

QUIET



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

clarissa bright

Quiet

Clarissa Bright

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Blurb

I 'm ruthless. My hands are stained with blood. And I'll cut my way through anyone threatening her to keep her safe... **and to make her ours.**

I'm the leader of the most dangerous gang in Orlando. I've learned to be vicious and violent to survive. Now someone is trying to frame the Mercy Drive Blades for senseless murders we're not responsible for and she's become our only hope.

Sofia. The insatiable journalist investigating the most dangerous serial killer in the state.

When she's left in the storage room in our club, bruised and beaten, I know I can't let her leave.

Even if she wants to.

Whether she likes it or not, she needs our protection.

But she's supposed to just be a means to an end, a tool to ensure that my men and I are protected—to exonerate us, no matter how guilty we are.

I have no right to want her, not after everything I've done to her. By trying to keep her alive, I might be snuffing out that very thing she most desires; her freedom.

I don't just need to protect her.

I need to make her mine.

For good.

If you love dark, twisty, suspense romances from Ana Huang, Lauren Asher, Elle Kennedy, and Lilith Vincent, you're going to love this series.

One click this steamy enemies-to-lovers romance today!

Prologue: Sofia

When I got my first gig as a reporter, I thought I'd be unearthing scandals, writing thinkpieces, calling out corruption. Instead, I'm known for one thing only: coming up with a corny name for a deadly killer.

I thought I would catch him. Instead, I made him famous.

And it turns out that catchy names don't win journalists awards.

I called him the Orchid Strangler before anyone else did. It wasn't in an article, not at first; it was in a conversation with my brother.

He asked me what I was working on after we'd drank a bottle of wine together, Jodie Foster and Anthony Hopkins talking quietly on his TV screen. I filled him in on the puff pieces I had been assigned before I told him about the passion project I had managed to convince my editor to let me pursue.

She wasn't buying it, at first, but she said there might be a story there. And she let me take it on, as long as I kept up with

the rest of my workload. If she really thought this was worthwhile, she would've given it to one of the more seasoned reporters, but I wasn't going to talk her out of it. I accepted the fact that she seemed to take pity on me with gladness.

I would prove her wrong. I was absolutely sure of it.

"So you think there's a serial killer around?" Sam asked skeptically, the dim yellow light of his living room catching in his jet black hair.

"I'm not saying that."

"Well, what are you saying, then?"

"People are going missing, Sam," I said, waving my wine glass around and spilling drops of it on his ikea coffee table.

"Someone is killing them, and the police aren't doing anything about it. No offense."

"People are always going missing, Sof," he replied, putting his empty glass down next to a coaster. "There are not enough cops and too many cases of people disappearing. Trust me."

"I do trust you," I replied. "It's your superiors I don't trust. Bureaucracy is always stupid. Mix bureaucracy and policing and you have a recipe for disaster."

Sam laughed quietly, leaning back on the sofa, his gaze settling on the spinning ceiling overhead. "I want to tell you you're wrong."

"I know you do," I said, slumping down as I drank the last of my wine. The bottle was turned away from me and I couldn't read the label. My arms felt too heavy to reach out and turn it

around, so I looked at my brother instead. "What is this? Zinfandel?"

"Yes," he said. "Should we open another one?"

"In a minute. My head is spinning."

He sighed, running his hand through his hair. "I wish you'd be more careful. Maybe ask your editor to assign you to the organized crime stories or something? I can give you the scoop on the Mercy Drive Blades," he said. "All the scoop. Where they hang out, what they're doing. I mean, technically, I'm not allowed to talk about it, but..."

"Tempting," I replied. "But after something like this happens, even the Blades aren't big enough. I mean, what's the story there? *Gang moved drugs*? Shocker."

"Yes," he said. "Gang moved drugs! Gang bad for community!"

I laughed. "Okay, I take your point, but I don't think Alayna is going to let me work on anything other than what I've already pitched her and I don't want to piss her off more than I already have," I said. "Plus, what if there *is* something here? What if it's something huge?"

He mulled over that for a few seconds, his brow furrowed in concern. "Okay, Sof," he said. "Let's say that this is a serial killer. How do you know they wouldn't target you if you tried to expose them?"

I laughed. "I'm counting on it. Bring it on. You'll protect me, right?"

"I'm not even a detective yet. I don't know how much I could protect you."

I shook my head, suddenly getting serious. Sam was two years younger than me, but he had already done plenty to protect me after we lost our parents. He'd only been nineteen years old at the time. I felt the weight of the grief and responsibility for him crushing me, but he was steadfast and supportive, until I managed to claw myself out of the grips of the worst depressive period of my entire life.

He'd been there through it all. I would've done anything for him before that; he was family, after all. But after that year, he also became my closest friend.

"You don't actually have to do anything, Sammy. I was joking," I said. "You don't have to protect me from the Orchid Strangler."

I thought he would laugh, but he paled instead. "The Orchid Strangler?"

"Do you like it? I just came up with it."

"No, I don't like it," he said. "It's awful."

"Right. But catchy, right?"

He ignored me. "How do you know he's strangling people?"

"Well, I don't know, exactly, but the last few bodies found had been strangled. It's not public record, but you know Sara? Sara Collins?"

"I think I do," he said. "How do you know her?"

”Well, we were in the same book club and she works at the Medical Examiner’s office. She’s such a gossip. We have a whatsapp about weird things she’s seen and she keeps talking about all these strangulations that have happened lately.” I said.

Sam laughed, throwing his head back. ”They need to fire her ass.”

”They really do,” I said.

”What about the orchid thing?”

”Oh, this one is kind of a stretch,” I said. ”After the first victim showed up, we went for brunch together and I loaded her up on mimosas. She told me that she’d heard from the M.E. that there was an orchid in the victim’s mouth.”

”I gotta look into this,” Sam said to himself. ”How would she know about it?”

”I’m pretty sure they’re sleeping together. Not her and the body, I mean, her and the M.E.,” I replied, as if that needed clarification. It made Sam laugh. ”But like, obviously, that’s just speculation. I don’t actually know if they’re sleeping together. She just seemed very familiar with him when she was talking about him, that’s all.”

”All of this is speculation,” he said. ”But you’ve always been able to tell when people are sleeping together.”

I laughed. ”It’s not like you and David were discreet!”

”We were discreet enough,” he said.

"You were teenagers," I replied. "You were *not* discreet. What's he up to now anyway?"

"We can stalk him on social media later," he said. "Anyway, you were talking about the serial killer, and all this speculation."

I nodded. "You're right, but I have a lot that might back this up. Do you want to see my files?"

"Not really, no. If I do end up looking into this, I don't want to go into it biased. Just promise me you'll be careful, okay?"

I nodded, feeling the weight of his concern settle on my shoulders. I should have known he would be worried; we lost our mom to violence, too. "Says the cop," I replied. "If anyone should be worried, it should be me."

"Please," he said. "The most exciting thing about my day is when Detective Holden brings donuts to the precinct. Like, not to be a stereotype or anything."

"Pretty sure that ship sailed already, kid," I replied.

He flung a pillow at me as he laughed. It missed me by about an inch. "If you're going to insult me, I'm not going to let you open the next bottle of wine."

I grinned and put my hands up in surrender. "Okay, okay, I won't insult you anymore. But seriously, Sam, I'll be careful. I won't take any unnecessary risks. As long as you don't."

"I don't take unnecessary risks. That's in the job description," he said, then looked at me, his face softened with a sweet smile. "I don't want to see you get hurt."

I leaned my head back against the sofa and closed my eyes, letting the weight of his words settle in. I opened my eyes and looked at Sam, a determined glint in my eye. "I'll be careful," I said, "but I won't stop. I need to know who this guy is. Why he's doing this. Maybe then, the cops will take it seriously."

Sam shook his head, but I could see the pride in his eyes. He also looked like shit, particularly when he sighed, his skin still pale. "You're a stubborn one, aren't you?" he said, grinning.

"I learned from the best," I replied.

"If Mom were here, she would tell you to stop."

I laughed. "Please. If Mom were here, she'd be looking into this herself," I said.

Sam chuckled. "Yeah, you're probably right."

We fell into a comfortable silence, the sound of the TV and the occasional car passing outside the only noise. I couldn't help but think about the Orchid Strangler, about the victims and their families, about the fear that gripped the city. I had to do something, even if it was just to give them a voice.

"You're sleeping over, right?" he asked. "You're too drunk to drive."

"I'm sleeping over," I said. "I need to finish all your wine."

"Good," he replied, standing up as he did so. "Okay. What do you want to watch next?"

He walked away before I could answer, and I sat there for a moment longer, my mind racing with ideas and possibilities. I

couldn't let this go.

My brother put himself in danger all the time. I was smart, capable. And I would finally be writing something that mattered, rather than a puff piece about a celebrity appearance at another downtown nightclub. Maybe I would finally be able to make a name for myself.

"What about *Scream*?" I called after him. "I need a palate cleanser."

"Sof," he replied, laughing. "You have to stop watching movies about serial killers."

Chapter One: Teo

My stomach twisted into a tight knot as Grayson approached me after he knocked on my door. He didn't have to, all my men had access to my house whenever they wanted it, but not one of them dared walk in without knocking first.

This time, however, he didn't even wait for me to call out that it was okay to come in. That was enough to make me worry.

It was early in the morning during a hot October day and I was drinking the last of my coffee, sitting on a barstool at my kitchen island. In general, my men knew not to approach me before breakfast. I knew they found me much more reasonable after ten o'clock in the morning, after I'd had some time to shake off the night's events and maybe, if I was lucky, get some sleep. Grayson's hair stuck to his forehead from sweat. His plain white t-shirt and jeans told me that he'd had to get up and deal with an emergency in the morning; I hadn't seen him in anything other than a suit in years. His face was white as a sheet and he struggled to meet my gaze.

He didn't have to say anything. I already knew what he was going to tell me. I put my unfinished coffee down as he walked up to me, his throat working when he swallowed.

I already knew what he had to say, so I held my hand up as he opened his mouth.

"Another body?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, boss," he said. "I'm sorry."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "And you're sure it wasn't one of our guys?"

"It wasn't one of our guys," Grayson replied, crossing his arms over his chest. "They know better than to dump a body behind Neon."

He was right; our men weren't stupid, and they knew better than to implicate us in whatever it was they were doing. As a rule, they also knew I much preferred it when they *didn't* kill people. Over time, I'd learnt that there was a hierarchy of crimes, not just when it came to punishment but when it came to cleaning up after them.

A street fight? Easy. Bribe a cop on the beat to look the other way or pay the target's family a large lump sum. A murder was much more complex. I didn't have time to cover it up.

And this one...fuck, this one was the third in a *month*.

I stood up from the stool and took a deep breath. "Alright. Let's go have a look at the scene."

Grayson nodded, relief evident in his eyes that he didn't have to face my wrath alone. We both knew what was at stake here. We couldn't afford to be linked to these murders. It would ruin everything we'd worked for.

We made our way to Neon, one of our nightclubs in the city. It was closed during the day, but the back alley was always busy with deliveries and pickups. Grayson drove us there. We weren't far, we could've walked, but we wanted to get there as soon as possible.

He parked his black Mercedes in a spot around the corner and he began to brief me as we walked out of the car, not sparing any details on what they'd found.

"She's a young woman, early twenties," he said, his voice flat.

"Same M.O. as the other two. Strangled, left in an alleyway."

"An alleyway?" I asked. He wouldn't meet my gaze when he spoke again.

"Our alleyway," he said, running a hand through his hair. Grayson had been my right hand man for years, and he knew that my temper ran hot, but he also knew that I wasn't going to turn against him for something that wasn't his fault. Still, I couldn't fault him for this. None of us wanted this to be happening on *our* alleyway.

"Right. Anything else happen to her?"

"Not as far as I can tell," Grayson replied, sticking his hands into the pockets of his jeans. It was getting hot now as the sun

shone high up in the sky and I could see beads of sweat forming on his forehead. "No signs of sexual assault."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Well, she's wearing all her clothes," he said. "I'm not going to look at her, obviously, more than just a glance, but yeah. It felt brutal but not sexual."

"Based on what? Vibes?"

"An educated guess," Grayson said.

I raised my eyebrows. He was smart, and he knew what he was doing, but my patience with the situation was wearing thin. We'd installed cameras in the alley—which had promptly, *mysteriously* broken—and then we'd posted a couple of people to patrol the area. They were good, capable men, and neither one of them ever saw shit. It wasn't just infuriating, it was worrying. I didn't like the idea that someone who liked murder was targeting us.

I grimaced at the thought. "Any witnesses?"

"Not yet," he replied. "But I spoke to Kev and Phil. Neither one of them saw anything last night."

"And they were both here?"

"Yeah. They didn't leave."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Alright," I said. "Okay. Any other information?"

"Her wallet was on her. Her name's Ana. Was Ana, I guess."

"Ana what?"

”Welton,” he said.

We turned the corner and I saw the body for the first time. It was lying on the ground, wrapped in a black plastic bag. My stomach churned as I moved closer to it, feeling the heat radiating off the pavement. I saw the outline of a body and the shape of a woman’s features under the bag. ”They put her in a bag?”

”Yes,” Grayson said. He crouched down next to me and swallowed hard enough that I could hear. He put his hand over his mouth as he tried to stop himself from gagging, his skin turning a light pale of yellow. ”I don’t know how long I can keep doing this, Teo.”

I sighed. ”I wish you didn’t have to. We need to catch this guy. Did she have anything on her?”

I crouched down and pulled the bag away from the face. The woman had long, wavy brown hair, and her skin was still warm to the touch. Her eyes were open and staring, and I could see the fear in them. I swallowed back bile and stood up on shaky legs.

Mercifully, I couldn’t see any blood. That would’ve pushed me over the edge.

Grayson was watching me, his expression unreadable. I knew what he was thinking, though. We’d been at this for a long time, and we knew each other better than anyone else. He could tell I was concerned and I really didn’t like it when my men knew I was worried.

"Boss," he said, his voice low. "What are we going to do?"

I rubbed my chin, thinking. We needed to find out who was responsible for this, and fast. Three bodies in a month was too much. Too many people were paying attention to us.

"We need to step up security," I said, my mind racing. "We'll have Jace get on top of getting the cameras fixed. And I want more patrols in the area. Can you handle it?"

Grayson nodded, his face serious. "I'll take care of it," he said. "Do you want me to loop Victor in?"

"No," I said. "I can do that myself."

Grayson nodded. I could tell he was holding back a sigh of relief. No one liked when I had to call in Victor; least of all me. He wasn't subtle. He could be brutal. Sometimes, cleaning up after him was worse than the original clean up.

But he was my last recourse when my patience was wearing thin, and my patience was fraying.

"Alright. What about the body?" Grayson asked.

"She can't stay here. Take her back to wherever she lives... lived. Make it look like a suicide."

"Fuck," Grayson said, standing up and wiping his sweaty hands on his pants. I could tell he didn't like this. This had never been part of his job before. "Alright. Whatever you need, boss. Oh, hm..."

"What?"

”There’s one more thing,” he said, so softly I almost couldn’t hear him.

”What is it?”

”It’s so weird, boss,” Grayson replied.

I stood up and looked right at him. I could read him as well as he could read me, and he looked sick to his stomach. We saw a lot of shit in our line of work, so for something to disturb him, it had to be really bad. I cocked my head, waiting for him to finish his sentence. ”What *is* it?” I asked, after it was clear that he wasn’t going to tell me without prompting.

”He’d stuffed a flower in her mouth,” he said. ”Left her head tilted back so we could see it. It was fucked up.”

”A flower?”

”Yeah,” he said. ”I don’t know much about flowers, but I think that was a white orchid.”

Chapter Two: Sofia

The words on my screen blurred into each other.

The smell of Chinese takeout filled my apartment, the sound of a Hallmark movie droning somewhere in the background. I always did my best work when there was noise in the room, but this was brutal, and I hadn't expected to fall asleep while looking through my files. Again.

I looked at my phone. There was nothing but the unanswered text message Sam had sent me.

I really wish you'd give this a rest. You should get some sleep.

I rolled my eyes. He wasn't there to see me do it, but I was convinced that, somehow, my brother would know the exact response his text would get from me. He was on track to be a detective. How could he expect me to give this up so easily?

I sighed as I looked at the unanswered message on my screen. I wasn't surprised that none of the victims' families or friends wanted to talk to me. The police hadn't taken them seriously,

that was, if they had even reported a missing person. By my count, that was twenty-four in just the last year alone.

Math had never been my strong suit, but by my count, that amounted to four missing people a month, which meant approximately one a week. If this was a serial offender—and I had no reason to believe it wasn't—then it was a prolific one. There were no signs that he was going to let up any time soon, but I had no leads, no clues and few discernable patterns.

I knew one thing for certain, and that was it. This predator liked targeting people who they believed wouldn't be missed, anyone who might slip through the cracks, anyone who wouldn't want the police alerted.

It was alarming, because even with that, the authorities had to know something was up. But I wasn't the authorities. I was just a reporter with an article due in less than a month, a pretty bad first draft and dwindling job security. I'd tried to impress my editor-in-chief, but Alayna was headstrong and I couldn't help but think that there was part of her that wanted me to fail.

Of course she'd finally given me this assignment—she didn't think I had anything real.

I didn't even dislike the pop culture beat. I just thought that it was important that someone cover this, and no one was. When I tried to pitch it to the rest of the newsroom, they all said that there was nothing newsworthy there.

Homeless indigents, prostitutes and mentally ill people disappeared all the time. A tragedy, yes, but not at all newsworthy.

I told my brother about it and Sam said he would look into it. But after I'd looped him in, the official investigation was completely out of my hands.

I typed up another message to send to the girlfriend of the man whose disappearance I was looking into. She had seen the first one but had yet to reply, and I didn't think following up would do much to prompt her to get in touch with me.

"Hi," I said, reciting the message I'd written so many times already. "I don't know if you saw my message, but I'm Sofia Reyes. I would love to speak to you about...shit, what was his name? Brady. I know he's been missing for a bit, and I just wanted to talk to you about it. If you want to give me a call, my number is...fuck, why bother? She isn't going to call."

Still, I dutifully finished the message, sent it off, and closed my laptop. It was already eleven o'clock at night, almost too late to be sending social media messages, but no one had cracked the etiquette code for that one yet and I wasn't sure when or even if she was going to see it.

I told myself I'd quickly shower and then get some sleep when my phone vibrated on the table next to my laptop.

When I saw it was a blocked number, I rushed to pick it up.

"Hello?"

"Stop," a distorted voice said.

"Haha," I said, no humor in my voice. "Very funny, pal. If--"

"Stop searching," the voice said. I couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman. The distortion on the voice made it sound

weird and robotic. "Stop sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, bitch."

Shit. I should've been recording the call, I told myself.

"Stop what?" I asked, desperately looking for my recording app. It took too long, and the voice answered me again before I could.

"You know what," the voice said. "If you don't stop, I'll fucking kill you."

My heart raced as my mind processed the threat. This wasn't the first time I'd been threatened, but it was the first time someone had gone as far as calling me directly.

"You'll kill me?" I repeated. "Who are you? Why are you doing this?"

There was no answer, only the sound of static on the other end of the line. I clenched my jaw and took a deep breath. This was a lead, a clue. I had to act on it. I didn't think they were going to reveal themselves, but if I could get them to slip up, then maybe I'd have something more to go on.

Or, well, anything.

"Wait," I said, my voice shaking despite my best efforts. "Please, don't hang up. Tell me more. Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?"

"I want you to stop," the voice said, the distortion making it hard to tell if there was any emotion behind the words. "I know you're very good at what you do, but so am I."

A scoff. The first sign of actual human emotion. My heart raced as I paced around my apartment. "Back off, Sofia," the voice said. "Or else."

"Or else what?" I asked. I didn't need to ask. I knew what would happen if I didn't back off.

"Or else you'll end up like the others."

The line went dead after the caller hung up. My hands trembled as I put down the phone on the dining room table, next to my laptop.

I immediately looked up the non-emergency police number. Not because I thought they were going to do anything—I really didn't—but because I wanted something on the record.

Someone clearly cared about what I was doing. Someone was threatening me. My first instinct was to call my brother, but I knew exactly what he'd tell me to do. I needed to make sure to start a papertrail. Then I would go to him, when I was a little less upset. I didn't want him to know how shaken I was; it would be another excuse for him to try and talk me out of pursuing this.

"Orlando Police, Precinct 11," a pleasant voice answered.

"How can I help you tonight?"

"Hi," I said. "Something just happened...I got this threatening phone call."

"Are you afraid for your safety?"

"No, not really," I said. "But I am taking it seriously. I think it might be more than a prank call."

The woman on the other end of the phone asked for my name, address, and the details of the call. I told her everything.

"Thank you for the information, Ms. Reyes," she said. "We'll have a patrol unit check in on you tonight. Please don't hesitate to call us if you receive any more threats or if anything else happens."

"Thank you," I said, my voice shaking.

I hung up and sat down on the couch, rubbing my temples. What was this? Was it a warning, a threat, or both? How had they found out about my investigation?

I was exhausted and needed to get ready for bed, so I stood up and made my way to the bedroom.

And that's when I heard the lock click. Someone was at my door. But they weren't knocking.

They were breaking in.

My heart clenched in fear as I listened to the intruder fumbling with the lock. I quickly grabbed my phone and went to dial 911, but the door swung open, and a dark figure stood there, towering for a second before the man pounced into my apartment.

I was only vaguely aware that I threw my phone across the room when the intruder entered my apartment, his footsteps getting closer and closer.

"I told you to stop," he snarled.

This time, his voice wasn't masked, but I still didn't recognize him.

I backed away as he walked towards me, my feet hitting the back of the couch and forcing me to stop. The man lunged at me, grabbing my neck, and I started clawing at his hands and arms, screaming. I had no idea what he was doing, or why, or how. My first instinct had been to run, but it was too late.

I *had* to fight back.

I kicked and flailed, trying to get him off of me, but he was too strong. He pinned me down on the couch, his rough hands gripping my throat tighter and tighter. I struggled to breathe, my vision going blurry.

A surge of adrenaline shot through me, giving me the strength to fight back despite knowing that I was about to lose. I kneed him in the groin, which caused him to grunt in pain. Then I clawed at his face, raking my fingernails down his cheeks.

He let go of my neck, and I gasped for air, choking. I tried to push him away, but he was too heavy. He punched me in the face, and I felt a hot, searing pain shoot through my nose. Blood gushed out, and I tasted the copper in my mouth.

I knew I was in trouble.

"Fucking bitch," I heard.

And then I didn't hear anything else.

Chapter Three: Sofia

When I pictured dying, I didn't picture this.

The pain would come later. I knew it—if pain came at all. There was the smell of sawdust around me, the thump-thump-thump sound of Reggeaton music somewhere in the background.

Above me, maybe.

I didn't expect death to taste like sawdust and sweat and fog.

I opened my eyes, and the world swam in and out of focus. I could see storage, boxes packed around the walls, black, indistinct from one another. I tried to move, but my limbs were heavy, uncooperative. I didn't realize I was sitting up until I tried to use my hands. They were bound to a chair, the rope biting into my raw skin.

I blinked, trying to clear my vision, but it only made things worse. The air was thick with the scent of cigarette smoke, making it hard to breathe. I coughed and tried to speak, but my throat was raw, my voice barely a whisper.

”Hello?” I croaked. ”Who’s there?”

There was no answer, only the sound of reggaeton music getting louder. I strained my ears, trying to pinpoint where it was coming from. It was coming from a door at the far end of the room.

I squinted, trying to make out any details. The door looked old, with peeling paint and rusted hinges. There was no way out of here, not unless I managed to break free.

I struggled against the ropes, but they were too tight. I cursed under my breath, my heart racing.

What had I gotten myself into?

Fuck. I could think about that later. I might’ve been bound to the chair, but the chair didn’t seem like it was bound to anything, so it only took me a few seconds to realize that I could drag myself across the floor with my feet.

Steeling myself, trying to swallow down my fear, I tried to inch myself across the ground, my bare feet scraping against the concrete floor. Adrenaline was coursing through my veins, making my heart pound, but I was exhausted—far more than I’d ever been.

Clenching my teeth, I pulled myself closer to the door, my bare feet growing raw and bloody as I dragged myself across the ground. As the chair scraped against the concrete floor, I slowly became aware of the pain. My head pounded, I could feel dull pain around my eyes, my mouth tasted of blood and my lips were numb.

I tried not to focus on that. I tried, instead, to think about how much closer I was to the door now, even though the journey there had felt eternal.

As I approached it, I heard the sound of the music become more muted. And then I heard voices arguing right outside the door. They were loud, angry. Two male voices, speaking indistinctly.

I lunged forward, my body screaming with agony as I scrambled towards the door, haphazardly pushing myself against the wall.

It was a terrible mistake.

I hadn't been careful; I'd thrown myself with all the momentum I had so I could hear the argument but all I'd managed to do was tip the chair on its side.

The impact made me wince. The pain was enough to make me nauseous. For a second, I was certain I'd broken my shoulder.

I bit down on my lip to stop myself from screaming and tried to ignore the pain as I strained to listen. Still, I couldn't discern anything, and my pounding headache didn't make it any easier.

Then the sound of someone being thrown against the door.

Please don't open please don't open please don't open

I chanted the words like a prayer as I watched a fight I couldn't see, listening for clues about what had happened to me. About where I was, about what the fight meant for me.

The fight got worse. I could hear blows, shouting, the sound of bodies being thrown against the wall.

And then...nothing.

The door wasn't opening.

Footsteps receded. Even though there was no way for me to be sure, I thought I was probably alone.

My eyes closed, despite everything in me fighting against it. And the last thing I thought was, *wow, this is a stupid way to die.*

I wasn't dead. When I woke up, again, I was still in the chair, this time pushed against a wall. I knew that because I could feel dampness against me, and my head was flush against something firm.

There were voices, too. Male voices. This time, I could understand what they were saying.

"You aren't supposed to bring anyone here," the first voice said. He sounded irritated, but there was clear amusement in his voice. I blinked the tears away from my face as he came into focus. Even in the shadows, I could see that he was striking. He was raw-boned, tall, lithe. He took a step toward me, leaning down to look into my eyes. "Hi."

I swallowed. "Hi?" I replied.

He was even more striking up close, with pronounced cheekbones and hazel eyes that looked golden in the backlit

room. He sighed, waving around dramatically. "Okay, I promise you won't get in trouble," he said. "Just tell me which one of these clowns brought you here."

I tried to look past him, at the people he was referring to.

I couldn't see anything. They were all huge. Tall enough to tower over me, particularly when I was bound like this.

Four terrifying men. Me, bound to a chair.

Not a statistician, but those were not great odds.

I tried to swallow down my fear. "I don't know," I said.

He sighed, slapping his knees as he stood upright. He'd been crouching to look into my eyes. The amusement faded from his expression. "You don't know?" he asked. "Let's start with something a little more simple. How did you end up here?"

I let out a deep breath. I briefly considered lying, but I didn't think there was any point. Despite how tough he seemed, I thought he was genuinely confused. "Someone broke into my apartment," I replied. "I don't know who it was. I couldn't tell. But they attacked me, and then when I woke up, I was here."

The man considered this for a second. "And do you know where here is?"

I looked around, then shook my head. "No. Maybe, like, a storage facility?"

The man frowned, glancing around the room, his eyes sliding over the three men he was with. "We're not—" he said, and paused. "We're not in a storage facility."

They all chuckled. As if there was anything funny about this.

"Grayson?" the man asked.

"Never seen her before in my life," Grayson said. "And I was busy all day. Also, I would never punch a woman."

The rest of the men grumbled in agreement.

"You'd know if I'd brought someone here, Teo," the next man said.

Teo nodded. "Yeah, you aren't quiet. Jace?"

"Nope," Jace said. He took a step toward me, crouching down to look into my eyes. He was the leanest of all of them, but also, somehow, the scariest one. He had sharp features, dark blond hair and bright blue eyes that became visible only as he inched his face so close to me I could see the lines under his eyes. "But she's pretty. Can we keep her?"

Teo pinched the bridge of his nose. "Are you guys fucking kidding me?" he asked. "This will be so much quicker if one of you owns up to it."

"Look at my knuckles," Jace said, extending his hand toward Teo's face. Intricate tattoos curled around his skin, from the outside of his wrist to right above his clavicle. "I've been doing ladies' work all day."

The other men laughed.

"Fine," Teo said. "Okay. So if none of you brought her here, *how* is she here?"

My gaze darted between them as I tried to figure out how each one of them would look clad in all black, chasing me around my apartment, but my mind kept going blank.

"I don't know," the nameless man replied. "Seems like we have a mystery on our hands."

"Just let me go," I said. "I don't know anything, I..."

Teo brushed his hand over his short hair. "Not possible, sweetheart," he said. "Unfortunately, I'm not convinced you wouldn't immediately call the police."

"So what? None of you kidnapped me, right?" I asked. Another mistake. I should've probably just said that I wouldn't call the police.

Teo scowled.

Right...I should've *definitely* just said I wouldn't call the police.

Teo raised an eyebrow. "We aren't exactly the kind of people you want to mess with," he said. "And we can't exactly let you go now that you're here. You're a liability, and we can't have liabilities."

My heart pounded against my chest, and I could feel sweat pooling on my forehead. The situation was spiraling out of control, and I had no idea how to get out of it.

"Please," I said, my voice barely shaking despite my best efforts. "I won't tell anyone. I promise."

Teo stood up tall, crossed his muscular arms over his chest, cocked his head as if he was considering this. "Yeah," he said. "I don't believe you."

Chapter Four: Teo

I'd always hated Wednesdays.

This one hadn't started much worse than other ones. There was a large shipment coming in, and we had to be at Neon to make sure that it would be distributed to the correct people. Of course, the person who'd been tasked with bringing the product was an incompetent child—really, a teenager, barely nineteen, at the most—and so he'd ended up on the other side of town, trying to offload ecstasy to a fancy theatrical gastronomy restaurant that shared a name with the nightclub.

I'd spent the entire day managing that crisis, and by the time I walked downstairs to the storage area in the nightclub, I expected a moment of peace and quiet. At least it was enough to distract me from the frequent murders that were happening right behind the nightclub where we conducted more of our operations.

There were a million things I had to do, but they'd all taken a backburner to finding the person responsible for these killings.

No one but me would have called the storage room a tranquil oasis. It clearly needed to be redone. It felt more like a dungeon than anything else, with narrow, dark walls and metal shelves with boxes full of paperwork, guns, drugs.

It was normally empty. And it was exactly where I needed to be after an exhausting day dealing with idiots.

But the room hadn't been empty. A woman with bruises on her face and blood running down her chin was tipped on her side in a chair someone had haphazardly tied her to.

I had to hold back the need to retch, the sight of blood almost enough to make me vomit. She was unconscious, probably—definitely—lucky that the bruise on her face didn't look like a fracture.

My heart rate spiked as I approached her, pulling my gun out of its holster in case whoever put her here was still lurking around. In case she was a trap. I was smart but I was also susceptible to women like this.

I'm not an idiot. I just hate seeing women in danger. I knew that there was a possibility that she was going to attack me if I approached her.

She wasn't. She didn't. She was totally out.

And there was no one else there. Just her and the mess whoever had put her there left behind.

"Fuck," I muttered to myself as I let go of my gun. My fingers curled around the handle of the chair, trying to get a better look at her face. She was pretty, even with the bruises. Maybe

mid-to-late twenties. Naturally dark hair, the tips dyed blonde, curled around her face. Long eyelashes. No visible tattoos. Three piercings, only one extra on the cartridge of her left ear. No rings, no jewelry, no scars. She was barefooted, wearing a black nightgown that was practically sheer. I resisted the urge to find something to cover her up with as I moved the chair upright.

I didn't untie her. I still couldn't trust her.

She didn't look familiar, but she was definitely too innocent-looking to be mixed up in our business.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Grayson. He picked up on the first ring.

"Yeah?"

"Grayson, did you leave a girl tied up in the storage room?" I didn't bother with a greeting.

"What?"

"Just tell me the truth."

"No. What the hell, Teo?"

I let out a long breath, trying to calm my nerves. "Okay," I said. "Bring everyone down here. We need to talk."

"You think it was one of them?"

"Grayson. *Now.*"

"Sure thing, boss," he said before he hung up the phone.

A few minutes later, we were all crowded around the woman who'd somehow ended up under Neon. She was upright now. I'd checked; she was breathing and her pulse was fine. From the way her face looked, I could tell she wasn't doing too well.

Victor was the first one to arrive. He nodded at me as he approached me silently, his eyes narrowing as he looked down at her. "I didn't do this," he said, his gaze lingering over her.

"I didn't think you did," I said, sighing. "But someone did."

Jace and Grayson arrived shortly after, clad in all black. They exchanged a puzzled glance. "Who is she?" Jace asked.

I'd been working with them for years; I had a pretty good idea of when they were lying. I didn't think they were lying then, but I *hoped* that they were. If this wasn't any of their doing, I was certain our lives were about to get considerably more complicated.

"You guys know you aren't supposed to bring anyone down here," I said.

None of them answered, and the woman in the chair stirred, her eyes fluttering open.

After a brief conversation with her, I was pretty sure that she wasn't going to tell us anything. She was too roughed up for a coherent conversation anyway and I quickly determined that our best course of action was keeping her around before we could attempt to extract information from her.

"Victor," I said. "Take her to HQ."

Victor looked at me with a question in his eyes, but he answered me with a curt nod. He knew better than to question me in public. A conversation could—might—come later.

”Jace, can you review our security footage?”

”On it,” he said, taking his phone out of his pocket.

”Grayson.”

”Yeah, boss?” Grayson asked, his eyes on the woman as Victor unbound her.

”Get this mess cleaned up,” I said. ”Everywhere, not just here. We need to change the locks down here, too. Can you take care of that?”

Grayson nodded. ”Of course,” he said.

”Good,” I said. ”The more expedient we are about this, the better. We have plenty to worry about without...”

My gaze went to the woman, whose name, I realized, I still didn’t know.

Victor had untied her and was helping her stand up. My gaze slid down her body, her hair falling wildly down to the middle of her back, her nightgown sticking to her skin with sweat and blood. She was barefooted, and even the soles of her feet appeared to be bleeding.

As Victor helped her stand up, she swayed and almost fell. I reached out to steady her, but she pulled away from me with a look of fear in her eyes. Victor held her steady, anyway. I

didn't need to intervene. I didn't blame her. If I were in her position, I wouldn't trust me either. I wouldn't trust any of us.

"Careful," Victor said to her, his voice more gentle than I'd ever heard it. "Don't fall."

She rolled her eyes. It was gutsy. Stupid. I liked her already. "I'll work on that," she replied sharply.

