever happens, you're part of this now, and I would do anything to protect you. We all would. You couldn't be in a better place right now."

She looked up into my eyes. "I didn't mess things up between you and Grayson, did I?"

"No," I said. "Grayson knows his place. And your place...well, as far as I'm concerned, it's right next to me."

She laughed, biting her lower lip. "You're so corny," she said.

"Besides," I continued, still looking into her eyes. "You've given us something to fight for, a reason to become better people. You don't have to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, Sofia. Just trust us. There's so much we can do. And I would do anything for you."

There was a long silence before she responded. Her hand found mine, and she

squeezed it. “Thank you,” she said. “That makes me feel better.”

“And you trust me?”

“Yes,” she replied. “With my life.”

“Good,” I said softly. “Look, Sof, I’ve made lots of mistakes in my life. You aren’t one of them. I know that for a fact.”

“How?”

“I can feel it in my bones,” I said. “Every time I look at you.”

“That doesn’t seem like enough.”

“It’s a lot,” I replied. “My instincts have kept me alive thus far. And mostly away from blood. When my gut talks, I listen.”

She smiled at me, her eyes closing and her body relaxing. “Okay,” she said.

“Believe it or not, that helps.”

After a little while, she drifted off to sleep. And I stayed awake, because while my instincts might have been telling me that she was good for me, they also told me that we were in danger.

Far, far worse than we had ever been before.

Except with Sofia in my arms now, I had a lot more to lose.

Chapter Twenty: Grayson

I didn't know exactly what time it was, but it was late. The street lights were still on and the moon was still shining in the sky, the fading light slinking through the blinds, casting a thin white stripe in the darkness of the room. I was used to sleeping in different houses and in different bedrooms, but I found this one in particular difficult to relax in, and I was having a hard time winding down after the gunfight earlier.

I could see the way Sofia held my gun in her hands, the fear in her eyes when we'd found her brother. She had been through enough. And then, of course, I had heard Teo made her feel better by fucking her.

Right next door to me. Just loud enough for me to hear.

I didn't think he was doing it to be an asshole. I could tell he genuinely wanted to look after Sofia.

But it didn't matter, because it had been an asshole move.

I tossed and turned in the queen bed until I realized I wasn't going to sleep. I needed to talk to Jace and Victor anyway, and I could do that from bed. I sat

up, took a swig of the water bottle on my nightstand table, and pressed the phone to my ear.

Jace picked up after the first ring, the cold metal of the phone pressed against my ear as Jace's voice crackled through. "Hey, man. What's the update?"

"I don't know how much Teo told you earlier," I said. "We managed to extract Sam but things were touch-and-go there for a minute."

"You guys okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "How are you two?"

"Fine, but..." Jace trailed off. "I don't know. I feel like we might have been made. There was a car trailing us as we drove away from HQ."

"You think or you know?"

"Just think," he said. "Figured I might still be paranoid since I got snatched off the street."

I sighed, exhaling heavily through my nose. "I think it makes sense to be on high alert right now," I said. "Did Teo tell you to come here yet? You should head back now, if possible. We need to regroup."

"He did, but we were going to wait until tomorrow."

"Don't," I said. "They let us off easy today. Something smells fishy to me. I'll send you a pin now."

A beat. "Alright," he said. "Whatever works. Victor and I will be on our way as soon as we can. I'll see you soon."

Click. The line went dead.

I knew I wasn't going to get any sleep, so I stood up and made my way toward the kitchen. When I turned the light on, I practically jumped when I saw Sam sitting on a barstool at the kitchen island, his arms resting over the dark marble surface.

"Shit," he said, looking up at me. "Sorry, Grayson. Didn't mean to startle

you.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay,” I said. “Are you sure you just want to...sit here? In the dark?”

Sam shrugged. “I can’t sleep. Too much adrenaline, I guess. And I don’t want to be alone.”

I understood. After everything that had happened, being alone was the last thing any of us wanted. “Alright,” I said. I grabbed a jug of water from the fridge, two glasses, and turned around, pulling out a chair and sitting across from him. “What’s on your mind?”

He ran a hand through his hair, exhaling loudly. “I just keep thinking about what would have happened if you guys hadn’t come for me. If you hadn’t found me in time...”

“But we did,” I said firmly. “And we’re all here now, safe. That’s what matters.”

“I’m supposed to be a cop. You guys are a gang. You aren’t supposed to be the ones looking out for me,” he said between gritted teeth.

I shook my head. “Things aren’t that simple,” I said. “This isn’t a game of cops and robbers, Sam. Sometimes, the lines between good and bad can get blurred. And at the end of the day, we’re all just people trying to survive.”

Sam nodded, taking a sip of his water. “I know,” he said. “It’s just hard to reconcile sometimes. All I wanted to do was help my sister and it seems like I’ve only managed to make life more difficult for her.”

I let the cool water slide down my throat. “Maybe. I think you’ve probably made her life a lot more interesting, too.”

“Teo?”

And me, I guessed, but he didn’t need to know that. I shrugged. “He’s rich, he’s handsome, and I’ve never seen him treat a woman poorly.”

I waved him off. It really hadn't been that many, but Teo had a reputation to uphold.

"The target, well, that's definitely a downside. But he can handle himself," I said. "And he's smart. He always knows how to get out of a sticky situation." Sam chuckled. "Yeah, I saw that today. The stories about him all seem like they're true."

"They're not...all true. He also has a great PR department."

"By which you mean, you?"

I shrugged, winking at him. "Now I can't give all my secrets away to a cop, can I?"

He laughed, his shoulders relaxing a little.

"He's not the only one, Sam," I said. "Someone kidnapped you, you were weak, and you still held your own pretty well back there."

Sam's expression faltered. "I don't know about that," he said. "I froze up when they had me."

"It happens to the best of us," I said. "But you pulled through and that's what matters. You're stronger than you think, Sam."

"Has it ever happened to you?"

"What? Freezing up?" I asked.

He nodded. I swallowed, my head suddenly pounding. I didn't really tell this story much, but it really sounded like Sam needed to hear it. I filled my mouth with cool water, letting it coat my tongue before I swallowed.

"Definitely," I said. "Do you know how Teo and I met?"

"Let me guess. On the streets?"

I laughed. "No," I said. "We were both teenagers, sure, and it's only slightly less predictable than that. We were in juvie. I was there because I'd been stealing cars and Teo was in there for aggravated assault."

“You had your records expunged,” he said, more to himself than to me.

“Yes,” I said. “We both got out before we were eighteen, and I figured anonymity would be useful for both of us. But before any of that, he was one of the only boys in juvie that didn’t try to mess with me. I was happy to fuck with anyone who tried to come my way, but I was a scrawny kid dealing with people who had been in this life for far longer than I had been in it. I thought I had to fight all the time, and here was this guy who was calm, collected, always seemed to have a plan. And he never froze up. Not even once.”

Sam looked into my eyes. “But you did.”

“Oh, yeah, big time,” I replied. “I wasn’t just a scrawny kid who was always itching for a fight, I had..inclinations some of my peers didn’t appreciate.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “You’re gay?”

I laughed. “Nah,” I said. “I’m just an opportunist.”

His cheeks flushed. “Oh.”

“But I didn’t really appreciate that some people would take advantage of that. I was a kid, you know? I didn’t have a filter, and I had no idea what I was doing.”

Sam nodded. “That makes sense. It took me a long time to figure out who I was, too, though I didn’t land on ‘opportunist’. So what happened?”

“Well, at one point, when I was fourteen, I was put into the same cell as a guy who was a couple of years older than I was. I fought him a lot, but he was bigger than me, and I...I guess I tried to tell myself that I liked him the way he liked me. I did not. He had no issues with me being in there with him as long as I did what he said. I didn’t even really understand what that meant, but I didn’t hesitate. I knew it meant food, shelter, safety. Things I didn’t have at home.”

“God,” Sam said. “I’m sorry.”

I waved him off. “Don’t be. Like I said, I was a kid. I didn’t know any better. So I did what he said. I was protected. And then one day, Teo came in.”

“When it was like...actively happening?”

I nodded. “Yes,” I said. “And to be clear, Sam, I had frozen up every single time up to this point.”

His eyes widened. “Grayson...”

I knew he couldn’t find the words. No one could ever find the words. It didn’t really matter—that wasn’t what the story was about—and the next part was seared in my brain, part of my identity as deep as my DNA.

I waved Sam off. “Teo fucked him up,” I said, remembering the way his fists flew and landed on Anton’s face. I could still hear the sound of his punches when I closed my eyes. “He beat the shit out of him. Put him in the infirmary. Risked extending his sentence so he would have to age out of juvie rather than get out. He didn’t know me, he didn’t have to do that.”

“Wow.”

“Right,” I said. “And the weirdest part was that he passed out.”

“Your cellmate?”

“Teo,” I said. “Yeah—between us, blood makes him incredibly queasy.”

“Wait, really?” Sam asked, a smile playing on his lips.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “I found it hard to believe. But after that, it was like something in me had shifted. Teo is tough, but he’s sharp, and he’s always been protective. Having his protection made being in juvie a far more enjoyable experience. I mean, even back then, everyone knew who the Blades were. And who he was in them.”

“The Prince of the Blades.”

“The very same.”

“And you never froze up again?”

I paused, thinking back to all the times I'd been in dangerous situations since then. "I can't say that," I admitted. "But I learned that freezing up doesn't mean you're weak. It just means you need more practice. And that's okay."

Sam nodded. It looked like he understood. "So what happened with you and...I don't know. Your cellmate? Teo?"

"My cellmate never touched me again on threat of death, no one snitched on Teo and I kind of got a little crush on him," I said, then winked at him. "And the rest is history."

The Everglades Viper III

I realize now what I suspected at the beginning: I should've been handling things myself.

I can set things in motion, certainly, but it seems like I'm the only one able to finish things. The Everglades is my home—it has been for years.

But now I need to turn back, drive up north to a place that I don't like returning to. I had already been showing my face plenty, just so I could keep a leash on Archer Holden, before he lost his fucking mind.

We had a plan, and he decided to go and ruin it.

He was impulsive. The people I had hired, they weren't impulsive. They were results-oriented. That was all that I needed.

I didn't need anyone to kill the kids. I needed them to corral them, to make sure they led me to places where I would be able to handle them myself.

Death was easy, but art was hard.

And the plan had always been to make art.

When it came to my pièce de résistance, I couldn't think of a better medium.

Chapter Twenty-One: Grayson

Sam looked like he was processing what I was saying when my phone vibrated in my pocket. “Sorry, one sec,” I said, looking down at the screen and seeing Jace’s contact card flash on it. “I need to take this. Hello?” “Sinclair,” Jace said. He sounded like he was out of breath. “Someone is definitely tailing us. Are you sure you want us to drive them straight to you?” I tapped on the marble, thinking. “How many?” “One car,” he said. A brief moment, where I could hear Victor speak in the car, but couldn’t make out what he was saying. “There are two people in it.” I rubbed my temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache. “Okay. Yes, bring them to me.” “You sure?” Jace sounded hesitant. “They’re bold. I think they’re dangerous.” I held back a smile. “Yeah, don’t worry,” I said. “We can handle it. Just need to wake Teo up. Make sure you guys are prepared. If we can lure them in, then maybe they’ll be the ones walking into a trap instead of us.” Jace exhaled. “Fine,” he said. “If you’re sure, Gray.”

“I’m sure,” I said.

“Got it. We’ll be there soon.”

I hung up and looked at Sam. “We’re going to have company really soon,” I said. “Jace and Victor are bringing them here.”

“Who is it?”

“Not sure, but I have a feeling they’re tied into this whole thing,” I said.

“Look, Sam, you can stay here if you need to. I know you need time to recover. But if these people are as dangerous as they seem, we need to be prepared.”

Sam nodded, his jaw hardening. “Right. Tell me what I need to do.”

“Honestly, just brace yourself.”

“Are you going to tell Teo?”

I furrowed my brow. Normally, I would have, but I thought we could handle this. “Maybe,” I said. “If things go wrong. Our first priority is making sure Sofia is safe, and you, too.”

I could see the worry in Sam’s eyes, but he nodded again. “Okay. Let’s do this,” he said, determination coloring his voice.

“We should wait by the gate,” I said.

“We should.”

The night was warm when we stepped out of the mansion. I shot Teo a text to let him know what was happening, so he could join if he felt like he needed to, but I really hoped it wouldn’t get to that.

He sent me back a thumbs up acknowledging that he got it, and Sam and I made our way to the gates to wait. We didn’t even have time to make conversation before the sound of tires screeching on the pavement alerted us to the arrival of Jace and Victor in their car.

They were being followed by a black Escalade that came to a sudden stop

just before the gate.

Everything after that was a blur. Jace rolled down the window quickly. “Get down, get down, get down!”

I tried to pull Sam down with me, but he was already there. The car Victor and Jace came in halted and both of them leapt out, holding their guns. Shots rang in the air and filled it with the scent of gunpowder.

As the Escalade’s occupants fired back, Sam and I stayed low, taking cover behind the gate. I could hear Jace and Victor shouting orders to each other, but I was too focused on the sound of the bullets whizzing past us. I peeked over the gate, trying to get a glimpse of our attackers. There were two of them, both wearing masks. They were firing wildly, not even bothering to aim.

The passenger in the Escalade wore a balaclava, and he leaned out of the window to aim his gun at us. Without thinking, I pulled out my own weapon and fired. The shot hit the car’s side mirror, shattering it into a million pieces. It felt like these guys were confident they could take us, and that we couldn’t cover our tracks...of course, they didn’t know there was more than one Escalade at the bottom of the lake behind the safehouse.

We knew how to cover our tracks.

The attacking car accelerated and drove straight at the gate. I heard Jace and Victor yelling, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. All I could see was the car barreling towards us, and I knew we had to act fast.

I leveled my gun to point at the tire. Things like this weren’t like they were in movies, and I wasn’t a sharpshooter. I preferred using my gun at the best of times and this was most certainly not the best of times.

So when I shot at the tire, it didn’t exactly blow it to pieces.

But it was enough to slow it down.

The car skidded and hit the concrete pillar on one side of the gate, smoke and steam billowing out from under the hood. The attackers stumbled out, their guns still in their hands, but they were disoriented from the impact of the crash.

“Stay down!” Jace shouted, and he and Victor moved forward, guns aimed at the attackers.

One of them hesitated for a moment, then took off running down the street when Victor got a shot right to his friend’s forehead, sending him to the ground.

“Stay here,” I growled at Sam and gave chase before I could think it through. I followed the attackers, my heart racing as I tried to catch up to them, my muscles burning. They were fast, sure...but these guys obviously didn’t know who they were fucking with, because I could see them turning a corner up ahead, and I knew if I lost them, I might never find out who they were or what they wanted with us.

As I rounded the corner, I saw one of the attackers reach for the gun in his waistband. I tackled him, sending both of us tumbling to the ground. My hand landed on his chest, feeling the steady thud of his heart against my palm. He struggled beneath me, but I pinned him down, my gun pressed to his temple.

“Who the fuck are you?” I growled, my voice low and dangerous.

In my peripheral vision, I saw the other attacker run off, his body casting long shadows on the grass as he jumped up a fence. I heard his footsteps recede as I looked down at the man I had pinned on the ground.

“Let me go,” he said. He sounded young. “I’m just...someone told me they would give us money—like, a lot of money, if we caught you, okay?”

“Someone put a bounty on us?” I asked. I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Yeah, but man, this ain’t worth shit,” he said. “Just let me go. I won’t bother you.”

I considered his words for a moment. Maybe he was telling the truth, but I couldn’t take any chances. “Who is it that put the bounty on us?” I demanded.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I swear, I don’t know. Just some guy in a mask, okay? I don’t even know his name.”

I narrowed my eyes. “And what were you going to do to us if you caught us?”

“Nothing, man,” he said, his eyes darting around nervously. “Just...hold you until the guy came to collect, you know?”

I pressed the barrel of my gun into his temple. He whimpered. I felt a little bad, but not bad enough to let up. “Who’s the bounty for? And how much?”

