



BOOK THREE OF
THE **ALPHA** GROUP

UN**LOCKED**ED

MAYA **CROSS**

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Unlocked

(The Alpha Group Trilogy #3)

By Maya Cross

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A Note From The Author

I just wanted to give you all a little advanced warning that, while the first two books were purely from Sophia's perspective, Unlocked moves between both Sophia and Sebastian. It was something I wanted to do earlier, but I couldn't make it work without giving away too much. I hope you enjoy being in Sebastian's head as much as I did!

CHAPTER ONE

Sophia

The first thing that I remembered was that I was cold. Everything was still black and my body wouldn't respond, but I shivered nonetheless. Then, gradually, things began to swim into focus, as though I were floating upwards from the darkest depths of the sea.

I coughed. Then again. And then sucked in several great breaths. One by one, I could feel muscles spark back to life. They were like dead weights, attached to my body, but at least I could move.

It took a few minutes for my mind to drag itself out of neutral. My first thought was that my lunch with Ruth must have turned into the bender to end all benders. It had happened before, and the cotton wool sensation in my head was at least a little reminiscent of my nastier hangovers. But then I remembered the following morning. My walk through Newtown. My newfound resolve to start getting things back on track.

The broken back door.

The stabbing pain in my neck.

The strong hands catching me as I fell towards the floor.

Oh Jesus. Oh fuck. What the fuck had happened? Where was I? And how long had I been out?

I flung myself into a sitting position, a move I instantly regretted as it sent a powerful coil of nausea twisting through my stomach. *Right, then. No fast movements.*

Drawing a few calming breaths, I steadied myself and surveyed my surroundings. At first glance the room around me appeared fairly ordinary. Sparsely furnished, with just a bed, table, and bookshelf. The cream coloured walls and smooth wooden floor boards made it feel a lot like the guest bedroom in my parents' house. However it didn't take long for the differences to become apparent. Firstly, there were no windows, just a small space above the bed that looked to have been painted more recently than the rest. Similarly, the door looked somehow out of place; a giant slab of thick timber with a heavy iron lock.

Battling a bout of vertigo, I dragged myself to my feet and stumbled over to it. I knew what I'd find, but my chest still tightened when the handle refused to budge. The room may not have looked like a traditional prison cell, but it would hold me just as effectively.

This time, the nausea came on more strongly. It clawed at my insides like a wild animal. I tasted bile, sharp and hot, at the back of my throat. Somehow I managed to stagger to the corner of the room before my stomach emptied itself on the floor.

When it was over, I dragged myself back to the bed and curled into a ball. I knew I should try and approach the situation logically, but all I could focus on was the terror that was running like ice water through my veins. How could I possibly react rationally in the face of something like this? I'd been kidnapped from my house by unknown assailants, shot full of God knows what, and was now being held prisoner, for reasons I didn't understand. It was straight out of a horror movie.

Even through the haze in my mind, I knew that this had something to do with Sebastian. It was the only explanation that made sense. The fear I'd seen in that final letter told me all I needed to know. Whatever he was involved in was extremely dangerous, and now I was in the thick of it. And I had no

idea why.

~~*Take a deep breath, Sophia. Crying isn't going to do you any good.*~~

I started with what I knew. They hadn't killed me outright. As horrifying as it was to consider, they could easily have done so. That meant they wanted something. Was someone trying to extort Sebastian? He certainly had the wealth for it. If that were the case, they'd probably already told him they had me. The ball was in his court. Would he do what they asked? It pained me to admit, but I didn't know. I had no doubt that he loved me, but the stakes were obviously much higher than I'd imagined. Perhaps they were too high.

Of course, extortion was probably the best case scenario. There were much darker possibilities. If Sebastian's secrets were as large as they seemed, it made sense that he'd have enemies, enemies who may be under the impression I knew something important. I suspected that if that were the case, they wouldn't be gentle about extracting the truth. My mind filled with terrifying visions; knives and saws and long iron poker, heated to a glowing red.

Deep down I knew there was a third possibility too. Maybe my kidnappers weren't strangers at all. No matter how I approached it, I couldn't see Sebastian having anything to do with this, but I couldn't say the same for his colleagues. We hadn't exactly kept our discussion in his building private. I knew Thomas had overheard and it certainly wasn't unreasonable to think that others might have as well. I had almost no idea what went on at Fraiser, a few scraps at best, but perhaps it was enough to make them feel threatened. And if that were the case, my gut told me that they wouldn't hesitate to do anything to rectify the problem.

I tried to convince myself that Sebastian was just moments away from tearing down the door and riding in on his white horse, but the truth was he had no way of knowing what had happened. He'd been very clear that all our ties were severed. Even if my captors had told him they had me, they wouldn't have been stupid enough to give away their location. For now, I was on my own.

Gradually, whatever they'd shot into me seemed to wear off and I began to feel more human. My mind ran in a constant circle, my body surging with some powerful combination of fear and anger. I paced the room, testing the lock over and over, searching for breaks in the plaster, anything that might hint at some chance of escape. I knew that it was all but impossible — this wasn't some hasty, spur of the moment snatch and grab — but I couldn't simply sit there and wait for what came next. It felt too much like admitting defeat.