Victor's expression darkened. "Don't hurt her," I said.

He looked up at me and nodded, his jaw tightening. "Yes, boss," he said. "What are you going to do with her?"

I looked at her. She was leaning on Victor despite clearly not wanting to. She gritted her teeth as she did so.

"We'll keep her with us for now," I said. "Take her back to HQ. Make sure she's okay. She can answer our questions later."

Victor didn't nod that time. "Okay," he said.

"We need to get to work," I said. "The sooner the better."

They all grumbled in agreement. Victor said something into her ear. She paled. "You got this?" I asked him.

"Yes, boss," Victor replied, anger creeping into his voice.

"Okay," I said.

With that, I left the storage room, feeling more exhausted than ever before. Wednesdays, man. They were always a fucking nightmare.

Chapter Five: Sofia

Victor smelled like lavender wine and gentle fabric softener. My face was crushed against his chest as the rest of the men left the room. I thought about moving away from him, but there was no chance I was going to be able to get away.

I knew dangerous men when I saw them and Victor, at first glance, ranked high amongst them.

He was tall, easily over six feet, with broad shoulders and a muscular build. His hair was jet black, a chiseled jawline accentuated by a five o'clock shadow that was obviously meticulously maintained. There were tattoos running down his arms, covering the webbing of his hands, circling his fingers like endless rings.

If I'd seen him on the street, I would've probably stared at him. I hadn't seen him on the street, though, and I was surprised at how gentle his touch was when he took me in his arms.

"I'm going to carry you," he said. "You can't really walk."

"I can walk."

"I wasn't asking," he said. He leaned down and grabbed me, cradling me as if he was about to carry me through the threshold after our wedding. "Having you walk would slow us down too much."

I didn't like being manhandled, but I also didn't have the strength to fight him off. Victor was right; my body was battered and weak. I let out a sigh and rested my head on his chest, trying to ignore the way my heart was pounding against my ribcage. I could hear his heartbeat, too. I noted how steady it felt, as if this was the kind of thing he ran into all the time. My body was shaking, my legs barely able to support my weight. I didn't want to go somewhere else with him, but maybe he would listen to his...boss. His boss had said not to hurt me and this man had nodded and said he wouldn't.

He carried me out of the room, which I now realized was a basement. The dimly lit hallway came into a view, a tall staircase at the end of it. Doors on either side flanked the corridor, no windows anywhere in sight. Fluorescent lights blinked in and out, casting a sickly glow over the carpeted horror-movie hallway.

As we made our way up the stairs, I caught a glimpse of myself in the metal railing. My face was bruised, eyes swollen, and my hair was a tangled mess. I looked like I'd gone through hell, and it wasn't too far from the truth. I didn't know what

these men wanted from me, but I knew I needed to get away from them as soon as possible.

We finally reached a door at the top of the stairs, and Victor pushed it open with his shoulder. Bodies moved around us, the music so loud it made it impossible to hear anything. We were in a nightclub, but Victor was imposing enough that people seemed to get out of his way, the crowd parting itself by his mere presence.

God, *who* was this man?

Victor continued through the club, making his way to a back door that led to an alley. The air outside was cold and damp, a stark contrast to the warm, pulsing atmosphere of the club. Victor set me down gently on the ground and I stumbled, my legs still unsteady.

"Can you walk now?" he asked.

"I think so," I replied.

"You're not going to try to make a run for it, are you? Because that would be exceptionally stupid."

He was right. He was much taller than me and I could tell he was faster. Even if I wasn't injured, barefoot, and practically naked, I wouldn't have been able to outrun him. Not that it would've done me any good, anyway. We were somewhere downtown, but it was indistinct, and I wouldn't have been able to get out of the neighborhood without a vehicle.

I was stuck.

"I'm not," I said, when I realized he was still looking at me, waiting for me to answer.

A smile softened his sharp features. "Good," he said. "We're not far. Lean on me if you have to."

Unfortunately, despite everything in me, I had to.

We made our way down the alley, the darkness and heat enveloping us. I tried to focus on putting one foot in front of the other, but my mind was racing. What was going to happen to me? Why had they taken me? Who were these men?

I stumbled again, but Victor caught me before I fell. "Just a little further," he said. "We're almost there."

We turned a corner and found ourselves in front of a nondescript building. From the outside, it looked like a parking lot, all white concrete. It was about five stories tall, I noted. There were no signs, nothing to suggest what was inside. Victor pushed open the door and led me inside.

The inside of the building was just as nondescript as the outside. White walls, white floors, and fluorescent lighting. The only difference was the heavy metal door at the end of the hall. I was swaying on my feet. Victor wrapped his arm around my waist with some effort—he was tall, I wasn't—and he kept me upright. My eyes darted from one corner to another until Victor opened the metal door.

"Relax," he said. "It's just an elevator. Not a torture dungeon or anything."

"Wow," I mumbled. "I feel so much better."

”Nah,” he laughed. ”We save the dungeon for special occasions.”

I wasn't sure whether his words were meant to reassure me or to taunt me. Regardless, I stepped forward with him, allowing him to guide me into the elevator. I knew that it was in my best interest not to piss him off.

The door he'd opened swung closed by itself and the metal doors of the elevator clanged shut in front of us, enclosing us in a small, confined space. We were surrounded by floor-to-ceiling mirrors. I looked at his reflection first, before I caught sight of mine.

Victor's reflection was just as imposing as the real thing, his broad shoulders filling up the small space. He looked like a predator, ready to pounce on his prey at any moment. My reflection, on the other hand, made me look like a fucking mess. The bruises and cuts on my face stood out in stark relief against the pale walls of the elevator, and my hair was a black and blonde tangle of blood-crusting curls.

I needed a doctor, not...whatever this was. I had the feeling I was probably concussed.

I looked away from the mirrors, not wanting to see my broken reflection any longer. Victor seemed to sense my discomfort and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. The silence between us was thick, only the soft hum of the elevator breaking it.

After what felt like hours, but was probably only a few minutes, the elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

"Ladies first," he said as he pressed his hand against the sensor to keep the doors open.

I hesitated for a moment before stepping out of the elevator and into a vast, luxurious-looking penthouse. The walls were lined with floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a stunning view of the city below. Expensive-looking furniture was scattered throughout the room, and the scent of luxury cologne hung in the air.

Victor stepped out of the elevator behind me, shutting the doors behind him.

"Don't be nervous," he said, his voice softening. "No one's going to hurt you here. We're just going to talk."

I turned around to look at him. "Would you hurt me, though? If your boss hadn't told you not to?"

As soon as I said it, I realized it wasn't necessarily a question I wanted an answer to.

He considered this for a long second. It was the first well-lit environment we'd been in, and for the first time since I'd encountered him, I could *really* see his face.

He was all sharp angles and chiseled features. Even his face looked like it could slice through flesh. His nose was slightly crooked to the left, like it had been broken before, and never set the right way.

"Yes," he finally replied. "If you gave me a reason to. So don't."

I swallowed, looking around the luxury penthouse for a sign of personality, a clue, something that would let me get out of this. But there was nothing, and when I saw that Victor was still staring at me, an expectant look in his eyes, all I managed to do was nod.

As long as he was watching me, I was pretty sure there was no way I could escape.

The Orchid Strangler I

I would *never* hurt an animal. I have never hurt an animal. Animals don't know what they're doing. They don't know right from wrong, they cannot learn, not really. They can be trained, sure, using rote memory, using skills they can get better at but never really hone.

When I was younger, I thought that people could be taught. I was naive. I waited for my father to change, then my mother, then my brother, and then I didn't wait anymore. I knew people didn't change.

I tried my best. I tried community outreach, policing in the way activists want you to police. I did crisis management, talked people off ledges—literally and figuratively—but none of that mattered.

There was no way for me to reach them. I tried to teach them to be good, kind, loving. I was hardly a blip on their radar, though, and the years went by without any significant change.

They all blamed the system. Even the *system* blamed the system, but I'd been part of the system, and I was an upstanding, contributing member of society. Most of the people I met, I was sure they had the chance to be that, too.

It made me realize that, no matter how hard I tried, I wouldn't be able to help. People didn't need to be gently guided; they needed to be taught a lesson, to be shown the error of their ways.

That's when I stopped helping and started hunting.

He was arrested, released. Arrested, released. He always came back to the same street corner, always looking worse for wear, always ready to inflict more damage on the people around him.

There were nice people in that neighborhood. People that didn't need to be bothered by someone like him, with the ever-worsening limp and the toothless smile. My partner and I always stopped to take him to the drunk tank, but that didn't seem to matter much.

He was back.

Every single fucking time.

I went back to the corner by myself, in the middle of the night, in my own vehicle. I waited for him to approach me, and he did, though I didn't give him a chance to speak. He leaned his head down and I reached out to grab him by the scruff of his shirt, pulling him against the car hard enough to daze him. I

threw my car door open, stepped out and pushed him inside the backseat.

He didn't fight me. He must've been too drunk.

I got into the car with him, pulling my weapon out of its holster. I pressed it against his temple. He whimpered, begged, said something I couldn't hear.

The cold metal of my gun left an imprint on his temple. Every bullet, every time the trigger was pulled, every time I handled my gun was meticulously, painfully accounted for.

There was no way for him to know that I wouldn't use it.

"Please," he said, his voice quivering. "I'll do anything you want. Anything."

I knew he wouldn't. I had asked him to get lost countless times, taken him to jail, given him the name of the best social worker I knew.

I was a good person.

I wanted to help.

But when people refused help...they didn't deserve mercy.

It was strikingly simple: he didn't want to change, and I didn't want to see him around anymore.

Other than my gun, I didn't have any weapons on me. But he was small, weak, even weaker now, and his breath reeked of booze.

I just wanted it to end. I wanted his rancid breath to stop filling the car, to stop taking up space and energy. So I put my hands

around his throat and squeezed until I crushed his windpipe.

I didn't mean to kill him like that. I didn't derive pleasure from it. Even now that I'm well-practiced, I don't derive pleasure from it.

I'm not a pervert.

But it is, I have to admit, much tidier than using a gun.

Chapter Six: Teo

I looked around Neon, trying to see if there was anything out of order. I didn't spot anything in particular, but I never did. The place, as always, was crowded. We had enough nightclubs now that we could make a lateral move and turn legit, if we wanted to, but we were embroiled in too many things to be able to simply leave all illegal activity behind.

In truth, I didn't think any of us were ready; the life was hard, but the perks were unmatched. All four of us came from varying degrees of poverty and the truth was that there wasn't one of us who was ready to go back to it. Even if it wasn't abject poverty—we were all accomplished, smart men, with a lot of business acumen from our day jobs—the life we'd built for ourselves provided a safety network that few legit jobs would.

People could stop going to nightclubs. They would never stop buying drugs.

Grayson, Jace and Victor were all counting on me, not to mention the dozens of people we employed.

So I couldn't let whoever was trying to frame us for these murders get away.

I wondered if the girl we'd found tied up in the basement of Neon was part of their plan, but I couldn't figure out how.

I went through potential suspects in my head. It could be other gangs, but we had a pretty solid grip on the territory around our nightclubs. It could be a rival group, looking to take us down, but I doubted they would be so bold as to commit multiple murders in our establishments. More likely, it was someone within our own organization. Someone who wanted to take us down from the inside.

Truthfully, I couldn't imagine any of the Blades turning on us like this. They were loyal to a fault, and we took care of our own.

My watch vibrated on my wrist with a notification. Victor was letting me know that they were at HQ. I sent him back a thumbs up emoji and called Grayson and Jace.

We needed to figure this out together. Whatever *this* meant.

As I made my way to HQ, I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease in the pit of my stomach. The recent murders had me on edge, and I couldn't shake the feeling that things were only going to get worse. I was the boss, they expected me to keep a handle on things. But things were spiraling and it was clear that I didn't know how to fix it.

When I arrived, Grayson and Jace were already there, standing at the door. They looked just as uneasy as I felt, their usual

carefree demeanor replaced with a seriousness that I hadn't seen before.

"What are you planning to do with her?" Grayson asked.

Jace cocked his head, his light eyes darting between the two of us as if he was trying to decide whether he should speak up or not.

"First, figure out who she's working for," I said. "We'll go from there."

"You think this whole thing is a setup?" Jace asked.

I shrugged. "I think it's extremely convenient to leave a pretty girl beaten and bruised in our club when we're known for protecting women," I said. "It feels like bait."

"She doesn't look like she's in a gang," Grayson offered. "Or like, affiliated with one."

"Right. And perhaps that's the point," I said, opening the door to our HQ apartment. "They wanted to get someone as clean cut as possible to make the trap seem as real as it could possibly seem."

The three of us walked inside, the door closing shut behind us. We found the girl sitting at the kitchen table with Victor. She was nursing a cup of tea, but Victor had bound her to the barstool with a zip tie, her arm flush by her side. It looked uncomfortable, and he could've tied her up anywhere else in the apartment. It wasn't tight, but it was enough to stop her.

Not that it needed to be done, since she was so battered, I didn't think she could really go anywhere.

She looked up at us as we entered, her eyes widening with fear. It was clear she didn't know what to expect from us, but she had good reason to be afraid. Whoever had done this to her was ruthless, and we needed to find out who they were before they could do any more damage to our organization. I grabbed a chair, flipped it around, and sat on it, my legs flanking the seat. I leaned my arms against the back and peered at her from above it.

"We won't hurt you," I said.

She stared at me.

"As long as you talk to us."

She nodded, her eyes flickering with a mixture of fear and relief. I could tell she was struggling to piece together what had happened to her, and how she had ended up in our club.

"Let's start with introductions," I said, trying to keep my tone calm and even. "My name is Teo. What's yours?"

"Sofia," she replied.

"Sofia. Do you know what happened to you?"

She hesitated for a moment. "What I told you," she replied. "I haven't gleaned anything else in the short time I've been here."

"Alright. If you don't know how you ended up here, will you at least tell us who you work for?"

"I work for the Sentinel," she replied.

I cocked an eyebrow as I looked right at her. "You work...for a newspaper?"

"Yes," she replied softly. "Covering the pop culture beat. So unless you want to know where your favorite telenovela star was last weekend, you should probably let me go. Besides, you can read all about it this Sunday..."

I edged my chair closer to her. It scraped along the floor as I did. "Look, you're clearly brave."

She stared at me, saying nothing.

"But I think it might be in your best interest if you talk," I said. "We didn't bring you here, I can promise you that. So if you're not lying to us, and you really were kidnapped by a shadowy figure that you don't recognize, then we might be able to help you."

She cocked her head, her brown eyes flashing as she looked between the four of us. My men were standing behind me, and I could see their reflections in the window behind Sofia. They all had their arms crossed, but they were all leaning forward, every single one of them clearly interested. "Why would you help me?" she asked.

"Because..."

She interrupted me before I could finish my sentence. "I know who you are," she said. "You're Mateo Costa and that's Victor Sinclair, Jace Roman and Grayson Santiago."

I raised my eyebrows. The mood shifted in the room; there had been some jovial camaraderie before, despite the weirdness of

the situation. I was sure we were all relieved that this wasn't another dead body.

But as soon as she said our names, it changed. We were aware people knew who we were; we weren't stupid. We tried our best to make our businesses look totally legit, but the law had caught up to us a couple of times, and we'd managed to get them off our backs through the help of excellent lawyers and a few well-placed bribes.

She was a reporter. She knew all our names. What had started as a mystery we all wanted to solve could've just turned into a serious threat.

She sighed, looking away from me, her voice almost breaking. "Look, I absolutely never meant to get in the crosshairs of any gang dealings. What the Mercy Drive Blades do is honestly none of my fucking business, and I wouldn't be stupid enough to actually come into your territory. I might have sent you an email or given you a call. I...I'm still trying to piece this together."

"Let's say I believe you," I said. I reached out to tuck a strand of wavy brown hair behind her ear. She followed my fingers with her gaze and I could tell she was trying her best not to recoil. Her adrenaline had to be pumping, but she kept herself upright and steady. "If that's the case, why is someone breaking into your house and kidnapping you?"

"Because," she said, her brown eyes fixed on mine. "I've been looking into the Orchid Strangler. And I think he found out."

Chapter Seven: Sofia

Teo was imposing, even when he got down on my level, a chair between the two of us. I slid my gaze down his body. He had his arms wrapped around the back of it, a dark tattoo of a blooming flower with thorns coiled around his sun-kissed skin. The intricate design ended on his shoulder, a large skull biting into a blade with sharp teeth.

”And you thought he was in our club?” Teo asked. I looked at his face to find an amused look on it. He clearly felt my gaze on him and he was probably used to women staring at him like this. The pain, which had ceded for a moment, suddenly returned. The sharpness in my head made focusing on what he was saying practically impossible and I instinctively went to put my hand up by my temple.

I couldn't, of course; both my hands were tied to the barstool under me and my range of motion was extremely limited. I told myself to get a grip and turned my gaze back on Teo, despite the headache that threatened to split my skull open.

I told myself I wasn't just looking at him because he was hot—though that certainly was one reason I was looking at him. I was looking at him because there was no way for me to know where I stood exactly with him, and if he was telling me the truth about none of them being involved with my abduction.

I knew that I would have to play my cards close to my chest. I'd heard about this gang, of course—everyone in Orlando had heard about the Mercy Drive Blades. I'd seen them in the news and I'd heard Sam mention them more than once. In front of me, every single one of them was more imposing, terrifying, and weirdly, handsome, than I had ever expected. The leader, Teo, looked at me, quietly waiting for me to respond to his question. I wiggled my hand in the zip tie as I looked him in the eye. "I can think a lot better when I'm not tied up."

He cocked his head, considering this. "It's going to be difficult for me to let you go, when I don't know what your allegiances are."

"My allegiances don't matter. Here are the facts. You're much bigger than me, all of you. There's four of you and there's one of me. I'm in an apartment in a place I've never been before and I have no phone, no wallet, nothing. I'm not stupid. I want to stay alive. I'm not going to go anywhere. My head throbs, my stomach hurts, and this is just adding insult to injury. So I'm just being reasonable. What am I going to do? Slap you?"

He flashed me a lopsided smile, his canines surprisingly sharp. His eyes caught a glint of the dim electric light in the

apartment and shone honeygold. "Tell me what you want, Sofia," he said.

My name sounded like sugar on his lips. He spoke slowly, softly. I didn't expect the leader of a gang to be soft-spoken. His voice sent a shiver down my spine.

I told myself to pry my gaze away from those sharp canines, from the stubble on his sharp jawline. "Please let me go," I said. I was fully prepared to beg if reasoning didn't work with him.

But he nodded after a beat. We locked on each other's eyes for what felt like minutes, but must only have been a few seconds. Teo cocked his head before he turned to look at Victor.

He must have given his men that look a lot because Victor quickly approached me and cut the zip tie with a wickedly sharp knife I hadn't known he was holding.

"There," Victor said. "Your hands are free."

I looked up at him, at the black ring around his eyes. He looked like he was going to say something else, but Teo interrupted his thoughts.

"Victor, get her some water," he said. "And then, all of you, give us some space."

That *was* unexpected. A shiver went down my spine. I didn't really think that he was going to send the rest of them away, and while I knew men were dangerous in groups, I also knew that he probably had an image to project to them.

Privacy scared me. I couldn't discern what kind of person Teo was and there was something in his eyes that I wasn't sure about. He was charming, handsome, magnetic even. But something about the way he looked—nevermind his reputation, which certainly preceded him—made my blood run cold.

Victor placed an unopened bottle of water in front of me. Teo opened it with a click. Victor handed it to me.

"Thank you," I said. I tried to brace myself to stand up—I wasn't sure why. Mostly, I guessed, I wanted to ensure that my legs worked.

"Whoa, easy," Teo said. He got up in one fluid motion and I stumbled over. Despite doing everything I could to steady myself, I stumbled and fell straight into his arms.

He caught me easily. He was unexpectedly lean, his muscles smaller than they looked when I first glanced at him. He was built like a dancer, tall and wiry, despite how much he clearly worked out. His muscles bulged under the fabric of his shirt, thin and slightly shimmery with sweat from the Orlando heat.

My instinct was to bunch my fists around the fabric of his shirt and feel his body under it with my knuckles. I didn't do that—of course I didn't do that, I wasn't insane.

Instead, I tried to pull myself away from him, my hands flat against his chest. I was off-balance and he caught me again, his arms surprisingly warm.

"Are you okay?" his breath was warm against my ear. It sent a shiver down my spine. I smelled the citrus on his skin, the

coffee on his breath, the aftershave on his face.

I looked up at him, my eyes narrow.

”Right. Dumb question.”

”Yeah. Dumb question.”

He smiled again, and I noticed a dimple on his left cheek. He pulled up the chair for me and motioned for me to sit, as if it was the most perfectly gentlemanly gesture. ”I’ll make sure you get everything you need,” he said. ”But you should probably stay seated.”

He was right and I hated it.

He extended his hand to help me sit down. I considered slapping it away; I was, after all, his prisoner. But it didn’t seem a good idea to piss off my captor, even if my captor said he was on my side.

So I took it.

He wrapped his fingers around mine. I noticed how long they were, how soft his hands were, much like the rest of him. With cat-like grace, he helped me back into the wooden chair I’d been sitting on. ”Water. Tylenol. Anything else?”

”A cold compress?” I asked. ”My head hurts.”

”Of course,” he replied. He grabbed his phone from his pocket and sent a text, which he did with only his right hand. It was impressive. He put his phone down on the table behind him and cocked his head. ”I’m serious, Sofia. Whatever you need,

I can provide it for you. All I ask is that you're honest with me."

"I am," I said. As I spoke, one of the guys walked in with the medicine and a cold compress, which he left in front of me. I didn't look at him; not because I didn't want to, but because he was fast and it was clear he didn't want to be seen. From the little information I had of Teo, I could already make an educated guess that he was not the kind of man who liked to be interrupted. I wasn't sure, but I thought it might've been Jace.

"Okay. So the Orchid Strangler," Teo said, demanding my attention.

I swallowed as I looked at his face again. "Right," I said. "He doesn't have an official name or anything, that's just what I call him."

He raised his eyebrows, waiting for me to continue.

"It's just my name for him," I said. "I don't know much else about him."

"So *what* do you know about him?"

"I don't even know if it's a guy," I said. "I just know that there's someone who is going around, disappearing people. When they turn up, if they turn up, they're dead."

"Strangled?"

"Yes, but it's not public record," I said. "And the orchid thing is a rumor. I don't know if it's true. I heard about it from a source but obviously I can't confirm that myself."

He cocked his head. "Have you tried to go to the police about this?"

I nodded. I almost opened my mouth to tell him that my brother was a cop, but then I clamped it shut.

He waited for me, his gaze probing into my eyes.

"Yes," I said. "But they don't think it's a real issue; most of the people that are being affected aren't really people on their radar."

"So they aren't taking you seriously."

I sighed, my heart hammering in my chest. I would've preferred not to talk about the Mercy Drive Blades if possible, but it was clear I wasn't going to be able to avoid it. "They think the Blades had something to do with it," I said. "And I can't tell them about the orchids, right?"

"Because they've found the bodies behind our clubs."

"Right. The ones whose bodies have been found," I said. "I think there are a lot more."

"We haven't killed anyone, Sofia." He sounded genuinely hurt, which surprised me.

"You haven't?"

"No," he said. "Not like that. Not for *nothing*. This might be hard for you to believe but I actually really hate senseless violence."

I didn't contradict him. The Mercy Drive Blades were known, in part, for their brutality. If someone crossed them, they

needed to watch out, because the Blades were very unlikely to hold back. They didn't do drive-by shootings or jail yard stabbings. They threatened and hurt and sometimes practically even tortured anyone who might've crossed them.

"How many times have you talked to the police about this?" he asked.

I knew I needed to be smart about revealing my full involvement with the police. I thought back to my brother. I wondered what he would do when we spoke about this. I wasn't lying, I had gone to the police numerous times; first, to report what I thought might be a serial offender, and second, to make sure I did my due diligence in case my investigation actually went somewhere and my knowledge became public.

But the police weren't very interested. I asked Sam about it, and he told me he would bring it up to his superiors. He had, and it had gone nowhere. "A lot of times," I said. "Enough that it's clear they don't care. I'm going to have to be the one investigating this."

He scoffed. "That sounds right. And I assume you told them what you've found?"

"I've tried," I replied. "But they don't want to hear it. And I can't exactly expose my source at the medical examiner's office without getting them in trouble. I take my job seriously, so this is the best I can do."

He considered this for a long time. "Do you believe me?" he asked.

”Do I believe you?”

”Do you believe me when I tell you that we,” he said, making a sweeping gesture with his hand, ”had nothing to do with it?”

I didn’t. But I also wanted to get out of this alive. ”Yes,” I said, my heart hammering in my chest. ”Yes, I believe you.”

Chapter Eight: Teo

There are few things I've always been good at doing. Everything I do is deliberate, slow and practiced. Reading people was one of my few innate talents, though I wasn't so much born with it as trained in childhood by a father whose moods were always unpredictable.

I could tell that Sofia was lying, but I didn't think that there was any other information I could get out of her. I considered what to do. I didn't think that killing her would solve our issues; if anything, it would likely make things worse.

There was another solution. I didn't love it. I didn't like to bring anyone into our inner circle, but we hadn't gotten anywhere with our investigation, and she was clearly getting close to uncovering something big.

I sighed. "What did you say your name was?"

"Sofia."

"Last name."

"I didn't," she replied. "My name is Sofia Reyes."

I stood up. "Give me ten minutes," I said. "Feel free to look around, but don't try to leave the apartment. The door only opens for the four of us, but if you did somehow manage to magically get it to open, the building is locked down and there are security cameras everywhere. Look, honestly, I really don't want to chase you around and you don't look like you would enjoy running much right now."

Sofia nodded, looking a little pale. "Okay," she said, taking a sip of her water with trembling hands. "I understand."

"Good," I said, walking toward the door. "I'll be back."

As I walked out of the room, I could feel Sofia's eyes on me. I didn't like the idea of bringing her into our world, but I didn't see any other way. We needed someone on the outside investigating the murders and she was the only one who seemed capable.

I walked down the hallway toward the balcony, where the rest of the Blades were gathered. They looked up as I entered.

"What's going on?" Grayson asked.

"Jace, can you look into her quickly?" I turned to look at him, ignoring Grayson's question. "Her name is Sofia Reyes. She works for the Sentinel."

"Already done," he replied, looking down at the phone in his hand. "Her name is Sofia Reyes, never married, lives alone. Pretty sparse social media presence. Her parents died in a car accident when she was twenty-two. She has a brother, two years younger. Samuel Reyes. He's a policeman, 10th district."

"Her brother is a cop?" Victor asked, clearly surprised and stopped leaning against the banister. I could feel Sofia's gaze on us through the clear double doors, though I didn't turn around to check whether I was right.

Jace nodded, straightening up. "Yes," he said. "She doesn't seem to have much of a social life. Mostly a workaholic. She's been working at the Sentinel for a little under five years now."

"Anything like this in her history?" Victor asked.

"Like getting beaten to a bloody pulp?" I interjected. "I'm going to make an educated guess here and say no."

"That's her public information," Jace said. "Do you want me to keep looking into her?"

"No," I replied. "I just needed to confirm what I already thought. We need to bring her in."

The air was sucked out of the room as they all looked at each other. We didn't bring anyone in. We had people who worked for us, sure, but the core group never changed, and she wouldn't be someone on our payroll. I wasn't surprised that it put my men on edge. It scared me too, but I knew there were no other options.

"So how do you want to bring her in?" Victor asked. "We can keep her here and question her about..."

I held up my hand to stop him from talking. "I'm going to ask her."

"What?"

"I'm going to ask her if she wants to join," I said. "And if that doesn't work, then I'm sure I can find other ways to be persuasive."

Another silent look. Jace, Grayson and Victor weren't normally quiet, but there was tension in the air. We were all worried about the killings that were being pinned on us and the woman in the other room was the ingredient that could tip the delicate balance in our favor.

Or away from us. She could be working to destroy us.

But I was lost, and I knew I could always just kill her if she tried anything funny. "Stay here," I said to the men. I turned around, my fists clenched and my jaw locked. I wasn't afraid of her, but seeing the blood on her face made me feel queasy.

She was staring out the window, her breath fogging up the glass. Her hair looked matted at the back, her small silhouette blocking the cityscape outside. My gaze slid down her body and my heart clenched in my chest. Whoever had gone after her was definitely, undoubtedly, trying to kill her.

I didn't think she would've been able to fight them off, so I was curious about what had happened.

"Sofia," I said.

She turned around to look at me. "Did you think I'd try to run?" she asked, her voice loud, clear. From the way she looked, I could tell she was in pain. God, that spunk. I had to stop myself from smiling.

"No. I didn't think you were stupid," I said. "How are you feeling?"

"A little better," she said. "The painkillers worked and I'm, you know, pretty confident I'm not going to die. So that's good."

"I can take you to the hospital if you want me to."

"I don't want you to," she replied, her jaw setting as she crossed her arms over her chest. She immediately grimaced from the pain. "Just...don't want to deal with the police, if possible."

I raised my eyebrows, wondering if she was going to disclose that her brother was a cop.

"Ever since this started, I don't really trust them."

"That makes sense," I said, crossing the space between us. She tilted her head up to look at me, and I saw a dried and crusted-over trail of dark red blood on her chin. It made me queasy, forcing me to look away. "Listen. I have a proposition for you."

She waited for me.

"It's clear that you're onto something with this," I made air quotes with my hands, "'Orchid Strangler'."

"You think so?" she said with a smirk, tilting her head as she did so, strands of curly hair falling on her face.

"Someone is trying to frame us and we need your help," I replied, trying to ignore the way her smile played on her lips.

”What you do with the information you find is entirely up to you, but we need to find out who’s behind all of this.”

She considered this for a second. ”No,” she said. ”Why would I do that? I’m just trying to write a story, not get involved with a fucking gang. Uh, shit, no offense.”

She had clearly spoken without thinking, and it was incredibly fucking cute. ”None taken,” I said. ”But you said it yourself. You’re getting close. You’re obviously in over your head.”

”So what are you suggesting?”

I looked her up and down. It wasn’t a suggestion and she knew it. She didn’t have a choice. I, on the other hand, did. I could choose to humor her, to make her believe that there was a way she could turn me down. It didn’t hurt me any and it might’ve helped her feel a little better. ”You help us and we’ll protect you,” I said.

”And if I say no?”

”Dumb move,” I replied. There was only so much I could do for her. ”But you won’t say no, because if this strangler doesn’t kill you, then we might. And you don’t want your brother to get hurt, do you?”

”My brother?” she asked, then swallowed hard. ”He doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

I shrugged. I had to force myself to look into her eyes. The blood smeared on her face was a distraction I didn’t want to deal with. ”You might think that. I might think that. What makes you believe the killer will think that?”

She fell silent, her eyes narrowing as she considered my words. I watched as a myriad of emotions passed over her face, from fear to anger, and then back to fear again. It was clear that she was struggling with the decision, but ultimately, I knew what her answer would be.

"Okay," she said, her voice quiet and resigned. "I'll help you. But I have conditions."

I wanted to tell her that she couldn't afford to ask for conditions, but I cocked my head instead and waited for her to finish her thought. She was spunky and I didn't mind playing along. Sure, this was dangerous, but everything we did was dangerous. I had to admit to myself that I liked the distraction. Beautiful women were a dime a dozen, but her...she was different. She didn't just want to be on the arm of a powerful man, she really cared about finding this killer. I cared too, because I wanted to make sure to get rid of him.

Obviously, her intentions weren't entirely selfless, but I knew that a reporter was inherently more selfless than our gang. At the end of the day, she would simply expose him. We were definitely going to kill him.

"Of course," I said smoothly, leaning in slightly. "What are your conditions?"

She hesitated for a moment, her eyes flickering back and forth as she weighed her options. "I want full access," she said finally. "To everything. Your operations, your meetings, your men. I want to see everything that happens."

I raised my eyebrows. That was a tall order. We were a secretive group and we didn't just let outsiders in. "You can't use our names," I said. "You have to ask what's going to go in print before you put it in an article. And if you go to the police about anything we say, your brother will be the one who pays the price."

She flinched at my words, but I knew that they were necessary. It was the only way that I could ensure her loyalty.

"Agreed," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"We'll hold up our end of the deal as long as you do," I told her, sticking my hand out so she could shake it. She hesitated for a moment, her gaze darting between my stretched out hand and then ending on my face. Finally, she reached out and shook my hand firmly. . As soon as our hands touched, I could feel the electricity that passed between us. It was a dangerous game we were playing, but it was a game nonetheless, and I was determined to come out on top.

"Good," I said. "Let's go get you cleaned up."

She bit down on her lower lip, her eyes wide and her jaw trembling. She was obviously afraid—and there was a part of me that felt bad for her.

But not enough to make her feel better.

If she wanted to stay alive, she needed to be afraid.

Chapter Nine: Sofia

“We can lend you some clothes,” Teo said. “You’ll stay here tonight. One of us will drive you to your apartment tomorrow to make sure you get everything you need. We can talk about terms more as you stay here, but obviously, you can’t tell anyone where you are or what you’re doing here.”

“Right,” I said.

He looked me up and down, appraising me. “In any case, I don’t expect you’ll want anyone to see you like this. And you don’t want the killer to know they weren’t successful. I see this as a good deal...your silence for security.”

I swallowed. He was right. I didn’t know him very well, but I could already tell that Teo was the kind of man who was often right, and he knew it. He carried himself with the soft confidence of someone whose voice was always taken seriously and I wondered if that came before or after becoming the leader of a powerful gang.

"Come with me," he said. He put his hand flat against the small of my back, his lithe fingers pressing softly against my skin through the fabric of my pajamas. He guided me through the open space of the apartment, until we walked past a set of white double doors. The apartment itself was sparsely decorated, but if the artwork on the walls was original, it had to be expensive. From the corner of my eye, I saw a large spiral staircase coiling up toward a second floor, right next to a large blue sectional that cut across the minimalist living room. I'd been so worried about the fact that I'd been taken against my will that I hadn't even noticed it.

Teo opened the stark white door for me and I turned my head to see a bathroom with a sunken shower and a bathtub that looked like it was encased in granite next to a large floating sink.

"I'm not going to watch you shower," he said. He'd leant down so he was whispering into my ear and his breath was hot and warm against my skin. I wondered if there was a challenge there, or if there was a challenge in his voice. "Clean yourself up. When you come out, there's a door to your left. For the time being, that's going to be your bedroom. I'll make sure you have some clothes. Do you need anything else?"