“All of the Blades,” he said. “Ten grand for each of you. Alive. Fifty for Sofia Reyes. Dead or alive.”

“What about Sam Reyes?”

I watched the kid swallow. “Fifty for him too,” he said softly. “But only if he’s dead.”

Who the hell was this guy? The prices were all fucked—we would be harder to kill, we were practically criminal royalty in this town—and I wasn’t thinking that because I was offended.

I was worried.

Because whoever this was...they really, *really* wanted Sofia and Sam dead.

“Fuck me,” I said, finally moving away from him.

I stood up and looked down at him. “Sorry,” I muttered. “This isn’t personal.”

And I shot him in the fucking head.

I might not have had Teo's deep aversion to blood, but I still wasn't numb to seeing someone's head blown to smithereens, particularly when I was the one who'd fired the shot.

Poor kid. He had no idea what he had been involved with.

I took a deep breath and holstered my gun, trying to calm down. I knew we were in trouble, and the dead man lying at my feet was just more proof of that.

Not to mention the hundred grand riding on the Reyes siblings' lives.

I hauled the body over my shoulder and made my way back to the house, a weight settling on my shoulders beyond the literal corpse in my arms. I kept my hand on my gun, which was in my pocket, and listened intently for any signs of anyone approaching me. There was no one. The only sound around me were cicadas.

Shit...if they hadn't caught the other guy...what the hell was I thinking letting them follow Jace and Victor here? I was cocky, and soon we might be paying the price for that.

As I approached the house, I could see Jace and Victor standing outside, both looking tense and on edge. They relaxed as I got closer, but I could tell they were still shaken up by the attack. Still, I was relieved to see that they were already taking care of the body, hauling him over to the gate.

"What the fuck was that?" Jace asked, his voice low and angry.

"A bounty," I said, my voice just as low. "Ten grand for each of us, alive. Fifty for Sofia dead or alive. And fifty for Sam, but only if he's dead."

"Fuck!" Victor swore.

Jace and I both looked at him. That kind of outburst wasn't like him at all.

"I left my cat in the car," Victor said. "She's probably losing her mind."

I waved him off. "Just go get her," I said and Victor's footsteps receded as he

approached the car. “Where’s Sam?”

“I told him to go inside when things were getting crazy,” Jace said evenly.

“Glad I did now. Can’t imagine a cop would be happy about watching two guys get iced.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds until he sighed heavily. “Ten grand isn’t a lot.”

“Ten grand isn’t a lot for us,” I reminded him. “It’s a lot for plenty of people.”

“But who would mess with the Blades for only ten G?”

I shook my head. “It’s not about the money,” I said. “It’s about sending a message. Someone out there wants us dead or captured, and they’re willing to pay for it.”

“Fuck that,” Jace said, his jaw clenched. “We’re not going down without a fight.”

“Agreed,” I said. “And if this was just about us, I would be a little more concerned about finding the source.”

“But the Strangler is dead.”

I nodded. “I know,” I said. “Sam made sure to kill him. But whoever is...I don’t know, was? Sponsoring him? I guess that’s the only way I can put it. They’re loaded. And they’re angry.”

Jace looked at me for a second, his jaw hardened and his eyes darkening.

“And they’re not going to stop until they get to us.”

Jace nodded. “Doesn’t worry me,” he said. “But what is Teo going to do when they find us?”

I had no answer for him, so we both just stood there for a minute, neither one of us saying a fucking thing. I finally shook my head and gestured at the body on the ground, Victor coming back with his cat in a carrier.

“Jace, take Victor’s cat and let’s get these guys taken care of,” I said. “Poor assholes...they didn’t even know what they were doing.”

It felt hollow to say that, though, when I didn’t think *we knew* either.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Teo

The guys and I sat across from each other in the backyard, long palm tree shadows obscuring their faces even in the bright morning daylight. I paced around, letting the nicotine of my smoke fill my lungs. I normally didn't start my days with coffee and a cigarette, preferring to leave my smoking to after things got stressful, but I hadn't gotten a wink of sleep last night after the firefight outside my window. I could've gone down and helped them, but I needed to stay with Sofia in case the goons managed to break through and tried to hurt her. I hadn't wanted to freak her out but I was ready to lunge for the piece I kept in the nightstand if I even so much as heard footsteps approaching us.

I hadn't, though.

Sofia could hear it too, but I had told her to stay with her brother while my men gave me a full account of everything that had happened to them.

I knew I couldn't protect her forever, but right then, I needed to try.

"I don't know if they were the same guys," Victor said. Midnight stretched on his lap, her spine curled. He stroked her back before he spoke again. "But

I knew something was wrong from the moment we left HQ.”

“No one was tailing us,” I said, furrowing my brow.

“Yeah,” Victor said. “I think they’re probably more afraid of you than they are of us.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Okay,” I said. “We’ve always had enemies. Why are they coming after us now?”

“They’re not coming after us, boss,” Grayson said evenly. He tilted his head toward the second floor of the house. “They’re coming after her. We’re incidental.”

I nodded, my lips dry. “Right. I agree with that,” I said. “And let’s say that this...the captain? Monroe? Let’s say he’s the one behind this. I mean, maybe he’s an accomplice of the Strangler, or maybe Archer had some dirt on him or something. But I can’t imagine him putting a bounty on us. That would call too much attention to him.”

“Unless he did it through a proxy,” Victor offered as Midnight purred on his lap. “Like on a message board?”

“He would need to cover his tracks really well,” Jace said, looking down at his phone. “Let’s say I don’t expect a sixty-six-year-old chief of police to be incredibly technically competent, but let’s say that he was. He would need to use different devices, scrap metadata, use dummy IP addresses...”

He sighed, putting his phone down on his lap.

“Which is to say, yes, Victor is right. There’s a bounty on all of us, on every message board where a message like that might be posted. But it all seems like it’s coming from different IP addresses, all at different times. It’s actually kind of wild how well done this is. Whoever is behind this is a seriously experienced hacker.”

I rubbed my temples. “So what do we do now?” I asked. “We can’t just sit

here and wait for them to come to us.”

“We need to strike first,” Grayson said firmly. “Find out who’s behind this and take them out before they can come after us.”

“But how do we do that?” I asked. “We don’t even know where to start.”

Jace leaned forward, his eyes intense. “We start by tracing the money,” he said. “Every bounty hunter needs to get paid somehow. We find out who’s paying them, and we find out who hired them.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay,” I said. “Can you get on that?”

“Yes,” Jace said.

“Victor, we need to make sure security at all the clubs is tightened, but particularly Neon. They’ll likely be waiting for us there and I don’t want an incident to happen because people are looking for us.”

“On it, boss,” Victor said softly.

“Right,” I said, my gaze slowly moving past all of them until it landed on Grayson. “Start settling in, guys. Grayson and I will be in in a minute.”

They made their way to the back entrance as Midnight stretched her hind legs on the arm of the wicker lounger. The backyard of the house was as discreet as it was luxurious, with high walls surrounding the property and a well-manicured lawn. A pool shimmered in the center of the yard. The air smelled of fresh cut grass, the day humid enough to make me feel like I was sitting in a sauna.

Midnight’s paws thumped softly against the tiled patio as she padded around the yard, going toward the house. She was Victor’s shadow—even if she hung out here with us, she would have gone after him quickly enough.

Once they were out of earshot, I turned to Grayson, who was studying me, his head tilted and his eyes narrow.

We all looked a little worse for wear, I was sure of it, but Grayson had gotten

it the worst out of all of us. It shouldn't have surprised me; he was the one who'd found the most bodies, and it had only been a few months. We'd been staring our own mortality in the face for a while, and I'd been going along with it, so wrapped up in Sofia that I hadn't checked in with him at all.

We hadn't even had a proper conversation after he'd tried to kill Sam.

The only reason I had managed to keep my house in order was because I took care of my men and I was falling short.

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "You okay, boss?" Grayson asked, his voice low.

I rubbed at my forehead and shook my head. "No," I said, my voice hoarse. "I'm not okay. None of us are okay."

His eyes widened. "Wow, okay. Didn't expect you to say that."

I laughed, topping my cigarette into the ashtray on the arm of the chair I sat in. "I'm more self-aware than you give me credit for."

"Your problem has never been your self-awareness."

I smiled. "And what has my problem been?"

He swallowed, looking away from me. "Didn't mean anything by that," he said. "I'm sorry, I keep...I forget myself."

I could sense his unease and it made me uneasy too. "No, it's fine," I said, trying to put him at ease. "You can say whatever you want, Grayson. We're all on edge here."

His gaze darted toward the house. "I'm worried about her," he said.

"I know," I replied. "Me too. Whatever she stepped in, it's far worse than one serial killer."

He chewed on that for a second. "Yeah. I mean, I don't want to say you're right, but you're right."

I sighed. My head was pounding. "Once they figure out that she's with me,

they're going to come after me. I mean, seriously come after me, more than they already have. If..."

"Nothing is going to happen to you."

"Right. I don't think so either," I said, though we both definitely thought there was a chance. After Archer Holden had shot me in the leg I was slower than ever. If Sofia was in danger, I was going to sacrifice myself. I wouldn't hesitate. I knew that in my bones. I could tell Grayson knew it too. "But if something does happen, like, ever, I need to know you're ready to take over. I know you know the operation like the back of your hand, but right now, I just need you to promise me you're going to keep her safe."

Grayson nodded slowly, his eyes meeting mine. "I promise," he said. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe."

I exhaled a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Thank you," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

There was a moment of silence between us, the weight of our words hanging heavy in the humid air.

"Boss," Grayson said softly, breaking the silence. "I know things have been...rough lately. But I want you to know that I'm here for you. We all are. And I'm sorry for what happened when I went to Sam's apartment. I should've asked you before I did, but..."

"She makes you crazier than you usually are?"

He laughed. "I wouldn't say that," he said. We stayed there for a few long seconds, neither one of us saying anything.

I needed to get this out of the way with. "Okay, this part is a bit awkward," I said. "But I think it's something I need to talk to you about."

He held back a smile.

I scoffed. "What?"

“Just don’t think I’ve ever seen you embarrassed before.”

“Please stop enjoying this,” I said.

Grayson’s expression softened. “Okay, what is it?”

“I overheard you talking to Sam about how we met last night. I wasn’t spying on you, I just went to get a drink and thought it was better not to interrupt. Anyway, so I wasn’t trying to be a creep, but you were telling him about how we met and it got me thinking like...am I doing the same thing to you?”

Grayson looked lost. “The same thing?”

“That, uh, what was the kid’s name?” I knew the kid’s name. I didn’t have to ask the kid’s name. I just didn’t want him to know that I knew it by heart, I didn’t know why.

“Wait,” he said. “Are you talking about my cellie? Anton?”

I snapped my fingers, which felt excessive even as I was doing it. “Right. Anton.”

“Are you asking if I think you’re sexually assaulting me?” Grayson said.

I held back the urge to wince. “I wouldn’t have put it like that.”

“You’re not,” he said, staring me right in the eye.

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn’t.

“Grayson,” I said. “You don’t have to be with Sofia too, and my terms don’t have to be...”

He waved me off. “I agreed to your terms the minute I decided to become your right hand man,” he said. “I didn’t realize that meant with women, too, but I’m not an idiot and I’m not naïve. Regardless of whatever this means for you and me, I really like her. I want to make her happy. If she wants to watch us get each other off, I’m more than willing to put on a show.”

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “Grayson,” I said, my voice low. “Are you sure about this? I don’t want to do something that would make

you, I don't know, uncomfortable.”

“I'm certain,” he said softly. “She's stunning and you're like...not bad to look at. And by this point, Teo, you should know that I only do what I want.”

He got to his feet in one swift movement. He leaned in close to me, his breath hot against my ear.

“And that involves only doing who I want.”

Chapter Twenty-Three: Sofia

My head was pounding when I got out of bed, my body sore. I was disoriented, too—like I'd slept too long or not enough, like I wasn't quite sure if I was awake or still dreaming. It took me a few seconds to figure out where I was, the bright bedroom I was lying in totally foreign to me. I could hear quiet voices coming from the living room, and I sat up, rubbing at my temples.

For a fleeting moment, it felt like it all could have been some strange nightmare...but that only lasted so long.

The memory of the previous night flooded back to me in bits and pieces, my mind struggling to piece it all together. I had been with Teo before I woke up to the sound of gunfire. I'd been alone until Teo had walked back into the bedroom and told me that I wasn't in danger, that the guys were taking the fight somewhere else.

At that moment, I hadn't cared about myself, but when I tried to go downstairs myself Teo had wrapped his arms around my waist, pulled my body flush against his, and pushed his face against my ear.

“I’m sorry,” he’d said softly. “You can struggle if you want, but I can’t let you go down there.”

I hadn’t struggled.

I barely had the presence of mind to figure out where I was.

I looked around the room, trying to get my bearings. It was a nice room, tastefully decorated with a king-sized bed in the center. I noticed my clothes were folded neatly on the dresser, and I got up to get dressed. As I looked out the window, I could see that it was already well into the morning.

I had overslept.

I stretched again and followed the scent of coffee to the dining room. The only person there was Jace, who was looking down at his phone.

“Where’s everyone else?” I asked. He picked up his head to look at me.

“Sorry. I meant, are you okay? Last night was wild.”

He cocked his head, his face illuminated by rays of sunshine. There was an empty mug in front of him, next to the coffee he had just put screen down on the dining room table. “I’ve dealt with worse. Grayson and Teo are outside, and your brother and Victor are just going for a jog together.”

I raised my brows.

“Around the property. The grounds are big enough,” Jace said, then stood.

“Sam had some energy to burn and Victor wants to keep an eye on him. We got some information last night...how do you take your coffee?”

“Morning coffee? Black.”

He nodded, grabbing a cup and pouring some coffee for me. “Here you go,” he said. “Drink up, you’re going to want to be awake for this.”

I took a sip, the bitter taste of the coffee soothing my throbbing headache.

“There’s a bounty on you. On you and your brother,” he said. “On us, too, but we’re not the main attraction. You two really pissed someone off.”

I shook my head, my coffee suddenly tasting like ash. “Wait,” I said. “Is that why they took you? Because of me?”

He tapped his fingers on the desk in front of him rhythmically. “Will you feel bad if I say yes?”

I could feel the blood rushing away from my face. “Yes! I’ll feel bad if you say yes.”

Jace smiled. “Then I won’t say it,” he replied, his expression softening a little when his gaze met my face. “Seriously, though. If it hadn’t been you, it would’ve been something else. I’ve always been quite aware of what being in this life means. Danger is just a part of it. You guys came to rescue me, so it wasn’t that bad, right?”

I took another sip of my coffee, feeling the warmth spread through my body. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I never wanted to put anyone in danger.”

“You didn’t ask for this. You didn’t make a decision to be in this life. You two...you were just trying to do public service, I think. It’s different for the Blades.”

I looked at him, at his sharp features and bright eyes, his light hair falling softly on his forehead. His shirt clung to his body, showing off his muscled biceps. There were scrapes on his face, a long cut on the back of his hand that wrapped around his knuckles. For a second, all I could think about was the fact that he looked like he could snap my neck with one of those hands if he wanted to.

He didn’t look anything like the tech boy-wonder I’d heard about.

Maybe it was the coffee, or the pounding headache, or the fact that I’ve always been too nosey for my own good. But I decided to ask him about it before I could second guess myself. “Right,” I said. “I’m sorry...I know this is out of left field, but how the hell did you end up here?”

Jace frowned. "I drove. With Victor."

"Not here as in the mansion, here as in the Blades," I said. "I mean, didn't you get into MIT when you were like sixteen?"

He smirked, and for the first time since we'd met, I noticed a light scar going from the right corner of his lip all the way down to his collarbone.

Jace's smirk faded as he looked down at his coffee. "Yeah," he said softly. "I did. But things got complicated. Family stuff. I won't bore you with the details."

I guessed that was all I was going to get. "Right. I get it. We all have our reasons."