I had no idea how much time passed. It's funny how quickly you lose sense of the hours in a room with no clocks or natural light. Eventually though, during one of my circuits of the far wall, there was a rattling at the door. Steeling myself, I took a few steps towards it and poised there. I wasn't sure what was coming, but I wanted to be ready, should an opportunity present itself.

The door flew open and a burly looking man in a suit walked through. He had dark olive skin, darker than Sebastian's, and heavy black curls that were cropped close to his head. He was carrying a tray with a sandwich and a glass of juice resting on it.

"Dinner," he said. He spoke with a sharp accent; Russian maybe, or Middle Eastern.

I had no doubt he wasn't the only one on guard duty, and judging by the easy confidence with which he moved, he wasn't particularly concerned about me escaping. But as he walked closer, I caught a glimpse of the open door behind him and all my survival instincts kicked in.

"Thank you," I replied, amazed by how little my voice was shaking. I reached calmly for the orange juice and began raising it to my lips, then with a flick of my wrist I tossed the liquid into his face and darted for the door.

In my head, it worked flawlessly. I saw him collapse to the floor as the citric acid set his eyes

burning. I saw myself finding the guard outside sleeping on his chair and, after stealing his gun and handcuffing him in place, making a daring escape. Unfortunately we weren't in a movie. This was real life.

Instead of falling, my captor let out a short hiss, and one hand flew up to his eyes, but he was obviously well trained because despite his temporary blindness, he moved to block my path. In retrospect, it was a pretty stupid plan; there was only one place I could go and he knew it. But desperation is a powerful emotion and I only had two words running through my head at that moment: *Get away.*

I ploughed right into him. He must have weighed at least double what I did, but that didn't stop me from trying to fight. I let loose with everything I had, pounding his chest, his stomach, his neck. I landed a few good blows, but they barely seemed to register. It was like punching a mattress. The heavy muscle that coated his body absorbed everything. I shifted my focus, trying to strike him between the legs, but by that time his eyes were open once more and he blocked my attacks with ease, seizing my arms and pinning them together with one giant, meaty hand.

"Nice try," he said with a smirk. "Now, my turn." And then with almost derisive casualness, he flicked back his arm and struck my face with a colossal backhand. I spun through the air, my vision flaring white as I slammed into the floor. The impact knocked all the breath from my lungs.

"Eat," he said. "The boss wants to talk to you, but it may be a while." He glanced down at the now empty cup. "I guess you're going thirsty until then."

And with another smirk, he pulled the door closed behind him.

I crawled over to the wall and propped myself up against it. My whole head was ringing, and my cheek felt like it were on fire. It would be a lovely shade of purple in a few hours. *Great plan, Sophia. Just beat up Mr Universe over there and make a breezy escape. That'll work a treat.*

I knew I should probably eat, but just glancing at the sandwich made my stomach turn. How could I think about food at a time like this?

I desperately wanted to retain my composure, but that encounter had really driven home the hopelessness of the situation. I began to cry; fat, salty, desperate tears that flowed like a river down my face. I was utterly helpless. Escape was not an option. Whatever they wanted from me, they were going to take. The only question was how they would go about it.

* * * * *

Somehow, I managed to fall asleep. I don't know if it was the lingering effect of the drugs, or my body's way of trying to cope with the situation, but the next thing I remember is waking up to some sort of commotion in the hall outside.

I had no idea what it meant; the walls were thick and the sounds indistinct, but at this point, I assumed that any activity was probably bad. It signalled that we were progressing on to whatever happened next. I desperately wanted to hide, but there was nowhere to go. My chest felt impossibly heavy, and my heartbeat was like gunfire in my ears.

There was a brief lull, but after about thirty seconds of silence the lock jangled once more. I braced myself. The door flew open...

... and in stormed Sebastian, a sleek black pistol in his hand.

My stomach turned a cartwheel.

His face was a picture of desperation, fear etched into every line on his skin. Seeing him again made my whole body ache, the wound left by his letter tearing open inside me once more.

His eyes were wild, almost insane, but they lit up as they fell upon me. "Sophia," he cried, taking three quick strides and lifting me into the fiercest hug I'd ever experienced.

As he wrapped his body around mine, everything surged inside me. I finally let myself feel the full magnitude of the situation. I found that I was crying again. My chest shook with great heaving sobs, incoherent thanks spilling from my mouth. He was warm and strong and radiated control, and I buried myself deeper against him, as if his body could somehow shield me from everything I was feeling.

He took my reaction in his stride, holding me close and stroking my hair softly. "I know, I know. It's okay. I've got you."

His touch was soothing. His presence washed over me, filling me with that primal sense of security. I knew things were a long way from being okay, and I still had more questions than I knew what to do with, but at that moment, I'd never been more relieved to see another person in my life.

After some time, the flood finally began to ease and I found myself able to speak again. "Can we get out of here? I can't be here anymore."

"Of course."

As I pulled away, he caught sight of my face and his expression hardened. "Did they hurt you?"

"Well they did this," I said, gesturing to my cheek where I assumed a bruise was blossoming, "but that was mostly my own fault for trying to do a runner."