I turned to look at him, at the way his eyes shone by the harsh light of the bathroom, at the curve of his lips, at his slightly open mouth. My heart fluttered in my chest from how close he was to me and I wondered if that was simply the adrenaline from the night I'd had and this misplaced desire to be safe.

His gaze fluttered from my eyes to my lips as his hand trailed up my body. Then it was on my arm, on my shoulder, almost up to my neck as we faced each other for a brief second. He leaned down so he could speak quietly to me, his hand pressed flat against my collarbone, his touch expertly avoiding my breasts. "The windows don't open from inside, Sofia," he said. "Don't try to escape."

"I won't," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Good," he said. And then he was gone, the door closing behind him with a soft click.

I let out a shaky breath, trying to calm my racing heart. I stripped off my blood-stained clothes and got into the shower, turning on the hot water as high as it would go. I stood there for a long time, letting the water wash away the blood and grime from my skin. It helped to calm me down a little, but I was still scared.

I kept replaying the man breaking into my house. The way my mouth had tasted when I first came to. The sound of the men around me, bickering, their voices seared into my brain.

For the first time since last night, it occurred to me that a serial killer had tried to murder me...and he'd failed.

I shuddered. This wasn't the time to think about it. I could reflect on how close I'd come to death *after* we'd caught the motherfucker.

I stepped out of the shower and grabbed one of the luxurious towels and draped it around myself, droplets of water falling

from my hair and down my back. I was already feeling more like myself as I cautiously opened the door...and my jaw dropped.

The room he'd indicated was right next to the bathroom, and it was, somehow, even fancier than the rest of the apartment. The king-sized bed was covered in crisp white sheets and a fluffy duvet, and there were two nightstands on either side. A tall, ornate mirror was placed in the corner of the room, reflecting the soft light coming from a lamp on one of the nightstands. A walk-in closet was located to the left of the bed, and I could see men's clothes hanging in it; jeans, pants, suits. A large window looked out onto the city, the lights twinkling in the night.

I took a deep breath and shook my head, trying to clear it. This was not my life. I was a journalist. I wrote stories about people and their lives, not about criminal organizations and their leaders.

I did not get involved with my stories. I knew better than that.

But I hadn't had a choice. It wasn't like my stories normally came into my apartment and tried to kill me. My pounding headache only lingered now and I had some time to think about my next move now that I was alone.

Like he'd said, Teo had left me a set of clothes on the bed. Butter soft pajama shorts, a loose white tank top and a soft gray sweater. I pulled them on quickly. They were slightly too big for me, but I didn't mind. I was happy to be wearing something that wasn't drenched in blood, even if I was a little

unsettled by the fact that Teo just had women's clothes lying around.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, feeling the soft mattress give beneath me. I ran my fingers over the fabric of the comforter, feeling the softness of it against my skin.

I closed my eyes and tried to calm my breathing, but every sound around me made my heart race. The soft hum of the air conditioning, the creak of the floorboards outside my door, the distant sound of a car honking on the street below.

I couldn't help but wonder what Teo and his gang were planning. What did they want from me? Why were they helping me? I knew I couldn't trust them. I wasn't stupid enough to trust the most dangerous gang in the city. If my brother knew about this...

Shit. My brother.

Even the thought of him made my heart race with fear. Teo was right; anyone associated with me was in danger. I played with the edge of the duvet cover as I tried to think of my next move, but I knew there was no way out of this. How could there be? I didn't need to test the windows to know that Teo was telling the truth.

A soft knock startled me. "Can I come in?"

I looked at the door, which was suddenly ajar. I wanted to tell the voice—it wasn't Teo, but I wasn't sure who it was—that I most certainly didn't have a choice, but I swallowed instead. "Yes."

The man pushed open the door and stepped inside. I picked my head up to look at him.

Grayson Santiago. I'd seen him in pictures before. He tilted his head down to look at me, his eyes narrowing. "I brought you something," he said softly. "Can I give it to you?"

I nodded.

"Use your words, Sofia," he said. "I need you to tell me what you want me to do. Always."

"Why?" I said, looking into his eyes. They reflected the city skyline, his pupils dilated as he looked at me.

"You'll feel better if you talk about it. It'll start to feel real more quickly."

"Okay..."

"And you want it to feel real. Because then you can figure out the situation. You seem smart. I know this has to be a lot, so own it," he said. "And use your words."

I swung my legs so I could turn my body to look at him.

"What did you bring me?" I asked him, my gaze scanning him for anything he might possibly want to give me. I didn't think he was going to drug me; it seemed unnecessarily cruel to drug me like this, if that was what he intended to do. At least for now, I didn't think the gang was particularly interested in hurting me.

He stuck his hand in his pocket, the sound of keys jingling in his jeans. "Here," he said, handing me a small silver key

attached to a metal bottle opener keyring. "Take this."

"What is it?"

"The door locks from the inside," he said. "Standard lock. All you have to do is turn it. But obviously, we could open it if we wanted to."

"This is a key to the room?"

"It's the *only* key to the room," he replied. "You can turn the lock and we won't be able to open the door. You won't need it, to be clear, we're not animals, and we intend to protect you. But I know you're not here because you want to be and Teo can be...scary."

"Yes," I said under my breath. "I noticed that."

"This isn't for your safety," he said. "It's to give you peace of mind. Maybe you'll even be able to get some sleep tonight."

I took the key from his hand, feeling the cool metal against my skin.

"Do you want to test it?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. "I'm choosing to trust you."

"Good call," he replied, a small smile on his face. "I know you're scared, but if you help us, and you let us help you, this could be great. Think about what we could learn from each other."

"I, uh," I blinked, unsure of what I could say to that. "Yeah, I guess that's true."

He sighed, his shoulders slumping. He opened his mouth to say something but seemed to think better of it before his gaze found my eyes again. "I don't think Teo wants to hurt you, Sofia," he said. "But trust me on this: don't do anything to piss him off."

And before I could figure out what the fuck that was supposed to mean, Grayson was gone.

Chapter Ten: Teo

I was a pretty bad sleeper at the best of times, and this was not the best of times. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see Sofia, lying on the cold concrete ground with a chair still attached to her, bruised and bloodied.

I didn't bother going home. I made my way to the balcony instead, where I lit the one cigarette I allowed myself every night, and stared at the traffic zooming past me. I normally found the sound of the city soothing, but I couldn't focus on it that night.

The sliding door opened and Grayson walked up to me, leaning his weight against the banister of the balcony as he walked out on the balcony too.

"It's so hot tonight," he said.

I nodded, looking at him only from the corner of my eye, taking a long drag of the cigarette I was too distracted to enjoy.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

I felt the smoke fill up my lungs as a car zoomed past a light below us, prompting the other drivers to start honking their horns. I stared at the scene for a little while before I shrugged. "I've had better days."

"I'm sorry you had to see that. If I'd known, I would've cleaned her up myself."

I waved him off. "It's okay," I said. "With everything that's been happening, I was bound to see blood sooner or later."

He nodded. He grabbed his vape pen out of his pocket and took a long hit, his eyes closing. I watched the smoke billow in front of his face, the smell of weed filling the air between us.

"I gave her the keys to her bedroom," he said finally. "Just to put her at ease a little."

I turned my head to look at him, waiting for an explanation. Grayson didn't do anything without a reason and I had come to trust him with my life, but his logic often surprised me, and this was one of those times when I wondered what the hell was going through his mind.

"It won't do her any good, obviously," he continued. "But she's in this weird apartment with four strange men after someone tried to kill her. If you want her to open up, then it's in our best interest that she gets comfortable."

I tipped the ash onto the little wooden ashtray we kept on the banister. "Patience has never been my forte," I said. "We have other methods to extract information. You know as well as I do that we can be very persuasive."

Grayson shook his head. "I know, but you know that forceful methods aren't always the best way. That's your philosophy, boss," he said. "Sometimes, it's better to let someone come to their own conclusion. And Sofia seems like she's already on the brink of breaking. We have to be careful not to push her over the edge."

"Three bodies have been dumped behind Neon in one month, Grayson," I said. "*One month*. The police might not give a shit about these people when they're isolated, but when it starts to look like a pattern, and one we're responsible for, there's little I can do. Who do I bribe here? The FBI? Which lawyer do I call?"

"I know the police are a problem," he said.

"They aren't our biggest problem, though," I told him, shifting my weight between my feet as I stubbed out my cigarette. "These people have families. They belong to other organizations. Some of them are sex workers, tied to pimps, who are tied to drug dealers, who are tied to gangs. You understand what I'm saying, right?"

"A turf war?"

"Not a war so much as a massacre," I told him. "They won't hesitate to be the ones to kill our families, Grayson, if they think we're the ones behind the killings."

He nodded in understanding. "I know," he said. "But we have to be smart about this. If that is the problem, we have to be strategic, and we have to be careful. We can't afford to make any mistakes."

”So don’t break her.”

”Try not to break her,” he echoed. ”She seems like our only reliable source of information right now. You want a reliable source of information, right?”

I nodded, leaning forward and looking down at the ground beneath us, at the sprawling parking lot surrounding the apartment building we were in. ”A journalist, though,” I said. ”It’s such a risky move. One whose brother is a cop.”

”Yeah, but...”

”But what are our other options?” I said.

From the corner of my eyes, I could see as he crossed his arms over his chest. ”Right,” he said. ”Exactly.”

I tapped my fingers against the white banister of the balcony. ”So if we don’t break her, what do you suggest we do?”

”I don’t know. Be nice to her?”

”I am being nice to her. I gave her a room, clothes, told her we’d protect her. That’s the definition of being nice to her.”

Grayson shook his head. ”No, actually give her something she wants, though,” he said. ”Wait until the morning. You don’t have to give her anything big. We all know she’s trapped here, so at least make the stay as comfortable as it can be.”

”Right,” I said. ”And then what do we do with her?”

”Above my paygrade, boss,” he said, slapping my shoulder softly before he turned around and went back inside.

I smiled as he closed the sliding door behind himself. Grayson was the closest thing I had to a brother, and I knew that he was usually right, but that was an indication that he had no fucking clue what to do either.

I realized there were no solutions to be had on the balcony as I yearned for another smoke I wouldn't allow myself, so I went back inside, hoping I would get some sleep.

I woke up before dawn broke. As I looked at the smartwatch on my wrist, I took stock of where everyone would be. Jace usually worked late, which meant he slept late. Victor would be out for a jog. Grayson might've gone home, but he might be making breakfast in the apartment. I wasn't sure.

And as for Sofia...

Well, she had to be in her room. She couldn't have gone anywhere. I wondered how she was doing. I closed my eyes and saw her bruised and bloodied face in the darkness of the room where I'd first found her, then illuminated by the bright overhead bulb in the kitchen.

I felt like heaving just from thinking about it. I shook my head as I stood up and yawned, stretching before I went to the bathroom to wash my face. My mornings were always slow and deliberate, a ritual that helped keep me focused regardless of what the day ahead of me looked like.

But I was particularly slow then, brushing my teeth leisurely, running a comb through my hair far too many times, shaving

my beard with an electric trimmer despite the fact that it didn't need trimming.

I knew I had to heed Grayson's advice. I put on some jeans and a v-neck white shirt from the spare clothes I always had in this closet, then made my way to Sofia's room. The apartment was quiet, none of the lights were on yet, and the only sound inside was the quiet whir of the air conditioner.

Hesitating for a second, I knocked on her door. There was no answer, so I knocked again, a bit harder this time. When there was still no response, I slowly pushed the door open. For a second, I wondered if she had tried to lock it. She hadn't.

The room was dimly lit, the only light coming from the sunlight peeking through the mostly closed blinds. Sofia was still asleep, tucked into the covers of the bed. I paused for a moment to look at her, feeling a twinge of guilt in my chest.

I really didn't like hurting people who hadn't done anything to us. Regardless of my position, it simply wasn't in my nature. Her breathing was slow and even, and her body was curled up in a fetal position.

I cleared my throat, and she stirred. She turned towards me, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "Good morning," I said, trying to sound as friendly as possible.

Her eyes shot open and she sat up.

"Did you sleep well?"

She brought her knees to her chest and hugged herself close, a hint of fear in her gaze. "I guess so. I must've passed out at

some point.”

”Can I...can I come in?” I asked. I was still standing by the door, and I could see the outline of her face. She’d washed her face, so there was no blood on it, but I could see dark angry welts on her pretty face, and my heart sank.

She nodded slowly, and I took that as permission to enter. I walked over to her bed and sat down beside her. Sofia was looking at me with a tentative expression, as if she was trying to figure out what I was going to do next.

I tried to offer her a small smile. ”I know it’s not much, but Grayson and I thought you might appreciate some breakfast,” I said, gesturing to the tray I had carried over with me. It had coffee, toast, and scrambled eggs.

”Thank you,” she said quietly, looking down at her lap.

I reached over and placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. ”I’m sorry,” I said. ”For what happened to you. We don’t want to hurt you. We just need to know what you know.”

”You made that very clear last night,” she said, then scoffed as she looked at the tray between us. ”You know, people are going to miss me.”

I waited for her to finish.

”My brother is a...”

I raised my eyebrows.

"He's going to notice I'm gone," she said. "We talk every day. He's going to know something is wrong. If you just drop me off at home, I promise I'll work with you."

I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "No," I said. "I don't know what you're going to do when you get home. I need you here, Sofia."

"At least let me talk to him," she said softly and her voice broke before she spoke again. "We only have each other..."

I considered that for a second. It was a risk, but this was all a risk, and Grayson was right. We needed her on our side. She didn't care about breakfast—how could she?—when she was worried about what would happen to her brother.

"Fine," I said. "I'll call him. You can talk to him, on speakerphone, while I'm here. Tell him you're going to be unavailable or not quite as available for the next few days."

"What?" she asked.

"I don't care what you tell him," I said. "But don't try to get smart, Sofia. Things could go very badly for both of you if you do. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She nodded, her face paling as she held my gaze. "I know," she said. "Don't worry. I understand the situation I'm in perfectly."

I nodded, satisfied with her response. "Good," I said. "Then let's make the call."

I took my phone out of my pocket and dialed her brother's number. I'd done my due diligence, as usual, and I already

knew it by heart. Her gaze darted between me and the phone, but she said nothing.

"Hello?" a man answered.

"Hey, Sammy," Sofia said, her voice steady as her hands fidgeted over the duvet. "Did I wake you up?"

"No," he said, then took a deep breath. I couldn't ascertain much from two words, but I could tell that he sounded worried, and that concerned me. "Where—who's phone—I mean, what's going on?"

"Oh, you know, not much," she said. She swallowed hard, and I watched her throat work as she gripped the duvet tightly. "I just wanted to call you first thing because I wanted to let you know that I'm not going to be available for a bit."

"You aren't?"

I didn't know if this man always sounded this worried or skeptical, but this was making me uneasy. I glared at Sofia, mouthing under my breath. "Sell it."

Her jaw clenched, her nostrils flaring before she turned her attention back to the phone. "I met someone."

"You met someone."

"You can stop repeating everything I say, kid," she said, forcing herself to smile. "He's..."

Her gaze trailed up and down my body before she spoke again.

"He's hot. Tall, broad-shouldered."

He laughed, and Sofia exhaled through her mouth, as quietly as she could. "Anything else I need to know about this mystery man? Will you send me a pic?"

"No need to know anything else," she said. "But you'll be pleased to know that he is very attractive. Great voice, too."

"I am pleased," he replied. "Are you sending me a pic?"

She looked up at me. I shook my head.

"No," she said. "Not until I get back. What if we go for dinner, instead? If he's as nice as he seems, I think you're going to want to meet him."

What the fuck.

A beat. "Yeah, of course," he said. "Maybe I'll have a date too. Is this his phone number?"

"Yes. I left mine behind," she replied. "I have a lot of notes and stuff I need to organize for the article, and I figure I can do that while we're away. But I'm reachable here, if anything happens. And on social media, too. I just don't want to have to talk to anyone else right now."

"You're leaving your phone behind?"

She swallowed. "Yes, but it's not like I'm unreachable," she said. "You were right. I needed a break from the case. Without it, I won't be able to write the article. You can always call me on this number, though."

"Right," Sam said. "So whose name should I save this number under?"

”Teo,” she said, immediately. ”That’s T-E-O. I’ll talk to you soon, Sammy.”

Then she reached over and ended the call.

”You gave him my real name?” I asked.

”Well, you put me on the spot,” she said. ”I’m a reporter, not an actor. If you wanted me to use a fake name, you should’ve said.”

”You didn’t have to use that excuse at all.”

”Once again,” she said. ”You put me on the spot.”

”A double date?”

”If he doesn’t think he’s going to meet you, he’s going to get suspicious,” she replied. ”I don’t generally do casual. And, in any case, in a week, we’ll hopefully be out of each other’s lives. For good.”

The Orchid Strangler II

I tapped on the dashboard of my car as I slowed down, circling the street where I knew she spent most of her time. If she had simply been a prostitute, she wouldn't have been in my sights, but she was more than that.

She brought girls—young girls, not women, sometimes as young as twelve—onto the beat with her and she seemed to have no issue making them work with johns she didn't want anything to do with.

The violent type. The bad type. The type that wouldn't pay.

She wasn't a pimp, not exactly, because she still did most of the dirty work herself. But she outsourced what she wasn't willing to do to children, and the very sight of her made me sick to my stomach. Once, years ago, I would've called this in. But investigations were slow and the longer I took, the more girls she could ensnare into her trap.

She was tall and stylish, pretty but not young. When I drove past her for the first time, I noticed the new black extensions

on her long straight hair, the strappy heels clicking on the hot pavement as she chased an approaching car.

I was in the civilian car I used for things like this, a nondescript old beater I'd bought from someone off craigslist for nine hundred dollars and I'd simply never registered it in my name.

I knew if I was in my patrol car, even the unmarked one, a seasoned sex worker like her would have been able to spot it. I rolled the window down and she leaned over, looking into my eyes.

"Hello, handsome," she said, her voice a practiced croak.

"How can I help you today?"

"What will you do?"

"The works, as long as you keep it vanilla," she said. "Kinky will run you a pretty penny and it needs to be preplanned."

"Nothing kinky. Get in the car. What's your name?"

"Show me the cash."

I flashed her a wad of hundreds and her expression softened.

"Star," she said. "What's your name?"

"One rule. Tell me your real name, not your sex worker name. I like to..."

"Pretend we're on a date? Sure, daddy. My name is Ana."

Good. I knew that, but that was all the confirmation I needed.

"Great. My name is Brock, Ana," I leaned to the side, opening the passenger door to let her in. "Hop in."

It didn't take long to drive us somewhere secluded—to get her in the backseat. She thought it was a game when I put my hands around her throat, even reminding me the kinky stuff cost extra.

She didn't realize I was serious until it was too late.

My hands tightened around her throat.

Crunch.

Finally...some peace and quiet.

The picture was off when I dumped the body, something inelegant about the whole thing. So I added an orchid—a pretty white flower, perched in her lips like a place-setting. Orchids meant innocence, a reminder of all the innocent lives she'd ruined.

I was a good person.

And this bad woman wouldn't hurt anyone else.

Chapter Eleven: Sofia

My head was pounding when I finally got out of bed. I dragged myself to the bathroom and looked at my reflection in the mirror, my own face staring back at me, the bruises on my skin turning a dark purple.

I pressed my fingers softly against my face and exhaled heavily as the pain spread from my cheekbone to my temple. Groaning, I splashed my face with cold water. A few things had been left next to the sink for my convenience; a hair dryer, face wash, a face cloth, a disposable, wrapped toothbrush and unopened toothpaste. I uncapped it and brushed my teeth, thinking about my next step.

Escaping was pointless. I knew they would find me. But I had a clue I didn't have before I was kidnapped and taken to Neon. Clearly, the Blades had something to do with the killings. I had thought that they were simply the work of a serial offender, but this made a lot more sense. The volume of murders alone should've clued me in to the fact that this was the work of multiple people.

I had to be very careful. These were dangerous men, and if they realized I was onto them, I knew they wouldn't hesitate to kill me. I knew I didn't have my phone or my laptop or any of my notes so I would mostly have to rely on memory to confirm any of my hunches.

I opened the mirror cabinet so I could see what they kept there, but it was nothing interesting. Expensive cologne, beard trimmers and over-the-counter painkillers, none of which told me anything about them as people. I wondered if any of them even used this bathroom, then looked up at my own reflection.

Of course. This was HQ. That meant that they did work here, and that I could probably find out everything I wanted to know from the environment around me. They seemed like careful, tidy people, but they weren't perfect.

All I needed to do was play along.

I put my hair up in a messy bun with a hair tie they'd thoughtfully provided me and padded toward the door of the bathroom quietly. I hadn't had breakfast because I wasn't sure if Teo would have put anything in it and I didn't want to find out the hard way. My stomach grumbled and I held it with my outstretched palm, telling myself that I would eat later. I opened the door and peered through the small opening. I saw Teo moving around in the kitchen, near the spiral staircase, until he made his way to the double sliding doors that led to the balcony. There didn't seem to be anyone else around so I quietly, slowly, crept out of the room.

I was clumsy. Even at my best, no one would've considered me graceful. But I could be sneaky and I wanted to gather as much information as I possibly could as quickly as I possibly could. I looked around the hallway trying to find clues. The apartment was huge, and I assumed the guys all slept upstairs, so I couldn't go up there. But I could stay down here and find some things out.

My gaze darted around as I sought something that might be helpful. A phone, a laptop, even a family picture. Anything that would get me information.

I didn't like the idea of violating anyone's privacy, but the more information I had, the longer I would survive. That much seemed perfectly clear. As Teo stepped outside, I slowly approached the kitchen island. There was a MacBook on it, so thin that it had been practically imperceptible from where I had been standing before. I looked around to make sure there was no one nearby and then, taking a deep shaky breath, I opened the laptop.

And it was locked.

Of course it was locked. I didn't know who it belonged to or what I could've possibly found on it, but I knew that I didn't want to get caught. I told myself I'd skulk back into my room and pretend that none of this had happened when I heard someone clear his throat behind me.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

"You'll need my password to get into that," a soft, masculine voice said from behind me. "And I don't usually give my

password out to strangers.”

I could see the outline of his features reflected on the darkened laptop screen. I remembered him from when they’d found me—he’d said something about ladies’ work and all of the guys had laughed.

Jace Roman.

I’d read about him, of course. I’d read about all of the guys. He was the youngest one, and at some point, he had been some sort of boy genius who’d gone to MIT. He was notorious because he was privileged. No one really understood why he’d fallen with the Blades, and it wasn’t like they gave interviews.

He was maybe the most delicate looking one of them all, tall and slender, with elvish features. He was lean, with a delicate bone structure. His skin was sunkissed, with high cheekbones and full lips. His lips were full and pink, with a slight curve that somehow looked playful and dangerous all at once.

Despite the softness of his appearance, I immediately knew I was in the presence of a dangerous man.

I turned slowly to face him, my heart racing. ”Sofia,” he said, his voice soft and terrifying.

”I’m sorry,” I replied instinctively.

”What are you doing?” he asked. There was a trace of amusement in his voice, but I could sense annoyance there too.

”I’m, uh, checking the time.”

Great save, Sof. He’s definitely going to buy that.

He checked his watch. "It's 9:30 in the morning."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Do you want me to open it up for you?"

"I wasn't snooping," I said.

He approached me, a crooked smile on his face. I could see the sharpness of his canines, the glint of his shiny white teeth as he leaned forward to open the laptop for me.

He pressed his thumb against one of the keys and the lock screen went away. The desktop was almost completely empty except for a few programs and a couple of documents.

"What do you want to see?" he asked.

My mouth dried.

"I'm an open book," he said, winking at me. "You just ask and I'll provide. So tell me what you want to know."

I tried to keep my breathing steady as he leaned in close to me, his scent filling my nostrils. He smelled like pine and mint. He had long arms, long fingers, manicured fingernails. He typed quickly, loudly, with only two fingers. "Maybe pull up a chair," he said.

I did as he told me. The barstools were tall and I was sore everywhere, so it was difficult for me to climb onto one. He offered me his hand. I held back the urge to sigh but I took it.

"If you'd waited for me, we could've done this in the living room," he said as I scooted forward on the narrow barstool.

"Done what in the living room?" I asked softly.

He smiled, shaking his head. "Does that work?" he asked. "I don't buy that you didn't know what you were doing for a second."

I straightened my body as I looked at him. "Fine," I said. "I wanted to know what I'm dealing with. Teo said you have information about the strangler and I want to know everything that there is to know. The police are fucking useless and it sounds like this person is trying to frame your organization. The more information that I have, the better. If you share everything you have with me, I might be able to help."

He nodded. "And Teo said it was okay?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I probably wouldn't be allowed free roam of the apartment if Teo didn't think it was okay, right?"

Jace shrugged. "I don't know. He doesn't really like..."

He trailed off and I bit down on my lower lip, wondering what the heck it was that Teo didn't really like. He waved me off, as if he knew exactly what I was about to ask him before I did.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough if you're lying," he said. "So the...what are you calling him? The strangler? He's been targeting our people for a while."

"Orchid Strangler," I replied. "I think he stuffed a white orchid into one of the victim's mouths. One of the earlier ones. But that's just a rumor, I don't know if it's true."

"It's true," he said immediately. "He's still doing it."

I felt the blood rush away from my face. I grabbed the corner of the kitchen island to make sure I wouldn't faint. For a

second, I wondered if the faint smell coming from the person who'd broken into my house was the scent of flowers, and I got dizzy at the thought.

Jace stretched out his hands, held my elbows. "Easy there. You okay?"

I nodded, trying to ignore the taste of ash in my mouth.

He looked me up and down for a second, then brought up a recording application on his computer. "I can send this to you when you're working on your article," he said as he pressed the button to start it up. "It might not be super clear but you might need to reference it when you're taking notes and working on it."

I nodded. "Thank you," I said, searching his face for any reason why he might be helping me. "Are you just doing this because Teo said I could have access?"

"Sure. And because I'm bored of this. I like solving problems, and this one just...keeps happening, and then it keeps happening, and then it happens again. It's infuriating."

The way he was speaking about the loss of human life made my blood run cold, but I supposed that in his weird, fucked up brain, it made perfect sense.

His nostrils flared as he threw his head back. "And I fucking despise men who target women," he said. "Didn't they ever hear about picking on someone their own size? If I find the person who did this to you..."

"You don't know me," I said, swallowing. "You said so yourself."

"Right. And?"

I shook my head. Who knew this psychopath could be so chivalrous? And what difference did it make? I needed to find out what he knew about the killings, not sit here and talk about how much he cared about protecting women. "So what do you know about the killings?"

"Right," he said. He brought up a document and, just from a quick glance, I could tell it was meticulously done. "So we're not sure when the killings started, but we're relatively certain that we've been targeted for approximately six months. It started late June."

"What happened in late June?"

"That was when we found our first body," he said. "The killer had left it overnight for us to find. Victor was on a jog and found him when he went to the back alley to go into the club in the morning."

"Do you know his name?"

"Yes," Jace said, tilting his chin toward the screen, a long list on the page he was pointing to. "We know everyone's name. This guy was a Robert Martinez. Victor knew him, he'd worked alongside him for a few years when he was first coming up. Their paths diverged and Martinez stayed a small-time dealer since he liked to sample his own supply. Victor, well, you know what happened to him."

I shook my head. "I haven't heard of him," I said. "He wasn't in my notes."

"That doesn't surprise me," Jace said. "He was a lowlife who nobody missed. No friends, no family. The only person who was even slightly upset he died was Victor."

"Can you send me the list of names?"

He nodded. "Of course," he said. "After that, it never really stopped. There was a body every week or every other week. We've had ten people dropped in the back alley behind the club. Ten. That's prolific for a killer for years, nevermind a few weeks. That's why we believed that it might be the work of a rival gang. But...it's no one we care about, really? Like we've known a few of the victims. Victor knew the first one, I'd met the fifth one, Grayson walked past a couple of them on his way to work some nights. If they wanted to target us, then I expect they would come for us, not for an assortment of what's mostly strangers."

I looked between him and the computer screen. "And what's all the info you have here?"

"Standard stuff. Name, social media, their logins. Social security numbers. Their credit score. Access to their browsing history."

"Standard stuff?"

He winked at me. "I'm thorough," he said. "Then the thing beside it is who found them, when, and how."

I scanned my gaze down the document, reading it quickly.

Only one of them hadn't found a body.

Teo.

Chapter Twelve: Teo

I watched as Jace spoke to Sofia, his gaze glued to her face. Jace was a handsome guy. He had no problem getting women and I knew he got around when he wanted to. I didn't know why I had expected him to steer clear of Sofia without me making it explicitly clear that he needed to, but I hadn't realized that it was something I needed until I was watching them interact.

I knew I was being unreasonable, but something about the way I had found her made me deeply protective of her.

As they spoke in whispers, I slid the door of the balcony open and took a step toward them. Sofia's head turned quickly to look at me. It made Jace quiet down, but I could tell he was trying his best not to laugh.

"Send me her address," I told him.

He typed something on his computer and my watch vibrated on my wrist.

"C'mon," I said, looking at Sofia. "Let's go."

Sofia's eyes widened. "I don't want to go."

"Don't worry," I said. "We're just going to pick up some stuff. You'll be okay."

"I don't believe you."

I sighed. "Too bad," I said. "You can either walk out of here or I can drag you out of here. Your choice."

Her jaw hardened, tears welling up in her eyes. She tilted her head back, clearly willing herself not to cry. "Fine," she said. "I'll go with you."

I extended my hand, but she didn't take it.

"I parked my car by the club, so that's where we're going first," I told her.

She gave me a sideways glance, but simply nodded when I spoke to her. I didn't want her to be afraid, but I also knew that there was no way I could put her at ease. It was important for me to show her we were on her side, but the situation made that practically impossible.

"Ladies first," I said when I opened the door of the apartment to the hallway. Sofia looked around, strands of curly hair falling past her ears.

She turned to look at me for a second then walked past, making sure to avoid me as she did so.

"Go straight," I said. "The exit is right in front of you."

She did as I told her. I pressed my fingerprint into the scanner near the front door and it unlocked for us. The streets were

mostly empty, a few people walked past us here and there. Sofia didn't say anything; she just walked beside me in silence until we got to the front of Neon, right where I'd parked my car.

She looked up at the sign, which we kept turned off during the day. "Do you guys actually make money from this?" she asked as I approached my Audi.

"The clubs? Yes," I said.

She narrowed her eyes as she looked at me.

"What? They're a source of income," I replied.

"*They* are?"

"We're known for one club. We don't make every one of our assets public."

Sofia opened her mouth to say something, but I cut her off.

"Get in the car." She did as she was told and I got in the driver's seat. With a roar of the engine, we sped off into the city, the neon club sign fading into the distance behind us.

Sofia sat in silence, her arms crossed tightly across her chest. I turned the radio up, but the sound of the music only made the tension between us even worse. We drove in silence for what felt like hours, the only sound being the hum of the tires on the pavement.

Finally, we pulled up to a small apartment complex on the outskirts of town. It was a run-down place, with peeling paint and broken windows. Not the kind of place I would've expected a girl like Sofia to live in.

"Do you have keys?"

She shook her head. "Not on me, no," she said.

"Okay," I replied. "Not a problem."

I walked around the side of the car and offered her my hand. She stared at it. "Take it," I said quietly. "We want this to look natural if your neighbors see us."

She kept staring at it.

I sighed. "And if the killer is still around, you want him to know you have protection."

That seemed to soften her a little. She extended her hand and pressed her palm into mine. I noticed how smooth her skin was, the way her delicate fingers curled around my hands. Her fingernails were painted different colors; soft lilac and aquamarine blue, all slightly chipped away.

"Thank you," she said.

For the first time since she had come into my life—since she had come into our lives—I could tell that she sincerely meant it. I was tempted to pull her close to me and tell her that everything was going to be okay, but I had no idea if everything was going to be okay, and I didn't want to lie to her.

"Lead the way," I said, letting go of her. I slid my hand down toward the small of her back and rested it there comfortably, waiting for her to shake me off. She did no such thing. She turned her head to look up at my face and smiled.

Wrinkles appeared around her bright brown eyes and I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief that she was smiling. This looked like the first genuine smile I had seen from her since I had met...well, met was a strong word. Since I had walked into the storage room and found her close to death.

The smile made her look even more beautiful and my heartbeat quickened ever-so-slightly. I didn't know what it was about her. Beautiful women weren't a novelty to me. But her...there was something about her, and I couldn't put my finger on what it was.

That scared me.

I liked to know everything, or at least as much as I possibly could, before I made any decisions. And those decisions frequently included how I felt about things. How I felt about people.

It seemed like she was leaving that decision entirely out of my hands.

We walked to the front of the apartment building, past the dirty entrance and up the stairs to her unit. She reached forward and turned the knob with a shaky hand. "I didn't have time to lock up last night," she said. "I left in a rush."

She hesitated before she pushed the door open. I put a hand flat against the door and looked down at her.

"Hey, it's okay," I said. "Let me go in first."

"Aren't you worried I'm going to run?"

I looked her up and down and flashed her a smile. It made her cheeks turn into a pretty shade of pink. "No," I said. "I like a good chase."

She swallowed, her gaze darting away from mine. Despite how much I knew I shouldn't have done it, I stretched out my arm and put a steady, crooked finger under her chin so I could tilt her head up.

"Listen to me, Sofia," I said quietly.

Her eyes widened, her mouth dropping open slightly.

"As long as you're with me, I will never let anyone hurt you," I told her. "I know you're scared of me. You should be. But I will fucking destroy anyone that tries to come near you."

Her eyes fluttered closed. "But why?"

Because I'd hated seeing her like I'd found her and I wanted to make sure she was protected. Because the moment someone had brought her into our lives by plopping her in a chair, tying her up and leaving her to die in the club we owned together, they had made her our problem, and I didn't appreciate it.

Because she was the most interesting thing that had happened to me in years.

Because I wanted to get to know her more than I wanted most things.

Because the idea of anyone hurting her again made my blood boil, my temple pulse, my body fill with rage.

"Because," I said after a second. "It would be messy. I don't like mess."

I removed my hand from her chin and she nodded as she looked at the half-open apartment door. "Okay," she said. "I guess that makes sense."

I pushed open the door and my breath caught in my throat as I looked at the mess. The person who'd assaulted her hadn't been careful. The scent of stale chinese food filled my nostrils until I found it, next to a shattered plate, on the carpet near a tiny circular dining room table. Her laptop had fallen to the floor, still half-open and knocked on its side. The water bottle she'd been drinking remained untouched on the desk.

The chair she'd been sitting on was tilted and on its back against the sofa. There were no sounds except for the quiet chirping of birds outside, punctuated by some traffic noise every now and then.