We sat there in silence for a few seconds until Jace looked right at me and sighed. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

Jace hesitated for a moment before speaking. "I grew up in a pretty wealthy family. My parents were both successful politicians, actually. They had a lot of expectations for me, but I was always more interested in technology. When I was sixteen, I got accepted into MIT, like you said. Around the same time, my dad got into some legal trouble. Turns out taking bribes from your constituents is a big no-no. My mom didn't know about this, but they'd always been a team in the public eye, so obviously her career tanked too."

"Fuck."

"Right," he said. He tapped rhythmically on the dining room desk before continuing. "My dad was arrested, their assets seized and my trust fund was frozen. I couldn't afford tuition anymore, and it wasn't like I could get emancipated because all my money was tied up to them. It destroyed my mom. She had done everything to build up this life, and he'd been taking money he didn't need behind her back. My mom was a public servant

through-and-through. She didn't always get it right, but she was passionate about helping people."

I sat there, listening to Jace's story with rapt attention. It was clear he didn't like talking about it, but I couldn't help but feel like I was getting a glimpse into the real Jace, underneath the tough exterior.

He licked his lips. "She was never the same," he said. "I dropped out of school to help her and my mom was always resilient, but she never recovered. Not really. She lost that spark that made her shine, that made her want to help people. We moved around a lot after that, trying to start fresh and get away from the scandal."

"Yikes, your dad sounds like such an asshole."

He scoffed. "He really was. I mean, he still is. Such a fucking asshole. He didn't even get a slap on the wrist," he said. "He got a fine, and he went into being a lobbyist, earning almost double the money he had before, except this time, it was all legit. Got a child bride only a couple of years older than me. Wanted me to be his best man as he got married to a college freshman. It was so outrageous. That's when I decided never to speak to him again."

I winced at the last part, unsure of what to say. Jace looked up at me, his expression unreadable. "My mom got sick and she...look, I don't know if she would've beat it if she was still a politician, if she still had her career. But I feel like she would've fought it more."

"Cancer?"

He nodded. "Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma," he said. "Called peripheral T-Cell Lymphoma. Just got unlucky, I guess."

I could sense the pain in his voice and the flash of anger that passed over his face. I nodded, understanding more than I wanted to admit. "I'm sorry," I said softly. "That's a lot to go through."

“Yeah,” he said. “We needed money to live. Money for her to get the treatments she needed. It didn’t really do much to help extend her life, but at least I could help her manage her pain. That’s what I needed. At the time, I was freelancing for people who had, let’s say, niche interests. Then this casino owner introduced me to Teo around five years ago.”

“That’s when you started working for them?”

“Yeah,” he said. “My mom died and I was pretty lost. I would’ve rather killed myself than asked my father for help, but I’d spent all the money I had trying to take care of my mom. At first, I was just doing tech work for them. But then I started going on jobs with them, and I…” he trailed off, his eyes distant.

“You what?” I prompted, sensing there was more to the story.

“I liked it,” he said simply. “I liked the adrenaline rush. Don’t you?”

I stared at him for a second, chewing on my lip. These men…they knew me, even if I didn’t like it. “Yeah,” I said. “I guess I do. But that can’t be the only reason, right?”

Jace smirked. “I can see why you got into journalism. You’re good at reading people.”

“So I’m onto something?”

“Of course you fucking are,” he chuckled. “And if you really want the whole stupid sob story…I liked being part of something that made a difference. And I was good at it, too. It was the first time I felt like I had a purpose since I’d needed to drop out of school.”

I couldn’t help but be a little bit awed by the transformation. “So you became a Blade,” I said, my voice hushed.

“Right. And that’s the MIT boy prodigy to gang member outlaw pipeline,” he said softly.

I sat there, stunned. I had never heard a story like that before. It was like Jace had lived a whole lifetime before he even turned twenty-five.

“I had no idea, Jace,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I’m so sorry for everything you’ve had to go through.”

Jace shrugged, but I could see the emotions playing out on his face. “It is what it is,” he said. “I’m not proud of everything I’ve done, but I don’t regret it either. It’s gotten me to where I am, and I have a family now. And I know I’m not alone. I mean, I’m in the Blades. We have each other’s backs.”

Before I could think it through, my hand was on his, squeezing it reassuringly. We’d never been at odds—aside from when they had kidnapped me, obviously—but we hadn’t exactly been friends. Jace and Victor mostly kept to themselves, and this was the first time Jace had actually talked to me in a way that felt like a conversation rather than a way to extract information out of me. “You could still do it, you know,” I said. “Go to MIT. Learn everything you want. Become who you want to be.”

He cocked his head. “I’m already working on that,” he said softly. “And at this point, I don’t want to leave my family. Would you?”

I shook my head. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“Exactly,” he said. “And I like what I do. It’s not perfect, but I get to help people in my own way. Plus, I don’t think I would’ve met you if I had gone to MIT,” he added with a teasing smile.

Blood rushed to my cheeks. “I’m sorry you got kidnapped on my behalf,” I said. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re here.”

His smile widened. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m glad I’m here too.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: Sofia

Jace's hand was still in mine, his fingers intertwined with mine. It was like we were still hesitant to let go of each other's comfort, even though the conversation had shifted. I couldn't help but notice how warm his skin was against mine. We sat in silence for a few moments, both lost in our thoughts.

"I'm sorry," he said suddenly, breaking the stillness between us. He jerked his hand away from me. "I shouldn't have done that."

"You didn't do anything," I said.

He bit down on his lower lip, then shook his head. "We both know that isn't true."

I waited for him to say something else, to fill me in on whatever the fuck he actually meant, but soon he was walking off and I was left by myself in the dining room, nursing a drink that was practically finished.

He stood by the entrance of the living room for a second, his striking body casting a long shadow against the wall. He looked over his shoulder at me, his eyes intense, before disappearing into the living room.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of longing as I watched him go. I wanted to follow him, to see what he was thinking, to understand what he meant by his apology. But I stayed put in my seat, unsure of what to do next.

As if on cue, Victor walked into the dining room, sweat glistening on his face. "Your brother went to have a shower," he said.

"Is he okay?"

Victor nodded. "Yeah," he said. "A little shaken, but he'll be alright. I expect he was doing mostly desk work before this?"

I shrugged. "He's wanted to be a detective for as long as I can remember," I said. "I think he was trying to work himself up the ladder."

"Or fuck himself up the ladder," Victor said simply.

I opened my mouth to tell him to shut up, anger bubbling underneath my skin. "He isn't a sycophant," I said. "I think he genuinely liked Archer."

Victor grimaced, tugging on the towel that was draped around the back of his neck. "That's worse," he said. "Poor Sam."

I didn't know how to respond to that. I hadn't expected the real concern I saw in his eyes, and I had no idea how to address it, so instead, I changed the topic. "Is Jace okay?" I asked. "I mean, after what happened..."

Victor furrowed his brow. "He'll be okay," he said. "He's still a little shaken."

"Understandably."

Victor shrugged. "He'll get over it. He has to."

"Because the Blades are counting on him?"

"No. Because he has to." Victor's expression was serious. "Because we all have to. You too, Sof."

I stared at him for a long second.

"What? Just because you and the boss are fucking doesn't mean I don't have

eyes,” he said. “I can tell this is getting to you. Don’t let it. This is not your fault.”

I sighed. I appreciated where he was coming from, but this was bigger than he realized. “Right. Thanks, Victor. I’ll think about it.”

Footsteps approached us and Victor quickly clammed up. “Your brother,” he said, pointing with his chin toward the hallway. “You two clearly need to talk.”

I turned around to look at Sam. He looked surprisingly calm, all things considered. His eyes were bloodshot, and I thought he might’ve been crying, but it mostly seemed like he was holding it together.

He’s going to be okay, I thought with a surge of relief.

“Sam,” I said. “Come over here.”

Sam walked over to me, settling down next to me.

“I’m worried about you,” I said.

He cocked his head, his eyes narrowing. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m worried about you too.”

I tried to ignore the knot in my throat, my eyes welling up with tears.

“Hey, look at me,” he said softly, cupping my face and forcing me to meet his gaze. “We’ve faced worse than this, Sofia. We’ll find a way through this, together.”

“What’s worse than this?”

“Mom. Dad,” he said simply. “We’re both still alive, aren’t we?”

He was right...but that didn’t make it hurt any less. While I found his words somewhat comforting, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being trapped, the sensation clawing at the edges of my thoughts. I clenched my fists, the nails digging into my palms, desperate for something tangible to hold onto.

“Sam, what if we can’t? What if we’re in too deep?” My voice trembled,

barely audible above the sound of sudden, rumbling thunderclap.

“Then we’ll go deeper,” Sam replied, his voice steady and unwavering. “We’ll unearth every last piece of evidence, expose every dirty secret until there’s nowhere left for them to hide. You know that’s part of the reason someone is after you. The department has to be embarrassed that an independent journalist found that there was a corrupt cop...fuck, not just a corrupt cop, a serial killer, in their midst. Drinking coffee with them every morning. Archer was pretty well-respected.”

“And you think the chief is an accomplice.”

“Yes,” he said. “And I think he’s scared, otherwise he wouldn’t be reacting like he is. Sof, he’s so afraid because we’re keeping him accountable. No. Not we. I haven’t done shit. You’re keeping him accountable. Someone needs to do that.”

I scrutinized his face, searching for any hint of hesitation or fear in his eyes. But all I found was a fierce and unyielding resolve that mirrored my own. It was enough to pull me back from the abyss, to remind me that we had each other, and that together we could face whatever challenges lay ahead.

We always had.

“You’re right.”

“I need your head in the game, Sof. I need your help to bring all these people down,” he said softly. “The city deserves to have a police force that isn’t affected by this fucking virus. I don’t know what...I don’t know how to fix it. But I let it go for too long.”

“What Archer did wasn’t your fault.”

He met my eyes. “It kind of was,” he said. “I was so afraid that he would hurt you that I didn’t do my job. I also really liked him, and I let it blind me to

what he was. I realized I was sleeping with a monster pretty late, and by that point, I wasn't sure what to do."

I felt sympathy for Sam because he was my kid brother and I had seen how vulnerable he was, but I didn't exactly disagree with him. He had willingly gotten into bed with a man who talked about murdering people as a hobby, only stopping his affair when he thought I was in danger.

My brother might've talked a big talk about protecting and serving, but when it came to the most simple thing he could do—don't sleep with a murderer—he hadn't even managed to do that.

Not that I could really call him out on it. Teo didn't like blood, but so what? He had his men kill people without a second thought, and he said he was not a killer because he didn't like blood.

But he was a killer. He just used his men instead of his own hands.

I wasn't sure, but I thought maybe that made it worse.

Clearly there was some sort of fucked up family thing going on.

"He manipulated you," I said. "Sam, it wasn't your fault."

"I know," he replied, his voice heavy with guilt. "But it doesn't change the fact that I should've seen the signs, that I should've done something before it got as far as it did."

I reached out and took his hand, squeezing it tightly. "We can't change the past, Sam," I said. "We can only move forward and do what we can to make things right."

He nodded, his grip on my hand just as tight. "Together," he said. "Always."

"Okay," I whispered, my breath hitching as the weight of our mission settled on my shoulders. "We'll do it, Sam. We'll bring them down."

We sat there for a few seconds, neither one of us saying. "I'm on board," he said. "But do you have any ideas?"

I laughed as the tension in the air dissipated. “No. I’m fried. I think we need to take a moment to think through our plans very carefully. I assume you know about the bounty?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sam said. “That’s why I think I need to go back to work.”

I blanched, the blood rushing away from my face. “What?”

“I need to go back to work, Sof. The whole bounty thing is too much to ignore. We need to have someone on the inside, someone who can keep tabs on what’s happening at the station.”

“But it’s dangerous,” I protested. “If they find out...”

“They won’t,” Sam said firmly. “I can talk to the chief and tell him that I need to work again, even if it’s just deskwork. It’s in both his interest and mine to keep up appearances. Getting close to them would be a boon.”

“You can’t go back there, Sam. They’ll kill you.”

“No, they won’t,” he said. “How would that look? I just have to be careful when I’m out of the station.”

“You’re delusional,” I said, still in shock that he would even suggest this.

“We don’t know who’s doing this. The chief is in on it, Sam, there’s no way—”

He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could get a word out, Teo cleared his throat. I’d been so focused on Sam that I hadn’t realized he was standing there, in the shadows, listening to our conversation.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine. This is your house.”

He furrowed his brow for a second. Teo, as always, was an enigma wrapped in leather and ink, his dark eyes harboring secrets only he knew. He’d been so honest with me last night that I’d thought things may have changed...but now I wasn’t so sure.

He seemed to dismiss whatever he was thinking about as he turned to face me.

“Sofia, we’ll watch Sam’s back,” Teo assured me. He crossed the space between us, resting his hand gently on my shoulder. “We’ll take shifts to watch his place when he isn’t at work, and we’ll make sure that he’s always surrounded by people if we can’t physically be there. We have plenty of people on the payroll, people I trust with my life.”

“Teo...”

“Your brother will be safe. You have my word.”

I believed him, and it turned out that his hand was the anchoring I needed.

“Okay. I’ll go back with you and I...”

Teo’s eyes widened. For a second, he looked genuinely horrified. “You don’t have to do that,” he said softly.

“But I can’t just sit back and do nothing. This is my fight too.”

His eyes narrowed, a flicker of concern passing through them. “Sofia, it’s too risky. You’re not—“

“Enough,” I snapped, cutting him off. “I won’t be a bystander while my brother risks his life. We need to take action, together.”

“It won’t work,” Sam said. “You can try to convince her but she won’t stay here.”

Finally, he sighed and nodded, the defiance in his posture softening. “Alright, sunshine. I can’t force you to stay behind. Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I promise,” I said, grateful for his understanding. My heart still raced, but now it was fueled by determination.

We all sat there, united in our purpose, as the shadows continued their silent dance on the walls around us. The fear remained, but so did our resolve.

Together, we would face the darkness and fight for the truth that had been hidden from us for far too long.

Now, I could only hope one of us wouldn't die while doing it.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Grayson

After it was clear that my attempt to have the rest of our group join us at the mansion had simply led to our location being discovered, Teo insisted that we had to get back to HQ. It would be easier to keep an eye on Sam there, anyway, since it was close to the police station, but there were plenty of things that needed to be set in motion before we went back.

Teo would have to make phone calls, organize people, figure out work shifts. I would've normally helped him with that, but right then, I was busy with the most important thing to him: Sofia.

He had taken me aside and asked me if I could keep Sofia busy.

I knew he didn't want to. Why would my boss want to leave me alone with his girlfriend, particularly when we were messing around? I could tell that I was developing feelings for her, and whatever was already there, it was only becoming stronger, headier.

She was like a drug; hypnotizing, moreish. I'd been off hard drugs for at least half my life at that point, but only they had made me feel like she had.

It...scared me. Whatever our arrangement was, whether I was allowed to pleasure her or not, Sofia was, at the end of the day, my boss' girlfriend. Worse than that, she was my best friend's girlfriend.

Even if she hadn't explicitly said so yet.

Teo had given me this look that explicitly said I wasn't allowed to fuck her, but he had never said anything about catching feelings for her.

I tried to push those thoughts aside as I led Sofia to my car, wanting to focus on keeping her occupied and away from the dangerous mess that was brewing at the police station. I could tell she was still rattled from the conversation with Sam, her eyes darting around with a mix of fear and determination.

"So, where are we going?" she asked, settling into the passenger seat and glancing over at me.

"My place," I said. "We'll go to HQ afterwards, when Teo and Victor have set up some defenses, and we learn what we need to do to keep Sam safe."

She settled into the seat, tying her curly hair up in a high ponytail. "You live nearby?"

I nodded, pulling out of the driveway and onto the road. "Yeah, just a few blocks away. I like living close to work."

Sofia hummed in agreement, her eyes focused on the passing scenery. I wanted to say something, but everything I thought of felt wrong—like it would only add to the tension brewing between us—so we sat in uncomfortable silence instead.