I straightened the chair, put her laptop back on the table and unplugged it, closing it as I did, and made sure that things looked generally tidier than they had when she'd been taken from her apartment.

I could see her standing by the door from the corner of my eye. "You can come in now, Sofia," I said. "I'm going to need a vacuum cleaner to get the food, but..."

She did as I told her, approaching me silently. She dropped to her knees in front of the food instead and sighed as she started to pick at it with her hands, her eyes welling with tears.

I kneeled in front of her, taking her hands in mine.

”Hey,” I said. ”You go get a bag of clothes for the week. Anything you need. I’ve got this.”

Her lower lip trembled as her eyes welled with tears. She was trying to stop herself from crying again, but this time, she wasn’t successful. When she closed her eyes, a fat tear slid down her cheek.

She shook her head, her hands still in mine. ”I just don’t get it,” she said. ”I hadn’t gotten...I didn’t even have information...I just...”

I shouldn’t have done it. I knew I shouldn’t do it even as I looked at her, but I couldn’t help myself. I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around her. For a second, I expected her to squirm away, to tell me to fuck off, to scream that I shouldn’t have touched her.

She didn’t do any of those things.

She leaned into my touch instead, sighing heavily. Her head rested on my shoulder and I felt tears on my shirt—then her shoulders shuddered.

She was sobbing.

”It’ll be okay,” I said. ”I promise.”

She laughed between tears, pulling away from me as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. ”You don’t know that.”

”I do,” I said.

I did know that. I knew that whoever had made this woman cry, I was going to kill them.

And I was going to make them suffer.

Chapter Thirteen: Sofia

Okay, so my first thought probably shouldn't have been how nice the gangster who had kidnapped me smelled.

He smelled so good, though. And he gave great hugs, to the point where I could almost forget that I was his captive—though, I had to now admit to myself, that wasn't entirely against my will.

I couldn't believe what was happening to me. One minute I was living my life, minding my own business, and the next minute, I was caught up in a world of violence and danger.

I probably wouldn't be able to extract myself from the Mercy Drive Blades anytime soon. It was perfect for my investigation, but the break-in had shaken me. I still didn't know whether I could trust the Blades or Teo himself, but I knew that I couldn't stay by myself, and that bringing my brother into this would only put him in danger.

We'd already lost our parents and I wasn't willing to put him on the line simply because of a story. I knew that Sam did

dangerous work. I didn't want to make his life any more complicated than it already was.

At least for now, staying with the Blades was my best—and really, my only—option. Teo had been surprisingly kind to me and, while none of them inspired a great deal of confidence, I could tell that they were warming up to me. The more they did, the more I could find out about the murders, and that was exactly what I needed.

I grabbed my suitcase out of my closet and put my staples in it, a few dresses, some denim pieces, mostly dark t-shirts. I looked around my room to find something I could defend myself with. It wasn't like I could get a knife from the kitchen, not under Teo's watchful eye. I'd never believed in having weapons in my home, but now, I regretted it. Sam had tried to talk me into buying a gun, but I chalked that up to anxiety, telling him that I definitely wouldn't need one.

If I had one now, maybe I would be able to get out of the situation I found myself in.

Hindsight is truly 20/20.

Quietly, I opened my nightstand drawer. It was a fucking mess, with a few medication bottles I needed to take, a lone pink vibrator, and one small nail file. I pocketed that, wondering if it was going to come in handy at all.

They were bigger than me, sure, but I had the element of surprise. They didn't see me as a threat and that was exactly what made me a threat. I would just extract whatever

information I needed out of them and then I would get the fuck out of there...using a nail file and a vibrator.

That's right. I was truly intimidating.

My thoughts of escape stopped when I heard Teo whistling. I couldn't place the song for a second, and then I realized it was *Whistle While You Work* from Snow White. I almost burst into laughter right then and there.

That, I most certainly wasn't expecting.

I peeked out from the bedroom, feeling the outline of the nail file in the pocket of the pajama pants he'd given me. Teo was dutifully cleaning the mess the person who'd broken into my house had made and I almost felt a little bad.

Almost. Just a little.

I cleared my throat. He picked up his head to look at me and smiled. "Do you have enough clothes?"

"For the week? I think so," I said.

"You can get your laptop, if you want," he said as he got to his feet on my now spotless floor. "I know you'll need it to write."

"Can I get my phone, too?"

"You won't find it," he said.

I opened my mouth to ask him about it.

"Sorry, I should clarify," he replied, waving me off. "The guys already did a sweep of your place. We don't have it either. They just couldn't find it. Whoever has your phone is probably the person who tried to kill you."

I bit my lip, feeling the weight of the situation settle heavily on my shoulders. It was one thing to be kidnapped and held captive by a gangster, but it was another thing entirely to know that someone had tried to kill me.

I felt a shiver run down my spine, imagining the person who had broken into my apartment rifling through my belongings and searching for information. I knew that I had to be careful in this world of danger and violence. But I also knew that I couldn't allow fear to consume me.

This meant I was definitely right. This meant there was a story there.

And I was going to get it.

I nodded, not sure what to say. The reality of my situation was beginning to sink in. I was in a dangerous world, one that I didn't understand. And worse yet, someone was after me. I had no idea who it was or what they wanted, but I knew that I needed to find out before they came after me again.

"I'll keep you safe," he said, as if he could read my thoughts.

"I won't let anything happen to you."

I raised an eyebrow. "You've already kidnapped me once."

He chuckled. "For your own safety," he said. "If you didn't want to stay with us, you could've said something."

That didn't seem right, but I didn't want to contradict him. And when I closed my eyes and thought about the weird turn my life had taken, I knew that I'd only felt safe when he gave me that hug.

I shouldn't have, but still...

"Your phone is a clue," Teo said as his gaze scanned over me.

"I already have Jace looking into it. He's exceptionally good, but this seems to have stumped him, so whoever we're up against is also good."

"He seems good," I said.

"If you run out of clothes, we can come back," he said. "Or I can buy you new clothes, if you want."

"You don't have to do that."

"Okay," he said. "But the option is on the table, if you want to take it."

"I won't."

He winked at me. "Alright," he said. "If you say so."

I didn't see a universe in which I would ever be okay with receiving gifts from my kidnapper. Even if they seemed like excellent ones.

"HQ is usually empty during the night," Teo explained as he drove away from my apartment. "You can essentially make it yours. We work there during the day, obviously, but only sometimes."

"You guys don't live there?"

"No. We use it for work," he replied, his hand relaxed on top of the steering wheel. I noticed that he wore dark silver rings

on his index and ring finger. "Our work can be...all-consuming, so I try to make sure we keep a work-life balance."

"From gangster shit."

He smiled at that. "You're funny," he said, then nodded. "But yes. From gangster shit. Work is work, Sofia."

I looked at him for a long second.

There was something about the way he said my name that sent shivers down my spine. It wasn't like hearing it from anyone else. There was a hint of danger, a sense of possession that I didn't quite understand.

Stockholm syndrome? How original, Sof.

I needed us to talk so I could get my mind off just how attractive he was. "So how did you get into this?" I asked.

"Off the record?"

"Yes. For my ears only."

He looked at me for a brief second, his dark eyes narrowing as he decided whether he was going to trust me or not. "I don't really know how it started," he said. "I think it started before I was born. My father was someone powerful in the org, back in the early eighties, and I guess I was expected to follow in his footsteps."

"You guess?"

"I don't know," he said. "I could never ask; someone murdered him when I was nine. My mom was never very involved, so I

grew up on the streets, and the gang took care of me. They were the closest things I had to a family. When the system took me away from my mom, and I was bounced from foster home to foster home, there was never any stability. But the gang was always there, always looking out for me. So I guess I just fell into it.”

I supposed that was how everyone ended up in a gang, but I couldn’t exactly say that. I wondered what his appearance would be like if he wasn’t in a gang—he was gorgeous, and he clearly knew it, but he would likely not be quite as sculpted as he currently was. It was obviously in his benefit to look scary and he pulled it off well, but I could see a gentleness behind his eyes that he seemed to hide from most people.

Or maybe that was just what I was telling myself to make myself feel better about the fact that I’d been kidnapped by his gang.

He smirked at me, a lopsided smile revealing one dimple on his right cheek. ”You’re staring.”

I looked ahead at the road, blood rushing to my cheeks. ”No, I’m not,” I said, then swallowed. ”Anyway. How did you become the Blades leader?”

”Slowly,” he replied, the smile on his face tightening. ”I have a knack for logistics. Always have. I like complex problems because nothing brings me more satisfaction than solving them. There’s nothing more complex than people.”

I nodded slowly, taking in his words. It was a lot to process, but I couldn’t deny that I was intrigued. Teo was a complex

man, with a lot of history that I wanted to uncover.

”And you’re happy doing this?” I asked finally.

He shrugged. ”It’s what I know,” he said. ”And besides, it’s not all bad. We help people sometimes. We protect our own. It’s not always just about violence and crime.”

”Do you regret it?” I asked.

He chuckled. ”I’m not sure I ever had a choice,” he said. ”But no, I don’t regret it. It’s given me a lot of power and influence. And that’s not something I take lightly. I try to use it for good, whenever I can.”

”You try to use being in a gang for good?”

He shook his head. ”You have no idea what it’s like for people on the street,” he said. ”I’m sure you’re aware, but gangs exist because people are hurting and the people in power don’t give a damn. What we do might be brutal, but we get to give back to the community on the other side of it...and to me, that makes it all worth it.”

He tapped on the steering wheel before he took a sharp left into a small alleyway. This place didn’t look like it got a lot of traffic, and I wondered how far away we were from HQ, which was where I thought he was going to take me. ”This person...whoever is killing people,” he said. ”They’re not just trying to frame me, Sofia. They’re mocking me. They’re taking out the people it’s my job to protect.”

I looked at him, at the way his jaw set, at his long fingers on the rich leather of the wheel. ”So you’re invested because of

your ego.”

He turned his head to look at me, his dark eyes hardening as he did. ”I’m invested because our reputation is incredibly important to these people,” he said, gesturing around. I didn’t see anyone, but I could tell this was a well used spot at night. ”The police couldn’t care less. They throw them in jail, they want them to rot. They don’t want to help. No one wants to help. Yes, sure, we use them; they’re informants or lookouts, but they’re never just a problem to get rid of. They’re people. We see them as people. By making sure that we look like fools, he’s sending the message that they aren’t safe.”

”But how are they safe with you?”

He glared at me. ”We don’t kill them for sport,” he said finally. ”We don’t kill anyone unless we have to.”

I wanted to tell him that there was no reason to kill anyone, ever, but I quieted down instead as we approached HQ and my mouth dried.

What did it mean when he said some killing was necessary?

And what could I possibly do to avoid being a necessary kill?

Chapter Fourteen: Sofia

Teo parked the car in front of a large, windowless warehouse. It was made of concrete and steel and looked like a fortress—the kind of place you didn’t walk out of unless someone *let* you out. He turned off the engine and turned to me, his dark eyes locking onto mine.

”Are you okay?” Teo asked.

I rubbed my aching temple. ”I mean, I’ve been better,” I said. ”Thank you for letting me go back to my apartment to get my things.”

He cocked his head. ”I’m choosing to trust you, but I need you to understand something,” he said, his voice low and intense. ”You’re safe here. No one will hurt you. But if you try to run, or if you betray me in any way, I can’t guarantee your safety.”

Okay...so ‘trying to run’ was one of the things that could make me a necessary kill.

Good to know.

I swallowed hard, feeling a lump form in my throat. "I won't betray you," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded, then opened his door and got out of the car. I followed him, knowing I was walking right into the lion's den and unable to do a damn thing about it.

As we approached the building, I saw Victor standing guard outside. He was dressed in all black and, despite his amiable grin, looked like he could snap me in half with one hand. Teo nodded at him. Victor stood up straight, flashing me a lopsided smile. I felt his gaze slowly slide down my body, taking in my curves, the way I looked when I wasn't a fucking mess.

I thought Teo might tell him to cut it out, but he didn't. He smirked, instead, his muscular arms crossed over his chest.

"All good, boss?" Victor asked when he finally focused his gaze on my face, our eyes locking.

"All good," Teo said. "I'll let you know if we need you. And you don't have to stay out here."

"I wanted to wait for you," Victor said, his voice low, gravelly. It sent a shiver down my spine. I looked at his body slowly, at the way his shoulders filled his black shirt, at his long legs. He was tall and he had perfect posture, which made him look even more striking than he naturally was.

And he was incredibly striking just at first glance.

When we'd walked up to him, he'd had his legs slightly open, his hands behind his back, his shoulders straightened. Even his posture made him look scary...and hot.

Really fucking hot.

Stockholm Syndrome strikes again.

He opened the door for us and smirked as we walked into the building. He closed it behind himself as we all walked down a long hallway. I vaguely remembered being escorted here by Victor the night before, but it was all a blur.

Teo walked in front of me, Victor behind me, my bag in his hands, and while they gave me space, it was clear that I was trapped. We walked down a long, dark hallway, the sound of our footsteps echoing off the walls. I could hear faint music playing in the distance, the bass thumping against my chest. As we neared the end of the hallway, Teo stopped at a metal door and turned to me.

"This is it," Teo said. "Welcome to our headquarters."

"I've been here before."

"Yeah, but I didn't give you a tour," Teo said, turning to me and winking. He was horribly charming, which made this much worse. "It was rude. I'm not rude."

"I didn't understand there were rules of etiquette surrounding kidnappings."

He shook his head. "Still," he said. "Let me show you around."

There wasn't much to show me, though the apartment was surprisingly large. He said I could have full range downstairs for whatever I wanted, where my room and my bathroom

were. There was a balcony there and I wondered, for a brief second, if I could jump off it.

When he saw me looking longingly at it, he reached out and tucked a strand of hair softly behind my ear. The touch might have been gentle, but it was too intimate, too weird for someone I'd just met, and it made me snap my head toward him so I could give him my full attention.

"Sofia," he said, my name sounding like brown sugar on his full lips, his canines showing through. "If you try to jump, you'll get hurt. You could die. I won't help you. No one will help you. If one of my men wants to, they might finish the job. Maybe we'll make it easier on you, but probably not."

I swallowed. I could tell he meant every word that he said and it sent a shiver down my spine.

"Do you understand?" he said, his hand cupping my face. His fingers smelled like leather and silver.

"Yes," I said, frozen in place as I fought the urge to lean into his touch.

"Good," he said, immediately removing his hand from my face. "Now you can go upstairs whenever you like for any reason, but there's nothing for you to see there. We come and go as we see fit. There are two bedrooms there, and we use them as needed. One more thing..."

I waited for him.

"If we've brought another person back to HQ, do not go up there. You won't like what you see. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Tell me you understand," he said, taking a step toward me. He was so close I could see the way his dark eyelashes curled toward his arched brows, the ridges of his full lips, the way his nostrils flared slightly as he looked into my eyes. "Use your words."

"I understand," I said.

"Good," he said. He looked me up and down, opened his mouth as if he was going to say something else, then dropped his arm by his side.

"Now what?" I asked before he turned away.

"I have to get to work," he said, then flashed me a cool smile.

"I assume you do too."

I could've made myself scarce and stayed in my room, but Teo was right. I wanted to get the work done and he'd given me access to where they worked, though at first glance, I could tell they were an incredibly organized group.

That would make finding crumbs of evidence or anything that might point me to a certain direction difficult. After speaking briefly to Victor, Teo had left, and I was alone with him.

I washed my face, put concealer on the dark bruise that was spreading across my face, and tried to fix my untamable hair. I put on some jeans and a black halter top that showed off my collarbone, which made me feel a bit more human.

When I walked out of my bedroom, Victor was sitting on the sofa, drinking a steaming cup of coffee and looking at something on his tablet. His legs were crossed, his left foot over his right thigh, and he looked incredibly relaxed. He picked his head up to look at me when I approached him, then motioned toward another mug on the circular glass coffee table in front of him.

”What is it?” I asked.

”Coffee,” he said. ”I figured you might want some.”

I did want coffee, but I didn’t know this man. I didn’t know any of them.

Victor laughed to himself. ”Are you worried it’s poisoned or something?” he asked. ”Here.”

He leaned forward, grabbed the cup he’d put on the coffee table, and brought it to his lips. ”See? I wouldn’t drink it if it was tainted. And we can swap drinks if you want.”

I shook my head and took the mug from him, feeling the warmth of the coffee seep through the porcelain. The aroma was inviting, the steam curling up to my nose. I took a sip, letting the liquid roll over my tongue. It was strong, bitter, but it was perfect. I let out a contented sigh, closing my eyes.

”Good, huh?” Victor asked.

I opened my eyes to see him watching me intently. He was so handsome, with his chiseled features and piercing eyes. His shoulders were broad, his chest solid. He looked like he could break me in half. I was just happy he didn’t want to.

Victor watched me with a small smile, his eyes glinting in the dim light. I wondered what he was thinking as he looked at me like that - was he imagining what I looked like naked, or was he simply sizing me up as a potential threat? I couldn't tell, but I didn't want to dwell on it for too long.

"Yeah, it's good," I said.

"Teo only drinks expensive stuff," Victor said. "He's very particular."

"About coffee?"

"About everything," he said, his gaze sliding down my body again. I had to fight the urge to hug myself. I wanted this man to think I trusted him, even though I didn't.

He gestured for me to sit down next to him. I hesitated for a moment, then sat down on the sofa, keeping my distance from him. He smiled at me, but his smile looked dangerous, and I didn't think he was trying to put me at ease.

"Thanks," I said, taking a sip of the coffee, tapping my fingernails against the mug.

"You're welcome," he replied, his eyes focused on mine. "So Teo said you're a journalist."

"Yeah," I replied, taking another sip of coffee.

"What brings you here, then?" he asked, leaning back against the sofa.

"I have no idea. Someone beat me up and brought me here, so...I know as much as you do."

He laughed at that, throwing his head back when he did. "You're not what I expected," he said.

"What did you expect?" I asked, setting the cup down on the table.

"I don't know. Someone more...fragile, I guess."

"Fragile?" I repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah," he said, nodding. "Teo seems very protective of you. And I get it, because of how he found you, but you seem to be bouncing back just fine."

I swallowed. "I don't have time to be hurt," I said. "I'm angry, and there's only one person who would've wanted to hurt me like this."

"The person you were investigating."

"The strangler, yes," I said, feeling a shiver run through me.

Victor nodded, his expression somber. "That's a dangerous path to go down," he said. "You could end up just like the others, if you're right about this being a serial killer."

"I know," I said, feeling a lump form in my throat. "But I can't just sit back and do nothing. I need to find him before he kills again."

Victor studied me for a moment, his brow furrowed. "You're brave," he said finally. "I'll give you that."

"I'm not brave," I said, shaking my head. "I'm just determined. Or maybe I'm just stupid."

He wrinkled his nose. "You don't strike me as stupid, sweetheart."

I felt my cheeks flush at the endearment, unsure if it was a genuine compliment or a calculated move on his part. I shifted in my seat, suddenly feeling uncomfortable under his gaze. "Thanks," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

Victor leaned closer to me, his breath hot against my ear. "But there's something else," he said, his voice low and husky. "I can tell."

"What?" I asked, my voice catching in my throat.

"Something that's driving you. Something that's fueling your determination. What is it?" he said, his low voice sending a shiver down my spine.

"There's nothing," I replied, trying my best to keep my heartbeat under control, even though it was hammering in my chest.

"Don't lie to me," he snarled. Fuck, he sounded so hot, and so feral, and so angry. Like he was waiting for me to fuck up so he could hurt me. It sent a shiver down my spine...and down the rest of my body.

I didn't have time to explore what the fuck that was about, so I turned my head to look at him instead.

I didn't have anything to lose by being honest, I was already there, I was already not going anywhere, and he looked like he was so curious about me. Far more than any date I'd ever had, probably.

But still.

"I'm not going to tell you anything," I said. "Unless you tell me something too."

"Like what?"

"Whatever I want," I replied, turning to look into his eyes. His pupils dilated as he set his gaze on me. "A little quid pro quo. I'll be honest with you if you're honest with me."

He considered my offer for a second, then his smile widened. I saw the golden hue in his light eyes, the dark ring around his irises, the way his eyelashes curled up toward his brows. His features were sharp; in a less striking face, they might've even looked ugly, but he made it work. "Okay, Clarice," he said. "A little quid pro quo sounds good."

"I think in this case, you're Clarice."

He laughed softly. "Fine," he said. "But you start. I asked first."

I took a deep breath. "My mom was a journalist," I said. "She was investigating this old serial killer, this trucker who went around Miami and the rest of the state, and then he would drive up and down the bible belt killing coeds. To be clear, she wasn't going to put anyone in jail. He was already in prison, he'd been sentenced to death. But my mom was convinced that he had killed more victims than the public knew about and she made it her life's mission to find out about them. She tried to pitch this to a bunch of newspapers but no one wanted the story, so she started this blog."

He waited for me as I took another sip of my now lukewarm coffee.

"It did really well," I continued. "She didn't go viral, exactly, but she got interview requests, that kind of thing. She became a public figure even though she didn't want to be."

"Would I have heard of this blog?"

I shook my head. "Unless you were big into true crime like five years ago, I seriously doubt it. My mom wasn't worried, and honestly, neither was my dad. He worked sales for a water treatment company and he liked helping her out. I think it was the most excitement he'd had for a while, at least since my brother and I had moved out of the house."

"Something happened."

I breathed out, trying to contain a sob. Getting to this part of the story always made me feel like screaming. "And then, a few months into this, they died. It was a car accident, on the interstate. The mechanic said their brakes were faulty. No one else was hurt."

"I'm sorry."

I rubbed my cheek as I felt a fat tear stream down my face.

"Thanks," I said. "But the thing is, it doesn't make any sense."

Victor leaned in closer, his expression softening. "What do you mean?" he asked gently.

"I mean that the brakes on my parent's car were fine," I said, my voice trembling. "I know this because my dad was meticulous about car maintenance. He checked everything,

always. And honestly, they both hated driving on the freeway. The fact that they were there in the first place makes no sense. My dad wouldn't have let my mom drive a car with faulty brakes."

Victor's eyes narrowed. "So, what are you saying?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling frustrated tears welling up in my eyes. "But I've always felt like something wasn't right. Like someone wanted them dead."

Victor's face grew serious. "Do you think it was intentional?" he asked.

I nodded. "I don't know. But it's always been in the back of my mind. It's like...like someone didn't want her to keep investigating. Like they wanted to shut her up, permanently."

"And now you're after a serial killer," he said, matter-of-factly.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I guess I wanted to help people too," I said. "And I thought, you know, if someone comes after me, at least I'll be ready."

The Orchid Strangler III

For the longest time, it didn't feel like anyone would notice. I often sat alone in my dark apartment, my mind racing with thoughts of the next person who'd cross me. Even though I told myself it was all strictly business, I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement as I imagined the fear in their eyes, the struggle for survival, the rush of power.

I could tell that it was starting to become an addiction I couldn't control, but I didn't want to. Not only was I doing the world a favor, I was making myself feel alive. I knew the only way to do that was through the ultimate act of domination - taking someone's life.

I had been careful, of course. No one suspected a thing. I was charming, handsome, successful. The perfect cover for my dark desires.

And yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was getting too close.

I kept my personal life separate from my professional interests, but I could tell that someone was about to start breathing down my neck. When I used my resources to ascertain who it was, I decided that the easiest thing to do would be to get close to the person investigating me.

I'd found ways.

But before I did any of that, I needed to make sure to keep them off the trail. And I could kill—if you'll forgive the expression—two birds with one stone. There were some people that were too powerful and too prominent for me to target, but that didn't mean that I couldn't undermine their carefully constructed reputation.

Because I refused to be powerless, and my plan was working, even though it was happening slowly.

More slowly than I wanted it to.

If it had been up to me, all of this would've been quick. But I needed to be careful. Regardless of my resources, I did not want to get caught. That would undermine all my carefully organized work.

These opponents were powerful and organized too.

But I had an ace up my sleeve.

One I knew they wouldn't see coming.

And it was time for me to use it.

Chapter Fifteen: Teo

I'd always been a man with a plan. When Sofia came into our lives, that threw that plan into disarray, and I had no idea how I could deal with her, the standard day-to-day transactions in the club, and the killings that some asshole was trying to pin on us.

But being honest with myself, it was mostly Sofia.

One week had passed since I'd found her bruised and bleeding in the storage room of our club and the bruising had subsided. She seemed to be taking her situation in stride, all things considered, and my men liked her.

A little too much for my taste, actually...but I wasn't going to tell her not to make friends, considering she wasn't going to go anywhere any time soon.

I noticed that Grayson stopped by HQ a lot more often, usually with one of those magazines that he found when he was checking out of a pharmacy, a chocolate bar (always a different chocolate bar, so I could tell he was trying to find her

favorite) and a hydrating face mask or a bath bomb. They spent a little while every day talking about the news, pop culture, music...anything that would make Sofia not feel like she was trapped.

I was surprisingly jealous of what I would've normally thought of as a strategic move. When I arrived at HQ and they were sitting on the couch together, with Sofia throwing her head back as she laughed, I could feel myself getting angry.

But I knew that wasn't the time for jealousy. Not when we had a killer on the loose, and we needed to find out who it was before they could do any more damage. The only way we could do that was by working together.

And there was no way she was interested. I could see the way she looked at me; desire and fear mingling in her eyes. But despite hating to admit it, even to myself, I was a gentleman and I wasn't going to take advantage of her situation.

Maybe in a different life, I would've asked her out on a date.

Not this one.

"Boss," Victor said, then cleared his throat to attract my attention. We were sitting in my living room, and I was...well, I was completely ignoring him.

I picked my head up to look at him and sighed. "What did you just say?"

Victor furrowed his brow. "I was just talking about the supply chain op next week," he said. "What you called me about?"

I rubbed my temple, leaning back on the sofa. "Right."

”Do you want me to just email you about it?”

I nodded as I looked at him. ”Yes.”

He was sitting upright in the chair across from me, his eyes narrow, his elbows on his knees. ”Do you want to talk about it?”

”Talk about what?” I asked, glaring at him.

He opened his hands, waving me off. ”You know what, it doesn’t matter,” he replied.

”It’s her,” I said. ”Is she making progress?”

”Hard to say,” he replied. ”Maybe ask Jace? He can hack into her devices if you want him to.”

”No, I just wanted to get a feeling. I want to give her space to work, but I guess I thought she’d be further along by now.”

”Why? It’s taken us months, we have a ton of resources, and we don’t know jackshit,” he said quickly, then cleared his throat. ”I mean. Respectfully.”

”I know, but we’re used to this. If someone comes after us, we know how to deal with it.”

”So as long as she’s with us,” he said. ”Nothing should happen to her.”

”Okay. And then what happens when she’s not with us?”

He shook his head. ”You can’t worry about that, Teo.”

But I couldn’t help but worry. Sofia was a liability, a weakness in our carefully constructed organization. But she was also a person, someone who had been through so much already. I

couldn't bear the thought of her being hurt again, especially not because of us. Every night as I drifted off to sleep, I closed my eyes and saw the way her face was bloodied and bruised when I picked her up and it made me feel sick to my stomach.

"Just keep an eye on her," I said finally. "And Grayson too. I don't want anyone getting too close to her."

Victor cocked his head, his eyes trained on me. I'd always trusted Grayson with my life, so the fact that I was even mentioning this would definitely come as a surprise to him.

"Got it," he said. He went to stand up, but I spoke before he could.

"Has she..."

"What?"

"Said anything to you," I said.

"About what?"

"About the case," I said. "About herself."

He thought about it for a second. "Nothing I haven't reported, boss."

"And what do you think?"

"Of what?" he asked. I could tell he was being careful. Victor liked confrontation, as a rule, but he'd been with us for years and I could tell that he appreciated being with the organization. He was careless, sure, but he didn't like to piss me off. I could tell that he still felt like his place in the Blades was not a sure thing, even though it most certainly was.

There were three men I trusted with my life, and three men only, and they were Grayson, Jace and Victor. Victor had been the latest addition to the group and he still, every now and then, seemed to have issues thinking we would want him around.

Because Victor was absolutely fucking insane.

But he was our type of insane.

And I certainly felt safer when he was around us.

"About Sofia," I said. "And tell me the truth. You don't have to pretend you like her if you don't."

"I like her," he replied, almost immediately. "She's smart, and she's funny, and it's nice to have a woman around. Particularly one who's so easy on the eyes."

"So you're into her?" I asked, clenching my fists. I could feel waves of anger rolling through my body, the heat uncurling in the pit of my stomach. I'd worked hard to control my temper, but when it came to Sofia, I clearly became a fucking animal.

"I mean, I wouldn't mind fucking her," he said quietly, then met my gaze and shrugged. "But I would never dream of touching your things."

I clutched the side of the sofa so I would stop myself from standing up and socking him in the face.

"Victor?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Get the fuck out of my house."

I stood in front of the mirror, getting myself ready before a date I definitely wanted to get out of. It wasn't her; if this had just been a real date, I would've been excited. But it *wasn't* a real date. A week had passed and now we needed to keep up appearances. I could've made her postpone dinner with her brother, but I knew she was going stir crazy, and I thought that getting to know him might give the Blades an advantage.

And, as much as I hated admitting it to myself, I wanted to go on a date with her.

Even if it was just a pretend date.

I looked closely at my reflection. There were bags under my eyes and, despite taking care of myself, I thought I looked worse than ever even after brushing my hair back and trimming my beard and eyebrows.

She knew I was on my way, so I didn't bother to text the prepaid phone I had given her to let her know about it. She probably was excited, but not to go on a pretend date with me. Just to get the fuck out of the apartment.

HQ was nice, but I was sure she missed her freedom.

I told myself that she had to do this, that this had been her idea as I drove to the building and parked in the shade outside. I needed to get a grip, and I needed to remember who she was to me.

A means to an end. Absolutely, in no possible universe, in no way at all, a romantic prospect.

I walked purposefully up to HQ, then stopped as I looked at the hallway.

”Stop being a child,” I told myself. My voice echoed in the sterile walls of the building, and I looked around to make sure that none of my men were around.

I was lucky that they weren’t.

They would’ve given me endless shit for my little self-pep talk.

I padded softly toward HQ, wondering if I was going to find her there, already ready. When the lock clicked, I half-expected to see her on the couch with Grayson, talking about their day.

But I found her alone.

She sat on the couch with large headphones over her ears, typing quickly as she did. She was wearing a black shirt that hugged her curves and tiny shorts that showed off the length of her shapely legs, which she’d crossed underneath her. She must’ve noticed me walking in, because she picked up her head and her eyes widened as she moved her headphones down.

”Shit,” she said. ”What time is it?”

I tried to swallow, feeling foolish. I’d spent ages thinking about what to wear, what to do, how to approach her when I first arrived.

To her, this was just another day. Of course. A pretend date. I shouldn't have gotten excited.

"It's six thirty," I said. "We have a reservation for seven thirty."

She moved her laptop to the side, dropping her headphones next to it. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was organizing my timeline and I got totally sidetracked."

I shook my head. "This was your idea. I'm happy to cancel."

"No," she replied. "Give me twenty minutes and I'll be ready. I don't want them to...I don't cancel plans with my brother."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Ever. It's kind of a thing. We're trauma bonded."

"Got it," I said, even though I definitely didn't get it. But if this was what she needed me to do so that she could keep up the pretense with her cop brother, I was happy to help her out.

"You can look at the work I've been doing if you want," she said as she stood up. "Jace has been helping me with a timeline of the victims, and I..."

"Sofia, no offense, but I'm tired," I said. "I'm sure we can talk about it later. Right now, I need to focus on, you know, tonight's performance. We both do."

She looked into my eyes, her pupils expanding over her dark irises as she did. "Right," she said. "You're right. What should I wear?"

She said it so casually, as if that was the kind of conversation we always had. "I don't know. Something short? I want to look at your legs all night."

"Oh," she said, approaching me and putting her hands flat against my chest. "Already getting into the role, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, my heartbeat quickening in my chest and my cheeks reddening as I looked into her eyes. "Absolutely."

Chapter Sixteen: Sofia

I hadn't wanted to get ready for the date because I wasn't sure that it was real. When I had brought it up to my brother, it seemed like it was so long ago. The week had gone by in a blur, and despite the fact that I couldn't really go anywhere, I was starting to like this.

It felt nice that I had round-the-clock protection now that I had processed what had happened to me. Teo had told the Blades not to touch me, and none of them did, though I could feel their lingering gazes on me. Despite the weird circumstances, I was pretty sure I'd found a friend in Grayson...but I wasn't stupid. I knew he was trying to form a bond so I would feel safe and tell them all the information I had. I could've fought it, but I didn't.

In such dangerous territory, I knew I could do with an ally.

But that was the rest of them. Teo was a different story. I watched him come and go, always looking like he had somewhere to be. He listened to the rest of his men give him verbal reports and gave deliberate commands after a few

seconds. He was obviously incredibly intelligent, and for a second, I couldn't help but wonder what his life would've been like if he'd had the opportunities I did.

Then again, with my salary, I would've never been able to afford this fucking apartment.

When he walked into HQ, I practically had to pick my jaw off the floor. He was wearing a well-fitted button-up shirt and a pair of black dress pants, his chest so broad that I got the urge to run my hands over it, to feel the brush of his hair against the tips of my fingers. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes were dark, and he was smiling at me in a way that made my heart race and my palms sweat.

There was something almost bashful about him, despite his striking presence in the room. Everyone else was gone—obviously on purpose, though I had no idea where they were—and I was left to deal with my feelings about this man who had kidnapped me looking like an absolute fucking snack.

It turned out I was hungry as fuck.

When my hands were on his chest, when I could feel his heart beating, I almost lost sight of what had landed me here in the first place. Of why we were even going on this date.

I pulled my hand away as if his skin had zinged me and took a step back. He looked at me, confused. I could've blamed it on the way he looked, but the truth was that I was on guard. I didn't know what was happening between us, and I could already tell that things were getting out of hand. "Sorry," I said. "I'm just...tired."

He grabbed my hand, dwarfing it in his. He wore a silver hand chain flush against his skin, the silver bracelet glinting and outlining the black ink of his tattoos, the chain linked across several long fingers. "I want to make something clear," he said. "I'm going along with this because it was your plan, but I don't want you to do anything against your will. And you don't *need* to do anything purely because I tell you to. You know that, right?"

I looked him in the eyes. "I want you to take me out," I said. "I think I've already explored every secret in this apartment."

There was that glint in his eyes again. "I doubt it," he said. "I have a lot of secrets."

That charm, that voice, it made me tremble with anticipation. I told myself to get a grip; this was only a pretend date and Teo was just getting into character. If I stayed there for too long, I was going to start buying it. "Okay," I said. "I'll be right back."

It didn't take me very long to get ready. I chose a black mini dress that went halfway down my knees, which hugged my curves in all the right places. I paired it with strappy high-heeled sandals and kept my makeup natural, opting for a nude lip and subtle smoky eye. Teo was already waiting for me by the door, and his eyes widened slightly as he looked up from his phone.

He composed himself fast enough...but I noticed.

Noticing things was my job, after all.

"Good?" I asked.

"Better than good," he said. "You look beautiful, Sofia."

His voice was low and husky as he approached me, stuffing his phone in his pocket while he did.

"Thank you," I said.

He reached out and touched the space between my neck and my shoulder blades, softly, his fingertips barely grazing me.

"This was really bad last week," he said. "How is it now? Did you cover it in make-up?"

"No," I said. "A little sore. Much better."

His fingers spread over my skin, his palm cupping the curve of my shoulder. "How about the rest of you?"

"I think I got lucky," I said.

"Lucky?" he repeated, his eyes darkening with curiosity.

"Yeah," I said. "I don't think they...you know...broke anything or whatever. I mean, I think you might've interrupted the process. I've thought about this a lot. Why wouldn't the killer kill me? Why would they just let me be? Why take me to Neon at all?"

"I don't know."

"I think you had something to do with it," I replied. "Because I heard a scuffle before you arrived and I was sure I was done for."

He thought about that for a few seconds.

”Right. It’s weird. Well, I’m glad they didn’t kill you,” he said, his voice low and dangerous. ”Because if they had, I wouldn’t have been able to control myself.”

I shivered at the intensity in his eyes, the way his fingers dug into my skin just a little bit, reminding me of his strength. ”Let’s go,” I said, my voice sounding breathy.

He nodded, taking my hand and leading me out of HQ and onto the streets of the city.

It was a strange feeling, walking with him, knowing that we were supposed to be pretending. But at the same time, it felt like so much more. I couldn’t help but feel drawn to him, to the way he carried himself, to the way he looked at me.

We walked for a while, making small talk, until we got to his car. He opened the door for me, helping me climb in. I noticed that there was no one around. There was no need for him to pretend at that moment.

As he slid into the driver’s seat, I studied him from the corner of my eye. His grip on the steering wheel was tight, his jaw set in concentration. We were driving through the city, the streets slick with rain. I watched the way the street lights played off his stubble, the way his muscles flexed as he shifted gears. It was easy to forget that this was all an act, especially when he looked at me with such intensity.

”Where are we going?” I asked, trying to break the silence.

”Nice little Italian spot,” he replied. ”I know the chef. I already texted your brother the address from your phone.”

I turned to look at him, my mouth drying. "Teo."

"What?"

"Are you going to hurt him?"

"Who?" he asked after a beat. As if he didn't know.

"Sammy," I said, my voice breaking. "Please, he's... Sam is all I have left of my family."

He considered this for a long second. I knew that Sam was his biggest piece of leverage and I didn't expect him to tell me that he wasn't going to hurt him, because he still didn't want me to run away. Now that I was sitting in his car, though, I knew that I wasn't going to go anywhere.

Ever since my parents had died, my life had been remarkably lonely. I'd always been a determined, stubborn person, but after the accident, my life felt like it was passing me by and my brain felt like it was in a fog. The college relationship I had, which never really seemed to be going anywhere, fizzled out. My friends didn't know what to say; nothing like this had ever happened to them and the tragedy of it was too much for them to handle socially, even though I had a few people ask me if there was anything they could do immediately after they heard news of their death.

But what could they possibly do? They couldn't bring my parents back, and I wanted to be alone. The only person who got it was my brother, who sat next to me in my childhood room when I was too stunned to cry, neither one of us saying a

fucking thing to each other from dusk to dawn, neither one of us able to sleep.

It had been years since I'd felt close to someone. Sure, my arrival had been marred by strange circumstances and I wasn't at liberty to leave, but for the first time in years I felt that I had people I could talk to. *Really* talk to, not just about work or celebrities or the next article.

Grayson, Jace and Victor actually listened to me when I talked. They didn't seem like they wanted to hear my story because it was salacious, they genuinely seemed to think I was interesting.

Teo was a different story. He listened, sure, but he was aloof, and I could tell that he often thought about my motivations. Because he was the one who was around me the least, he didn't seem to trust me that much. Regardless of what the other three acted like, I knew for a fact that Teo was the one pulling the strings.

At any point in time, he could snap his fingers and I'd be shit out of luck. And so would my brother.

"I promise I'll stay," I said. "Please, just don't hurt my brother."

He gave me a long sideways look. "I'll think about it," he said softly.

"Really?"

"Yes," he said. "I promise."

Chapter Seventeen: Teo

I didn't want to hurt Sofia's brother.

But if the choice was to keep Sofia safe or hurt her brother, then there wasn't a choice. If I needed to kill him with my bare hands, then I was going to do it without even thinking about it.

She looked so beautiful sitting in the passenger seat. Now that she'd healed up, I could see the features of her face. Her eyes were a deep brown, almost black. Her lips were plump and perfectly shaped, and every time I looked at her, I couldn't help but think about how they would feel against mine. Her hair cascaded down her back in loose waves, and I had to resist the urge to reach out and run my fingers through it.

I knew that I shouldn't be thinking about her like this. She was just a means to an end, a tool to get what I wanted. But I couldn't help the way she made me feel.

We arrived at the Italian restaurant, and I led her inside. The atmosphere was cozy and romantic, with dim lighting and soft

music playing in the background. We were ushered to our table without having to stop by the host, and I wondered if her brother was already here.

The circular table was close to the window. I pulled a chair out for her and she flashed me a soft smile. There was some hesitation from her before she sat down.

"So," I said over fake candlelight. "Do you think your brother will bring anyone?"

She shrugged. "Hard to know," she replied. "He's not really someone who dates very much. If he brings someone, he has to really like them. I mean, he could say the same thing about me..."

She picked up her head and her gaze locked on my eyes. I waited for her to finish her sentence, but she didn't.

"Anyway," she said. "You said you knew the chef?"

For the next five minutes, we talked about food. It was nice; it actually felt like we were on a date and I was happy to get to know her. As we talked, I couldn't help but notice the way her eyes sparkled when she talked about her favorite dishes. I was glad to see her relax and forget about everything else for a moment. I wished that this was how I always saw her.

I was usually pretty aware of my surroundings—came with the job—so when the door chimed and a tall figure entered the restaurant, followed by an older guy, I could immediately tell that this was Sofia's brother.

He had the same soft features, the same hair color, and even similar mannerisms as he looked around to find us.

"I think your brother is here," I told her.

Sofia turned around. I could see how excited she was from her body language, and she waved wildly at him so he could find us.

Sam spotted us and rushed over to our table, his gaze never leaving Sofia. He pulled her into a tight hug, and I could see the relief on her face as she hugged him back.

"Hey, sis," he said, pulling away as he side-eyed me. "I'm so glad to see you're okay."

She smiled up at him. "I'm fine," she said. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You don't usually disappear with men for a week."

"Some men are worth it," she whispered into his ear, just loud enough for me to hear.

Her brother rolled his eyes and turned to me. "I'm Sam," he said, extending his hand.

"Teo," I replied, shaking his hand.

He looked at me for what felt like a long time. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. "I guess I just have one of those faces."

I definitely did not have one of those faces, and we both knew it, but in the darkly lit restaurant, he probably couldn't

recognize me from the newspapers and certainly not from a mugshot.

Sam shrugged. "Alright," he said. "This is Archer."

Archer was a man in his late forties wearing tight black slacks, a grey shirt and a denim jacket. I could immediately tell that he was also part of the police; something about the way he held himself made it obvious.

I could also immediately tell that he was sleeping with Sam.

"You brought a date!" Sofia said, as we all sat down.

Sam's eyes widened. "Uh," he said, his gaze darting around the room. "Yes. I mean, yeah."

So that meant he wasn't just a date. He was probably Sam's superior in some way, which made him interesting.

I took a sip of wine, keeping my eyes on Archer. He was older than me, softer around the middle, with wrinkles around his eyes.

It seemed like a façade.

There was something dangerous about him, something that made my pulse quicken. I knew that I shouldn't be thinking about him like this, but I couldn't help it. I told myself I was just being paranoid.

Most of the time, and for good reason, I didn't trust the police.

"So, Teo," Sam said, interrupting my thoughts after we'd ordered and as we started to make conversation. "What do you do for a living?"

"I own a few nightclubs," I said. "Real estate holdings. That kind of thing."

Archer leaned forward, his cold gaze appraising me. "Really? You look like you'd be in security or something."

"What can I say?" I shrugged. "I make time to work out. It's good for my mental health."

Archer's mouth quirked up into a smirk. "I can certainly see that," he said. "You must have a lot of...stressful situations to deal with."

I didn't miss the way Sam glared at Archer, as if warning him to back off. It was obvious that the two of them had some kind of history, and I was curious to know what it was.

Sofia seemed to sense the tension in the air, so she quickly changed the subject. "So, Archer," she said, smiling sweetly. "How did you meet my brother?"

Archer's eyes flicked to Sam before he answered. "On the job," he said. "Your brother is a fine protégé and he'll make a good detective some day."

Sofia's eyes widened. She looked more than a little alarmed and she flashed me a look as if I was going to be able to bail her out. I knew I should've kept my mouth shut, but this was the first time she had actively asked me for help.

I took another sip of my wine. "Do you make it a habit to sleep with your protégés?"

Archer smiled at that, his gaze sliding down Sam's body. "Only when they're devastatingly handsome," he replied.

Sam cleared his throat, his cheeks reddening. "Can we talk about something else?" he asked, looking uncomfortable.

Sofia looked between her brother and his date and nodded. "Of course," she said. "Whatever you want."

The rest of the meal passed by without incident, but I noticed that Archer would often look at me as if he was searching my face for answers. Mostly, I let Sofia do the talking. Regardless of the weird social situation we found ourselves in, it was nice to see how well she got along with her brother, and it was clear that they had missed each other.

I considered what I was about to do next very carefully. Leaving Sofia alone with her brother implied that she could ask him for help, and if she did, we'd be in a world of shit. Even then, I could tell she was concerned about him, and she wasn't stupid.

This was a gamble, but it was one I knew I needed to take.

Once our meal was finished, I stood up. "I'm going for a smoke," I said. "Archer, care to join?"

Archer definitely didn't want to join, but I was intimidating, and I could tell that he wasn't stupid. He wiped his hands on the cloth napkins and stood up. "Yup," he said. "You lead, I'll follow."

I waited for him and we stood outside the restaurant, off to the side, as my heart raced.

"You don't look like the kind of man who smokes," he said.

"What does someone who smokes look like?"

"I don't know," Archer replied. "Less buff?"

I laughed. "It's just once a day," I said. "Bad habit I got into when I was a kid. I mostly dropped it years ago."

He nodded, leaning against the concrete. "So where did you find her?"

I looked at him for a long time, wondering what the fuck he meant by that. "Sofia? She was at the club when I popped in," I said. "She caught my eye, we got to talking, and we've been inseparable ever since."

I always found that the easiest way to get away with lying was making sure I adhered as closely to the truth as possible and everything that I just said was technically the truth.

Archer nodded, but I could tell that he wasn't entirely convinced. "She's very pretty," he said.

"She is."

"She's a reporter, right?"

I nodded. He was fishing. This was definitely something Sam would've told him. Maybe he was just a detective doing his job, but something about the way he was asking questions struck me as odd.

"So are you two serious?" he asked.

I looked into the restaurant, but all I could see was my reflection. I finished my cigarette with a long drag, dropped it on the sidewalk and stubbed it out with my foot. I wasn't sure

why, but I had a feeling that I needed to make sure that Archer knew Sofia was protected.

Though maybe that was just because I liked her so fucking much.

”Yeah,” I said. ”Serious as a heart attack.”

Chapter Eighteen: Sofia

My heart was hammering in my chest when Teo chose to leave me with Sam.

Sam was my confidante; we'd always been the best of friends since we were little, and I had rarely—if ever—kept secrets from him. Once, when we were teens, we'd gotten into a spat because we both liked the same guy. He turned out to be an asshole and we'd laughed about it over ice cream and stolen cabinet liquor as we watched a movie in the living room, well past the time our parents had gone to bed.

We'd drifted a bit after we both moved out, it was hard to stay in touch. Then our parents died and we became best friends again.

This was different. I needed to keep the secret to myself because I needed to be careful. And I was worried about him; worried about the date he'd brought along, worried because my brother usually asked more questions.

Something was troubling him and I wanted to know what it was.

As soon as Teo and Archer were out of the restaurant, he picked his head up to look at me. "Are you sure you're okay, Sof?" he asked. "I'm worried about you. This isn't like you."

"He's very good-looking," I replied, as if that could explain everything. It couldn't, of course, but I could appeal to Sam's sense of beauty. He'd always been pretty shallow. "But honestly, Sammy, I could say the same thing about you. You're dating a detective?"

"Well," he replied, narrowing his eyes. "He's also very good-looking."

"But he's nice? He treats you well?"

He thought about it for a second. "He's...intense," he replied. "Interesting. Smart. A little possessive. Really good in bed."

"Does that mean he doesn't treat you well?"

"No, he treats *me* very well," he replied, and I noticed the heavy emphasis he'd put on the word *me*. "He's just kind of a hard person for other people to get to know, that's all. I think he has a reputation at work for being kind of a hardass."

I nodded, taking in what he said. It sounded like a delicate balance, but it was clear that Sam was happy. That was all that mattered, even if I couldn't quite shake the feeling that something was off.

"Sofia," Sam said, reaching across the table to grab my hand. "You know you can tell me anything, right? Are you in

trouble? Do you need help with anything?"

I squeezed his hand and looked at him, grateful for his concern. "No, kid," I replied. "I'm not in trouble. I just... wanted to catch up with you."

"What about the article? Are you still working on that?"

I nodded. "Here and there," I lied. "You know, when I have time. Teo keeps me busy."

He forced a smile. "Sof, you need to drop it," he said, leaning close to me. "Please. Promise me you'll drop it. You have something else to focus on now and that something else has money and looks. Enjoy this phase of your life and forget about this killer."

I felt a pang of guilt in my chest at his words. He didn't know the truth, but if he did, I knew he would never ask me to drop it.

"I'll think about it," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "But I can't just let it go, Sam. You know me. I can't just sit back and do nothing while someone is out there hurting people."

"I know," he said, his voice softening. "I just worry about you. You always get too deep into things."

"I'll be careful," I promised, even though I wasn't sure if I could keep that promise. There was something about this whole situation that had me feeling uneasy. Maybe it was Teo's secretive behavior or Archer's probing questions or maybe it was just my gut. But I knew that I couldn't ignore it.

Once again, before Teo came in, he asked me if I was sure I was okay.

I told him that I was.

He looked like he didn't entirely believe me, but he didn't press the issue. When he moved his arm away from me, I noticed that he held back a wince. It was strange, but I couldn't really question him. I had no leg to stand on if I wasn't going to be totally honest with him.

We chatted for a little while longer, about nothing in particular, until Teo and Archer returned. I could tell that Teo was on edge, but he did his best to hide it.

"Ready to go?" he asked, offering me his hand.

I took it, feeling a jolt of electricity run through me at his touch. I did my best to hide my reaction, not wanting to give anything away to Sam or Archer.

Teo led me out of the restaurant and into the cool night air. I shivered slightly, wishing that I'd brought a jacket.

"Are you cold?" Teo asked, noticing my shiver.

I shook my head. "I'll be fine," I said.

Teo wrapped his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close to his side. I could feel the heat coming off of him and it made me feel warm all over.

"You didn't say anything to your brother, did you?" Teo growled in my ear while the valet brought his car around.

"No," I said. "Not a word."

Teo nodded, his grip on me tightening ever so slightly. "Good," he said. "You need to keep this quiet for now. There's too much at stake. What did you talk about?"

"Everything," I said. "Except this."

I turned to look at him and he was so close to me I could smell the wine on his breath. "This is probably stupid, but..." I trailed off. Teo didn't have any interest in helping me and I needed to remember that this whole thing was just for show. "Nevermind. Don't worry about it."

"It's okay," he replied, his voice low and throaty. "You can talk to me, Sof."

Sof. For the first time since we'd known each other, he called me by the nickname almost everyone did. The familiarity in which he addressed me sent another shiver down my spine. If this was a performance, he was nailing it. "It's Sam," I said. "His date..."

"Was older?" Teo offered.

"Yes, but not that. No, I'm just being stupid."

"You're not being stupid," Teo said. "You're one of the smartest people I know. Don't worry. I already asked Jace to look into him."

I moved away from Teo so I could look into his eyes. "You did?"

"There's something wrong with that man," he said. "And I'm not going to wait around to find out what it is."

”You think so?”

He rubbed his temple. ”I think there’s a chance that he’s a threat to your brother,” he said. ”And he’s all you really care about, right?”

”Yes.”

”I won’t hurt him,” he whispered in my ear, his low gravelly voice sending a shiver down my spine. ”I won’t let anyone hurt him. If this man is a threat to him, or he’s a threat to you, I’ll slit his throat myself.”

I swallowed hard, feeling a mix of fear and arousal. It was a dangerous game we were playing, and I knew that if I wanted to get to the bottom of this, I would have to be willing to risk everything.

”Thank you,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

Teo leaned in closer, his breath hot on my neck. ”You’re welcome,” he said, his lips brushing against my skin. ”You know I’ll do anything for you, right?”

”You hardly know me,” I replied.

”Wrong,” he said, his arm snaking down the side of my body, until he was holding me close. ”I see you. I see how determined you are, how smart. I see how hard you work. And it’s fucking hot.”

I felt myself tremble at his words. His body so close to mine, the low croak of his voice, it made me feel weak at the knees. I wanted to ask him if this was still a performance, if this was

for the sake of selling it to my brother and his partner, but for a second, I didn't think it mattered.

I was just going to enjoy it, even if it was all a lie.

"Do you mean it?" I asked him, even though I shouldn't have. I didn't want to know it if he didn't.

"Yes," he replied. "I always mean everything I say."

Maybe I was being stupid, but I completely believed him.

Before I could lose my nerve, I grabbed the front of Teo's shirt and pulled him to me. The kiss was deep and hard, my tongue in his mouth, tasting him, reveling in his warmth. Teo's hands were in my hair, pulling me even closer to him, one of them sliding down my back, until it reached my ass, squeezing it, pressing me against him. There was something animalistic about the way he kissed me, but it made me want him even more. I wanted him to take me right there in the open. I wanted to feel him inside of me. I wanted him to fuck me right there in the parking lot.

And I could tell that was exactly what he wanted, too.

But all too soon, he pulled away.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry, I...fuck, Teo, I..."

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, looking into my eyes. "It's okay," he said. "Do you want to go back to my place?"

Chapter Nineteen: Teo

I've had a lot of stupid ideas in my life. They've all come back to bite in the ass. I know the importance of being careful and steadfast. I know how crucial it is to make sure I don't get too close to other people, particularly those who might turn out to be liabilities.

But with Sofia, none of it mattered.

I didn't want to take her to HQ. I wanted to take her back to my house, push her against the wall and kiss her until neither one of us could breathe.

I could feel the desire radiating off of her in waves. I could smell it. I could taste it. I could practically see it in the way her breath hitched in her throat whenever we were close to each other. I felt it, too. I felt the same desire that she was feeling. I felt it, and I didn't care that it was potentially going to get me into trouble. I didn't care that it was dangerous. I didn't care that she could end up being a liability.

I didn't care.

I just wanted her.

"Are you absolutely sure you want to go back to my place?" I asked, my grip around the wheel tightening.

"Yes," she said. "I am."

I looked at her from the corner of my eye. Her cheeks were flushed and her hand was sliding down the front of her neck, her mouth half-open, beads of sweat on her forehead.

"Sofia," I said.

She closed her eyes. "What?"

"Do you want to touch yourself?" I heard myself ask. I had no idea what I was thinking; all I knew was that I was already rock hard, that all the blood in my head seemed to have rushed down to my dick, and that she could probably—no, *definitely*—see the outline of my erection in my pants.

She looked at me, her eyes wide. "What?"

"Touch yourself," I said. "Hike your skirt up, put your hand in your panties and finger that pretty pussy for me."

"Right now?"

"Right now," I said. "I can tell you're soaking wet. I don't want to make you wait."

She tried to say something, but I stopped her with a look. "I don't like repeating myself. Do it," I told her.

Sofia looked at me, took a deep breath, and dropped her hand down her stomach. I watched, transfixed, as she hooked her index finger underneath the lace of her underwear, slid it down

her hip, and then moved her hand toward her clit. She was gasping for air. I watched as her breathing picked up, as her fingers slid down the wetness between her legs, as her fingers circled her clit faster and faster. She bit her bottom lip, moaning slightly. I could see her hand move in her lap, her fingers moving in and out of her pussy, her breathing getting heavier.

Fuck, I wanted to see her. I wanted to taste her. I wanted to pull over on the shoulder and lick her until she came.

"You're doing so good, sunshine," I said. "Keep touching yourself for me. I want to watch your fingers inside of you."

She was moving her hand faster and faster, her knuckles white. I kept one hand on the wheel, but with the other, I reached out and put it on her thigh, running my fingertips along her skin, all the way up her leg to her pussy, making small circles on her inner thigh. I could feel the wetness of her skin through her panties, and my cock twitched as I pushed my hand a little higher, running the tips of my fingers along her panties. Sofia gasped as I touched her. I grabbed her hand, running her fingers along her clit.

"Do you like it when I watch you?"

She nodded, throwing her head back and whimpering as she did.

"Does it turn you on to know that I've thought of you every single night since I first found you," I said, my voice echoing in the car. "That I've wanted to have you ever since the first moment I saw you?"

”Yes,” she said, her breath hitching in her throat.

Somehow, miraculously, I had managed to make it home. It was a blur—mostly because I’d spent the majority of the drive watching her, looking at her, enjoying the way she sounded and smelled.

I killed the engine but continued to watch her as her hand moved faster and faster, as her fingers slid in and out of her pussy, her knuckles white against the black of her underwear. I put my right hand behind her neck, pulling her toward me, crushing her lips to mine, my tongue deep in her mouth as I watched her touch herself. I could feel her slick wetness against my fingers as I moved them up and down her pussy, making small circles on her clit. I slid my fingers underneath her underwear, feeling her arousal, the heat of her body move down and around my hand.

”Are you close?”

She whimpered something that sounded like assent.

”Do you want me to help finish you off?”

Her eyes opened and she looked right at me. ”Yes,” she said.

”Fuck. Yes.”

”Good,” I growled into her ear. I didn’t want to hold myself back from touching her anymore. ”I want to taste you.”

”What?”

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her fingers out of her pussy, then slowly, deliberately, licked her clean.

"You taste so good," I said. "I bet I can find a way for you to taste even better."

I moved my fingers inside of her, her pussy slick and swollen with desire. She whimpered against my lips as I pushed her further and further, as my hand moved faster and faster inside of her. Her head fell back, her fingers wrapped around my forearm to steady herself. She moaned, her whole body tightening, her thighs clamped around my hand, and I felt her pulse around me as she came. I slid her hand out of her panties and licked her wetness off my fingers. She was gasping for air.

I grabbed her face and kissed her hard, needing to taste her, needing to taste myself on her lips, kissing her with urgency, with hunger. She was shaking. Her hand touched my cheek, her fingers on my jaw, and I moved her hand behind my neck, pulling her closer to me, kissing her with more intensity. I wouldn't stop until she couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything but kiss me back. I had never wanted anything as much in my life.

I pulled away from her when I noticed that she was gasping for air again. "Are you okay?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said. "Yeah, I just...I didn't expect that to happen."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes, Teo, I liked it," she said, and she sounded annoyed. I moved away from her. She breathed out a shaky breath from her mouth. "I really liked it, it was just, you know, confusing. I mean, what happens after this? Do you drop me back at HQ? Do you..."

”No,” I said, suddenly realizing that this had probably been a mistake. Fuck. She was right. ”No, you just stay here, okay? I’ll sleep on the sofa. You can take my bed.”

”Why would you do that?”

”Because I don’t want you to be uncomfortable,” I replied.

”And I should’ve never made you do this.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but then she unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed out of the car to go inside. She stood by the side of the car. ”I don’t have keys.”

”It’s a keycode. It’s 1987. Just wait for me.”

She didn’t say anything before she disappeared into my house as I stayed outside, watching the closed door like an idiot.

What the fuck was I doing? It was hard enough being around her, without fucking her. And now I had totally screwed up. I put my hands through my hair, then pinched the bridge of my nose. Why was I even thinking of a relationship? It wasn’t possible, not for me, not now. I took a few deep breaths.

She opened the door slightly, as if she was thinking about something. I stood there, watching, waiting. She broke the silence by walking up to me. She was inches away from me and I could still smell her sweet scent. ”Teo.”

”What?” I asked.

”Maybe it was a mistake,” she said. ”But by now, you should know, I don’t do anything I don’t want.”

Chapter Twenty: Sofia

I wanted Teo to sling his arm around my waist, pull me close and kiss me right then and there, but he did nothing of the sort. He flashed me a sad smile, then shook his head. "We should probably talk about this tomorrow," he said. "After we've had some sleep."

"But why?" I asked him.

"Because you're still my prisoner, Sofia, and I don't want you to think that you're forced to do something you don't want," he replied.

"You're the most interesting thing that has happened to me in years," I said.

He smiled. "If you're trying to seduce me, it's working," he said. "But it's not going to help, you know that, right? It's going to make me want to be around you more. I want to see you all the time. Know everything you're doing. The idea of someone hurting you, it fills me with rage. And the reason..."

"The reason?" I asked when he trailed off.

”The reason I’m not often at HQ when you are is because I see the way you interact with my men,” he continued. ”I see the way they look at you, the way you look at them. Every time one of them makes you laugh, I want to ram my fist into their face until they’re bloody.”

”Nothing is going on with any of them,” I said softly.

”I know. I know everything that happens in that apartment,” he replied, tucking a strand of loose hair behind my ear. ”And you should know that, because if I thought there was anything going on with you and one of them, I would’ve already killed him.”

I bit the inside of my lower lip, my heart racing. ”You would, huh?”

”I would,” he said. ”And I would make it hurt.”

I believed every word coming out of his mouth. From the way he was looking at me, from the intensity in his gaze, I could tell that he meant it.

”Well, nothing has happened,” I said. ”With any of them. Only with you.”

”I know,” he replied. ”And it was stupid. I told you I would protect you and I meant every word. But you...you’re the most dangerous person I’ve ever known.”

I laughed, shaking my head. ”How’s that?” I asked. ”You live in this world of gangs and drug deals and murders. I’m just a journalist.”

"Because," he replied simply, his voice low, croaky. "You're the only person in my entire life that has made me lose my head like that."

"I'm not a threat to you," I said. "I'm a prisoner. You kidnapped me, remember?"

"No. I'm your prisoner. I was your prisoner from the first moment I saw you. If you can't see that, then you're a fool."

I wanted to reach out and touch him. Put my hand on his mouth and kiss him until my lips ached, until I couldn't feel anything or think anything anymore. I just wanted him. But I was taking this slow, and if I pushed him now, I knew he would push me away.

I didn't know if those were just pretty words, but fuck, I really wanted to believe him.

"Now, if my prisoner is done talking, I think it's time she got some sleep," he said, breaking the silence. "Is that okay?"

I nodded, and he walked me towards the house. I was surprised at how much he trusted me. He could've tied me up or locked me up or even kept me in the car, but he didn't. He handed me a blanket and a pillow and told me to take the bed.

I wanted to ask him to stay with me, to sleep next to me and hold me all night, but I didn't. I was still embarrassed at how everything had gone down. I hadn't let go like that in so long, after all. I wasn't sure how he would react if I said something like that to him. He might think I was clingy, or desperate. The sheets were squares of maroon fabric stitched together, and the

bed was surrounded by a thick furry blanket. There was a large mirror in the ceiling, right above the bed, which I thought was strange and weirdly, kind of hot.

The bedding smelled of lavender and a musky scent, like he did. It was a smell I couldn't place at first, not until I got into bed, something fresh and not flowery; not sharp, but deep.

The sheets were soft as silk against my fingertips, and they were cool against my hot cheeks. I touched the headboard, running my hand along the carved curves and the detailed lines. From the way HQ looked, I could tell that they had a lot of money, but this was something beyond that. I'd always known Teo was particular, but I could guess straightaway that the furniture was bespoke.

He knocked on the door, which was ajar.

"It's your house," I said. "You can come in whenever you want."

He approached me. He'd changed out of his date clothes and into a white pajama shirt that was practically translucent, nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs underneath. It didn't leave much to the imagination; the outline of his cock was huge, and incredibly distracting. I fantasized about hearing his slow panting in my ear as he pressed himself on me and kissed me everywhere, my gaze stuck on the boxers.

"I'm up here," he said, sounding amused.

I felt my cheeks redden as I picked my head up to look into his eyes. "Sorry, I..."

”Don’t worry about it; I’m flattered,” he laughed, then handed me a glass of water. ”I didn’t want to intrude, just thought you might be thirsty.”

I hadn’t even noticed that he was carrying that with him. When he handed it to me, he got close—very close, to the point where I could see the splashes of hazel and green in his irises. Our fingers touched for a second as I grabbed the glass, ice clinking against the sides.

”Thank you,” I said, taking a sip. ”Are you sure you want to sleep on the sofa? There’s plenty of room here.”

”I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

”We don’t have to touch each other,” I said. ”It can be a totally innocent sleepover.”

”I can’t control myself around you,” he replied. ”If you make me sleep in the same bed, I’m going to spend all night kissing you.”

I wanted to ask him if that was a bad thing, but I knew that it probably was. It didn’t seem like a great idea to ask him to stay, even though I really wanted him to. He slid his gaze up my body, toward my eyes. ”You can’t sleep in that,” he said. ”You can use any of my shirts or whatever.”

”Any?”

”Sure,” he said. ”Whatever you find comfortable.”

For a second, I thought he was going to kiss me. He leaned forward, his gaze darting between my lips and my eyes, and

then he sighed heavily as he pulled away from me. "Sleep well, Sofia," he said.

Before he said anything else, he stood up and walked out of the room. He closed the door behind himself and I heard him pattering around outside, but I didn't dare walk out there. He'd made it clear that this wasn't going to happen, and I didn't want things to get even more awkward between us.

Why had I kissed him? What the fuck was wrong with me? I finished the glass of water he had brought me, shimmied out of the tight dress I was wearing, and kicked my shoes off. My underwear was soaking wet and I needed to find something—anything else—to wear. Teo had told me I could look everywhere, so that was exactly what I did.

I was practically naked in his room when I opened his top drawer to look for a shirt and some spare boxer shorts I could wear. Instead, I found a neatly organized drawer with what seemed like little mementos, pictures on top of plastic containers. I knew I shouldn't have snooped, but it struck me as sweet.

I couldn't resist taking a closer look. One of the pictures was of Teo as a baby, his face squished and red as he wailed into the camera. Another was of him as a young boy, grinning toothily with a missing front tooth. Then, there were several pictures of him as a teenager, looking broody and serious.

And then the pictures changed.

My heart caught in my throat as I noticed that these were not simple mementos from his childhood; these were little

headshots of the victims that had been found outside of Neon.

There was nothing else, just passport-size pictures. Some of the people in them were smiling, some weren't, but they were all either missing or dead. I recognized them from their social media pictures; they were the ones I'd painstakingly spent time on and had plenty of notes about.

I had no idea how he had managed to get *these* pictures. They seemed intensely personal and also official, the kind of thing no one would put on their social media pages. They also didn't look like they were all printed from the same place. This seemed like the kind of media that only a thief would be able to get; someone sneaking into the victim's household, taking their belongings and maybe killing them. What is it that he had said? It wasn't that he didn't kill people. It was that he didn't kill people *for sport*.

So maybe in his weird thought process, he thought that the murders were for a good reason. I just needed to figure out what the fuck that was.

I quickly closed the drawer, my heart pounding in my chest as I tried to process what I had just seen. Teo was keeping headshots of the victims in his drawer? What kind of sick obsession was this? Was he keeping them as trophies? Or was he involved in the murders? My mind raced with a million possibilities, none of them good.

Maybe the investigation on his part was a ploy to take the heat off him. He could pin it on anyone; he was the boss and everyone trusted him. Of course everyone trusted him.

Fuck, I had let things go so far. I had even believed everything he'd said, like a lovesick teenager. I was such an idiot.

I wanted him to want to protect me and I had become blind to how dangerous he was, even though he never held it back from me.

I thought about escaping out the window, but I had no belongings on me, nothing that could take me anywhere. And if Teo had lied about this, he could've lied about anything.

He certainly could lie about whether he was going to hurt my brother.

So I had to stay.

And I had to nail the bastard.

Even if it cost me my life.

Chapter Twenty-One: Teo

I knew I probably shouldn't make her breakfast, but I always found it relaxing to cook, and making French toast just for myself felt strange. I made enough for her, made her a cappuccino—I knew how much she liked cappuccinos—and then hesitated before I knocked on the door of my own goddamn bedroom like a fucking child.

She took the decision out of my hands when she opened the door for me. I could tell she hadn't slept; her eyes were bloodshot and there were dark shadows under them. She wore one of my black v-neck shirts, which fell loosely over her shoulders and down below her underwear.

No. My underwear.

My eyes flickered down to the sight of her legs, smooth and toned, peeking out from underneath the hem of my shirt. I swallowed hard, feeling a familiar heat pooling low in my stomach.

”Good morning,” she said softly, holding the door open for me to come in.

”Morning,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady. I handed her the plate of French toast and set the cappuccino down on the bedside table.

”Thank you,” she said, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. She picked up a fork and began to pick at her plate, but I could tell her mind was elsewhere.

”Did you sleep okay?” I asked her.

She barely looked up at me. ”You have a very nice bed.”

”Sofia, about last night...” I began. She wouldn’t look at me. I knew that things were awkward between us, but she was acting even more scared than she had been that first night, and it was weirding me out. ”What’s wrong?”

”Nothing,” she said, putting the plate on the bed and talking far too quickly. ”I...no, it’s nothing.”

I knew she was lying. I could see it in the way she avoided my gaze. I reached out and took her hand, pulling her towards me until she was sitting on my lap. She tensed at first, but then relaxed into my embrace.

”Talk to me,” I said gently.

She picked her head up to look at me, and when she set her gaze on mine, her eyes were brimming with tears. ”I can’t, Teo,” she said. ”I can’t...I can’t trust you.”