When we arrived at my apartment, I unlocked the door and let her in, gesturing for her to make herself at home. "Can I get you something to drink?" I asked, heading towards the kitchen.

"Water is fine, thank you," she replied, settling on the couch and pulling out

her phone.

I grabbed two glasses and filled them with water, placing one in front of her and taking a seat beside her on the couch. She looked around, her eyes wide. There was a painting on the wall that seemed to catch her attention, stark hues of purple and red in contrast with the modern white walls. Her gaze kept moving around, taking in the results of my collaboration with an interior designer. I didn't know much about design so I had hired an expert and she'd done an incredible job. The living room had vaulted ceilings which had long and modern chandeliers made from wrought iron that cast a warm, soft light throughout the room. An ornate bespoke coffee table flanked my sofas, intricate carvings on the wooden legs. Her gaze seemed to catch on more things; the white marble floor, the plush velvet drapes on the floor-to-ceiling windows, the glass vases with fake flowers that were hanging on the industrial brick wall.

"What?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to how you guys live."

"Excessively?" I offered.

She smiled. "I can tell you have expensive taste."

I chuckled. "I like nice things. But it's not about the money, it's about the quality."

"I get that," she said, taking a sip of her water. "I just never really had the chance to indulge in nice things growing up. It's still a bit foreign to me."

"I can understand that," I said, leaning back against the couch. "I didn't exactly grow up in luxury either. But I worked hard to get to where I am now."

"You chose the Blades to do that?" she said, a smile playing on her lips.

I considered her words for a second. “Yes,” I said. “Look, there were no other options for me. I had some...run-ins with the law growing up. My parents were addicts, in the throes of addiction when I was a kid, and they didn’t care about me. Meant I had to fend for myself. I was angry and lost, and I didn’t know what to do with my life. I tried hard to keep my head down, but obviously, I was caught. Met Teo in juvie, and he gave me this place next to him. This sense of purpose, of belonging. I would be dead without him.”

Sofia leaned closer to me, her hand resting on my arm. “I’m sorry you had to go through all of that,” she said softly. “But I’m glad you found somewhere you belong. And I’m grateful for all you’ve done for Sam, and for me.”

I turned my head towards her, our eyes meeting in a moment of shared understanding. “I’ll always protect you, Sofia,” I said, my voice low and sincere.

Her gaze flickered to my lips for a moment.

I cleared my throat. “Listen, before I say anything else, I need to tell you about the conversation I had with Teo.”

Her eyebrows rose, concern etched into her features. “What happened?”

“Everything’s good now,” I reassured her quickly, not wanting her to worry.

“We cleared things up between us. He understands my feelings for you.”

Sofia let out a breath, relief evident in her eyes. “I’m glad you guys are okay.”

“Me too,” I said, shoving my hands into my pockets. “And about your brother—we’ve got a plan to keep an eye on him when he gets in and out of work. We’re gonna do shift work so he’s never alone.”

“Thank you, Grayson,” Sofia murmured, her gratitude warming my heart.

“Jace also mentioned that people were trying to reach you for an interview

about the article,” I continued, watching her closely. “I think it was GMA?”

“Really?” Her eyes widened in surprise. “I had no idea.”

“I mean, you can’t take it,” I told her. “You need to stay out of the public eye where you can.”

“Yes. I know,” she said.

I could see the worry etched into her features and, without thinking, I reached out to take her hand. It was warm and soft in mine. She didn’t pull away, and I felt a thrill run through me at the contact.

“Grayson...” She breathed my name like a prayer, her fingers curling around my hand. “What...what is this between us?”

Fuck. She could tell something was up, and I needed to tell her how I felt before I lost my nerve.

So that’s exactly what I did, knowing I might not be able to take any of this back.

“Sofia, I have to be honest with you,” I murmured. “Every day, I find myself looking forward to seeing you, talking to you, just being near you. You’re strong, resilient, and fearless. And I care about you, more than I’ve ever cared about anyone else.”

As the weight of my words settled between us, I held my breath, waiting for her response.

“Grayson,” she whispered, as if testing the weight of my name on her tongue.

“I...I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything, Sof,” I said. “I just want you to understand how much you mean to me.”

Her gaze flickered between my eyes and my lips, as if she were searching for the right words. Finally, she met my eyes again, a newfound determination shining in them.

“Tell me more,” she said, her voice steady. “Tell me about us.”

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, surprised at her request. “Us?” I repeated, unsure of what she was asking for exactly. “I don't know, Sofia. I don't even know what this is between us.”

She leaned closer to me, her eyes bright with determination. “I want to know what you want,” she said, her hand reaching out to touch my face. “Tell me what you want, Grayson.”

I took a deep breath, my eyes locked on hers. “I want...I want you, Sofia,” I said, my voice low and husky. “I want to hold you, kiss you, make love to you. I want to be with you, in every way possible.”

She let out a shuddering breath, her hand moving to rest on my chest. “I won't do anything to hurt Teo.”

“I know,” I replied, my hand on hers, my fingers wrapped around her palm. “Neither will I.”

Our eyes met, the moment stretching between us, filled with tension and longing. Sofia's head dipped forward, her lips brushing mine, a soft, tentative kiss.

As I kissed her back, my hand moved to her face, cupping her cheek. Her hair was soft in my hands, and I could feel her heart beating against my chest.

Teo probably knew exactly what he meant when he asked me to distract her. And I wanted her so much, more than I had ever wanted anyone else.

As long as she was here with me, I didn't have to worry about her being in danger. This was good. What we were doing made sense.

I trailed my hand down the side of her face, caressing her neck as I did so.

Her fingers slid into my hair, tugging me closer to her. I could feel her breath on my lips, her tongue darting out to taste my bottom lip.

“I need you, Grayson,” she whispered, the words a jolt of electric shocks to

my heart.

“Sofia,” I breathed, my lips on hers again, my teeth nipping at her bottom lip. She gasped, and I took the opportunity to slip my tongue into her mouth. She relaxed into me, her hands sliding under my shirt, trailing her fingers up my sides. I was hard in an instant, my cock pressing painfully against my pants. I slid my hands under her shirt, feeling her skin against my fingertips. Her hands slid back into my hair, her fingernails scraping against my scalp. Her lips were soft against mine, her tongue eagerly exploring my mouth. My hands moved to her waist, sliding over her hips and waist, and around to the small of her back. She was intoxicating, her scent and taste wrapping around me, filling me with desire.

I ground my hips into hers, feeling her body respond to mine in a rush of heat. I ground my hips into hers, feeling her body respond to mine in a rush of heat. She rocked her hips against me, her body pressing against mine, her breasts soft on my chest.

Her hands reached inside my shirt, pulling it over my head, and then she broke away from me, her eyes full of need.

I pulled her back to me, covering her mouth with mine once again. Her hands slid over my shoulders, tugging my shirt off and tossing it to the side.

When she pulled away again, her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, her lips swollen.

“We have to be careful,” I murmured against her mouth, my actions in contrast with my words as my hands slid under her shirt. Shit, I knew we had to be careful—Teo had said in no uncertain terms I wasn’t allowed to fuck her—but there was nothing stopping us now that we were alone.

She gasped as my hands slid over her bare skin, her hips jerking against me. Her skin was soft and smooth, her nipples hard in my palm. I pulled her shirt

over her head, my eyes traveling over her bra. It was soft lace, pink against her tanned skin. She tugged at my waistband, her hands slipping under the waistband of my pants. I groaned, my cock pressing against her hand.

She moved her hand from my cock, letting her fingers trail over my stomach.

“I want to touch you,” she whispered, letting her fingers slide into my pants.

She moved her hand lower, her fingers trailing over my cock.

I groaned, my head dropping back as I felt her hand moving over me. Her fingers stroked my cock, and I moaned as she wrapped her fingers around me, pumping me slightly.

“Sofia,” I managed to get out, my hands gripping her hips.

My cock was so hard it ached, and I could feel the wetness soaking through my pants, wetting my underwear. I ground my cock into her hand, desperate for the friction. She squeezed me, her thumb sliding over the tip, spreading the pre-cum.

“Like that?” she asked, her voice deep and husky.

“God, yes,” I whispered.

I could feel her breath, hot and ragged, against my neck. My hands slid around to the front of her bra, and I fumbled with the clasp, finally tugging it open.

I trailed my fingertips over her nipples and it sent a shiver down her spine.

“Fuck, you’re pretty,” I said, dipping my head down so I could take one of her nipples into my mouth.

“Grayson,” she said, her fingers tightening on my cock, her breath coming in short gasps. We were sitting next to each other on the sofa, neither one of us able to say anything but each other’s names. I leaned down and slid my teeth down the front of her clavicle, toward her gorgeous tits.

I teased her nipples with my tongue and fingers, until I could feel her gasping

for air, her hips pushing against my hand.

“Please,” she begged, her hand pumping me faster, her eyes heavy lidded with pleasure.

“Do you want me to touch you?” I asked, my mouth moving to her neck, kissing her there.

“Yes, Grayson,” she whispered, her hips pushing against me.

I moved my free hand from her nipple, trailing my fingers down her side. My fingers slid into her panties, and I could feel the heat of her soaking through the fabric.

“You smell amazing,” I said.

Her fingers tightened on my cock, and I moaned.

Her hand moved faster, as I slipped my fingers inside her panties, moving towards her clit.

I groaned, electricity running through my body as I touched her. I could feel her heat on my fingertips, and it was incredibly sexy.

She moaned, her head dropping to my shoulder.

I moved my fingers in little circles around her clit, and she gasped, her hips bucking against my hand.

“Grayson,” she moaned, her voice desperate. “Please.”

“Only if you want me to,” I said, trailing kisses down her neck.

“I want you to,” she begged, her voice breaking. “Always.”

I slipped my fingers between her wet folds, moving them in little circles around her clit. I could feel her body bucking underneath me, her hands gripping my shoulders. I moved my fingers lower, sliding one inside her. She moaned, her hips moving in time with my hand, and I slid another finger inside her.

“Grayson,” she moaned, her voice deep. “So good.”

I slid a third finger inside her, thrusting them in and out of her, before moving my thumb to her clit. This was the first time I had been inside her, even with just my fingers, and it was heaven.

She was heaven.

She was moving her hips faster now, her fingers tight around my cock.

“I’m going to come,” she whispered, her thighs shaking.

I slid my fingers in and out of her faster, my thumb circling her clit. Her hips jerked against my hand.

“Come for me,” I growled, biting her neck.

She moaned, her thighs tensing, her nails digging into my shoulders. She cried out, her voice deep in her throat as she came.

Her hand tightened on my cock, and I moaned, coming as well. My hips jerked against hers, and I could feel my cock pulsing in her hand.

We both collapsed on the sofa, breathing heavily. My hand was still between her legs, my fingers still inside her. She was so wet, and it turned me on, knowing I had done that to her. I ground my cock against her hip, wanting to do it again.

“You’re fucking hot,” I said softly.

“How do you do this?” she asked me, just as softly, while we both sat there, neither one of us moving an inch. “How do you...how can you restrain yourself when you clearly want more?”

“Because I have to, Sof. Because we have to,” I said.

She nodded, her eyes searching mine. “Why?”

I let out a breath, my fingers sliding out of her. I pulled my fingers to my lips, licking her taste off of them, before pulling her panties back up, and straightening her clothes out. It made me instantly hard again, but I needed to remove myself from the situation.

She sighed. “You don’t have to answer. I know why,” she said. “And I appreciate it. I just...I lose my head around you.”

I turned to her and winked. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Don’t let it go to your head,” she called after me.

I heard her laughter trailing behind me as I left her on the couch, and went to wash up before I made a pot of coffee.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Sofia

Grayson had told me that Victor would be coming to collect us in the morning.

Someone—lots of someones, probably—was watching HQ and they would jump at the chance to hurt me or my brother. That was why the plan was to stagger our arrival, until Teo and Victor had all the details of our security plan totally down.

Grayson was taking a shower when I heard a heavy knock on the door. With a deep breath, I opened the door, revealing the imposing figure of Victor, his dark eyes boring into mine.

“Victor,” I said, my voice wavering slightly. “Come in.”

He flashed me a half-smile. “Kind of half expected to find you two fucking.”

Blood rushed to my cheeks. “We’re not fucking,” I said. “For your information.”

“Cool. Dry humping, then.”

I rubbed my temple. “You’re in a mood today,” I said. Victor and I were friendly, sure, but we hadn’t really managed to get past the quid pro quo

dynamic we had originally established. Not that I really wanted to; partially, it was nice to know I had a favor I could still call from one of the scariest people I knew, but also, he didn't particularly seem to want to become my friend.

Not that he was a dick to me or anything. If he had been, I was pretty sure Teo would have killed him.

But he was never particularly talkative or friendly. I was pretty sure his hot-and-coldness was the case with all of the Blades, and I wasn't special at all, but I could feel him watching me and sometimes, it felt like he was judging me.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Did I do something to upset you?" I asked. "Because I know...look, I know me being here is a complication. I'm aware of it."

His eyes narrowed for a second as he took a step closer to me. I could smell the scent of his cologne, dark and spicy, like the man himself. He smelled like gasoline and leather and I forced myself to breathe evenly. "You think I'm upset about you?"

I arched an eyebrow. "You're acting kind of upset."

His shoulders slumped slightly. "My boy wants you," he said, looking away. "He's never wanted anything or anyone more than he wants you. Didn't expect him to share, but hey. I don't live in his head."

"You didn't answer me. You *are* upset about me."

"Let's get straight to the point, Sofia," Victor began, his voice low and gruff as he set his gaze on mine. "I need to know what you're playing at. Your relationship with Teo and Grayson... it's not just about getting a story, is it? If it was, you would've gone home long before now."

I felt my cheeks heat up in response, but I didn't falter. "No, it's not," I

admitted, meeting his accusatory stare head-on. “But I promise you, my intentions with this gang, with all of you, are genuine. I care about what happens to the Mercy Blades.”

“Then why them?” Victor demanded, clenching his fists at his sides. “You’re putting us all at risk by getting involved with the two people who hold the most power in this gang.”

The weight of his words settled heavily on my shoulders, and for a moment, I was afraid I would crumble under the pressure. But something inside me hardened, and I stood tall before him, determined to make him understand.

“Teo and Grayson...they’ve shown me kindness when they didn’t have to. They’ve protected me and given me a purpose when I felt completely lost. I can’t help the way I feel about them, Victor. But I would never do anything to jeopardize the safety of this gang.”

He looked me up and down, his gaze stopping on the shadow of my collarbone for a second as his mouth opened slightly. He was only inches away from me when he spoke. I could smell the coffee on his breath.

“I can see why they would want you,” he said, his gaze sliding down my body, stopping at my chest for a second. He bit down on his lower lip. “You’re very nice to look at.”

I bit down on the inside of my cheek. “That doesn’t answer your question. You still think I’m a threat to you.”

“I’m really fucking glad you’re not; I was beginning to think Teo was going to lose his fucking mind.” He shook his head. “You’re a cute kid who’s gotten wrapped up with a really dangerous situation. I ain’t telling you to stop wanting Teo and Grayson. You’re in love with them, or something. Whatever you tell yourself. But just don’t put yourself in harm’s way, Sofia. These two men are made of pure fucking destruction.”

“I know,” I said. “But I can handle it. I promise you, I’m not endangering the gang. At least, I’m not trying to.”

He studied me for a long, tense moment, his expression unreadable. As the silence stretched on, I felt my resolve begin to waver.

“I wish I could go home. Don’t you think I wish Sam and I weren’t in danger? I wish we weren’t...I don’t know, a complication. I didn’t want any of this, Victor. I was in a storage room when you found me, remember? I’m not here because I want to get in anyone’s business. I just...I’m sorry.”

Finally, Victor’s gaze softened, and he let out a heavy sigh. “Alright, Sofia. I get it, it’s not your fault, and I’ll give you a chance. But if you’re going to be a part of this gang, you need to understand what’s at stake. The Blades are everything to me... and I won’t let anything - or anyone - bring us down.”