”What?”

"I was thinking about it," she said. "You were right. This was stupid and I should've, you know, never kissed you. You said some very nice things last night but it doesn't change our situation."

I looked her up and down. I had observed Sofia enough to know when she was lying, and this was definitely a lie.

I reached out to her, cupped her face in my hands, and watched as she tensed her jaw in defiance. "I don't like lies, Sofia," I said. "You're not a good actor. Tell me the truth."

"I don't want to."

"Why?" I asked, not letting go of her.

"Because I think you're going to kill me if I do," she replied in a whisper.

It almost made me wince. I had no problem killing people, usually, but hurting her? Killing her? It was unthinkable. It was insulting.

I let go of her, scooting closer to her on the bed. "Tell me why you think that."

"I saw the pictures," she said, her voice low and tight.

I froze. She had seen the pictures in my drawer. I knew it was a stupid mistake to leave them there, but I hadn't even thought about them the night before. All I had thought about was the way she looked. I didn't even take care of myself on the couch, no matter how much I wanted to, because I didn't want her to walk out there and feel like she needed to do anything.

"It's not what you think," I said.

She hugged her knees to her chest, closing her eyes tightly.

"Are you going to kill me now?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. I reached out to stroke her hair, but she recoiled away from me. "What was your plan?"

"I was going to keep it to myself," she said. "But I guess I've gotten into this habit of blurting things around you. I think fearing for my life makes me talk too much."

I wanted to smile, but I didn't. It didn't seem appropriate. "I promise you, it's not what you think."

"What do you think I think?" she asked, her voice small, thin.

"I didn't kill them," I told her. "I...I couldn't have."

She stared at me, her eyes wide. It was clear that she didn't believe me.

"I can prove it to you."

"How?"

"You can't tell anyone," I said. "Ever. For any reason."

She nodded, her lips pressed tightly together. She was obviously still scared. I leaned over her and opened my nightstand drawer, pulling out my multitool.

"Don't worry," I said, looking up at her. "This is for me. Not you. I said I wasn't going to hurt you and I meant it."

I popped the blade attachment out of my multitool and slid the sharp edge against the top of my forearm, feeling queasy the moment that I saw blood on my skin.

Sofia gasped as she watched the blood trickle down my arm, her eyes widening in shock. "What are you doing?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"I'm showing you that I didn't do it," I said, holding my arm out to her, then looking away from my arm. The queasiness was turning into nausea and I knew that if I didn't sit down straight away, I might actually faint. "I can't kill anyone because I pretty much faint at the sight of blood."

Sofia stared at me, her eyes locked on the small wound on my arm. I knew I had her attention now, and I took advantage of the moment.

"I know it's hard to believe," I said, trying to steady my voice. "But I've never killed anyone. I couldn't even if I wanted to."

Sofia was still staring at the cut on my arm, but I could sense her skepticism. "You're right, Teo. It's hard to believe," she said, her voice trembling. "I've seen the pictures. I know what you're capable of."

I shook my head. "I don't get my hands dirty," I said. "I have people for that. I'm not proud of my past, but I'm not a killer."

"And the pictures?"

"I look at them every night," I said, looking at her face so I could avoid looking at my arm. "Because it's easy for me to get lost in the minutiae of the day, it's easy for me to forget that these are real people. It reminds me that I need to find out who their killer is before they get anyone else."

”But why are those the pictures that you have? Why not pictures with their families?”

”It’s a reminder,” I said. ”Of the stakes. Of what happens if I fail. I could look at their social media or whatever, but these are like, documents. These people’s legal lives. I don’t know, it’s stupid, but it reminds me that they’re more than just a story. I know it’s twisted, but looking at those pictures reminds me that they were real. That they mattered. And that I need to find their killer.”

Sofia was silent, her eyes still fixed on the wound on my arm. I knew that it was going to take a lot more than just a simple cut on my arm to convince her that I was telling the truth. But I had to try.

”You can ask—”

”You don’t like blood?”

”I can’t even watch a horror movie,” I said.

She glared at me. ”But he strangles people,” she said. ”You...I mean, it isn’t bloody.”

I nodded. ”That’s true, but the clean up is. And he’s not afraid to get dirty. Trust me, you don’t want to see what he does to these bodies. Plus there is the fighting back. None of these people go quietly.”

She stared at me for a few seconds as my mind raced, trying to think of a way to convince her that what I was saying was the truth. I tried to think of any justifications, anything that might make her believe me, but I could think of nothing.

When I met her gaze again, though, she was smiling.

Sofia let out a small laugh, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly. "Seriously? The big tough gang leader is afraid of blood?" she said.

I smiled weakly. "Believe it or not, it's the truth."

She reached out and traced a finger along the cut on my arm. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions like that."

"It's okay," I said, feeling a wave of relief wash over me. "I get it. I'm not exactly the most trustworthy guy out there."

Sofia looked up at me, her eyes searching mine. "I don't know," she said hesitantly. "I feel like I can trust you."

I felt a jolt of surprise. "Really?"

She nodded. "Despite everything, I feel safe with you. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

I smiled. "I'll take it as a good thing. Sorry we kidnapped you."

"An apology and everything? I'm starting to believe you're a big softie."

I grinned. "Don't ruin my reputation now."

Sofia laughed, and I felt a sudden surge of something in my chest that I couldn't quite identify. It was a nice feeling.

"No promises. I need leverage too," she said. "Where's your first aid kit? Let me take care of that for you."

"Really?"

”Yeah,” she replied. ”You said you didn’t like blood, so...let me help you.”

I nodded in agreement, thankful that she was willing to help me out. I watched as she stood up from the bed and made her way over to my dresser, opening drawers until she found my first aid kit. She brought it back to me and sat down beside me, carefully cleaning and bandaging the cut on my arm. Neither one of us said anything while she did this. I needed to process what had just happened and I thought she did as well.

”You might want to look away,” she said.

”Well ahead of you there,” I replied, staring at the window behind her. I really hadn’t managed to look at my arm at all since I’d sliced it open.

I winced as she applied pressure to the wound, but I didn’t object. It was nice to have her take care of me for once, instead of the other way around.

As she finished up, she looked up at me and said, ”Okay. That’s pretty well bandaged now. You shouldn’t see more blood, I don’t think, but I’m not exactly a nurse.”

”Thanks,” I replied, looking into her eyes. ”It would’ve been really bad if I had to tend to it myself.”

She flashed me a smile. ”You really did look like you were going to faint. Is it like that every time?”

”Without fail,” I said. ”My first girlfriend did not appreciate it.”

She laughed. ”What now?”

I paused for a moment, thinking about the question. I wasn't sure what the answer was, but I knew that I didn't want her to leave just yet. "Stay with me?" I asked, my voice soft. "Just for a little while longer."

Sofia looked surprised, but she didn't object. Instead, she scooted closer to me on the bed, resting her head on my shoulder. I wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close. We sat there in silence, her head on my shoulder and my arm around her, watching the sunlight creeping through the window.

Then my watch vibrated and I looked down to see Grayson's contact card on the digital screen.

"I need to take this," I told her.

She nodded, moving away from me. "Of course."

"Hello?" I said into my watch. "You're on speaker."

A beat. "Hey. You better get down here. There's been another one. And this one is, uh, bad."

Sofia looked into my eyes, and before I could ask Grayson what the fuck he meant, the line had gone dead.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Sofia

Teo's face had gone pale as he ended the call. "Another one?" I asked, my heart racing.

Teo nodded, his expression grim. "Yeah. And apparently it's worse than the others."

"What do we do?"

Teo stood up from the bed, his expression hardening. "We go and investigate. Grayson's waiting for us."

I followed Teo out of the room, my mind racing. This killer was prolific, but this was bordering on ridiculous. I'd overheard the guys talking; they had floated a bunch of theories, including someone from a rival gang trying to frame them.

But they'd spoken about the Strangler too, as if that was the most likely option. I liked being right, in general, but it turned out that I didn't particularly love being right about killers.

"I don't have any clothes here," I said.

Teo threw me a large shirt. "Here," he said. "You can make this work."

I didn't have time to think about it. I threw on the dress I'd worn the night before, put the large white shirt he'd given me over it, and put the same shoes on.

"We'll go straight to HQ after this," he said. "You can get clothes there."

I nodded, following behind Teo as we made our way to the car. The drive to the crime scene was mostly quiet, tension palpable in the air. I was scared, but Teo's presence next to me made me feel a little bit safer.

"When this first started, we blocked access to the alleyway behind Neon," Teo said as we took a right turn. "We only let people we trusted in. We put CCTV up everywhere and a bunch of other security measures. Grayson always sweeps the alleyway in the morning, before anything else."

I looked at him from the corner of my eye. "That sounds like a hard job."

"Oh yeah. It's brutal," he replied. "I mean, sometimes Jace or Victor relieve him, but he likes...well, likes is the wrong word. He prefers to be the one handling the logistics there. I help him, obviously, but only after the first part."

"Is that why you've never found a body?" I asked, then wondered if that might be insensitive. "I mean, uh, Jace showed me this document..."

"I haven't found any of the Strangler's victims," he said when I trailed off, which definitely meant he'd found *other* bodies. "My men can be a little protective."

"Aw," I said.

He glared at me.

"What? It's nice."

"It's not nice," he replied. "They do it because no one can see me as weak."

"And because they love you."

He rolled his eyes, but he was smiling, then his expression sobered. "Anyway," he said. "Let's get back to the issue at hand here. The problem is that this man seems to know all our defenses, he seems to have unlimited resources and he is coming after us until something happens."

"Why do you think it's a man?" I asked him. I also thought it was a man, but I wanted to hear his theory; I might share mine with him later.

"Think about it," he replied. "The force it would take to press on someone's windpipe for long enough to cut off their airway."

He took his hands off the steering wheel, showing me his thumbs.

"Look at your hands," he said. "Now look at my hands. Sure, in theory, you could strangle someone to death, but it would be more difficult than if I were to do it. What do you think?"

"I think it's a man too," I said. "But not because of his physical strength or anything, though I guess what you're saying makes sense."

He looked at me, waiting for me to elaborate.

"First, there are practical concerns; I know of few women who could spend that much time unaccounted for, even those without family. I have a feeling these killings take a long time."

"Not if he—they—are well practiced with them, and they are."

"Sure," I replied. "But beyond that, there's the psychology of it. The way the killer leaves the bodies, posed and displayed like they're trying to prove something. The fucking *orchid*? It feels like they're trying to make a statement about power and control. And that feels male to me."

Teo nodded, his eyes on the road. "I see what you mean. But we won't know until we catch him."

We arrived at the alleyway, the sun beating down on us. There were barriers between the street and the alley, and Teo parked in the back. There was graffiti on the back wall of the club, intricate bubble letters that spelled someone's name in bright pink.

"You can stay behind if you want to," Teo said.

"I don't want to," I replied, rushing past him.

Teo followed close behind as we made our way down the alleyway. I tried to keep my eyes off the ground, but the closer we got to the scene, the more it felt like I was walking into a

nightmare. The smell of blood was overwhelming, and I had to cover my mouth to keep from gagging.

Grayson was already there, his face tight with anger and frustration. He nodded at Teo as we approached, then turned to look at me. He looked back at Teo, a question in his eyes.

Teo shrugged.

"She shouldn't be here," Grayson said.

I squared my shoulders, trying to look more confident than I felt. "I want to help," I said.

"She doesn't have to see this, Teo," he said, ignoring me. "She can work on her article without seeing it."

"How about you address me and don't talk to me like I'm not here?" I asked, letting my temper get the best of me. "I can handle it. Someone's died and I might be able to help tell their story, Grayson. I know you want to protect me, but let me help."

"If you're sure this is a good idea," he said, looking into my eyes, though I was certain he wasn't addressing me.

"You heard her," Teo said. "She's a grown woman. She can handle it."

"I can barely fucking handle it," Grayson snapped at him. "And I've been in this life for a while."

Teo considered this for a second, then put a hand on my shoulder. "Grayson is right," he said. "I know you want to help, but this is a lot. You can scan the scene for clues if you

want. Grayson can give us both a full report. If you still want to look at the body after that, you can. It's your decision. I don't recommend it."

"Don't do it, Sofia," Grayson said. "Stay here. Look around if you have to, but don't do this to yourself."

He sounded like he was on the edge of pleading, and Teo was agreeing with him, and it was...bizarre. I waited a few seconds before I nodded. "Okay," I said. "Fine. But you have to tell me everything."

Grayson took a deep breath and began to explain what he had found. "The victim is a young woman, probably in her mid-twenties. She was strangled, just like all the others. But there's something different about this one."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my curiosity getting the best of me.

Grayson hesitated, glancing at Teo before continuing. "She's been...posed. Like the killer wanted her to be found a certain way."

"Like with a white orchid?"

"Yes," he replied. "Except this time, he, uh, sawed it into her."

"Excuse me?"

"It's stitched into her mouth," he said. "Like, onto her lips."

I turned to look at Teo, who had clasped a hand over his face. He looked like he was going to throw up.

Grayson continued, his voice low and pained. "And that's not all. There's a note."

"A note?" I asked, my heart racing in my chest.

Grayson nodded. His gaze drifted over to Teo again. "Maybe we should talk about this in private."

"She has full access," Teo said. "Tell her everything."

Grayson sighed, rubbing his temple with two fingers. "It's not great," he said.

Teo squeezed his hand on my shoulder. "It's about her, isn't it?"

Grayson nodded, his gaze landing on my eyes again. "Yes," he said. "It's addressed to you, Sofia."

"To me?" I repeated, my voice barely above a whisper.

Teo stepped forward, his eyes intense as he put his body between us. "What does it say?"

Grayson pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket. It was crumpled and stained with blood. He unfolded it slowly. I could see that Teo was fighting the urge to look away.

"Be careful what you wish for," he read aloud. "You might just get it."

Chapter Twenty-Three: Sofia

”Again,” Teo said.

We were sitting around in the living room of HQ. Jace had his laptop open on his knees, taking quick notes as we spoke. Teo paced around, running his hand through his hair, something I noticed he only did when he was nervous. Grayson was leaning against the sofa, his arms crossed over his chest, his gaze burning into me. Victor sat next to Jace and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward to look at me.

”I don’t know what else you want me to say,” I said, fidgeting in the seat across from them. We’d gone over what had happened several times, though I didn’t really understand why; I’d gone over it in my head over and over again and I couldn’t find anything that provided any clues. It was hard to focus on that right now. I thought about the victim, about the fact that she seemed to have died to send *me* a message specifically. ”Can we talk about her, instead? I don’t see how going over what happened to me that night again is going to help.”

Grayson looked up at Teo. Teo nodded, slightly, and Grayson uncrossed his arms. "What do you want to know, Sof?"

"Everything you know," I said. "Talk me through it, and tell me who she is."

Grayson sighed. He sat on the arm of the sofa and I watched as his throat worked when he swallowed. "Alright," he replied. "I woke up this morning, went to do a sweep, and she was there. She was propped against the garbage cans in the back toward the loading entrance, sitting up, her arms over her lap. The rest of the bodies have been placed in garbage bags by the killer."

"He's such a fucking creep," Victor muttered, just audibly enough for me to hear.

Grayson ignored him. "When I approached her, I noticed that there was something white, but it wasn't, you know, in her mouth as usual. It was around her mouth. I got closer and realized he'd sewn it shut."

His jaw hardened as he looked away from me. Jace silently handed him a gray and white bottle from the coffee table in front of him and Grayson took it, taking a long sip.

"That could've been vodka," Jace said with a smile when Grayson handed it back.

"I wouldn't have turned that down either," Grayson replied, then turned to look at me again. "So anyway, I realize her mouth is sewn shut. And he's been placing these orchids in their mouth so it's not that hard to follow what he wants me to do next."

"And you did it?" I asked.

Grayson looked at Teo again. This time, it was for longer, then Teo nodded again. Grayson pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I did it because he'd written something on her chin," he said.

"He, uh, he wrote your name, Sof. And he drew an arrow toward the victim's lips."

I paled, the world suddenly swimming in and out of my vision.

Teo was instantly by my side, his arm around my shoulders as he helped me to steady myself. "It's alright," he murmured, his voice low and soothing. "We're going to figure this out, Sofia. We won't let him hurt you."

I nodded, grateful for his presence. I glanced around at the others, noticing that Victor looked like he was going to be sick. Jace had a grim expression on his face, his fingers flying over his keyboard as he typed up notes. Grayson looked like he was in pain, his eyes dark with emotion as he looked at me.

"What else?" I asked softly, focusing back on Grayson.

Grayson took a deep breath. "Her name is Amber," he said.

"We found her ID on her. She's a local college student, works part-time at a coffee shop downtown. It seems like she was out here on her own. Family had disowned her, that kind of thing."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

Grayson tilted his head toward Jace, who looked up at me, still wearing the same dark expression on his face.

"Did she have any connection to me?" I asked, my mind racing with possibilities.

He didn't look to Teo for permission before he answered.

"Yes," he said. "She's your barista."

"What?"

"Yeah," Grayson said, shaking his head. "She works at the coffee shop you go to every morning. The one near your apartment."

I felt the world tilt on its axis. My mind couldn't process what was happening. This killer had been watching me. Watching me enough to know my daily routine. Of course he had; he had broken into my apartment to kill me and I had just gotten lucky. The gang might be protecting me now, but when it was time for me to go back home—and that time was going to come—I was truly fucked.

And this poor girl. This poor girl who'd done nothing wrong except be my acquaintance. I tried to place her, thinking of the young students who took my coffee orders in the morning.

I tried to look at their name tags, but I was frequently frazzled, and I couldn't remember a single one of them now.

I couldn't place this girl. This girl who had died because of me.

"This isn't your fault," Teo said as if he was reading my mind.

"I don't understand," I said, ignoring him, my voice barely above a whisper.

"And that's not all," Grayson said, looking at me intently. "There's something else."

I felt my heart drop into the pit of my stomach. "What?" I whispered.

Grayson hesitated, then reached into his pocket. He pulled out a small, black envelope. "This was in her pocket," he said, handing it to me.

I took it from him, my hands shaking. I could feel the weight of everyone's eyes on me as I opened the envelope. Inside was a small piece of paper, with a single line of text scrawled across the back.

Tick-tock, Sof. Your time is running out.

That, with the note telling me I would get what I wished for, almost made me throw up right then and there.

I felt my breath catch in my throat. I looked up at the others, feeling the tears welling up in my eyes.

"We'll catch him," Teo said softly, his hand resting on my shoulder.

I nodded, wiping away the tears with the back of my hand. "We have to," I said, my voice shaking. "Before anyone else gets hurt."

"That's why you need to tell us everything," Grayson said softly. "I know you don't want to revisit it, but it might give us clues. It could help us understand who this person is. Things that might seem minimal to you could be important to finding him."

I sighed, burying my face in my hands. "I told you," I said, my speech muffled. "It's all a blur."

I couldn't see them, but I could tell that they were looking at each other.

Whatever you remember," Teo said softly. "Grayson is right, anything helps."

"I was working on the disappearance of a man called Brady Mandeville," I said. "I thought the Strangler might have targeted him because I thought he fit the MO; you know, vulnerable, worked this beat. His girlfriend had reported him missing, and I was trying to piece together his last movements."

I closed my eyes, trying to remember the details.

"I'd followed her on social media and I was making a list of people who could be potential subjects from the Charley project. I got her phone number, called her, but she didn't get back to me. She, uh, wasn't answering me. It was around seven o'clock when I realized I was hungry, so I walked to the Chinese place a few blocks away from my house. I remember I didn't take my car because it wasn't too hot and I wanted to have some time to think."

"Then what happened?" Jace asked. He'd stopped typing by then, the computer sitting on his lap.

"I got home. Put a Hallmark movie on," I said. "I went down the list of people my contact from the ME's office had told me were definitely victims and the list of people I thought might

be getting targeted. I tidied my draft a little bit, but I thought it was still shit, and then I fell asleep at my computer.”

They waited for me. None of them said anything. ”Can I have some of that water?”

Victor snatched it from Jace’s hand when he went to hand it to me. ”Here you go,” he said. ”Do you need anything else?”

The outburst was uncharacteristic for what I had come to know as a pretty stoic man, and when he handed me the bottle, he looked angry.

I turned to look at Teo for a second, who flashed me that half-smile, the dimple appearing on his right cheek. ”Do you want ice water instead?” he asked.

I shook my head, took a deep breath and then a sip of the water, which cooled my throat but did nothing for my hammering headache.

”Then I got this phone call,” I said. ”I thought it was a prank call, at first. I’m not hard to reach, you know, I’m a journalist so it’s important that people know how to get in touch with me. This person, they were telling me to stop. Stop looking into them. They said...”

I close my eyes tightly, trying to remember what they had said exactly.

”Something about how I was good at my job?” I venture. ”Which, like, I am. I’m really good at celebrity gossip. I can give you the rundown on any pop culture scandal. But I’ve never done any crime investigation so...”

”So why would they think that?” Grayson completed my sentence for me when I trailed off.

”Exactly,” I said. ”And how would they know that I was even investigating them in the first place? I mean, I guess they could’ve been related to one of the victim’s families or friends but most of the people the Strangler targeted didn’t seem to have much of a support system.”

”So it could be someone close to you,” Jace said, matter-of-factly. ”In fact, that’s what makes the most sense. You’re not hard to find or anything, but how would this person know to find your apartment?”

A shiver went down my spine. ”You think they were stalking me?”

”It’s a possibility,” Victor said. ”We have to consider all angles.”

I couldn’t believe it. How could someone be stalking me and I not even know it? The thought made me feel sick.

”But we need to know more,” Grayson said. ”Did the caller say anything else?”

I shook my head. ”No, just to stop looking into them. And then they hung up. And then I called the police.”

”You called the police?” Teo asked. He was curious; when I had told them about this before, I skipped over that part. It wasn’t because I was trying to hide it from them, it genuinely was a blur, but it hadn’t felt important up to now.

”Yes. I told them about the call. They took my info down, said they’d send a patrol car over.”

Jace cocked his head, narrowing his light eyes as he set his gaze on me. ”Do you know which precinct you were calling?”

I shut my eyes tightly. ”I don’t know,” I said. ”Eleven?”

His fingers flew over the keyboard as he typed something.

”That was the night we found you, right?”

”Yes.”

He made this hmm sound that indicated he was thinking about it, but before I could ask him about it, Teo gently squeezed my shoulder. ”What happened after that?”

I sighed, my heartbeat pounding my ear. ”Pretty much as soon as I hung up, someone broke into my house. They were wearing all black, their face was covered, but they towered over me. I tried to fight, or maybe hide, honestly, I can’t remember. Like I said, it’s all a blur. And then I woke up in the storage room of your nightclub and I was pretty fucking sure I was going to die.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: Teo

I could feel my blood pounding in my ears.

After telling us what she had been through, Sofia sat up straight and looked ahead, past Jace and Victor. I squeezed her shoulder once again and stood up, making a beeline for the balcony.

The day was hot and humid and the sliding door glass was frosted from the heat. I leaned on the railing, taking a breath to calm myself down. I reached for the packet of Marlboro I always kept out there and found it empty.

Fuck.

I didn't want to go back in; it was going to be easy for her to tell how upset I was and I already knew that was only going to make her feel less safe than she already did. She might've landed in our lap under strange circumstances, but I had told her I was going to protect her and I intended to stick by that.

Now that the threat had ramped up, we needed to do something about it. Something else. Clearly, everything that

we had done had been absolutely fucking pointless.

I was pacing around the balcony absentmindedly, my fingers aching to hold a cigarette, when Grayson slid the door open and approached me. "Here," he said, handing me an unopened packet of Marlboro.

I picked up my head to look at him.

"You only pace this much when you're out of smokes," he said, almost cracking a smile.

I grabbed them from him. "Thank you," I said.

He leaned against the railing too. He looked pale, older than he ever had. The sparkle in his green eyes dulled, his head tilted. He normally did a better job of at least pretending he wasn't concerned about me. "Can I ask you something?"

I nodded, lighting up the cigarette and taking a long drag. "Sure."

"Just a week ago you were threatening to kill her," he said. "And now, I'm pretty sure you're going to go on a murderous rampage if you find the person threatening her. So what happened?"

I blew out the smoke, feeling it rush out of my lungs as I thought about my answer. I had never been a sentimental person, and my job had taught me to be practical, to take care of business first and foremost. But something had shifted in me since we had taken Sofia under our wing.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess at first I thought she might be a threat. I was worried about it. I would've killed her if I thought

she was going to be a problem, but she's...I don't think he left her there as a trick. I think the fact that she's alive is just a lucky break."

Grayson nodded and we both looked down at the busy street below us.

"But now that she's here," I continued, "I feel responsible for her. We haven't been able to help so many people and now we might be able to help her. Honestly, the change didn't feel gradual; once I realized that she wasn't his associate or something, things instantly changed in my head. I guess I didn't realize how or why until now, though."

He considered that for a long moment, standing up and straightening his shoulders as he stretched himself out. "You went to meet her brother. And he's a cop."

"I'm aware. But what was he going to do? Even if he recognized me, was he going to arrest me?" I took another long drag.

"Do you think he recognized you?"

I thought about it. "Yeah," I said. "I would say there's a seventy percent chance he realized who I was once the date was over."

"Maybe the killer is escalating because he knows that Sofia is protected now," Grayson said. "If her brother made you, it's absolutely not outside of the realm of possibility that her stalker did as well. Since it's someone targeting the Blades, they would definitely recognize you, probably right away."

"I would've noticed someone watching us."

"Right. You definitely would have," Grayson replied, looking me in the eyes. "So it stands to reason that there's one person who wouldn't have needed to stalk her and who has a vested interest—now even more of a vested interest—in making sure that the gang goes down. One who might want to threaten her but not actually hurt her."

I turned my body entirely so I could face him. "Wait. You're not saying what I think you're saying, are you?"

He tapped his fingers on the railing rhythmically. "I've been turning it over in my head for a bit, actually," he said. "And it's the only thing that makes sense. Her brother is the only person who's close to her, he has beef with us because he's the law, and he doesn't actually want to kill her. This person—you know, this strangler or whatever—he's only targeting people who don't have families, really. She's his only family. When the article comes out, she'll bring attention to him, and that'll be difficult for everyone."

I opened my mouth to rebuff his points, but found that I didn't have anything to say. "He loves her."

"Hence the not killing her," he replied. "I mean, think about it. It's the only thing that makes sense. The moment he made you or realized who you were he would've chased you down and arrested you if he thought Sofia was in danger. Unless..."

"Unless he had something to hide."

I finished my cigarette and crushed the butt under my shoe. "Fuck," I muttered, turning to look back into the apartment. "We need to find out if her brother is involved in this."

"She's not going to like it."

"She doesn't like any of this," I said. "We kidnapped her, remember?"

The ghost of a smile appeared on his face. "I don't know. I feel like she likes some of this."

"That is...not relevant," I replied.

"I don't know. It's nice to see you happy."

"She's not my girlfriend or anything. She's my prisoner."

"So ask her," he replied, shrugging. "If you want her to be your girlfriend, I'm sure all you have to do is ask."

"I'm sure that's something we can talk about once this has all blown over," I said, though I was sure we would definitely *not* talk about this at all when it had blown over.

"Let's figure out the brother thing first," I said. "You might be right, there could be something off about him, and he's the only one who would know what she was working on other than her editor. Jace said no one had hacked into her devices or anything, so this is what makes most sense."

"Plus," Grayson said. "He said she's good at her job and how would he know that if he wasn't familiar with her? She told us her work is the pop culture beat so..."

"Yeah, but that's not enough evidence," I replied. "We need to be sure before we make any accusations."

"I know," Grayson said, nodding. "But we have to do something. We can't just sit here and wait for the killer to strike again. We have to take action."

I shook my head. "Wait," I said. "Let me talk to her first. I know you want to protect her too but if we go for her brother too early, this could cause a giant mess for us."

He leaned over the railing again, standing in between the bars and bending his body to look down. "I *hate* this," he said. "All you have to do is take a quick look at her and see that she's terrified and honestly, you're not doing much better."

I didn't have to ask him how he was doing. I could see it written all over his face.

"Grayson," I said, a warning creeping into my voice. "I need you to let me handle this."

"If he doesn't strike again," Grayson said. "If he does, you can't hold me to that."

Before I could argue, he was slamming the sliding door as he went back inside.

Since Sam was the only family Sofia had, I didn't know exactly how to bring up that we thought her brother might be a serial killer.

I decided to ask the rest of the guys to leave for the night. Jace worked from his place that night, looking into Sam's internet presence. I sent Victor to follow Sam and see if there was anything suspicious. Grayson insisted on breaking into Sam's place to investigate, and while I wasn't against it, I knew that we might get found out, so I sent him to Neon and asked him to do his regular job instead. He knew what Sam looked like and he could easily keep an eye for him at the club. Grayson was an intelligent man, whose insight had often let me stay one step ahead of our enemies, but he could also be impulsive and difficult. He liked risk more than I did and going after Sofia's brother—he was a cop, he might've been a serial killer, he was Sofia's fucking brother—was a huge risk.

I needed to keep him on a tight leash.

Sofia didn't really care about what the rest of the guys were doing. She sat on the floor of the living room in HQ, wearing black shorts, her hair up in a messy ponytail that she had put up absentmindedly. I noticed her hands were practically shaking when she did so.

Once they were all gone, I poured both of us a bottle of sangria and brought the box of Scrabble we kept under the coffee table to her.

"I thought you might want a distraction," I said.

She flashed me a tight smile until she saw the glass in my hand, then reached out and our fingers touched for a second when I handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said softly. I sat across from her, though we had perfectly usable chairs and tables, but I said nothing about that. She drank the sangria, practically all at once, her lips red and lush with wine.

"Do you want another one of those?"

She nodded. "I *would* like a distraction."

I went to the kitchen to pour her another glass of sangria, and when I got back, she'd already set up the game in front of her.

"I have to warn you," she said softly. "I'm really good at this."

"So am I," I replied, handing her the drink.

She shook her head, her eyes set on mine. "I didn't expect that."

"I'm offended," I joked.

She smiled thinly and I was glad that she wasn't worried about the threat to her life, if only for a second. Neither one of us said anything as we started the game. It was nice, sitting there and playing Scrabble with her, forgetting all about the chaos and danger that surrounded us. Just the two of us with only the sound of tiles clacking against each other, punctuated by the sound she made when she was thinking.

"Hurry up, Reyes," I said when she took some time to think about the next word. "I don't have all night here."

She smirked. "Okay," she said, then grimaced. "But this is the only thing I have."

She placed the word *murder* on the board, then looked up at me and shrugged.

"Cute," I said.

"It was the only thing I had," she said. "Don't read into it."

I looked at the board and then back at my tiles. "Okay," I said.

"Then don't read into this."

Slowly, I put the word *undress* next to the u in murder.

When I looked up, she was staring at me, her eyes dark and bright. "Are you sure you don't want me to read into that?"

I leaned forward, my hand reaching out to brush a strand of hair away from her face. She didn't move, didn't flinch away from my touch. Her pupils dilated as she looked into my eyes.

"Your move," I said, my gaze flitting between her lips and her eyes.

Her gaze drifted to the game, and she shook her head. "I can't focus on this anymore."

"I can find something else for you to focus on," I said, and before she could say anything else, my fingers were threaded in her hair and I was pulling her toward me in a crushing kiss.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Sofia

He pulled away from me breathlessly.
"We're finishing this game," he said softly. "You were right, you're good, and I wanted to throw you off balance."

The kiss seemed to have thrown him off balance too, though it was him who had initiated it and I now wanted to finish it. I craved to have his lips on mine, but I also didn't just want him to be a distraction, though I was sure he would prove to be a good one.

My gaze darted from his mouth to his eyes again and I saw the darker coloring on his cheeks, the way he looked like blood had rushed to his face. He was always exceptionally handsome, but he was even more handsome now, with his hair tousled and his defenses down.

"Fine," I said, swallowing as I looked at the tiles in front of me. "But I'm going to kick your ass."

"You can try," he replied, wrinkling his nose.

I looked at my tiles and then back up at him. I had other options, but slowly, I placed the word *suck* on the board.

"Weak," he said. "I can do better than that."

"I'd like to see that."

Slowly, he placed the word *choke* on the board in front of us.

"I'm pretty sure that's more points than suck."

"It is," I said. "But less fun."

"You don't like being choked?"

My cheeks reddened. My sex life had always been pretty boring; truthfully, I had never been that interested. It was different with him. Just being around him made everything in my head go haywire. Maybe it was the danger, all the adrenaline, how fucked everything had been to get to this point, but this man did things to me no one ever had before. I swallowed, looking into his eyes. "I don't really know," I said. "I don't think so."

It took me a couple of seconds to realize what was happening. Teo pushed the game aside, his thumb on my chin. He was kneeling in front of me, his eyes dark and dangerous.

"Open your mouth," he said.

I opened my mouth and he slid his thumb across my chin, toward my bottom lip, stroking the ridges of my lower lip slowly. My breath hitched in my throat as I watched his eyes darken further. His thumb slipped into my mouth, and I sucked on it instinctively. He let out a low groan, his eyes closing

briefly. When he opened them again, they were blazing with desire.

"Fuck, Sofia," he muttered. "You don't even know what you do to me."

"What do I do to you?" I asked, my heart thumping in my chest.

He slid his hand down the front of my body, toward my core, his hand hovering on my abdomen for a second. "Do you want to find out? Because I can show you."

"How?" I asked breathlessly.

He replied by placing his hands on my shoulders and pushing me backward, until I was laying on the carpet. He knelt down on top of me and lowered his mouth to my neck, his tongue tracing the curve of my neck. "How do you want it," he asked, his breath hot against my skin. "Soft or rough?"

"I don't know," I said, my breath coming in short gasps.

"Don't lie to me, Sofia," he said. "I can tell."

He moved his mouth lower, to my collarbone, and I felt a moan escape my throat as he left a trail of wet kisses on my skin. "I don't know how I want it," I said. "Just do what you want to me, Teo."

He chuckled softly as his mouth moved lower, until his tongue was tracing the curve of my breast. He grabbed my shirt and pulled it up over my head, his eyes raking over my body, his hands moving to the clasp of my bra.

He undid it with a flick of his wrist, and my breasts spilled out, my nipples pebbled and aching to be touched. He grinned as he pulled the bra off of me completely, then moved his mouth to my right nipple and sucked on it, hard. The sensation made me moan his name, my hands moving to his shoulders, my fingers digging into his skin.

"You like that," he said, his gaze moving to my face as his mouth released my nipple. He wasn't asking me, he was telling me, and it made my entire body shiver.

"Yes," I gasped.