I took a step closer to him, tilting my head up and furrowing my brow. “I didn’t want any of this, Victor,” I said. “I’m here because of circumstances outside of my control.”

He wet his lower lip with his tongue. “But you like being here.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “Yeah, I do like it here.”

He took a step closer to me, and I instinctively inhaled, my body responding to the proximity of his. “I’ve seen the way you look at me,” he murmured. “You’re so busy being a damsel in distress to the boss that you don’t realize how hungry you are.”

It took everything in me, but I took a step back. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He glared at me for a second, his eyes narrowing. “Maybe you will once you’re not in mortal danger all the time.”

“Victor...”

He shook his head. “I almost wish you were still in danger,” he said, his

voice low and gruff. “Because it would mean you were out of sight and out of mind, and then I wouldn’t get so damn distracted thinking about you.”

I cleared my throat. “Let me get you some water,” I said.

“I don’t want any water.”

“Then let me get *me* some water,” I muttered under my breath.

I left the room, hurried into the extra bathroom, and locked the door behind me. I leaned down, resting my hands on my knees for a minute as I tried to catch my breath. I had been so focused on getting Victor to make nice that I had managed to sidestep my own bubbling feelings. But now that I was away from the man, I had a chance to think about what had happened. Well, what had almost happened. Victor had looked at me like I was his next meal, and I had been so overwhelmed by the intensity of his stare, I had to force myself to back away before I did things that would have repercussions in the future.

I couldn’t deny that I wondered what it would be like to let Victor fuck me. Something about Teo’s appetite had stirred something in me, and now, I wanted...fuck.

Maybe Victor was right. I needed to get my head on straight.

Grayson rapped his knuckles softly on the door; I guessed he was done with his shower. “Sof? You okay in there?”

“Give me a second!” I flushed the toilet once, just so that he would think I was answering nature’s call, then I washed my hands. And yeah...that was part of the performance, but it was also like I was washing off the desire crawling over my skin, making me feel like an animal.

I’d always had a healthy sex drive, I guess...but nothing like this.

Nothing like what I felt for all four of these ruthless men.

I finally got a hold of myself and took a deep breath before unlocking the door and stepping into the hallway. Grayson was still waiting, leaning against

the wall, his hair wet and his skin glistening with drops of water that I wanted to lick right off—

Fuck, Sofia, stop.

“I’m fine,” I said, forcing a smile onto my face. “Everything’s fine.”

“But you don’t look fine,” he said, cocking his head.

“I’m worried about Sam and…” my gaze darted toward the hallway, where Victor was standing.

Smirking at me.

“Did he spook you?” Grayson said, dropping his voice a little. I could tell he was still amused, and I didn’t appreciate it.

I shook my head, trying to shake off the feeling of Victor’s gaze roaming all over my body. Not that I hadn’t liked it. I loved it.

“No, he didn’t spook me. I just need to clear my head.”

Grayson’s expression softened. “I get it,” he said with a nod. “But you can’t let him get to you like that, Sofia. Victor’s just…he’s Victor.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “I’m just having a hard time figuring him out.”

He laughed. “Yeah, welcome to the club,” he said. “I’ve been trying for years.”

“Any insight?”

“Don’t piss him off?”

“Thanks,” I said, holding back laughter when I saw the expression on Grayson’s face.

He shrugged. “Hey, it’s worked for me so far.”

I smiled at him, grateful for his attempt to lighten the mood. “Thanks, Grayson.”

“But seriously,” he continued, “Victor’s not an easy man to read. He’s got layers upon layers of defenses, and it’s hard to know where the real him ends

and the gangster begins. With me, well, it's pretty obvious."

I cocked my head. "Oh, it is?"

"I mean, yes?" he replied, winking at me.

I rolled my eyes and laughed. "Yeah, you're a real open book, Grayson."

He grinned. "Glad you think so."

We stood there in silence for a few moments before Grayson spoke up again.

"Seriously though, don't worry too much about Victor. He's tough but fair, and he's got a soft spot for people who prove their worth. And you, Sof, have already proven yours."

I shook my head. "I've done nothing but put the Blades in danger."

"Sofia, we're always in danger," he replied, suddenly serious. "You saved us from him. But I'm not just talking about that. I'm talking about what you did for Teo. What you did for me..."

"You mean when I made you come?" I smirked.

"Not that—although, yeah, I appreciate that..." He trailed off, his expression softening. "You're a good person, Sofia. And I know that sometimes being in this life makes us forget that. But you're not like us. You're better than us."

"You guys aren't so bad," I said.

He wrinkled his nose. "Sometimes I forget you haven't been around for long," he said. "C'mon. We need to head back to HQ and hash out the plan."

Good. Maybe hashing out our plan would help me focus on anything but the way my body now felt when I looked between him and Victor, and wondered, for a second, what they would look like if they were together.

"Let's go," I said, brushing past them.

I didn't know why danger made me horny, but I knew I needed to get a grip.

The Everglades Viper IV

If it was up to me, I would've never come back to Orlando.

I But Archer Holden had left me no choice. He had been sloppy and impulsive, and I had to clean up his mess. I hated coming back to this place - there were too many memories, too much of my own past wrapped up in it.

I hadn't left a sloppy mess. I wasn't sloppy.

But I had left a legacy behind, and it was of the utmost importance that it wasn't disturbed.

I had to find the kids. They were the key to my masterpiece, and I couldn't let anything stand in my way.

Every weekend, since Archer started his insane and ridiculous spree, I would go to Neon and sit there in one of the booths, waiting for him to call and ask for my help. He never did.

And then, when he was exposed--after death but exposed nevertheless--I knew that I had to spring into action. I would not let his mistakes tarnish my reputation. My art was too important to be sullied by someone else's ineptitude.

It pained me to leave the Everglades; being among the concrete and neon lights once again was beyond draining and even the city's most skilled bounty hunters seemed to be struggling to get to Sam and Sofia Reyes.

Turned out they had the protection of the gang that Archer Holden had talked me into trying to frame, because the man was a magnet for mess.

Orchid Strangler. More like Foliage Failure.

It was a shame. To have spared them years ago only to have to come back for them...

But I guess that's the thing about art. It's never really finished.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Sofia

We arrived back at HQ to find the rest of the Blades gathered in the living room. Victor addressed everyone, laying out our plan for Sam and the rival gang. I tried to focus on his words, but my mind kept wandering to the feel of his breath on my skin and the way he had looked at me earlier.

We had bounties on our heads, there was some mysterious person out there who was after us all...and all I could think about was the way Victor smelled, Jace's hand on mine, Grayson's tongue, and Teo's cock.

I was really starting to wonder what was wrong with me.

As if sensing my distraction, Teo moved closer to me and slipped his hand into mine. I glanced over at him with a grateful smile.

"You okay?" he whispered, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze.

I nodded, clearing my throat. "Yeah, just...lots on my mind."

He raised an eyebrow. "Care to share?"

I wanted to tell him about Victor's advances, about how conflicted I felt inside, but I hesitated. What if Teo got jealous? What if he couldn't handle the thought of me with another man?

“Maybe once this is all over. What’s the plan with Sam?”

“Right. Before we get into that, I wanted to share what I’ve found,” Jace said, standing up. For the first time since we got there, I realized that he was casting the screen on his laptop to the large television. “So I’ve been doing a little digging, because I thought, there’s absolutely no way that someone on Monroe’s salary is able to afford a compound, right? Not even if he married into money. Why would his wife even want to own a compound?”

Teo squeezed my hand again, grounding me in the present. I focused on Jace’s words and watched as he pulled up a map of the city and circled a location. “Here’s where the compound is located,” he said. “It’s heavily guarded and fortified. But the real answer is always in financial records,” Jace continued, scrolling through his laptop. “And wouldn’t you know it, Nicole Monroe owns a shell corporation that just happens to have made several large deposits into her personal account over the last few years.”

“Money laundering,” Teo said, his eyes gleaming. “Classic.”

Jace nodded. “I also hacked into the tax office and found an interesting detail about Captain Monroe’s tax returns.”

He clicked on a file and brought up Monroe’s tax returns from the past five years. “See this?” he pointed at a line item that read ‘donations to charity.’ “All of these donations are going to one particular charity, but it’s a shell organization. There’s no record of where that money is actually going.”

Victor leaned forward, his eyes gleaming. “So we cross-reference the charity donations with the deposits in Nicole Monroe’s account. That’s where they’re funneling the money.”

“Exactly,” Jace said, nodding.

Teo’s eyes narrowed. “Okay. We know how they’re financing the bounties. Do we know why? What do Captain Monroe and his wife have to do with

this?”

Grayson’s voice was cold and clinical as he spoke. “They’re doing it to offload all of the gang violence onto us. They want to make it seem like we’re the ones responsible for all the chaos in the city.”

Victor turned his neck to look at him. “But why?”

“So Monroe can justify the militarization of the police force and have a political candidate that backs him,” Grayson said.

We all took a bit of time to digest that.

“Because he wants to kill us,” Victor said finally. “That’s what you mean, right?”

“Right. Yes,” Grayson replied.

“Good thought,” Jace said. “There’s probably a component of that when it comes to the Blades, but when it comes to Sof and Sam, I mean, a journalist and her junior cop brother, it doesn’t make much sense.”

“Maybe it’s just an optics thing for him,” I piped up. “I already made him look bad enough by posting the article, so why would he want to make things worse for himself? Having Sam around, hell, having Sam alive, is a liability.”

“Yes,” Jace said. “That could also be it. But there’s the fact that he was desperate to get his hands on my devices. Desperate enough to kidnap and threaten to kill me.”

“But *you* have dirt on everyone,” Teo said softly. “Why would he want to target you specifically, and bring attention to himself?”

Jace stood in front of the screen for a second, his head cocked, long dark blonde hair on his shoulder. “He doesn’t,” he said. “That’s the thing. Monroe doesn’t want to do any of this. He’s being blackmailed.”

We all blinked at him. “What?” Teo said, his voice straining.

“I’m sure of it,” Jace said. “I’ve been doing some research, had a look at the

backend of his computer. Someone went in and did a deep dive. They have so much dirt on him.”

“What kind of dirt?” Victor asked.

Jace shrugged. “Everything,” he said. “And I mean *everything*. Financials, data files, audio files, video files, the works? They have enough to put him in prison for bribery, extortion and a dozen other charges.”

“And what’s the bribe?” Teo asked. “Specifically, what’s the person bribing him asking for? Because if it was money, they would’ve gotten that already, right? So we have to come in at some point.”

Jace paused for a second, his throat working as he swallowed. “Right. The Blades are, as we suspected, incidental,” he said softly. “Honestly, so is Sam.”

My heart hammered in my chest. “Wait...Does that mean...”

“Yes, Sofia. Whoever this is, all they want is you.”

My breath caught in my throat as the weight of Jace’s words settled heavily on my shoulders. Me. They wanted me. My mind raced with possibilities, but I couldn’t focus on anything but the fact that I was in danger.

“What...what do we do?” I whispered.

Teo’s eyes scanned the room, assessing each person individually. “We need to up our security,” he said slowly. “You can’t be alone, sunshine. One of us will always be with you.”

I shook my head. “I can’t...I can’t ask you guys to do that. You have your own lives. Victor is right, I came into this, and I disturbed everything.”

Teo glared at him for a second. “Is that what he told you?”

Victor, who was normally defiant, seemed to sink into himself. “That wasn’t how I put it.”

Teo’s jaw hardened. “Well, it doesn’t matter. You seemed to be confusing

that with a request, Sofia. It wasn't."

I blushed, feeling a strange mixture of shame and arousal. Teo's dominant demeanor was always such a turn-on to me. I didn't know what it meant, but that way he spoke, softly but authoritatively, was so delicious. It made me almost forget that we were in danger.

That I was in danger.

"But..." I started to protest weakly.

"No buts," Teo said firmly. "You're in danger, and we'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

I looked at him for a long second. "But you don't have enough manpower for this," I said. "You have to make sure someone is always looking after my brother and you have to make sure someone is always staying with me. What about your business? You still have a job. I don't want to become your job."

Teo shook his head. "Sof, you can't really believe that," he said. "We're one of the most powerful gangs in the city. We have hundreds of people on the payroll. Just because you're bouncing between our safe houses doesn't mean that this is the extent of our organization. We don't sit around and drive from place to place, away from trouble. The only reason we've been cowed is because of you."

I felt the blood rushing away from my cheeks.

"Now don't get me wrong," he said, his hand squeezing mine. "When the Strangler was around, and when I realized that you were the only thing I really wanted to take care of, being cautious was the name of the game. But now we have to get back into the city. The Blades have to prove that we still run Orlando. With a bounty on your head, that'll be easier than trying to hide away from anyone that's trying to get to you."

I shook my head, still feeling like this was my fault. "But you already have a

job,” I insisted.

A threatening smile played upon his lips. “You’re right,” he said. “I do have a job. You’re not telling me how to do it, are you?”

I felt the heat rising to my cheeks as I shook my head, feeling my chest heaving in excitement. “No,” I murmured, barely able to form words as I stared at him.

“I have a plan,” he said. “I always have a plan. And we look out for our own, no matter what. So if you’re going to get angry, go ahead, get angry. I’d rather have you alive and pissed off than dead and mourned.”

Teo’s words hit me like a ton of bricks. The reality of our situation was starting to set in. I was in danger, and this group of men was my only protection. But the thought of constantly being watched, constantly being guarded, was suffocating. There was a part of me that had come to enjoy it, but that was when it felt like it was my decision.

Once again, I feared the little bit of agency I had left was being taken off my hands.

“I’m not angry,” I finally managed to say, my voice barely above a whisper. “I’m scared.”

Teo’s expression softened at my admission and he turned to look into my eyes, his hand reaching out so he could cup my cheek. “I know,” he said softly. “But we’ll protect you. We’ll keep you safe.”

I leaned into his touch, feeling the warmth of his palm against my skin. It calmed me, even as it stirred up other feelings inside me. Feelings that I couldn’t afford to have right now.

I knew I had to be strong, for myself and for my brother, but it was getting harder and harder to push away the desires that threatened to consume me.

The thought of being constantly watched by these men, Teo especially, had turned into a twisted form of pleasure that I couldn't resist.

But now, with the threat of danger looming over us, there was no room for distractions. I had to focus on staying alive, on keeping Sam safe.

"Okay," I said finally, pulling away from Teo's touch. "What's the plan?"

Teo smirked at me. "First, we increase security at your apartment. You have to go back. I don't want this asshole thinking you're scared. I think we need to fight back, and the easiest way to do that is with our presence," he said. "I'll have Jace set up some cameras and alarms."

"The apartment complex already has cameras and alarms," I protested weakly.

"And that worked really well last time, right?"

Teo's tone was sarcastic and biting, but I knew he was right. My current security measures had failed me before, and I couldn't afford to let that happen again.

"Okay, fine," I said with a sigh. "What else?"

"We'll rotate shifts," Teo continued, his eyes scanning the room as though he was already strategizing. "One of us will always be with you or your brother."

I nodded. "That makes sense."

"Good," Teo said, a hint of relief in his eyes. "Now, Jace, you have all this information. I assume that means you have a plan, too."

Jace hesitated for a few seconds before speaking. "Yeah," he replied. "I think we need to find out who's behind the blackmail. The person or people who have dirt on Monroe and are using it to control him. If we can find them, we might be able to figure out why they're after Sofia."

Teo nodded in agreement. "That's a good plan, Jace. We need to find out

who's pulling the strings, and we need to do it fast.”

“I can look into it,” Grayson said suddenly, his usually calm voice tinged with anger. “I have some contacts in the city who might be able to help. If something weird is happening, they'll be able to tell me.”

Teo turned to him, his eyes sharp. “Do it,” he said firmly. “And do it discreetly. We don't want this person finding out that we're on their tail. But we do want them to know that Sofia is untouchable.”

“And Sam, too,” I said, thinly. “Don't forget my brother.”

Teo's eyes softened as he looked at me. “Of course not, sunshine. We'll protect both of you.”

I felt a wave of gratitude wash over me as I looked at each member of the group, knowing that they were risking their own safety to keep me and Sam out of harm's way.

“What about Victor?” I asked suddenly, remembering the muscle-bound man who had been so quiet during our conversation.

Victor laughed under his breath.

“No change there,” Teo said. “He'll be our backup. He always is. He'll be close by in case we need him.”

As the meeting came to an end, I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief wash over me. The weight of the situation was still heavy on my shoulders, but for the first time since everything had started, I felt like there was hope. Hope that we could catch whoever was behind the blackmail and put an end to it once and for all.

Clearly, whatever I'd gotten involved in was much bigger than one serial killer.

But as everyone began to file out of the room, Jace lingered behind. He stopped streaming to the TV and looked at me with a mix of admiration and

concern. “Are you okay?”

I looked up at him, surprised by the tenderness in his voice. “Yeah,” I said with a shrug. “I’m fine.”

He didn’t say anything for a few seconds, just studied me intently. “You don’t have to act strong,” he said finally. “It’s okay to be scared. It’s okay to lean on us.”

I smiled at Jace, feeling a warmth spread through my chest. “Thanks, Jace,” I said softly. “That means a lot.”

He nodded, his gaze lingering on me for a moment before he turned to follow Teo out of the room. He craned his neck before he followed him out of the room for just a second, his gaze meeting mine. “You should try to get some rest, Sof,” he said softly. “You’re going to need it.”

Jace’s words lingered in my mind as I watched him leave the room. I was grateful for his concern, but part of me couldn’t shake the feeling that he wasn’t telling me something. There was something in his eyes, a vulnerability that he usually kept hidden. But I didn’t have time to dwell on it.

I knew I needed to focus on the plan, on staying safe, and on protecting my brother. But despite my best efforts, my mind kept drifting back to the twisted desires that had been consuming me since I’d met Teo and Grayson. The thought of being constantly watched by these men, of having them control me in every way, had become a strange kind of addiction.

And now that I was in danger...now that the stakes were so high...the desire burned even hotter inside me.

I knew it was wrong. I knew it was dangerous.

But fuck. It was so, so sexy.

And maybe it was okay if that was all I could think about...if it was all they could think about, too.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Grayson

I watched Sofia as she left the room, her body tense with the weight of the situation. I wanted to reach out and comfort her, to tell her that everything would be okay, but I knew it wasn't my place. Teo was the leader of our group, and he had taken charge of the situation. My job was to support him, to follow his lead, and to do everything in my power to keep Sofia and her brother safe.

As she went to what had become her bedroom in HQ, I lingered behind for a moment, letting my gaze trail over her body. She was stunningly beautiful, with long dark hair and piercing brown eyes that seemed to hold a hint of sadness beneath their surface. Her hair had grown since Teo had found her in that apartment, the blonde growing closer to her waist.

Fuck, her waist.

I couldn't help but recall the feeling of my hands on her hips, pulling her body against mine as Teo watched. The memory made my cock twitch with desire. I imagined my hands wrapped around it, pulling her into me as I pressed her against the wall.

But I had to push those thoughts aside. Sofia was vulnerable right now, and it wasn't fair to take advantage of that. Plus, there were bigger things at play here. We needed to find out who was behind this blackmail and stop them before they could hurt Sofia or Sam.

Teo was outside, smoking a cigarette. Victor was in the kitchen, getting himself a drink. Jace was going...I didn't know where Jace was going. Probably to set up all the security measures we needed.

And I needed to stop thinking with my dick and head to the city.

It was only early afternoon, so I likely wouldn't be back until much later. "Okay, going out," I called into the apartment, though I was certain no one was paying attention.

I needed to get as much information as possible, and the easiest way to do that was by doing my standard rounds.

First up was Neon.

That was our flagship club, and there was a reason we spent most of our time there. If anyone had information, they would likely be there. Since Neon was only a few blocks away from HQ, I decided to walk to it before I went back to my car. Walking at night reminded me of home. I'd grown up in this city, hopping from bar to bar as a teenager looking for excitement.

I couldn't deny that back then, Orlando had been exciting. I'd found more than enough of that in the bar district. And thinking about it now, I was reminded of how different things were between me and Sofia right now. Back then, I'd fucked anything with a pulse. But for some reason, Sofia...well, it wasn't just about that.

Probably shouldn't have felt like that about my boss' girlfriend, but it was what it was.

I cleared my mind as I walked into the slightly quieter neon lights of the club.

Like most of our locations, Neon had a small VIP area in the back, one that would be much busier later at night. Though we had more than enough money to fill the club with some of the biggest names in music, Teo and I had always been of the opinion that we should keep it more low-key.

And thank God for that. It let me blend in with few problems, allowing me to walk right through the crowd without drawing too much attention to myself.

But it also meant there wasn't much information to be gained at first glance.

I stayed in the club for a few hours, keeping my eyes and ears open for anyone who looked like they might have more to say. As the club began to fill with more people, I made my way to the bar, trying to look as nonchalant as possible. Nothing about that was out of the ordinary. After all, this was my job.

"Any weird people tonight, Xan?" I asked. "Or, you know, lately?"

Xan, the bartender, flashed me a thin smile. Xan had been bartending at Neon for close to ten years and knew how things worked. He knew that part of his job was paying attention, not just serving drinks.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, Grayson," he said as he wiped the bar down.

"But you know, with what's going on, no one's talking much. After what happened with the Strangler, people are still spooked. They don't want to talk to their bartender. No matter how drunk I get them."

"What about police? Or police adjacent people?"

That made him stop what he was doing, surprise written all over his face.

"Here?"

"I know it's a little weird, but if you have any info about that, I would appreciate it."

Xan looked at me curiously, his eyes trailing over my face for just a second. It wasn't until then that I realized something was wrong. There were bags

under his eyes and his cheeks looked hollow. He put the glass he was holding down and shouted at the girl he was working with that he would be right back. He tilted his head toward the VIP room in the back.

I knew what he meant. *I don't want to shout about this.*

My gut told me there was something going on, something that directly related to Sofia was going through. It had to be. If someone had been blackmailing the whole city, they would have known everything before I did.

Xan took a deep breath before he spoke again. "Yeah, there's someone quiet in there most nights, and it's usually the same person. He doesn't look like a cop."

"What does he look like?"

"Like he doesn't belong here," Xan said simply, shrugging his shoulders.

"Like he belongs somewhere nice and quiet, maybe with a few books and a desk full of files. I tried talking to him but he's kind of tight-lipped."

"How long has he been coming here?"

"That's the thing," he said. "Since the Strangler murders started. When the bodies started to show up, I told my wife he was my best bet. But then we got word that the Blades had killed the Strangler, and then that article Sofia Reyes wrote came out, and it turned out I was wrong."

"Keep talking," I urged him.

He sighed before continuing. "He's this older guy. Maybe in his sixties. Built. He doesn't come here every weekend, but he's here often enough that it's weird. He drinks like it's a pub, not a nightclub. And it always feels like he's looking around, waiting for something. For someone. Always pays in cash. Doesn't talk to anyone but me or Madison when she's on bartending duty."

"Someone paranoid? Looks around the room suspiciously?"

“I wouldn’t call it suspicious,” Xan said. “This guy is looking like he knows that there’s someone out there, someone that might be a problem for him. Like he’s on high alert, not like he’s worried. It’s just...you know, it’s weird. I don’t know if it’s police adjacent but it feels weird.”

“What does he look like?”

“Tall, olive skinned, handsome,” Xan replied. “Very clean-cut.”

When I heard that, I realized something. Something that made this trip to Neon even more worthwhile. Whatever was going on, whoever was threatening Sofia had started around the same time as everything else. Which meant whoever it was had been inside our club before. The question was... how could I find them? They wouldn’t be stupid enough to give themselves away that easily. But if they were a regular, someone like me or Xan might recognize them eventually.

It was worth a shot. “Listen, I got dinner plans and this conversation is giving me an appetite. I’ll see if I can’t find this guy and get him talking. You got any of the security footage?”

“All the stuff in the club is recorded already,” Xan said. “I can’t play it back here but if you think it’ll help, I bet you can pull it up in one of Jace’s programs.”

“Good call,” I said.

The club footage was hard to go through, there were a lot of people on the dance floor and even the VIP room tended to be crowded. I’d have to trawl through hours of conversation and shaky camera footage just to find what I was looking for. And even then, I could barely pay attention to it, the constant movement making my stomach spin if I wasn’t paying close attention.

But Jace would happily take this on. He was good at it, and he probably

wanted to feel useful after he'd gotten kidnapped. We hadn't even really debriefed since our rescue mission.

I hadn't really thought about it, I'd been so concerned with everything else. He could be useful here. Xan could track down the tapes for me and Jace could slow them down and help me watch for anything weird.

Oh yeah, that sounded like the perfect plan. I gave Xan a big grin as I clapped him on the shoulder before going back to HQ.

I knew that what I was getting into next wasn't going to be any easier than the last few weeks had been. But it never was.

The sooner I got back, the better.

The sooner I was close to Sofia, the better.

Maybe then I would be able to do something. Anything.

And that was what I had to do.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Teo

I watched Sam leave the police station and check behind himself. Sofia was still safe at HQ, but she couldn't stay there for the rest of her life. We'd brought her there against her will, and in any case, it was a place of work.

No one was supposed to live there. Definitely not my girlfriend.

More importantly, I wasn't going to allow her to be hidden away. I understood the circumstances of how she had come into our lives, and I wasn't willing to make her feel like she needed to hide.

Not after everything she had gone through.

So it might still be a little early to have her on my arm when I went out.

But the thought of someone hurting her made my blood boil. I needed to make sure she was safe no matter what it took, even if it meant putting myself in danger. Sophia was my responsibility now, and I wasn't about to let anything happen to her.

And that meant protecting her brother. Sofia's little brother meant everything to her, and more than safe, I wanted to keep her happy.

Sam looked behind himself, then at the car I'd taken to pick him up. It was my least flashy vehicle, a black sedan that wouldn't draw too much attention. He hesitated for a moment before getting in the front seat next to me and fidgeting in his seatbelt.

"Thanks for picking me up," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"How was your day? Did you get anything? Any information?" I realized I sounded a little too eager, but I didn't care.

Sam sighed before he turned to look at me.

"No. It was fucking weird," he replied, looking into my eyes. "Like everyone knew something was wrong, but no one could say a thing about it. It was like...I don't know. Like they'd all been to a mention I wasn't invited to."

I frowned, "Did anything happen? Did someone say *anything* to you?"

"No. But it was like everyone was on edge, like they were waiting for something to happen." Sam leaned back into the seat with a sigh, "I just wish I hadn't gotten her into this. I would be able to protect her better if I wasn't in the police. And my colleagues...they all seemed off around me. Something just felt strange. I know I have to keep going to work, but man, pretending everything is normal and Captain Monroe isn't trying to have the both of us killed is hard."

I could see the worry and anxiety etched in Sam's face and it made me feel responsible to solve this case as soon as possible. The Strangler had wanted to target the Blades for a reason. Sam, whether he realized it or not, had simply been one of his victims. He'd just been lucky to make it out alive.

"Listen, everything will be alright. We'll keep you and Sofia safe, I promise."

He flashed me a look I couldn't quite read before he turned his head to stare out of the window. "You know," he said. "It's weird. I always thought the

police would protect me. Turns out it was Orlando's most dangerous gang that had my back."

I smiled at that. "Yeah. Didn't think I'd be driving a cop back to HQ, but life is funny like that," I said as I drove. "You know I don't like blood, right?"

"You don't like blood?"

"I don't. See, much like you never thought you'd be getting defended by the Blades, I never thought I would be the leader of a gang. I guess things happen for a reason, because I would still murder anyone that hurt her. Or, you know, you. Because she loves you."

"She's always been the protective older sister," he said softly. "I just wish she didn't have to do it like this."

He was right. As we approached HQ, I couldn't help but think about how much Sofia had been through in such a short amount of time. She was taking risks that no one should have to take, all for the sake of protecting her brother and herself. And now, she was caught in the middle of a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse with someone who really wanted to hurt her.

I parked the car in the garage and turned to Sam. "Listen, don't worry about anything. We have a plan to keep everything under control," I reassured him.

"I hope so," he said as he opened the car door and stepped out. "I really do."

I nodded as I followed him out of the car and into the elevator that took us directly to HQ.

As we walked through the halls, I could hear the faint sounds of music and laughter coming from the common room. It was a strange juxtaposition to the seriousness of our situation, but it also reminded me that we were more than just a gang. We were a family.

When we entered the room, I saw Sofia sitting on the couch between Grayson and Victor, her head thrown back in laughter as they exchanged jokes.

Midnight was curled up on top of Victor's lap.

Jace was sitting at his computer desk, typing away.

Sofia stopped laughing as soon as she saw us. "Teo," she said. "Sammy."

Sam smiled at her. "Nothing to report, sis," he said.

Sofia's smile faltered slightly, and I could see the worry in her eyes. "That's okay," she said, standing up to greet us. "We'll figure it out."

I walked over to the couch, giving her my hand. She took it and I wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close and looking into her eyes. "You're okay?"

"I'm not, like, hurt," she said.

"But you're worried," I said, trying to read her expression.

She nodded slowly. "I just feel like we're always one step behind. Like no matter what we do, we can't seem to catch a break."

"We will catch a break," I replied, rubbing her back soothingly. "We just have to be patient and keep working together."

Sofia leaned into me, her body relaxing against mine. Victor gave us a small smile before returning his attention to Midnight, while Grayson cleared his throat awkwardly.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," he said. "But I think we have something."

I raised my eyebrows and broke away from Sofia. As Grayson explained the information he had gotten at the club, Jace looked through the tapes himself.

I listened intently to Grayson's report, trying to piece together the information we had. We needed to find a way to catch the Strangler before he could strike again. As Grayson finished his report, Jace turned to face us with a grim expression.

"This guy Xan was telling us about," he said. "He knows where the cameras are."

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means he keeps his head down to avoid being seen,” Jace said. “And then, when he is there, he...look, watch.”

With a few deft clicks, Jace brought up the camera footage from the club. We all leaned in to watch as he rewound the footage, playing it back in slow motion. Finally, he paused on a figure in the background, partially obscured by shadows.

“He comes in with his head down, moves around the club in a way that means we can’t actually catch his features. Not even his gait. He’s always obscured by people. All we know is that he’s, you know, tall.”

“Shit,” I muttered, running a hand through my hair. “We need more than that.”

“I know,” Jace said, frustration clear in his voice. “But that’s all we have right now.”

Sofia groaned. “And we don’t even know if they’re related to this, right?”

“We don’t,” Grayson said. “It’s speculation, but Xan is a smart guy. This person in the shadows is related to the Strangler somehow.”

And it made sense, didn’t it? It felt like every step we’d taken since catching the Strangler had been watched...and it made even more sense that that person would be in our own backyard.

On our turf, *watching us*.

I could see the determination in her eyes, and despite my reservations, I couldn’t deny that her plan had merit. It was dangerous, but it also presented an opportunity to finally catch the person responsible for so much of our pain and suffering.

It would give me a chance to catch and kill this man myself, and despite how queasy blood made me, it turned out I was thirsty for it when it came to

someone even trying to hurt this woman.

I looked around the room, gauging everyone's reactions. Grayson was glancing between Sofia and me, his expression unreadable. Victor had a hand on Midnight, stroking her head as she purred, his eyes narrowed in concern. Jace was staring intently at his computer screen, lost in thought.

"We need to deal with this head on," Sofia said. "Confront him at the club. If he's even related to the Strangler case in any way, I want to be the one to talk to him. We can't keep letting him get away."

Sam was staring at his sister, partly proud of her, partly looking like he wanted to kill her.

I totally got how he felt.

Finally, I turned back to Sofia. "Alright," I said softly. "We'll do it your way."

Sofia's face lit up with a mixture of relief and excitement. "Thank you, Teo," she said, throwing her arms around my neck and hugging me tightly. "I promise I won't let you down."