"Get used to it. I'm not going to stop until you're begging for more."

His mouth wound its way down my chest again, his tongue tracing the curve of my abs. As he moved lower, to my belly button, he curled his fingertips into the waistband of my shorts and pulled them down.

"I'm taking these off," he said.

I lifted my body up to give him easy access and his fingernails trailed down the sides of my legs as he pulled my shorts off. He seemed to pause for a second, admiring my body, before he leaned down and kissed my inner thigh.

Teo's lips moved along the edges of my underwear, and I groaned at the sensation.

"Are these in the way?" he asked, his voice low and teasing. "I can see how wet you are. I can smell you."

I groaned, throwing my head back, unable to answer him.

”Teo,” I said, my voice breathy. ”Can you please just-”

He grabbed the sides of my panties and yanked them off, pulling them over my legs. I felt like my entire body was on fire, and I just wanted him to touch me, to fill me, to do whatever he wanted to me at that moment.

His eyes roamed over my body, drinking in my naked form. He kissed his way back up my body, his tongue tracing along my inner thigh, and then his mouth closed over my clit. My back arched off the ground with the sensation, my hands moving to his head, and I felt another wave of pleasure pass through me. He slid his arms under my thighs and around the small of my back and sucked on my clit harder, and I felt a moan escape my throat.

I reached between my legs and grabbed his hair, tugging on it gently.

”Don’t stop,” I moaned, grinding my hips against his mouth.

”Fuck,” he groaned against me, his words muffled, and he pressed his mouth closer to my body. I felt his tongue flick out in time with his mouth, and I let out a loud moan as I felt him flick against my clit. ”I want you to come on my tongue.”

Four simple words sent me over the edge. My hips bucked against his mouth as I came, my back arching off the floor as I felt the waves of pleasure rush through me. I felt myself clench around his tongue as the orgasm rippled through my entire body. His tongue moved faster, more insistently, drawing out my orgasm, and as soon as it passed, I felt another one begin to build. I tugged on his hair. ”Teo,” I moaned.

”Good,” he said. ”I want to hear you say my name when you come.”

He pulled his mouth away from my pussy, kissing his way back up my body, his lips brushing against my skin. He cupped the back of my neck, pressing his lips to mine, and I moaned again as I felt his tongue trace my bottom lip. A wave of pleasure passed through my body as I felt him press his body against mine.

”Turn around,” he growled into my ear when he pulled away from me.

”What?”

I didn’t have time to think about it; he was flipping me around, one hand around my waist and one around my neck.

”Do you want me to fuck you?”

”Yes, Teo,” I said, my voice pleading. I was desperate for him to be inside me. ”Please.”

He slid his arms under my thighs, and then I felt his warm, hard length pressed against my back as he ground his hips against me. He slid his hands down my thighs and grabbed my knees, spreading my legs apart. He pushed himself against me again, and I felt him slide his hand between my legs, rubbing me. His hand moved to my clit, and he stroked it up and down, his fingers moving in firm circles, as he teased me with his hardness.

”Is this what you want?” he asked, his voice deep and gravelly.

”Is this what you need?”

He pumped his fingers in and out of my body, faster and faster, swirling his thumb around my core. I felt my body tense and I bit my lip as I felt the orgasm building, and I did as he asked, grinding my hips against his hand as he finger-fucked me.

I felt like I couldn't breathe as it washed over me. The waves of pleasure spread through my body, and I felt myself clench around his fingers.

He took his fingers out of me, I felt his erection press against my lower back. I knew he was teasing me, waiting for my begging, but I didn't care. I needed him inside me.

I kept my eyes closed as he pushed his fingers inside of me again, arching my back and pressing my ass into his erection. "Fuck me, Teo," I murmured. "Please."

He removed his fingers from me, and I felt the tip of his erection against my entrance. I could feel him pause, and I opened my eyes, turning my head to look at me. He was staring at me, his body tense as he held himself above me, barely inside of me.

"Do what I tell you," he growled.

Fuck. "I want your hand around my throat while you fuck me," I said.

"That's right," he said. "You're doing such a good job. I know you can take all of me."

He grabbed the back of my head, raked his teeth against the shell of my ear for a second, and then he grabbed my throat, pressing his fingers into it.

I gasped, my fingers curling under me as he pushed his cock inside of me.

He slid all of the way inside, filling me up, and my back arched as I felt him stretching me out. My hips bucked against his, still pressed against my ass. He started to move his hips, pulling out of me, and then sliding back in. Each time he moved out, I could feel myself tightening around him, and each time he moved in, I could feel his cock throbbing inside of me. I wrapped my arms around his, feeling the muscles in his arms tensing up, and I dug my nails into his skin. He towered above me, holding me down with his weight, so I wasn't able to match his rhythm.

"If you need me to stop, dig your fingernails into my arm," he said into my ear.

"Don't stop," I heard myself say. "Please don't stop."

I swear I could hear his smile as he thrust in and out of me, slow and deep, until he began to fuck me harder and faster.

"Tell me how much you love my dick inside of you," he growled in my ear.

"I love your dick," I moaned.

"You're so fucking tight. I could fuck you all night."

His hand tightened on my neck, and I shivered. I could feel the orgasm building inside of me, and I knew he could tell.

"I'm gonna come," I moaned, barely able to form coherent thoughts into words. I was seconds away from coming for the third time that night, and I knew he was close, too.

”Come for me,” he growled. ”I want to feel you come around my cock.”

My back arched off the floor as the orgasm ripped through me, washing over my entire body like a tidal wave. I felt him tense up, and then he buried himself as deep as he could inside of me, shuddering as he came.

”Such a good girl,” he said, his voice barely a breath.

He pulled away from me, and I felt his arms wrap around my waist and pick me up off the floor. He carried me back into the living room, and I felt him sit down on the couch before he gently placed me down on top of him. I curled up into his chest as he wrapped his arms around me. ”You did so well,” he said as he pressed a kiss into my hair.

I felt safe in his arms, his heart beating in my ear, and I sighed contentedly, my eyes fluttering closed.

Maybe Stockholm Syndrome wasn’t so bad after all.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Teo

As we lay there, in the soft afterglow of what had just happened, Sofia snuggled into me. She looked more beautiful than she ever had before, dark strands of wavy hair falling on her face, sticking to her skin with sweat.

She drifted in and out of sleep, her breathing changing as she relaxed into my arms.

I watched her, wondering how I was going to tell her what Grayson thought. I thought maybe she wouldn't want to hear what I had to say, but I needed to say it. She was right—she wasn't a child, and she needed to know the truth.

When I first suggested playing a game with her, it was genuinely so we could talk, not as some kind of foreplay to fuck her on the floor. I had gotten carried away. I wasn't supposed to, I was supposed to keep a cool head at all times, but having her around clearly made me stupid. I always thought through my decisions—but not with her.

Everything was harder with her around.

It was also better; the world seemed to come into focus around her in a way that made every color sharper, every object more defined.

Even the background. Even the things I tried so hard to ignore.

I didn't regret it at all, but I couldn't just sweep her off the sofa and take her to bed, though I really wanted to. If we didn't have this conversation now, she would probably never forgive me.

Her eyes fluttered open as she looked at me, sighing contentedly. "How long was I asleep for?"

"Not long," I said. "Maybe ten minutes."

She smiled at me. "Thank you for that. I really needed it."

I winked at her. "I'm happy to provide that kind of distraction whenever you like."

"You're just afraid I would've beat you at Scrabble."

"You could never beat me."

She sat up straight and glared at me, still smiling, her arms crossed over her chest. It was nice to be able to forget why she was here in the first place, even if just for a second.

As long as she was with me, she wasn't in danger. But I couldn't exactly keep her there for good, not when I had promised her I wasn't going to hurt her or her brother. As I had fallen for her—and fuck, I *had* fallen for her, despite trying so hard not to—I realized that I was utterly fucking useless as long as she was around.

”What are you thinking about, Teo?”

I looked away from her.

”Oh, no,” she said. ”You’re worried.”

I nodded. ”Yes,” I said. ”But I’m also enjoying this while I can.”

We stayed there in silence for a few seconds as I thought about how I was going to speak to her about what Grayson said. ”You know there’s something I need to tell you.”

She cocked her head. ”I’m on birth control,” she said. ”I have the implant, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I shook my head, though I appreciated her telling me that anyway. ”It’s not what I’m worried about, though that’s good to know,” I said.

”Then what is it?” she asked. ”I mean, I get it, I’m still under threat or whatever, but it’s nice to think that he can’t really touch me as long as I’m here. If I worry about it for too long...”

I tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear. ”You’re so beautiful,” I said.

”Teo.”

”Right,” I said, then sighed. ”Look, Grayson said something that I think you should know.”

She straightened up and stared at me, her dark brown eyes widening as she cocked her head. ”So that’s what you’re worried about. What did he say?”

Fuck, okay. This was it. I looked away from her, just for a second, feeling the cool cloth of the sofa under my bare legs. "He said that there's only one person who makes sense here, and I think he's right."

She knew who I was talking about before I told her. I saw it in the way she looked at me, heard it in the iciness of her voice when she spoke. "Oh?"

Fuck it. I might as well tell her. "Grayson thought it had to be your brother."

I was almost certain that she was going to get angry. I saw several emotions cross over her face before she settled on one. She took a second to process it, looking baffled, then laughed. "Teo, my brother has nothing to do with this. He's an absolute sweetheart, always has been. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Maybe you think so. But your brother is a cop, and because he is a cop, he's probably capable of more things than you think."

"My brother doesn't have anything to do with this," she said flatly.

"Think about this," I said impatiently. "Why isn't he investigating this? Why does he want you to drop it so much?"

"Because he's worried about me."

"Sof," I said, putting my hands on her shoulders. "There's absolutely no shot your brother doesn't know who I am. So why isn't he coming after me for you?"

Her bottom lip was trembling and her eyes were wide. "I don't know."

"Sam is hiding something," I said. "So we're going to look into him."

"What?" she asked, her head snapping up so she could look in my eyes.

"I promised you we weren't going to hurt him, so we aren't going to hurt him, but it's not outside of the realm of possibility that we might have to...you know, stop him."

"You're going to try to catch him in the act, huh?" she asked. She didn't sound amused anymore. "My brother is not a fucking serial killer. He's the best person I've ever met."

"Sof," I said. "You don't get it."

She put her hands over her ears and shook her head. "Fucking stop. I thought I could trust you, but you're insane."

"Look," I said, standing up. "I know you're protective of your brother and I know it's for good reason. But if you're right, and you're probably right, then it's not a problem. We go, we tail him, nothing happens. Right? But if he is the strangler..."

"My brother isn't the strangler."

"Right, okay," I said. "I believe you. I don't know if Grayson believes you. And he made some good points."

"Call him."

"What?"

"Call Grayson. I want to hear his theory myself."

”I don’t think—”

”You either call him or I’ll go find him myself.”

”Alright,” I said, sighing. I grabbed my phone from the coffee table, scrolled to his contact card and pressed the call button.

He picked up on the second ring.

”Hey, boss,” he said. ”I’m a little tied up with something. Let me give you a call back in ten minutes.”

He hung up immediately and my blood ran cold.

Sofia’s gaze darted between me and the phone and then it landed on me again, a question written all over her face.

”What did I miss there?”

”Did you hear that?”

She shook her head. ”Did I hear what? Grayson?”

”He works at a nightclub, Sofia,” I said. ”What did you hear in the background?”

”Nothing,” she replied. ”I didn’t hear anything.”

I looked into her eyes, dropping my arms and standing up so I could walk away from her. ”Do you understand what this means? It means that when I told him to go to the club so he would work. Instead, he went to look for your brother.”

”What do you mean that he went to look for my brother?” she asked, her eyes wide. She’d brought a pillow up to her knees and was hugging it closely, her hair wild and curly around her face.

I sighed. "He wasn't at a nightclub, Sof," I said. "There was no sound behind him."

She shook her head. "Grayson wouldn't do that," she said softly.

"Respectfully, you have no fucking clue what Grayson would do," I told her. "You don't know him like I do."

"I told you that my brother is not responsible for these murders."

I sighed, getting to my knees in front of her. "Listen to me, Sofia," I said. "I know that's what you want to think. I get it. You have every reason to trust your brother. I don't know him so I don't trust him. You understand that, right?"

"But you trust me."

"Yes," I said. "I trust you. But I think this is someone close to you and, if there's anything that Grayson finds that makes him think that your brother is the Orchid Strangler, he's going to take things into his own hands, and it's going to be very difficult to come back from."

"What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything, Sof. He's going to kill him."

She shook her head desperately, her curly hair moving around her pretty face. "No," she said softly.

"Sofia..."

"You have to stop him, you have to stop him before he does anything to my brother," she said. "You have to promise me

you're going to stop him.”

”Okay,” I replied. ”I promise you I’ll stop him.”

I didn’t tell her that I’d never managed to stop Grayson from doing anything.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Sofia

I was running ahead of Teo, though I wasn't quite sure where I was going. It had only taken me a few times going in and out of HQ to realize that there were several entrances and exits, that they very rarely used the same one, and that the elevator Victor had used that first night was probably for freight.

I would've gotten lost if it wasn't for Teo's steadying hand on the small of my back. "Hurry up," I said to him, my voice thin.

Teo was right. I really liked Grayson, I thought he was kind and funny, but I'd clearly lost sight of the fact that every single one of these men was dangerous. That they would do anything to keep their power...and to keep me safe. Teo always seemed in control, but I could tell that this concerned him.

His men were his weapons.

And sometimes, weapons misfired.

"Straight ahead," he said softly into my ear.

I looked straight ahead, at the glass window at the end of the hallway, and it looked like it was impossibly far away. I didn't realize that I was practically running until I got to it, completely breathless.

He waved his hand in front of a sensor and the door wooshed open. "C'mon," he said. "My bike is closer."

I didn't have time to question the fact that he had a bike, not when he was tugging my hand and rushing through the street. Everything after that was a blur; he threw a helmet at me, he got leather gloves—though I had no idea from where—and then I was on the back of a motorcycle, both of us racing away from HQ.

I also didn't click onto the fact that he obviously had my brother's address until we were racing down the highway, headed to Clearmont. I'd never even been on a motorcycle before; most of the time, I wouldn't have ever agreed to this.

The seat vibrated under me and I felt like I was going to throw up as Teo took a sharp corner onto the street that led to Sam's place.

As soon as we got to his apartment complex, I realized that things were worse than I thought. Grayson's car was parked outside of the building, a converted cottage that had been turned into apartments a few years ago at the end of a cul-de-sac. It was a pretty shitty apartment, and it was also exactly the place that I loved going to every single weekend until this whole thing had happened. My brother, and by extension his home, had always been my safe space. I felt sick to my

stomach, thinking about how difficult it would be to come back here if Grayson got his hands on Sam.

If he did—and he was wrong, because he had to be wrong—I would be left all alone in this world.

I'd seen Grayson in that Mercedes before, parking in front of HQ. For a luxury car, it wasn't particularly ostentatious, but it certainly stood out among the many sedans and SUVs in Sam's parking lot.

He was parked right next to my brother's Honda Accord, as if this was a fucking social call.

"Is he in the car?" I asked, panic creeping into my voice, though I obviously already knew the answer.

Now I was worried that I would never get to see my brother again. He got off the motorcycle and then lent me his hand.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Where's your brother's apartment?" Teo asked.

"Behind the back, upstairs."

"C'mon," he said. He grabbed my hand, his still clad with leather, and the cool feel of it on my palm grounded me for a second; that was, until we were both sprinting toward the stairs. Teo was much taller than me and when he dragged me along, it was hard for me to keep up with him.

He seemed to know exactly where to go. He climbed up the stairs and I followed behind him as fast as I could, my arm aching as he dragged me along. He wasn't being delicate, but it didn't matter; this was a matter of urgency and my heart was

beating out of my chest as we turned the corner to my brother's door.

Which was cracked open.

I felt like I was going to throw up as soon as we saw the cracked door. A bunch of scenarios passed through my head; each one progressively worse than the other.

Teo motioned for me to stay back and he crept towards the door, his hand on the hilt of a knife he had pulled out of his pocket. I stood frozen in place, my heart pounding as I waited for him to give me some sort of signal.

But before he could, there was a sudden movement inside the apartment and Teo burst through the door, his knife at the ready. My eyes widened as I saw Grayson standing in front of him, his hands raised in surrender.

"Teo, what the hell are you doing?" Grayson said, his voice calm and collected despite the knife pointed at him.

"Where's Sam?" Teo growled, his eyes scanning the small apartment.

"On a date, I think," Grayson said. "Jace hacked his devices. He's keeping me updated on his whereabouts."

I took a step forward. "Grayson, what are you doing in my brother's apartment?"

Grayson flashed me a tight smile. "Didn't Teo explain?"

"He explained," I replied through gritted teeth. "But I want to hear it from you."

"I was just investigating. I care about you, I don't want to do something that'll hurt your brother if I'm not sure he's the person responsible for these murders."

"I told you to stay put," Teo said, anger creeping into his voice.

"I know. And I would normally listen," he said, his gaze flitting between my face and Teo's. "I know you're angry, boss, but I needed to do this."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Leave my brother out of this. Sam doesn't have anything to do with it."

Grayson shook his head. "I know you want to believe that," he said. "But there's something I need to show you."

Teo lowered his knife, but didn't put it away. Grayson moved to the side of the room, gesturing for us to follow him. My heart was pounding in my chest, wondering what he could possibly have to show us. I knew Sam's apartment like the back of my hand, but right then, it felt cold, sterile, vaguely unfamiliar.

"My brother wouldn't..."

Grayson held his hand up and I trailed off. He stepped in front of the brown bookshelf, which was full of Jack Ryan novels, and grabbed a thick binder. I had never noticed it there before, but I didn't pay a lot of attention to what Sam read.

Grayson fingered the top of the folder before he handed it to me. "I'm sorry to be the one showing you this," he said. "I really wish you'd given me more time."

I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or to Teo, but at that moment, it didn't make much of a difference.

Teo's fingers curled around mine and I knew he was trying to be supportive. Grayson waited for me to take the binder. I took a deep breath before I grabbed it, my fingers touching the smooth blue leather before I opened it.

My breath caught in my throat when I opened it.

It was filled with photographs and newspaper clippings. I flipped through it, my eyes widening as I saw the familiar faces of the victims that had been found so far.

"These are all connected," Grayson said, his voice low. "These are all people who have crossed paths with your brother at some point or another."

"My brother is a cop, Grayson," I said. "It makes sense that he's investigating this."

"On his own time? Keeping his research in a binder like it's the 90's?" Grayson challenged.

I felt a pang of doubt, but I couldn't bring myself to believe that my brother had anything to do with these murders. "He's just trying to help," I said softly, my eyes still focused on the contents of the binder. "My brother isn't a detective or anything. I was the one who told him about the strangler. He said he would investigate..."

"I understand why you want to believe that," Grayson replied.

"But you have to admit, it doesn't look good."

I shook my head. "This isn't evidence. If you found Jace's digital notebook, you'd think he was the murderer too," I said, handing him back the binder. "Or my notes. But we're all just investigating."

Grayson looked at Teo, a question in his eyes. Teo must have nodded because Grayson sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I take your point," he said. "But there's something else."

"It better be good," I said through gritted teeth.

Grayson looked into my eyes. For a second, I thought he might apologize. He didn't. "Follow me," he said.

Sam's apartment was small, but right then, it felt cavernous. Grayson hesitated for a second before he opened the door to Sam's bedroom, then grabbed the handle and pushed in.

As always, his room was pretty tidy save for the mess on his nightstand. I scanned the room for anything that might indicate that my brother had anything to do with this, but there was nothing. His room looked as mundane as it always did.

"Excuse me," Grayson said, then opened the closet behind him.

I turned around to look at what he was pointing at.

And right there, among Sam's hastily hung and folded clothes, a giant bouquet of white orchids looked right back at me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Teo

I heard Sofia gasp as she looked at what Grayson had shown her.

He was right—it was compelling evidence—but I wished he'd given me time to break it to her. Grayson and Sofia were friends, but I didn't think she had opened up about how much Sam meant to her, and I could see that this was hurting her.

Sofia took a step back. Her skin had paled to the point where I was almost certain she was going to faint. I reached out to steady her, but she jerked away from my touch. Her eyes were still fixed on the bouquet of white orchids; her body was trembling.

"Sam doesn't even like flowers," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "He always says they're impossible to keep alive."

Grayson looked at me meaningfully, but I ignored him. He was right—probably—but this wasn't the time to talk to him about that.

"It might not mean anything," Sofia said. She sounded like she wanted to convince herself. "I need to speak to him."

She turned to walk out of his apartment. She had disentangled herself from me at one point, but I reached out to grab her by the wrist so I could stop her. She tried to wrench herself out of my grasp, but it was pointless; I was bigger, stronger, and I could just pull her toward me if I needed to.

"Sofia," I said softly. "This isn't a good idea."

"I need to speak to him. Before you go making any wild accusations, I need to talk to Sam."

I shook my head, pulling her close to me so I could wrap my arms around her waist. "No," I growled into her ear. "You're staying with us. This is dangerous, Sofia."

She banged her fists against my chest. "Fuck you," she said. "You don't get to tell me what to do. Aren't you supposed to be fucking dangerous?"

I eased up on my hold of her, just to give her some space. I'd seen her upset before, but never like this. "We're not..."

"Killers? Like my brother? You might not do the dirty work yourself, but you know, that only makes you worse, right?" she asked in a shouting whisper, through gritted teeth. "You're starting to lose control, Teo. You might have been able to tell your men what to do before, but Grayson's gone rogue, and you're just standing there stopping me from seeing the one person in the world who cares about me."

"I..." I trailed off before I told her that I cared about her. This was not the time.

"Grayson keeps finding bodies," she said, her tone cool, full of venom. "Maybe your bestie is the killer. Did you ever think about that?"

"Back off, Sofia," I said, taking a step toward her so I could tower over her. "You have no idea what you're talking about. Leave him alone."

"You're all so fucking bloodthirsty," she replied, looking up at me, her eyes hardening as tears welled up in her eyes. "Maybe look in the mirror first."

"Look, I—"

"You don't get to stop me from doing this," she snapped, her face contorted with rage. "You don't want to see what happens if you try to hold me hostage again."

She spun around and walked away from me. I watched her back until she slammed the door behind her. My body felt tight with frustration, and I wanted to chase after her, but I knew that would be a mistake.

We both watched her leave, then Grayson turned to me, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, that went well," I said, then set my gaze on Grayson.

"You should have waited for me."

"I was just trying to protect her."

"Don't lie to me," I replied. "If you were trying to protect her, you would've listened."

He rolled his shoulders back, sighing deeply. "Fine. I just thought I would be able to catch the killer. I didn't expect you to bring her here."

"What the fuck were you thinking?" I asked, shaking my head.

"Grayson, we don't mess with the *police*."

"We don't normally mess with the police," he said. "But we have the chance to now. You have to admit that it's a little fun."

"It's not fun," I said. "You're putting all of us in danger."

"Not if we get to them first."

I groaned. I took a step forward, the handle of my blade in my hand. He didn't seem remotely concerned.

Which is why he wasn't expecting it when I struck him in the face with a closed fist.

He staggered backward with a grunt, trying to get his feet under him—and Grayson was fast, but I was faster. Before he could react, I had him pinned against a wall, my forearm pressed hard against his throat.

"You listen to me," I growled, my voice low and dangerous.

"This is not a game. People are dying, and Sofia is in danger. You need to stop acting like a reckless idiot and start thinking clearly. We need to find out who did this and protect the people we care about. That's all that matters."

Grayson's eyes widened, and he struggled against my hold. But I was too strong for him; he couldn't break free. I leaned in closer, my breath hot against his face.

"If you ever put Sofia in danger again," I said, my voice dripping with menace, "I will kill you. Do you understand me?"

Grayson nodded frantically, and I released him. He stumbled back, gasping for air, and I turned away from him. I needed to get out of there before I did something I would regret.

Grayson had done reckless things before, but he always seemed to find a way to fix them. If he hurt Sofia, there would be no coming back from that. He was my brother in all but blood, but I was certain that I would kill him without hesitation.

It was very quickly becoming clear that *Sofia* was the real danger here...because I'd threatened to kill for her, and I would do it again.

And at this point, I was too addicted to stop.

Still gasping for breath, he followed me outside, where I leaned against the railing and looked down at the parking lot of Sam's apartment complex.

"You're right," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry won't cut it," I replied. "I *will* replace you."

He sighed, leaning over the railing too. "There's something I didn't show you."

I turned on him, raising an eyebrow. "What?"

Grayson pulled out a cell phone, pressing a few buttons. He held the phone up for me to see, and I frowned.

"What's this?"

"It's not my phone," he said. "At first, it was Sam's. But I think it actually belongs to Sofia."

"What?" I took it off him.

"I found it in Sam's nightstand."

He didn't need to say anything else. The night Sofia had been beaten up was the same night she had lost her phone. "Do you think she would've recognized her brother?"

"I mean, I think she would like to think she would've recognized her brother."

I nodded, feeling a sense of unease settle in my stomach. If Sofia's brother was the killer, then we were in more danger than ever before. I needed to talk to Sofia, to tell her what we had found. But first, I needed to find her.

"She can't have gone far," I said softly. "She doesn't have a car or a phone. We need to split up and find her. And Grayson, if you see her, do not engage. Just tell me where she is."

"I could put her in my car and drive her back to HQ."

I shook my hand. "Leave the handling of Sofia to me," I said. "You've done enough."

He nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. We both knew that we were running out of time. The killer was getting

bolder, and we needed to stop him before he struck again. But now, we also needed to protect Sofia from her own brother.

I pocketed the phone and ran down to my bike, then I took off in one direction, scanning the streets for any sign of her while Grayson went the other way.

I had to find her before Sam did.

Because if he caught her again, I wasn't sure if she would get away.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Sofia

I knew that, if I went through the back of the apartment complex, I would be able to cut through the leasing office and the pool toward the eastside. Once I got out of the apartment complex, I was able to duck into a gas station that was only a few minutes away.

I didn't have any money on me, I didn't have a phone and I definitely didn't have a car, so getting access to my apartment was completely out of the question. But I needed to speak to my brother, and I would find my way home. I'd made a deal with Teo and truthfully, I didn't particularly want to involve the police, considering it might get my brother in trouble.

Not because he was the Orchid Strangler.

Because he was a police officer, and this whole thing seemed like a horrible HR nightmare.

The woman behind the glass at the gas station barely looked up at me.

"I need to use the phone," I said. "I don't have any money."

She picked her head up, narrowing her dark eyes as she set her gaze on me.

"Well, that's not my problem," she said. "What do you think I am? A charity?"

"No. It's just... I need to call my brother. He's a police officer."

She threw her head back, laughing. "Don't tell me you want to call the police," she said. "I've seen your kind before."

"I don't have any money," I said. "But my brother's a cop... he'll pay you."

"If he's not a cop, you're going to have to leave."

I nodded gratefully. "Thank you," I said as she handed me her phone, an act of kindness in an otherwise inhospitable moment.

My mind raced as I tried to remember Sam's phone number. It had obviously been saved in my phone, and I could vaguely remember it, but accessing it in my current situation felt like a monumental task. I delved into the recesses of my memory, recalling the day we had bought our phones together. Thankfully, the memories surfaced, and I could piece together the number I needed.

We shared nearly identical phone numbers, differing only in the last four digits. I dialed the number with trembling fingers, a sense of urgency mounting with each passing second. For an interminably long moment, I feared that he wouldn't answer.

The phone rang and rang, causing my anxiety to rise to a nauseating level. It seemed as though he was sending me to voicemail, and panic gripped me. I knew that if Teo or Grayson found me, escaping from them again would be impossible. They had shown me some leniency, but I understood that their patience wouldn't last forever, especially because Teo was concerned for my safety.

But in that dire moment, my safety wasn't my primary concern; finding my brother was. I didn't just need to clear his name, I needed to find out for myself if he was the strangler.

He wasn't. He couldn't be.

There was no way my sweet baby brother was a serial killer.

The phone continued to ring, each unanswered call intensifying my desperation.

Finally, a distant, muffled voice broke the silence on the other end. "Hello?"

It was Sam's voice, but it sounded far away, as if he were in a different world. "Sam, are you there?" I asked, my voice trembling. The cashier watched me, her eyes never leaving my face.

"Sofia?" he responded, his voice still distorted.

"Yeah, it's me," I confirmed, relief washing over me.

For a moment, the line seemed to disconnect, sending my heart racing with anxiety. "Are you okay?" he asked when he came back on the line.

"I need to see you," I replied urgently. "I need to see you right now. Where are you?"

"Where are you?" Sam inquired. I noticed that he wasn't offering to pick me up, but he was conspicuously avoiding revealing his location.

I hesitated, realizing that explaining my situation and location would be complicated and risky. Instead, I decided, "No, I'll come to you. Tell me where you are."

"I'm on the corner of Ocean and Third," he divulged. "Do you remember where that theme park used to be? The one our parents..."

His voice turned into static, but I understood what he meant.

"I remember the theme park on Ocean and Third," I said, my voice determined. I hoped that by repeating it, he would tell me if I'd gotten the wrong end of the stick. He didn't say anything, though. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

I was about to tell him that I didn't have any money and I needed him to pay for a cab, but he hung up the phone and the cashier gave me a suspicious look as I handed hers back to her.

"Can I use your bathroom?" I asked, knowing that I needed to clean up and compose myself before I set out on foot to find Sam.

She hesitated for a moment, eyeing me up and down. But eventually she nodded and handed me the key to the bathroom.

I locked the door behind me and splashed some cold water on my face, trying to steady my nerves. The thought of my

brother being the Orchid Strangler seemed ludicrous, but at the same time, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something wasn't right.

After I took a few deep breaths and splashed some water on my face, I unlocked the door and went back outside. The cashier looked at me expectantly. I didn't have any cash to pay her, but she didn't ask for any. It was either compassion or the fear of involving the police. Either way, I was thankful.

Since I didn't have any cash, my best bet was walking about half a mile toward the nearest hotel with a shuttle. Several of them passed by theme parks every day, and while this one was abandoned, the transportation around it was solid. So it would take me a bit to get there, but I would get there tonight, and I would speak to my brother in person.

I took a few deep breaths, trying to dismiss the anxiety that gripped me. It was probably nothing. My brother was probably just investigating because this was his work. Or he got caught up with it before he brought it to his superiors. But I couldn't help the feeling that trouble was coming, and I needed to leave the safety and comfort of the Blades' HQ and find my brother.

I trotted into the gas station to tell the cashier I was leaving and she watched me with a curious gaze. "You're not walking, are you?" she said.

I shrugged. "I don't have any other options."

"Ocean and Third? That's going to take you all night," she said. "And some of the places you'll walk by aren't the best."

I shrugged. "I need to get there," I said. "Whatever it takes."

She groaned. "Don't tell anyone I did this," she said. "Your brother's a cop, right? So he can pay for a cab when you get there."

She picked up the store's landline and punched in a number. After a quiet conversation, she hung up. "A taxi will be here to pick you up in ten minutes. You want my advice, mama?"

I didn't really want her advice but I had a feeling I was going to get it anyway. I leaned forward so I could hear her better.

"Don't go out of your way for any man like this," she said.

"Not one of them deserves it. Not even your own brother."

Chapter Thirty: Sofia

The taxi arrived, and I eagerly climbed inside, grateful for the warmth and safety it offered. As the driver pulled away from the gas station, I couldn't help but ponder the cashier's words. Was she right? Was I wasting my time and energy chasing after my brother, a man who may or may not be a killer?

I pushed the doubts aside. I couldn't abandon my brother, no matter what. He was family, and I owed him that much.

The taxi driver was a burly man with a thick beard and a gruff demeanor. I doubted he was very talkative, but I decided to try anyway.

"Do you know anything about what's been going on in town?" I asked.

The driver grunted. "Someone's disappearing people. The cops don't care. Anything new?"

"Have you heard anything about him?"

"Yeah, everyone knows about him," the driver said. "It's all anyone's been talking about. Every cabbie I know is afraid to take passengers anywhere now."

"Don't worry. I don't think the Strangler targets people with families."

He looked at me through the rearview mirror. "How fucking kind of him."

His words chilled me. He was right; of course he fucking was, the Strangler wasn't a nice person even if he spared people with spouses. I quieted down as the taxi's tires skidded when he took a corner, the idea that my brother was the Strangler chilling me to the bone.

As we drove through the darkness, I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. Was my brother really innocent? Or was I risking my life to clear the name of a killer?

But I pushed those thoughts aside, focusing instead on the task at hand. I needed to see my brother, to ask him the tough questions and hopefully put this nightmare to rest.

Finally, we arrived at the abandoned theme park, and I stepped out of the taxi, my heart racing with trepidation as I scanned the eerie surroundings. The park was dilapidated and overrun with weeds, and the rusted rides creaked in the wind. I shivered, feeling like I was in a horror movie set, but I pressed on, determined to find Sam.

"Stay here," I said. "My brother will be out in a minute, he'll pay you."

”Are you fucking kidding, lady—”

I interrupted him by sliding out of the car and slamming the door loudly behind myself. He wasn't happy, but he'd feel better once I found Sam and had him pay for the fare.

”I won't be long,” I said, turning to look at the yellow taxi over my shoulder. ”I promise.”

”You're on your own, bitch,” the taxi driver said, flipping me off before he skidded away from me.

I ignored the insult and took a deep breath, steeling myself for what I might find. As I walked through the park, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched. The shadows seemed to shift and writhe around me, and a sense of dread crept over me like a suffocating blanket.

”Sam?” I called out, my voice echoing in the emptiness. ”Sam, it's Sofia. Where are you?”

There was no response, and I began to get nervous. I picked up my pace, my eyes darting around the decrepit rides and abandoned food stands. Suddenly, I heard a noise, a rustling in the bushes nearby.

My heart pounding, I made my way over to the source of the sound. The only thing I had on me was the little purse with some make-up and the nail file I'd first taken from my apartment, but in the pitch dark of the abandoned theme park, I didn't know how that was going to do me any good.

As I approached the bushes, I saw a figure slumped against a tree, his body obscured by the shadows.

”Sam?” I called out, my voice trembling.

Before I could process what was happening, someone was grabbing me by the shoulders, a hand wrapped around my throat and a large hand on my face.

”Shh,” I turned my head to look at where the voice was coming from, but I didn’t need to. ”Sof, be quiet. We don’t have much time.”

”Sam?”

”You weren’t supposed to take the bait.”