"You letting me down isn't what I'm even remotely worried about," I said between gritted teeth. "If something happens to you, though..."

"It's a club, Teo," she said. "There are people everywhere, and I know you aren't going to be far from me. Maybe one of you can catch him and then both Sam and I will be safe no matter where we go."

Her idea had merit. It didn't mean that I liked it.

"Fine," I said.

Sofia smiled at me, relief flooding her features. "Thank you," she said softly.

"I promise, I'll be careful."

As we began to plan the details of Sofia's meeting with this mystery man, I couldn't shake the feeling in the pit of my stomach.

This was a dangerous game we were playing, and if things went wrong, someone could get hurt. But I trusted Sofia, and I knew that she wouldn't put herself in harm's way if she didn't think she could handle it.

The plan had been set into motion. Sofia's meeting with the mystery man was set for the next night at Neon. We would show up there and she would be on my arm before I pretended to slip away to do something. I would still be close enough to watch her, to make sure that nothing happened to her. We all had our roles to play, but I was going to be closest to Sofia - watching her every move to ensure her safety.

I slept next to her, her body curled up against me, her skin warm. We did nothing but cuddle, no matter how much I wanted her. I was far too distracted thinking about the plan and how it would go to do anything else.

She stirred in my arms. "You okay?" she asked. "You haven't slept at all, have you?"

I sighed. "I'm worried," I said.

She rolled over to look at me. "I don't blame you," she replied softly, her hand running over my chest soothingly. "I'm worried too. But we'll be okay. We've got each other's backs."

I turned to look at her, studying her face in the moonlight that filtered in through the window. Despite everything we had been through, she still managed to look so beautiful. There was a scar on her forehead now, right above her eyebrow. It was hard to notice unless I stared, and the very presence of it filled me with rage.

I leaned forward, my lips brushing against her scar. She shivered under my touch and I hoped that she felt the same way.

"You're so beautiful," I murmured, my mouth trailing down to her neck.

"I..."

I needed to tell her. I felt it in my bones whenever I looked at her, and it made the rage feel so much more potent.

“I love you,” I whispered against her skin, unable to hold it in any longer.

Sofia’s eyes widened and she pulled back slightly to look at me. Teo...“ she started, but I cut her off with a kiss.

It was gentle at first, but quickly grew more passionate as the emotions between us boiled over. I pulled her closer to me, my hands running through her hair as our tongues tangled together.

Eventually, we had to pull away to catch our breath. Sofia looked up at me, her eyes shining with tears. “I love you too,” she said softly. “I didn’t know if it was okay to say it...with everything that’s been going on.”

“Nothing is more important than how I feel about you,” I said firmly, my hand cupping her cheek. “I’ll always protect you, no matter what.”

She smiled, her face softening. “Yeah,” she said. “I know that. That’s why I’m not afraid.”

I smiled back at her, holding back what I wanted to tell her, though my brain was screaming it.

Maybe you should be.

Chapter Thirty: Sofia

It had been a long time since I had been clubbing and I suddenly remembered that going out to the club was a whole thing the Friday afternoon before our plan was going to take place. According to the intelligence Grayson had, the shadowy man was more likely to be there on Fridays than any other day, but of course, there was no way for us to know if he was going to be there at all.

I tried a black dress on at first, and while it fit well, it wasn't quite right. Ultimately, I slipped into a short black skirt and a white tube top that accentuated my curves, and slipped on a pair of strappy high heels. I finished off the look with a smoky eye and a bold red lip. I really wanted to sell the ruse that I was going to this club to have fun and not to be bait.

Teo was waiting for me in the living room, dressed all in black, his tattoos peeking out from under his shirt sleeves. He took my hand and pulled me close, his eyes scanning over every inch of my outfit.

"You look incredible," he murmured, his voice low.

I felt my cheeks redden at the compliment. “Thank you,” I said softly. “You look pretty handsome yourself.”

He grinned at me, pulling me in for a kiss. It was slow and sweet, but there was a hint of desperation to it. We both knew what was at stake. “Do everything exactly how we told you to,” he said. “Don’t go anywhere any of us aren’t able to see you. Do not follow this man. Don’t try to catch him yourself. This is what we have a process for.”

I looked into his eyes. “I’ll be careful,” I said. “I promise.”

Teo let out a deep breath, running his fingers through his hair. “I know you will,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “Jace will be watching the cameras and Victor and Grayson will both be nearby. As far as Sam goes...”

“I made sure to ask for the night shift,” Sam said. “As instructed. Which is weird, because I should be able to be there.”

“It would be harder to protect both of you,” Teo said simply. “You know this.”

“I do. I just don’t like it. Please keep me updated.”

Teo nodded. “Of course. You stay somewhere visible, doing paperwork, if possible.”

“Don’t worry, I’m thoroughly benched,” Sam replied simply.

There was nothing else to discuss. “Look after yourself, kid,” I said.

“You too, Sof,” he said, looking up at me.

As we left the apartment, Teo’s hand engulfed mine protectively. I was grateful for his presence, but I also couldn’t ignore the fact that being so close to him made me want him even more.

The club was dark and packed, the music pounding through the air. I could feel Teo’s presence behind me as we made our way to the bar. Order a drink,

act like you're having a good time, and wait for this man to make his move. It was a simple plan, but it felt dangerous all the same.

I ordered a tequila sunrise and took a sip of it, feeling the liquid burn its way down my throat. Teo ordered a beer and stood behind me protectively, scanning the crowd for any sign of danger.

His hand was on my waist for a second, his body dwarfing mine as he drank his drink. I wasn't sure, but I thought he was nervous.

I turned my head to look at him and he met my gaze. There was a vulnerability in his eyes that I had never seen before, and it made me ache for him. I knew that this plan was risky, but seeing him like this made it all the more real.

"Hey," I said softly, reaching up to cup his cheek. "We'll be okay."

He leaned into my hand, his eyes closing for a moment before opening once again. "I know," he said. "I just...it's hard to think about the possibility of something happening to you."

"I'll be careful," I promised him again. "We'll both be okay."

He nodded, but his grip on my waist tightened. I took another sip of my drink, feeling the familiar buzz settle into my body. The music was so loud that I could feel the bass reverberating through my bones.

Victor was at the front, standing by the door, scanning the area, and Grayson stayed beside us, drinking and watching. Jace wasn't in the room, but he was looking at the cameras, keeping a close eye on everything that was happening. I tried to remind myself that this was Blades turf, that Teo was in control of every little detail of this plan.

Everything was going exactly according to the plan.

For now.

Teo put his empty glass down on the bar. "Okay," he said into my ear. "Are

you ready?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I said, though it was so quiet I wasn't sure it was audible.

"Great. Let's dance."

Teo took my hand and led me to the dance floor. The bass thumped in my chest as we began to sway to the beat. I could feel his breath on my neck, sending shivers down my spine. It was hard to concentrate on anything else besides his touch, but I knew that we were here for a reason and couldn't afford any distractions.

As we danced, my eyes scanned over the crowd, searching for any sign of the shadowy man. The club was packed, making it hard to spot any one individual. Teo's arm wrapped around my waist tighter, pulling me closer to him.

"Anything?" I asked him softly.

He shook his head, his eyes still scanning the crowd. "Not yet," he said. "But keep dancing like you're enjoying yourself."

"I am enjoying myself," I said.

He laughed against my ear.

"Okay, well, try not to enjoy yourself too much," he said. "We're here to work."

The plan was for me to wait at a table at the edge of the dance floor, very close to where we were dancing. It was in a dark corner, but it was the most visible place in the room and clearly in view of the cameras. I made my way over to it, trying to seem more confident than I felt. As I passed Teo, he gave me a smile of encouragement. I flashed him one back, and I saw the look in his eyes that told me he was proud of me. That reassurance helped me feel better about the whole situation.

Coming here was a good idea.

I tapped the table for a few seconds. Nothing happened for what felt like a long time, and then I spotted a dark figure coming toward me.

He strode quickly toward me, his face covered in shadow. I knew the guys had spotted him and were probably getting ready to pounce.

My heart was beating so hard that I was sure everyone could hear it, but from the rest of my body, the adrenaline coursing through me made me feel oddly calm. It was a dangerous situation, and it felt like everything was happening in slow motion.

The man sat down across from me, and I could see his face more clearly.

“Hi,” the man said. At least I thought it was what he said, because it was hard to figure out what he was saying.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Here,” he said. The man reached into his pocket. From behind him, I saw Grayson practically jump on him, but stop just short of it when I looked up at him and shook my head.

He grabbed a scrap of paper and placed it in front of me.

“My name is Jason. Someone paid me \$100 to wear this hoodie and write that note.”

I looked down at the note, my heart dropping.

You didn't think it was going to be that easy, did you?

“Is he here?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “That was part of the deal, lady. I'm not supposed to tell you that either.”

“Okay, okay. I'll pay you...fuck, I don't know. So much money,” I said, thinking that Teo would be the one to pay him.

Jason, a man in his thirties, who didn't look like he wanted to be there, gave me a sideways look. “He's outside,” he said. “But I wouldn't...”

I had been under strict instructions not to leave the club, but right then, it was more important that I find the person who was harassing me. Who was harassing my brother.

I let instinct guide me before I could think about the consequences. I vaguely heard someone telling me to stop—Grayson, I thought, but it was hard to hear him over the sound of the music. I felt a hand around my wrist, but I looked up to see Grayson’s face and shook my head once again.

“You can’t...”

Without thinking, I dug my fingernails into his hands, hard. I knew he would catch up to me, but it was enough to get him to flinch, and I knew it was from surprise rather than pain.

We could talk about it later. Right then, I needed to find out who had hired Jason.

I walked out of the club, following Jason’s direction. The night sky was black, and the air was warm. I heard a rumble of thunder in the distance, but I barely noticed. My eyes were scanning everywhere, trying to locate the person who was trying to come for me.

Who was he? What did he want?

Nothing made sense. And the expensive whiskey and the warm summer weather weren’t helping any.

Was this just someone responding to my article? Then why had they started showing up when the Strangler had first appeared? It made no sense.

There were tons of people outside and, given the strange things people wore while clubbing, it was hard to figure out who didn’t belong. I spotted someone near the tree line, clearly looking up at me, though I couldn’t see their features at all.

And in that moment, I knew.

Fuck. That was him.

I knew it was him.

I could feel it in my bones.

Another crack of thunder broke up the conversation around me and I started to try to run for him despite my heels.

He noticed me straightaway.

“Hey!” I called out to him. “Hey! Stop!”

He didn’t.

I managed to kick off my shoes, my soles hitting the gross Orlando sidewalk, and pushed past the people who were close to me.

Someone got in front of me for a second, just enough to lose sight of the guy.

I barely took in the man’s features--all I knew was that he was not Jason--before he said my name.

“Wait,” he said. “Are you Sofia Reyes?”

I turned my face to look at the person in front of me, confusion overwhelming me. “What...who are you?”

“Are you Sofia Reyes?” the man insisted.

“Yes, but please don’t hurt me,” I said, my heart suddenly dropping in my chest.

“Hurt you?” the man replied, his brow knitted. “I’m not here to hurt you. Sofia Reyes, you’ve been served.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that my head spun.

“What?” I asked. “You’ve been served what?”

The man smiled and put a stack of papers in my hand. “That’s what you’ve been served with,” he said. And then he left.

I looked down at the papers in my hand, and for a few seconds, I didn’t even process what I was looking at. All I felt was the thick paper in my hands.

And then a feeling of dread overcame me, and for a moment, I couldn't feel my heart beating. Was this some sort of joke? I'd been served? Someone was suing me for something?

"Oh my God," someone else said from in front of me. It also took me a second to process that this person was coming toward me, a phone pointed at their face with a selfie cam. "Did you guys see that? Looks like we finally found her."

Before I could process who this other new person was—so that was at least four people, by my count, including the man in the tree line—Victor suddenly appeared through the mass of people and knocked her off her feet with his shoulder. He could've easily hurt her, but I could tell he was only trying to confuse her or stop her from what she was doing.

Someone was dragging me away from the chaos, dragging me by the waist. "C'mon," Teo said in my ear. "We have to go."

"Hold up," I said, trying to process what the hell was going on.

"No time," Teo said, and then he was dragging me along, away from Neon, as the people around us talked loudly.

"What's going on?" I asked, turning to look at the disorderly crowd behind me. But there really was no time. Teo was dragging me away from Neon, toward his car, fast as he could. I was vaguely aware that I had no shoes on and when we finally made it down the sidewalk, I started to pull from him.

"I need my fucking shoes," I said, panicked. "Teo."

But he didn't stop for my shoes. He helped me into his car and slammed the door shut before he got into the driver seat, all in what felt like one swift movement despite his limp getting, which looked worse than ever.

"Are you okay?" he asked as the car purred under him, his voice shaky.

"I'm fine, I just—"

He turned to look at me, his eyes narrow. “You can’t fucking do that,” he said. “You can’t run away, Sofia! What if one of us hadn’t managed to get to you in time?”

I stared at him for a moment, my eyes wide. “He was right there. I could have found his identity,” I said. “I didn’t know who that was, and I was just trying to find—”

“You know what I’m talking about,” he spat back. “Jesus fuck. You were fucking lucky!”

“He was far away and then lots of things started to happen. I don’t regret going after him,” I said.

“We had a plan for a reason!” he said, obviously furious.

“I understand that,” I said, my voice calm as I tried to keep my frayed nerves from taking over. “I was just trying to stop whoever that was from, I don’t know, coming for me and my brother. That was all.”

Teo shook his head, his jaw tight with rage, deep furrows in his brow. I couldn’t even begin to process what had happened on the sidewalk, but the adrenaline hadn’t left me yet.

“Anyway, looks like someone is suing me,” I said, my voice cracking. “This is serious.”

“At least you’re alive,” he said between gritted teeth. “Again, you got lucky.”

“Victor’s there,” I said. “He’s there, he’ll—”

Teo threw the car into reverse as he turned back to me. “I don’t want to wait for him to come back,” he said. “Let’s go. Right now. We’ll meet them back at HQ.”

“We were close.”

Teo scoffed. “No,” he said. “*He* got close, Sof. And we got outplayed.”

And with that, he drove in silence to HQ.

Chapter Thirty-One: Sofia

The drive to HQ was tense and silent, with the only noise being the sound of the car engine and the occasional curse from Teo. I sat there, clutching the papers tightly in my hand, feeling a mix of fear and confusion as I tried to make sense of what was happening. Why was I being sued? And by whom?

What the fuck was happening, exactly?

When we finally arrived at HQ, Jace and Grayson were already there, sitting in the living room with drinks in hand. Jace had his laptop on his lap. They both looked up as we entered, and their expressions immediately turned serious when they saw the look on Teo's face. I barely noticed that Victor was there too, icing his knuckles.

"How did you guys get here so quick?" I asked.

Grayson stood up, his head cocked as his eyes narrowed. "We didn't," he said. "You guys just took a while."

"You didn't notice, but I drove in circles," Teo said. "Not that it did us much good. Pretty sure whoever was at the club knows where HQ is."

My head was throbbing. I put the papers down on the kitchen island and sat down, sighing heavily.

“Hey,” Grayson said, walking up to me again. “It’ll be okay.”

I looked up at him, my eyes meeting his. There was something in his gaze that made me feel safe, like everything would be okay as long as he was there. But then I remembered the papers in front of me and my heart sank.

“I’m being sued,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t even know what for.”

Jace leaned over and looked at the papers. “Let me see,” he said, grabbing them from the island. He scanned them quickly and then looked up at me with a frown. “It’s from the Sentinel. Saying the article you published was their IP.”

“Well, it isn’t,” I said.

“This says that you used their resources and they want any money you made from the article going viral back,” Jace said.

“But I haven’t made any money.”

“Clearly they think you have,” Jace said simply, putting the papers down in front of me again.

Teo took a step forward. “I wouldn’t worry about this,” he said. “I’ll pay for a lawyer, and in any case, it was clearly a distraction. This man knew we were coming.”