”What are you—”

”There’s no time to explain. Reach into my left pocket and grab the keys. There’s a car parallel parked next to the Boba Tea store across the street, a little Dodge Neon. These are the keys to that car. I want you to use it and then I want you to go as far as you can from the city. Get your boyfriend to give you money. Go to Georgia, fuck, Sof, go all the way to New York. Go north until the car dies.”

I didn’t understand what was happening, but the urgency in my brother’s voice was enough to spur me into action. I fumbled with his pocket, my hands shaking as I tried to locate the keys. Finally, my fingers closed around a cold metal object, and I pulled the keys out, my heart racing.

”Sam, what’s going on?” I asked, fear lacing my voice.

”There’s no time. Just take the car and go. You need to get as far away from here as possible,” he said, his eyes scanning the area nervously.

I hesitated, unsure of what to do.

”What about you?”

His ragged breathing stopped for a second. ”I’ll catch up to you,” he said, his voice shaky.

I didn’t believe him.

”Kid...”

”I love you, Sof,” he said. ”Please do this for me.”

I could see the desperation in his eyes and the fear in his voice. I didn’t understand what was happening, but I knew that I had to trust him. I nodded, my mind racing as I tried to figure out my next move.

”Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. ”Okay, I’ll go.”

”Be quiet,” he replied. ”And promise me you’ll run.”

I nodded, turning to look at him. Even in the pitch black of the abandoned theme park, I could tell that he looked like shit. His dark hair was sticking to his sweaty forehead, and his clothes were torn and stained. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked like he hadn’t slept in days. I took a step closer to him, my heart breaking at the sight of him in such a state.

”I promise,” I said. ”As long as you come with me.”

”Sof, we don’t have time for—”

He was interrupted by the sound of something metallic cracking against his skull. It took my brain a few seconds to process what I was seeing.

A figure towered over us both, a gun in his right hand. I couldn't see anything because he was backlit, but he looked vaguely familiar.

"I told him not to run," the man said. "But it doesn't matter. Family special, huh?"

It took me a few seconds to recognize him.

"Archer?"

Before I could duck out of the way, he was hitting me on the side of the head with the back of his gun.

There was no time for questions.

The Orchid Strangler had me in his claws.

The Orchid Strangler IV

She'd been a happy coincidence. I liked him at first, of course; he was exactly my type, young, handsome and eager. He took instruction well and he didn't say anything to anyone at work about our entanglement.

But then I found out that his sister was the one working to uncover the identity of the Orchid Strangler.

He'd let it slip after a long night together; he mostly kept information about Sofia to himself. Sam was intensely private and that was one of the things I liked most about him, other than how good he was in bed.

But when he mentioned his sister's name, I felt a spike of fear in my chest. I'd been careful, of course, but there was always a chance that someone would find out. And if Sofia was on the case, it was only a matter of time before she connected the dots and came after me.

I tried to ignore the feeling of dread that settled in my stomach every time I thought about her. But as the days went on and

Sofia's investigation heated up, I found myself becoming more and more paranoid. Every time I saw a news report about another victim or heard a siren in the distance, I couldn't help but wonder if she was getting closer.

That's why, when Sam showed up at my apartment late one night, I knew I had to act fast.

I'm sure my expression was one of utter shock and confusion. I didn't know what to say—I couldn't even believe what I was hearing.

"She started calling you the Orchid Strangler," he said again, his voice thick with emotion. "Please, please, you have to stop."

His words hung in the air as I processed the magnitude of what he was saying. I had put so much effort into covering my tracks and now it was all unraveling before me. There was a sense of inevitability to it—it was like a boulder rolling down a hill and no amount of effort would be able to stop it.

I knew that if Sofia continued on her mission, she would eventually discover who I really was and put an end to my reign of terror once and for all. No. Not terror.

That would be how people would see it; they couldn't understand.

I was a cleanser. An exfoliant. A needed touch to clean up the face of the city.

Without me, Orlando would always be ugly.

Because they would *never* understand, I had to get rid of her. My work needed to keep happening, but only in the shadows. Explaining would be pointless. Sam didn't understand, but he would have never turned me in.

I knew where his sister lived. I wanted to get him more involved; I would send him flowers, information about the blight, tell him why they needed to be gotten rid of. Officer Sam Reyes sat near me, nodding solemnly, and never doing a goddamn thing.

But his sister was going to take things into her own hands.

I knew that if she died, then no one would ever know the truth about who I was or what I had done—and that was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"I can't keep a secret from her, Archer," Sam said in a thin voice.

I looked up to meet his gaze.

There were tears in his eyes as he pleaded, but I knew what I had to do.

I had to kill her.

And I had to get rid of anyone who stood in my way.

Even if I loved fucking them.

Chapter Thirty-One: Teo

I watched from a distance as Sofia stumbled to her knees, the figure towering over her, gun at the ready. My heart pounding, I knew I had to intervene. Grayson and I had followed her since I'd found her at the gas station; from a distance, to make sure she didn't get too freaked out.

Taking a deep breath, I moved closer, my hand hovering over the hilt of my knife. I had to act quickly, before Archer had a chance to react.

I hated to spill blood—I might pass out—but I knew I had to help her.

The bike couldn't get through the overgrown terrain in the abandoned theme park or I would've ran him over without hesitation. As I crept closer, I saw Sofia struggling to get up, blood trickling down her face from where Archer had hit her with the butt of his gun. My blood boiled with fury at the sight, and I knew that I couldn't let this stand.

"Hey!" I shouted, my voice booming through the park. "Let her go!"

Archer whirled around, gun trained on me, but I didn't flinch. Instead, I pulled out my knife, the blade glinting in the dim light. I was ready for a fight.

"You should have stayed out of this," Archer growled, his finger tightening on the trigger.

My eyes were still not used to the darkness. The theme park around us was eerily silent, and the only sounds were the faint rustling of leaves and Sofia's ragged breathing. The tension in the air was palpable, and my adrenaline was pumping.

"I'm not going to let you hurt her," I said, taking a step closer.

Archer hesitated for a moment, his eyes flickering between me and Sofia. I saw a moment of indecision in his eyes, and I knew that I had him. With a sudden burst of speed, I charged at him, my knife at the ready.

But he was too quick for me. In a blur of motion, he sidestepped my attack and slammed the butt of his gun into my stomach. I doubled over, gasping for air, as Archer stepped back, his gun pointed at my head.

"You should have listened to me," he said, his voice low and menacing. "This is bigger than you or me or Sofia. You can't fight it."

I could've lunged at him, but I didn't know where Grayson was, and if he killed me, Sofia would be without protection.

I needed to be smart, even though I was ready to attack.

I put my hands behind my head, my knife still threaded in my fingers. "Look," I said. "I'm not a threat. You're a cop, right?"

Archer glared at me.

"Let them go and you can have me," I said.

"Why the fuck would I want you?"

"Think about it, Archer," I said. "I'd be more than a feather in your cap. You can book me, fuck, you can kill me and people would see you as a hero. But Sofia and her brother?"

"Shut up, Costa," he said. "what the fuck do you know?"

He took a step toward me, his gun glinting in the moonlight.

"They're innocent people. They've never done anything to you. And they have a connection to you...so someone will know what you did."

Archer considered my words for a moment, his eyes flickering between me and Sofia. I saw the conflict in his expression, the indecision as he weighed his options.

"Get up," he said. "Get up or I kill them."

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my hammering heartbeat.

"Up," he said. "Now."

Slowly, I got to my feet, my knife still clenched in my hand, pointing at the ground.

"Good," Archer said. "And if you don't want them to die, you won't move."

My fist clenched around the handle of my blade. I caught a glimpse of Grayson. He stalked behind Archer, in the

shadows, like a wolf.

We both knew he needed to be careful about when to strike. In the darkness, I could see Sofia's gaze darting between the three of us, the white in her eyes shining.

I had to act quickly. I looked at Archer, his grip on the gun tight, and then I glanced at Sofia, who was still on her knees, trying to catch her breath. I couldn't let Archer hurt her or her brother. Her brother was on the ground in front of her, his head in her lap as she stroked his hair.

I slowly raised my hands, my knife dangling from my fingers. I knew that I had to make a move; I couldn't just stand here and wait for Archer to decide my fate.

"Let them go," I said, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible. "Please, they haven't done anything wrong."

Archer looked at me, his eyes cold and steely. "You're right, Costa. I could kill two birds with one stone here."

He smiled. It made a shiver run down my spine.

"But I'm not going to let them go," he said. "They know too much."

I had to strike then.

I caught Grayson's eyes behind him and gave him a nod. In a split second, he rushed at Archer, tackling him to the ground.

I lunged forward, blade in hand, my heart beating like a drum. Archer thrashed against Grayson as he tried to free himself,

but it was no use. I was too close and the cold steel of my blade pressed hard against his neck.

Grayson was still trying to wrestle the gun out of his hand. The struggle was intense, but I kept my eyes on Archer, waiting for him to make a move. He glared up at me, his eyes burning with hatred.

Grayson twisted the gun out of his hand as I pressed my blade against his throat. It clattered on the ground next to him.

He glared at me and snarled, baring his teeth like a wounded animal. "You're not going to kill me," he said. "I know who you are. You're a fucking pussy. You let everyone do your dirty work for you. You don't know shit about me, Costa, but I know everything about you."

My hand shook as I held the knife to his throat, bile rising in my throat. I wanted blood. I wanted his blood. Even if I passed out taking it from him, at least he wouldn't hurt Sofia again.

Grayson punched Archer on the side, still holding him upright.

"You guys can beat me up, but I've already won," Archer said.

"Whose face do you think your girlfriend is going to see whenever she closes her eyes at night?"

I glanced at Sofia, who was still holding her brother's head on her lap, and charged at Archer. The scuffle was quick; he was being held by Grayson and his neck was exposed so it was easy to slash his throat. Blood poured down the front of his clothes and I had to look away as it pooled around the collar of his polo shirt.

He fell to his knees. It took me a second too long to realize that he was scrambling for his gun; lunging to the left as he did so. I heard another gunshot and something felt like it grazed me, hard and sharp enough to make me wince for a second, but not enough to call my attention with my adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I felt woozy so it was hard for me to be as fast as usual.

Damn my stupid fear of blood.

The gun was on the ground, inches from his fingers as he tried to pull it to him. I grabbed my blade and lunged at him, my knife raised.

He tilted his neck back, showing me the blood spurting from his throat and I found myself retching instead of reaching for him. He might as well have laughed when he set his gaze on mine, still trying to reach for the gun as he inched his fingers closer and closer to it.

I was about to stab him when he managed to grab it again. Grayson threw himself on his back protectively, but a gun was a gun, and as soon as he pointed it at me, I realized I was probably done for.

Everything after that happened in slow motion.

Sofia moved.

Sam let out a gut-wrenching cry and reached for her.

She struck at Archer and more awful red blood spilled out.

She screamed.

The sound of a gunshot rang out, a high-pitched whine resonating in my eardrums. Grayson stumbled back, and my throat dried as I wondered if he was going to die, if *I* was going to die.

Sam seemed to wake up from his stupor. He dragged himself along the ground in front of Archer as I tried to swipe low at him so he wouldn't be able to fire again.

Sam crawled on his hands and knees toward the gun in Archer's hand. He was splayed on the ground but he was still holding onto it desperately.

Leaning down, Sam punched him in the shoulder, just hard enough to make him unclench his fist. He swiped the gun out of Archer's hand, aimed it at his face.

Archer opened his mouth to say something.

Before he could, Sam emptied the clip into it.

Archer's body shook on the ground as Sam fired round after round into his face. The field filled with smoke and the smell of gunpowder, my heart rate increasing with every shot.

I watched his face change under the constant barrage of gunshots, each one of his features turning into nothing but a bloody pulp.

My stomach turned.

And the world was awash with vibrant, horrifying red.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Teo

I woke up feeling like I'd just run a marathon. My head was pounding and my limbs felt like rubber. I was lying down, on my back, staring up at a ceiling. I had no idea where I was but I tried to force myself to piece together how I got here.

It took me a few seconds to orient myself. I didn't like hospitals; as a rule, they were best avoided, in case the law was around. The steady beep-beep-beep grounded me immediately, though. I tried to sit up, but a reassuring hand appeared on my chest. "No," a delicate voice said. "Don't move."

It was Sofia. She was sitting next to me, her eyes filled with concern as she looked down at me. Her hand was on my chest, gently pushing me back down on the bed. "You need to rest," she said softly.

I didn't think she looked much better than me. There was a large bandage around her head, her pretty hair pulled away from her face.

I tried to speak, but my throat was dry, and my voice came out as a croak. Sofia quickly handed me a glass of water, and I drank it gratefully. "Where am I?" I managed to ask.

She handed me a tumbler filled to the brim with ice water and I instantly read the logo for Orlando Health Regional Hospital.

"Are you okay?"

She smiled at me. "I'm a tough girl," she said. "I'll be fine. How are you?"

"Fine. I really don't think this is necessary because I fainted when I saw a little blood..."

I trailed off. She held my stare for a second. "A little blood?" she challenged, cocking an eyebrow.

I closed my eyes, seeing the bullets landing on Archer's face behind my eyelids and trying to push the memories away.

"How's everyone else?"

"Archer is dead," she said. "Grayson is shaken, but okay. Sam is being seen to. And you're not here because you fainted, Teo."

I looked at her, raising my eyebrows.

She glanced at my leg.

That was the first time I realized I wasn't at all in pain, though my body did feel incredibly stiff. It took me a second to realize that my leg was suspended on a metal contraption and it hung loosely over my body.

The sickening feeling returned to my stomach. Something was wrong, very wrong.

My eyes broke away from Sofia's, but her hand closed around my own, squeezing it gently. "You're going to be alright," she said. "And we're going to be alright."

"I can't feel anything," I said, my voice a little shaky.

"Medicine," she explained. "It's to prevent the pain. You were shot in the leg, Teo. You have to stay still until it heals. You're lucky the bullet didn't hit any arteries."

"I feel fine," I said. "I feel normal and I feel like I can get up."

Well, I *did* feel like I could get up...but I also felt like I was going to vomit. My stomach was clenching and unclenching, sweat beading on my forehead.

"That's out of the question," Sofia said, then leaned in close to me. "Anyway, you don't want to go back to HQ right now. The police are looking into this really closely."

"What is this?" I asked, meeting her gaze.

"The killer," she said. "You were wrong. It wasn't my brother."

"Archer," I said softly.

She didn't even nod. "Jace confirmed it. He kept a digital log of every victim," she said. "He was so very thorough. He never thought he was going to get caught."

"And your brother?"

Her eyes welled up with tears. "They were romantically involved before—"

"I can answer that," Sam said as he walked into the room. "Hope you don't mind my eavesdropping...but you deserve answers, Sof."

The implication was there. Don't say anything that will get any of us into trouble.

"We were romantically involved because I was trying to get him," he said. It was clearly bullshit, but it was a good indication that we were being monitored and that someone was taking note of what he was saying. "Unfortunately, any evidence we had was circumstantial, and as you know, Detective Archer Holden was my superior. I know the means were less than conventional, but when he wanted to get involved with me..."

He trailed off, shooting Sofia a meaningful look.

"I realized I had a golden opportunity. Unfortunately, it seems like I was made tonight," he said and shuddered. "I knew he would go after my sister, but I didn't expect this."

I looked him in the eyes. "Good job," I said. "I'm glad he's dead."

Sam nodded, clearly relieved I wasn't going to say anything out of line.

"The police have already taken away Jace's hard drive," he said, his gaze darting between the two of us. "They're probably going over it right now. They'll investigate more."

"Of course. He hid his tracks well," I said.

"Better than you think," Sam said, his gaze flitting between the two of us. "I'll leave you two to it."

He stood up and walked outside and Sofia and I watched him as he walked away. There was a red wristband on his right arm with his surname on it, indicating that he was also a patient here. He didn't limp away, exactly, but the last time I had seen him, he seemed young and spry.

Right then, he looked tired, like he could barely shuffle his weight on his own two feet.

"Is he going to be alright?" I asked Sofia.

She chewed on her lower lip as she looked out toward the hall until Sam disappeared. "Yes," she said. "I really hope so."

Neither one of us said anything for a minute. We were both relieved her brother was alive, of course, and right then, it was too hard to contemplate just how lasting the damage was going to be.

But the night had already changed our lives for good, and I was pretty sure we both knew it.

"How's Grayson?" I asked after a long minute.

"He's okay," she said. "They're taking his statement right now, but he should be here soon."

I nodded and closed my eyes, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in my leg. The events of the night played in my mind like a movie on an endless loop. The sound of bullets ringing in my

ears, the sight of Archer's face exploding into a blood-red mist, and the smell of gunpowder filled my senses.

"I'm sorry," she started. "I should've known better than to run away from you."

I opened my eyes and looked at her, a small smile tugging at the corners of my lips. "It's okay," I said. "I'm just glad you're safe."

"I should've listened to you..."

I turned to look at her, my eyes narrowing. "Don't do it again," I said, an edge creeping into my voice. I wanted to tell her that it was okay that she was worried about her brother, but even with the killer gone, I knew better than to trust anyone else.

Once Sofia wrote her true crime exposé, she might become anyone's target. It wasn't like she would give it up. I knew what was coming next: the endless probing into her own life.

Which meant endless probing into mine.

Regardless of my extracurricular activities, I'd always been good at keeping a low profile. Keeping my head down was something I excelled at.

With her in my life, I realized it was no longer going to be possible.

And it didn't matter.

I wanted her.

Even if it meant that my life was about to get a lot more complicated.

She edged her chair closer to me, her hand on mine. "I won't do it again," she said softly. "I promise."

Chapter Thirty-Three: Sofia

I held back a grimace as I watched Teo slowly make his way across the living room of HQ. It had been two months and his doctors said his recovery was going to take a while, but watching him struggle to drag himself across the living room of this apartment when his presence had filled it made my chest tighten.

He picked his head up to look at me.

”It’s oka—”

”Don’t fucking say it’s okay,” he replied between gritted teeth.

”I know it’s not okay.”

”Right. But it’s better than it was.”

He sighed. I was right and we both knew it. When he had been discharged, his leg couldn’t bear any weight.

But now, he was slowly regaining his strength. The bullet wound had healed, but the pain still lingered.

"I'm not useless, you know," he said, his voice laced with frustration. "I can still do things."

"I never said you were useless," I replied, trying to soothe him. "But you need to take it easy for now."

"I've been taking it easy for two months," he said, his voice rising in anger. "I'm sick of this. I need to get back to work."

I took a deep breath, trying to remain calm.

"Teo—"

"Boss, you almost died," Grayson, who had been sitting quietly on the couch pretending to read a book, finally said.

"You need to take your recovery seriously."

Teo quieted down, his face darkening for a second. We hadn't spoken about how things were between the two of us, but Teo always took Grayson seriously, and Grayson hadn't said a word about this until now.

I had been frustrated by it at first, but as my gaze flitted between the two of them, I could see that Grayson's move had been calculated.

Teo sighed. "You're right," he said. "You're right, I just feel like I'm going crazy. I don't know how much longer I can handle this."

"Come," I said, scooting away from the middle of the couch so Teo could sit next to me. "Have a seat."

He sat between us, the couch moving under his weight.

He buried his face in his hands for a second, a rare moment of vulnerability around us. I wondered if he would do the same thing if Jace and Victor were around, but I immediately realized that he wouldn't.

"I just feel like everything's spiraling," he said. "I don't know what's going to happen after the police question Jace."

"Nothing," Grayson said. "The police only got his decoy devices and we all know how to handle ourselves during an interrogation."

I looked between them. "What does that mean?"

Teo straightened up and smiled. "It means we ask for a lawyer and don't say anything. Still, we've never been questioned about something like this."

Grayson nodded. "But we'll handle it. We always do."

Teo turned to me. "And what about your article?" he asked. "Are you still going forward with it?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes, I am. After Sam gives me the go ahead. I need to make sure he's all cleared with the police before I do it."

"He's okay with it?"

I nodded. "He's more than okay with it. He asked me to do it."

He looked at me, his expression serious. "Are you sure? I mean, it could put you in danger."

I smiled at him. "That's why I'm staying here," I said. "With Victor outside standing guard and both of you in here,

absolutely nothing can touch me, right?"

Teo's smile widened. He inched closer to me, his fingers climbing up the back of my neck until they were threaded in my ponytail. "Only I can touch you," he said, pulling my head back slightly.

The gentle tug sent a shiver down my spine. We hadn't been intimate for a while, since before he had accused Sam of being a killer. After that, he had gone to the hospital, and we hadn't been together since. Not really. I wanted to give him his space while he recovered, but I could tell he wanted me. I wanted him too, now perhaps more than ever.

He had literally taken a bullet for me.

I smiled, turning my head slightly to look at him. "Now who told you that?"

Teo's hand tightened in my hair, pulling me closer to him. "No one needed to tell me," he growled, his lips finding mine.

I moaned into the kiss, my hands snaking around his neck as I pulled him closer. I could feel the heat radiating off his body, and it only made me want him more.

He pulled away from the kiss, his eyes dark with desire. "I need you," he said, his voice hoarse.

Grayson stood up from behind him. "I can give you guys some space."

Teo moved away from me for a second, craning his neck to look back at him. It was the first time I noticed the flush on

Grayson's cheeks, the way he was turning his body away from us.

Teo laughed under his breath. "Are you hard, Grayson?"

Grayson didn't say anything.

Teo whispered into my ear, just loud enough for Grayson to hear. "Do you see what you're doing to us?"

I was in shock. The sudden turn of events had left me reeling. I could feel the heat of Teo's breath against my ear, and I could sense his desire. But more than that, I could sense the tension in the room, the way Grayson seemed to be holding his breath, the way he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. All of it was intoxicating and terrifying at the same time.

Teo's hand trailed down my neck, his fingers tracing the curve of my collarbone. I shivered at his touch, my body coming alive under his expert hands. His mouth found my neck, his lips trailing a line of fire down to my cleavage. I moaned, my hands grasping at his shoulders.

"Teo," I gasped, my eyes closing in pleasure. "What about Grayson?"

"He likes this," he said, his hand sliding down to cup my breasts. I opened my eyes to look at Grayson. "You like this, right?"

Silently, Grayson nodded.

Teo's hand slid lower, and my breath caught in my throat as he cupped my pussy. I could feel my desire pooling between my legs, my panties growing damp under his touch. Grayson's

eyes never left me, his gaze fixed on Teo's fingers as they rubbed the damp fabric.

I felt vulnerable, sitting there with both of them watching me. But the feeling was electrifying. Their desire made me feel powerful, their eyes on me making me feel sexy. I reached out to Teo, pulling him closer. My mouth found his, and I kissed him hungrily, needing to feel his lips against my own. I could feel Grayson closing in on us, and I could sense the way he wanted to join in.

"Jesus, Teo," I said, my hands grasping at his. "We can't..."

"We can," he said, his eyes dark, his voice low.

I moaned as his fingers traced the edge of my panties. He pulled away for a second, his eyes never leaving mine. "Don't you want us?"

I could only nod.

"Then do it," he said.

"Do what?" I said, my voice shaking.

"I might still be recovering from my injury," he said softly.

"But that doesn't mean I can't find ways to please you."

His gaze darted toward Grayson.

"Do what you want to her," he said. "But don't fuck her, or I'll kill you."

Grayson chuckled. "You're so romantic," he said.

I wanted to tell them both to stop, to tell them we could never go through with it. But as soon as the words left my mouth, I

knew they wouldn't listen. I didn't want them to listen.

Grayson's hands gripped my waist, and I gasped as he hoisted me up. I was still sitting on the couch, but now I was almost in his lap, staring up into his eyes.

He looked down at me, his fingers trailing my waist gently. "I've thought about this for a long time," he said, his voice low, his eyes dark.

"What?" I asked, my voice breathy, my heart beating out of my chest. "What have you thought about?"

"This," he said. "The way you would feel in my arms."

His lips found mine, his tongue snaking into my mouth. I moaned in his arms, my arms wrapped around his neck.

I could feel Teo behind me, his hands trailing over my hips.

And I could feel my own wetness between my legs.

Teo tugged at the waistband of my shorts and pulled them down my legs.

"I don't know about this," I whispered.

"Tell me to stop. Tell him to stop," he replied, his voice a croak in my ear. "You don't want us to, do you? You want us to keep going."

Grayson's hands were on my breasts, his fingers pinching my nipples through my shirt. I kissed him again, our tongues entangled as our bodies crushed against each other. Teo's hand slid between my legs, and I moaned as his fingers tugged at my wet panties.

"You're dripping," Teo whispered into my ear. "You want us."

"I can't," I protested weakly.

"Liar," Teo said softly as Grayson played with my nipples.

I moaned as Teo tugged my panties off, pulling them down my legs. I was in a haze of desire, my head swimming with the possibilities of what was about to happen.

"You should have told him what you wanted," Teo said. "If you don't tell him, he'll never know."

Grayson squeezed my breasts, his mouth finding my neck. Teo slid his fingers into me, and I cried out in pleasure.

"Fuck, I want you," Grayson said, his fingers tugging at my nipples. "I can't wait to fuck you."

Between my pussy and Grayson's hardened cock was Teo's fingers, which he was pumping into me, making me scream with every thrust.

"You're not allowed," Teo said wickedly. "You want to feel how soft and wet she is, you can—but this pussy is mine. Isn't that right, Sofia?"

I whimpered as I nodded.

To my surprise, Grayson grinned. "Sure thing, boss," he said.

Teo's fingers slid out of me, and his hands found Grayson's belt. His movements were practiced, even though he couldn't see much because I was in the way, and I wondered if they had ever done this before.

As if on cue, Grayson smiled at me. "I'm only doing this for you," he said. "Because even if I don't get to fuck you, getting to touch you is the hottest thing that's happened to me in my entire life."

I threw my head back as he raked his hand over my breasts, capturing my nipples in his fingers. I could see how hard Grayson was, his erection pressing against my belly through his pants, and I wanted nothing more than to feel him inside me. I leaned back against Teo's chest as Teo unbuckled Grayson's belt and pulled down his zipper. The big cock I'd seen before came free, hard and even bigger than it had seemed before.

"God, you're big," I moaned.

"For you," Grayson said, thrusting his hips and pinning his cock between the two of us.

I could feel Teo's hands sliding up the inside of my thighs, teasing my pussy. Teo's hands were dangerously close to Grayson's hardened cock, certainly close enough to feel the heat coming from his skin. I was wet and ready for them, and I squirmed in Grayson's lap.

"Tell us what you want," Teo whispered into my ear. He dug his fingers into my hips, rubbing my ass as he pushed into me.

"Oh my God, Teo," I shrieked. "You're going to make me come, oh, god, you're going to make me come."

"Then come, sunshine," Teo growled. He dug his fingers into my hips and spread my legs wide, providing Grayson with a

full view of my dripping pussy. He stopped for a second, as I got to the edge of my orgasm, whispering in my ear. "What would make this better for you? Remember, he can't fuck you."

Better? I couldn't think of many things that would make it better, my senses already so heightened from everything that was happening.

I looked down at my legs, at the way I was astride around Grayson, at Teo's hands hovering near Grayson's cock.

And at how close their faces were, only my shoulder between them.

I closed my eyes. "Kiss," I heard myself say, my voice a whisper.

There was a beat, as if they were both processing what I had just said. It was Grayson who answered first, laughing deep in his chest.

"I think she means she wants us to kiss, Teo," he said. I was still pressed between the two of them, wearing nothing but my panties and a dark tank top, feeling more exposed than I ever had in my entire life. Their bodies were hot and hard pressed against mine, and being between them was absolutely perfect.

Teo removed his hands so Grayson's cock was pressed against my underwear, and I moaned as I felt just the barest touch of the head.

Grayson's lips found mine, and I made a noise of protest when the kiss ended. But then I was kissing Teo, fiercely and

hungrily. I ground against Grayson's cock, taking more and more of it and moaning as it hit my clit.

I threw my head back, pulling away from them for a second.

They stared at each other for a beat too long. I wondered if I'd ruined the moment.

Then Teo craned his neck and took control, capturing Grayson's mouth in a bruising kiss. My entire body felt like it was on fire, desire thrumming through my veins as Grayson opened his mouth and Teo deepened the kiss.

With a throaty laugh, Teo broke away from Grayson and looked at me. His gaze was hot and hungry, and the look in his eyes made me feel like I was the only person in the world.

"You want to see more?" he asked.

I just nodded, my eyes wide.

"Say it," he said, his voice low and deep.

"Yes," I said, my voice hoarse. "I want to see more."

"Fuck," Teo said. "I need to fuck you right now, Sofia. Thank you for getting her ready for me."

Grayson smiled, his eyes dark with desire.

Despite his injury, Teo was graceful. He spun me around and pushed my shoulders back.

"You're going to sit on top of him while I fuck you," he said.

"He can play with you all he wants, but only I get your sweet pussy. Do you understand?"

I nodded, unable to form words.

Teo kissed my lips, then dipped his head to just below my shoulder blades. "Good girl," he said, the vibration of his voice giving me goosebumps. I was still rubbing against Grayson's cock, and he reached up to grab my breasts. Teo grabbed me by the waist, pulled me back slightly so I was practically hovering. It was barely a second later that I felt the head of Teo's cock against my entrance.

"Ask him if he wants you," Teo commanded.

I looked up at Grayson and purred, "Do you want me?"

"I want you so fucking bad," he said, his fingers pinching my nipples.

I winced in pleasure. "I'm yours," I said, my voice a moan as Teo pushed into me, slowly and carefully. Teo's hands slid over my breasts and down my stomach, settling over Grayson's and guiding them.

I was sandwiched between the two of them, my whole being alive and tingling. Grayson's fingers pinched and pulled my nipples, and Teo's cock was driving into me. It was even hotter, somehow, that Teo was controlling Grayson's hands; though Grayson obviously knew how to touch me, he didn't do it without Teo's permission, only settling his hands where Teo left them.

"Oh god, fuck," I moaned. I leaned back and closed my eyes, the sensation of Teo pumping into me made all the more intense by Grayson's hands playing with my nipples and the way he played with my tits. Grayson nibbled on my shoulder, his teeth raking up my pulse as Teo thrust into me harder. The

two of them moved at the same time, Grayson playing with me every time Teo eased off, Teo thrusting into me whenever Grayson paced himself.

It was so much. I could hardly breathe, nevermind think.

"I can feel you squeezing my cock," Teo said. "Get ready for it."

His words sent a thrill through me, and I ran my hands over my belly, feeling the muscles flex under my fingertips. Teo grabbed my hips, squeezing me hard as he bottomed out in me, and I cried out, my breath coming in gasps. "Do you like that?" Teo asked, his voice low. "Do you like it when my cock is inside you? Do you like feeling how hard Grayson's cock is against you?"

"Yes," I whimpered, working my hips backwards in search of him. "Oh, god, yes."

"Come for me, sunshine," Teo said, his voice rough.

I was still coming when Teo yanked his cock out of me and pulled me back against him, pressing his cock against my ass. I cried out as I felt the barest touch of his cock against me.

"You want me?" he asked, his voice rough.

"Yes, yes, yes," I cried, grinding my ass against him.

"Do you want me to fuck you?" he asked, his voice almost a growl.

"Yes, I want you to fuck me," I said.

He put his arms around my waist and pushed me onto Grayson, who caught me with his arms and pressed a kiss against my lips. I kissed him back, barely able to stop myself from crying out as Teo slid into my pussy again and I knew I was going to come again. Teo grabbed my hips and started pumping into me. I was so close to coming that the feeling of Grayson's cock slipping against me was almost too much.

"Oh my god," I whimpered, my pussy clenching and unclenching around Teo's cock.

"Do you want Grayson to come?" Teo asked, his voice a growl.

"Yes," I whimpered, knowing that I would do anything now, I was so close.

"Ask him," Teo commanded.

"Will you please come for me?" I asked, my whole body trembling. I knew that Teo was going to come, and I was so close to coming, and I wanted it to last forever.

I looked up from underneath my lashes at Grayson, who was watching us, his eyes dark with lust. He was touching himself, his hand stroking his giant cock, and I knew he was going to come.

"Do you like that, Grayson?" Teo murmured. "Do you like seeing her come for me, knowing that you aren't going to get to fuck her?"

"Yes!" Grayson moaned, his hand moving faster in a frenzied rhythm.

I watched, my whole body tensing for another orgasm. Teo grabbed me and pulled me back, holding my back against his chest and thrusting into me again. He tangled his hand in my hair and tugged my head back, his dark eyes boring into mine.

”Are you going to come for me?” he asked, and I felt like I was drowning in the intensity of his gaze.

”Yes,” I moaned, my whole body tightening with my impending orgasm. I was so close, and the way he looked at me was making me come undone.

”Are you going to come thinking about him watching you?” Teo asked, his eyes intent on me.

I groaned as I felt the press of his cock against my g-spot, and I cried out. Grayson threw his head back, and I heard him moan, his hand still circling his cock as he looked right into my eyes, which I fought to keep open so I could stare at him while I was having one of the most intense experiences of my life.

The orgasm rolled over me, and I gripped onto Grayson’s arms as I felt Teo’s cock swell inside me. His hand fell from my hair, and he wrapped his arms around me, holding onto me as he came. His cock twitched inside of me and I cried out, seeing stars.

”Oh, god, that was fucking hot,” I said, and I wasn’t sure if I was talking about Teo’s cock or Grayson watching or the way both of them had made me feel. I was pretty sure it didn’t matter; they were both so amazing that I was just happy that they were mine.

We stayed that way, Teo holding me in his arms and me leaning against Grayson until Teo groaned behind me.

”Shit,” he said softly. I could hear the pain in his voice.

I turned around. ”What’s wrong?”

Teo flashed me a flimsy smile. ”Nothing,” he said, hobbling along so he could sit next to Grayson.

Still warm from my orgasm, I sat next to him. I noticed that Grayson reached out to help him, but Teo ignored him. He might as well have slapped Grayson’s hand away.

”Is your leg okay?” I asked, my voice soft.

He rolled his eyes. ”Sure. I’m just tired.”

Before Grayson could ask him about it, the door swung open. Victor’s gaze landed on us, his eyes wide, then he shook his head and averted his eyes.

No one touched Teo’s things...except, of course, Grayson.

”I didn’t mean to interrupt anything, boss,” he said, ignoring the way we were sitting on the couch, our clothes rumpled and the smell of sex in the air. ”But I think we have a problem.”

Teo sighed. ”What is it, Victor?” he said, sliding his pants up his legs as if this was totally routine.

”Jace isn’t answering my calls,” Victor said.

”Maybe he just needed a break,” I quipped and immediately regretted it when I saw the look on Victor’s face.

”You don’t understand,” Victor said. ”I can’t find him anywhere. I think he’s gone missing.”

THE END