“What about the person with the selfie stick?” I asked as my headache worsened.

“Victor took care of her,” Grayson said, nodding toward Victor who was sitting silently in the corner.

“I didn’t hurt her,” Victor chimed in, his voice gruff. “I just knocked her over and she dropped her phone.”

“Yeah, but she’s...going to be a problem,” Jace said softly. “I looked into her. She’s kind of obsessed with you. Someone tipped her off that you were going to be there.”

I shook my head. “Wait. Who is she?”

“Miranda Olivier,” Jace said. “She’s a really famous true crime social media person. She’s been looking for you for ages after the article dropped, covering all the victims of the Strangler. She wanted to talk to you and someone must have tipped her off that you were at Neon.”

I swallowed, my throat dry. “And she caught me getting served on a livestream?”

Jace nodded solemnly. “Looks like it. It’s not good, Sofia.”

Teo put a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll handle it,” he said firmly. “All of it. Just stay low for a while. And don’t go chasing after strangers alone.”

I put my face in my hands. “This is all my fault,” I said. “He did this because of me.”

Grayson sat down beside me, his hand rubbing my back comfortingly. “No, it’s not,” he said. “This was going to happen eventually. We’re in the business of danger. If we weren’t here...”

Teo crossed his arms, leaning against the wall. “If you had managed to follow him, you could’ve been hurt,” he said.

My head snapped up, anger rising inside of me. “I know that,” I said firmly. “I made a mistake. But I’m not some damsel in distress that needs saving all the time.”

Teo’s jaw clenched. “You would have been if you followed him!”

I stood up, feeling the heat of anger coursing through my veins. “I can take care of myself,” I spat out. “You don’t get to decide what I do and don’t do.”

Teo took a step forward, his face turning red. “I am the leader of this group

and you will follow my orders.”

“I’m not part of the Blades,” I said. “And you don’t get to tell me what to do.”

In a split second, Teo had his hand wrapped around both of my wrists, holding my arms behind my back. He leaned down so he could speak in my ear. “Wrong,” he said. “You are part of this now, and you will do what I say. Don’t forget who’s in charge.”

His grip on my wrists was tight, almost painful.

I gritted my teeth, feeling anger and fear bubbling up inside of me. “Let go,” I hissed, struggling against his grasp. “Teo, let go.”

He let go of me, hard enough to almost throw me off balance.

“Fine,” he said. “But you need to learn your place. We can’t have you jeopardizing the mission, and we certainly can’t have you jeopardizing your safety.”

I glared at Teo, determined not to show any weakness. But his words stung. I knew he was right, but I didn’t want to admit it. “I’m a reporter, dammit! Just because I’m your girlfriend doesn’t mean I’m not a journalist.”

Grayson placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “We know that, Sofia,” he said. “We’re not trying to stifle your voice or what you do. But we need to protect you, especially now that there’s someone out there who’s obsessed with you.”

“I won’t do it again—”

“No,” Teo said. “You won’t. I don’t care if you’re a reporter, I don’t even care if you’re my girlfriend, I don’t want you to get hurt. And since talking to you doesn’t work, I’m going to have to teach you a different way.”

“What does...”

He didn’t let me finish. He grabbed me by the arm again, inching his face

close to my ear. "All you had to do was listen."

A shiver went down my spine as I realized what he was saying - he meant to punish me. The realization was so intense that it clouded my mind. "What?" Everything after that felt like it happened in quick succession. Teo was much taller than me, and he made dragging me feel like easy work. I was aware the rest of the guys were watching as he led me toward the living room.

I was still very much in view of them when he pulled me toward the living room. My heart was pounding in my chest, my mind racing with thoughts of what he might do to me.

He pushed me onto the couch, hard enough that the wind was knocked out of me. I scrambled to sit up, but he held me down with a firm hand on my chest. "You need to understand," he said, his voice low and dangerous. "We can't have you putting yourself in danger like that. So I'm going to show you what happens when you disobey me."

I tried to speak, but words failed me as he placed a kiss on my neck, trailing it down to the exposed skin of my collarbone. My body tensed and tingled at the sensation, and I tried to push him away, but his grip only tightened.

Suddenly, Grayson was there beside us, his hand on Teo's shoulder. "Hey," he said calmly. "Maybe this isn't the best way to handle things."

"This is the only way to handle this," Teo replied between gritted teeth. "Can't you see it?"

Grayson stared at him.

"How excited this makes her," Teo said. "What it does to her."

Blood rushed to my cheeks. I tried to speak, but my voice was stuck in my throat. I didn't know what to say, and I didn't want to admit that he was right. Sure, I was embarrassed, but Teo had clearly given me an out.

I didn't want it.

In one swift motion, Teo swapped where we were and he was sitting on the couch as he put me over his lap, my stomach on his legs.

He flipped up my skirt, baring me to everyone in the room. A rush of humiliation and arousal coursed through me at the same time. I tried to squirm, but his grip on my waist was too tight.

Teo's strong hand landed on my ass with a sharp slap, sending an electric shock through my body. I let out a small gasp, my body trembling with anticipation and excitement. He left his hand there, his fingers hanging over the juncture of my thighs.

I squirmed a little bit, but not to get away. Instead, my ass wiggled back toward him, begging silently for more.

His second slap was harder, sending a jolt through my body that I didn't expect.

"You knew what you had to do so you wouldn't be punished. Sofia, you asked for this." His hand slid down the back of my panties and I felt him pinch my skin. The pain made me shudder, but I wasn't sure if it was from the hurt or from arousal.

All of a sudden, he jerked my panties down, exposing me to the group. I let out another gasp and tried to cover myself, but Teo wrapped his arm around my waist tight enough that I couldn't squirm away. His grip didn't calm me enough for me to relax. Instead, my breathing quickened and I felt an ache between my legs that pulsed with each heartbeat.

I could feel the guys' eyes on me. I could have told him to stop, but I didn't want to. I wanted him to keep going.

Teo gave my pussy a firm slap. It stung more than it should have. "Naughty," he said disapprovingly. Then he slid his hand between my legs. I spread them a little wider, begging silently for him to touch me. His finger teased my

entrance, my underwear soaked for him, and I continued to squirm under his touch.

“You can’t do that,” he said. “You can’t run off where we can’t protect you. Do you understand?”

His finger hovered over my clit, barely touching it. Teo’s warning was all I needed to hear. I nodded as Teo rubbed his thumb on my clit for a second, before he moved his hand away and spanked my ass hard enough to make it sting. “Say it.”

“I understand,” I said shakily.

“Good girl,” he said as he rubbed my sore spot.

Teo started to spank me again, not quite as hard this time, and my body tensed in anticipation. He positioned his hard cock into the curve of my hip, rubbing it slowly. The sensation made me shudder and squirm harder over his lap.

I couldn’t help but moan at the sensation of Teo’s cock pressing against me.

“Unfortunately,” he said softly, in that fucking voice, and I almost came right then and there. “A couple of spanks aren’t going to really teach you. I have to make sure you know. And I can tell...”

He ran his finger over my slit, the dampness increasing by the second as I pushed my hips towards him, desperate for more. “That you know that, too.”

Teo’s finger continued tantalizing my entrance for a few more seconds before he continued.

“I think you need to learn what happens when you put yourself in danger. Don’t you?”

I hesitated. I didn’t know if I could do it. Not now. Not in front of everyone. But just as I was about to say that, Teo’s finger plunged inside me with one

smooth stroke. I closed my eyes and gasped loudly at the sensation and my body trembled with pleasure.

“The thing is,” Teo said as he continued to thrust his fingers in and out of me. “I know how much you love to be fucked by me. And right now, you don’t deserve a reward, do you?”

My pussy clenched around his fingers, my arousal reaching a point that I couldn’t take much more. My body was begging for more than he was giving me. “Please,” I begged, my eyes squeezed shut.

“Since you are being good now,” he said. “I’m going to give you something. But it’s not going to be my cock, no matter how much you want it. Next time you step out of line, I’m going to tie you up in your bed, and leave you there so anyone can punish you.”

Another smack.

“Much as I like doing this, everyone else might not be as gentle.” He slapped my ass again, then his fingers slid inside me once more and he continued to fuck me with them. “My men are less charitable than I am. So you might not deserve my cock, but since your pussy is so wet, maybe you can take something else instead. Something you aren’t going to love quite as much...”

He removed his fingers from inside of me and smacked my ass hard again, hard enough to make me whimper.

He moved his hand so it was in front of my face. “You’re going to clean me up,” he said. “Then you’re going to go into your room, with your skirt hiked up like this, and you’re going to wait. And if you don’t, this punishment will feel like a reward. Do you understand?”

I nodded slowly, my arousal starting to grow again under his command. My mouth hung open as I waited for him to give me the order, excitement coursing through my body.

“Clean my hand,” he said.

I dutifully began to lick his fingers, softly moaning as I tasted my wetness on his salty skin.

Teo continued to stroke himself through his pants the entire time, his cock getting harder with each motion of my tongue over his fingers. “Not bad,” he said. “Now go to your room. Do what I told you.”

He pulled me off his lap and I sat up, my legs a little shaky from the aftereffects of the spanking.

And then I did what he told me, and went to my room.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Grayson

We all stood there for a second, the scent of Sofia hanging in the air as Teo readjusted his cock in his jeans. We were all watching him, waiting for him to say something, anything.

His gaze found my eyes. “Well, what are you waiting for?” he asked. “You’ve been wanting to fuck her for ages. Go. Do it.”

It was a command. Not a suggestion. Not a question. Even if I had been thinking about waiting, the last sentence made sure that I wouldn’t have the opportunity.

And I understood, though I didn’t agree. The punishment was that it wasn’t his cock.

Any other time, I might have bristled at his words, but right then, my only instinct was to take care of Sofia. Plus, the display had been pretty fucking hot.

As I walked toward her room, Teo called out to me. “Grayson?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you fucking dare leave any marks on her.”

I nodded. *Be gentle.* That's what he was asking me to do. He could dish out the punishment, but she couldn't see him—and we couldn't see him—as being weak.

I reached Sofia's door and opened it, a little surprised to see her just sitting there, waiting. I closed the door softly behind myself as I looked at her pink cheeks, at her skirt, at the way that tube top and miniskirt hugged her gorgeous body.

“Hi,” I said. “Can I join you?”

She looked up at me, doe-eyed, and nodded. I walked up to the bottom of the bed and sat next to her.

“That was intense. You okay?” I asked.

She nodded, taking a shaky breath. “Teo spanked me really hard,” she said.

“Yeah, I know,” I replied. “It looked like it hurt.”

She blushed a little. “It did.”

“Did you like it?” I asked her.

She nodded again, biting her lip. “Yeah.”

“I could hear how wet you were,” I said. “It was so hot. You're so fucking sexy.”

And it was so true. Teo had her pussy glistening and red and I couldn't wait to get my hands on it. But not if she just wanted to talk.

“If you need time to process what...”

“I don't need time to process,” Sofia said quickly. “You heard Teo. I need to be taught a lesson.”

She got to her feet shakily, kicking her panties away from her legs since they were already halfway down her thighs and climbing on my lap. I hugged her waist and pushed my cock against her, the material of her dress feeling so soft as it brushed against my body. She fumbled with the zip of my pants,

which didn't take much effort. I was already ridiculously hard and getting rid of my pants was quick, easy work.

I desperately wanted to just tear her skirt off of her right at that moment.

"Fuck," she said, her voice husky. "I want you."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked her, in between kissing her cheek and her neck.

"Fuck me," she said quickly. "Please. I need you right now."

Our lips met as I hiked her skirt up to her waist.

She gasped into my mouth as I found her entrance, the firm tip of my cock pressing into her pussy.

Her hips began to sway in a slow rhythm, grinding my length against her clit hard.

"I...fuck, I need you so bad," she said.

"I'll be gentle," I said.

"I don't need you to be gentle."

"I can't fuck you hard if you want me to last, Sof," I said as I teased her pussy with the tip of my cock, her body hovering over mine. "I've been wanting to do this for ages and I want to enjoy your pussy for as long as I possibly can."

"I've desperately wanted you inside of me since the first day I met you."

This woman was trying to kill me. I rested my forehead against her, feeling her quick breathing on my face. "I want to enjoy you, Sof."

Sofia kissed me again, pushing her hips down on mine as hard as she could.

She brushed her fingertips against my back and whispered in my ear. "I've been wanting you for so long. Please, just fuck me."

That's what I wanted to hear.

I quickly thrust upwards, my cock sliding into Sofia's pussy. And fuck...it

was worth every agonizing second of waiting, of wanting her, of licking her pussy and jerking myself off as I waited for the chance to be inside her. My hands gripped her ass tightly as I pulled her body up and down on my length. She groaned in pleasure and arched her back as I filled her with every inch of my cock. Her fingers clawed at the skin on my back as I fucked her, taking in every curve and swell of our bodies coming together.

My heart thudded in my chest as I felt her twitch with pleasure, the brief feel of her tight pussy closing around me sending electric shocks through each of my body.

“Fuck,” I moaned. “You’re so tight...”

“And you’re so hard...” she gasped. “So deep inside of me. Your cock feels so good.”

She lowered her body down onto mine and kissed me hard again.

Her body rocked against mine like a wave, her hips slowly grinding my length into her as I fucked her pussy. She was so wet that I could hear the sloppy sound of our bodies together, each thrust sending waves of pleasure through my body.

“Fuck,” Sofia moaned. “Grayson.”

Her moans turned into soft whimpers as I began to thrust harder. She clung to me tight, her body moving with each stroke of my cock inside of her.

I could feel the tingling sensation at the base of my cock that signaled I was close to an orgasm. She was that close too. I pushed my hand down between us and rubbed her clit until she let out a loud moan, her pussy tightening around me in a strong wave of pleasure. She kissed me again as I supported her body on mine, my hand on her ass guiding her movements until the orgasm subsided.

“Will you come inside of me?” she moaned into my ear.

My cock twitched at the thought.

“You want to feel my cum inside of you?” I asked her.

“Yes, please,” she begged. “Please, Grayson.”

Fuck. I thrust harder into her, holding her body in place with my arm around her waist, grabbing her throat gently with my other hand as I kissed her hard.

“Fuck,” I groaned. “You’re gonna make me come so hard.”

I leaned back, Sofia’s walls tightening around me as she came again, her hips grinding in a circle as I thrust into her. The intense build up of pleasure made it feel like my vision was going blank from the corners, zeroing in on her gorgeous, open lips.

“Sof,” I moaned into her ear. “I’m gonna come inside of you.”

“Yes,” she said, breathlessly. “Yes. Fuck, yes.”

I grabbed onto her body again tighter and buried my cock deep inside of her, feeling myself explode while my body began to shake with pleasure. We moaned at the same time, her muscles clenching around me until I felt like I was going to pass out.

I pulled out of her slowly and she fell into my chest. I was sure she could hear my pounding heartbeat, and I could feel hers.

She breathed deeply and I looked at her face. “Are you good?”

“Yes,” she said. “Spent, but good.”

“I’ll draw you a bath,” I said. “You stay here and lie down. Get some rest. Maybe you’ll want to be on your stomach if your ass still hurts?”

She laughed softly. “Thank you, Grayson,” she said. “Are you good?”

I nodded, capturing her lips in a soft kiss. “Yes,” I said when I broke it off.

“Better than ever.”

I pulled her body up with ease and put her on the bed as I got to my feet and tried to ignore my shaky legs. She stripped out of her clothes, ginger with her

sore ass, and lay back on the bed, her gaze never leaving me.

“So what now?”

“I can get you some ibuprofen if you want,” I said. “You’re going to be sore soon.”

She smiled at that. “No,” she said. “Like, yes, thank you, I’ll take that. But outside of the sex. What now?”

I cocked my head and looked at her. To me, the answer was extremely obvious. I was surprised it hadn’t occurred to her, smart as she was.

“We’re going to find this man who is after you and your brother,” I said.

“We’re going to kill him. And it’s going to hurt.”

THE GANG WILL BE BACK IN WHISPER