"None of this is your fault, Sophia," he said, sounding impossibly sad.

He led me out into the hallway. Somehow, I'd gotten into my head that Sebastian had done this alone, James Bond style; but, of course, that was ridiculous. Waiting for us outside were five hulking men, sporting earpieces and stubby black guns. Their crisp suits and grim expressions made them dangerous ringers for my visitor from before. If I hadn't known any better, I'd have guessed they were on the same side. *Maybe all the world's evil organisations shop at the same rental agency. Rent-A-Thug.*

But even my inner monologue's attempt at wit couldn't bring a smile to my face at that moment. Seeing them all standing there, alert and armed to the teeth, really drove home exactly what kind of shit I had embroiled myself in. They had guns, for Christ's sake. I'd never seen a drawn gun in real life before. Australian firearms laws are notoriously tough, so it's just not the kind of thing we are exposed to. But here were five men, carrying pistols as casually as if they were newspapers; and judging by the way they handled them, they were perfectly comfortable putting them to use. I couldn't see any sign of struggle in the hallway, but I doubted my captors had just invited Sebastian and company in for afternoon tea. Blood had been spilt here somewhere. Blood that, in a roundabout way, was on my hands. I shook my head rapidly, trying to clear the image. That kind of thinking would do me no good.

Several men scouted ahead while the rest walked with Sebastian and I to the front door. It was dark outside, but judging by the suburban buzz in the air, it wasn't too late at night.

My prison turned out to be nothing more than a large, two-story house. Obviously some significant changes had been made, but to the casual observer, nothing would have stood out as strange.

There were several cars waiting for us. Sebastian guided me into one and followed me into the back seat, and in a matter of seconds we were turning the corner and pulling out into the night-time traffic.

Safety.

With every meter we put between us and the house, the tension in my muscles eased just a little.

more. I still felt like I might break down again at any moment, but at least the sense of sheer terror was subsiding. Now, I just felt exhausted, vulnerable, and utterly utterly confused.

Sebastian seemed to be almost ignoring me now. He was staring out the window, the initial relief on his face gone, replaced by a kind of heavy thoughtfulness. For my part, I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing. I was so ill-equipped to deal with the situation. Part of me just wanted to throw myself back into the comfort of his embrace, but now that we were making our escape, the questions began to come again, piling up in my head almost faster than I could process them.

"Where are we going?" I asked, figuring that was as good a starting spot as any.

He looked over at me. "Somewhere safe."

"Safe from who?"

There was uncertainty in his eyes, that innate defensiveness he'd spent a lifetime fostering. "Can we not do this now, Sophia? You've just been through one hell of an ordeal."

"Exactly, and now I want to understand what happened. So who the hell were those guys?"

His jaw worked wordlessly for a few seconds, but eventually he let out a small sigh. "Honestly, I'm not sure."

"Seriously? No idea at all?"

He shook his head wearily. "We're working on it."

"Then how the hell did you find me?"

He hesitated. I could see what looked like guilt on his face. "After I sent you that letter... I know this looks bad, but I was worried about you. So," he drew a deep breath, "I left someone watching your place. It was just a precaution, but thank God I did. They saw the whole thing go down."

My eyes widened. "You mean you expected this?"

"No. No! Of course not." He ran a hand through his hair. He looked utterly distraught. "Like I said, it was a 'just in case' measure, that's all. Some of the people we deal with...well, there's not much they're not capable of, and things are a little unstable at the moment. I just wanted you to be safe."

"So why didn't your guy intervene?"

"There were three men that took you, and they were good - professional. He didn't think he could stop them by himself, so he called it in and followed, instead."

"I see." I couldn't say I wasn't thankful he'd had someone there, but it was a little like handing someone a fire extinguisher after you'd set their place alight. Also, it drew my mind to the elephant in the room. Last time I'd gotten too curious, Sebastian had offered me nothing but heartbreak, but this was different. I was no longer merely a spectator. My life had been put in jeopardy. That entitled me to know a few things.

"How about we cut to the chase then. You may not know who they were, but you sure as hell know who you are. What kind of man are you, Sebastian? And what the hell is all this?"

He gave a desperate little shake of his head, his eyes darting towards the unnamed guard sitting in the driver's seat. "You know I can't answer that."

"So, what, I have to go along with all this without any idea what's happening to me?"

His brow furrowed. "I'm sorry."

I felt a surge of anger and I latched onto it. I may not have been able to take out my frustration on my captors, but I sure as hell could lash out at Sebastian. "Sorry? You're sorry? Are you for real? I just got kidnapped! Do you understand that? Sorry doesn't really cut it. Maybe in whatever secret, corporate world you guys play in that's normal, but in regular person land, that's kind of a big fucking deal."

He hung his head. "I know."

"At least give me something. What about a motive? I mean, what would anyone want with me? I have no idea about whatever it is you're into. As you just illustrated, that knowledge is clearly not for the likes of me."

His lips tightened. "I don't know exactly. We're trying to work that out."

I rolled my eyes. "Awesome. You don't know who they are, or what they want. Is there anything you do know?"

His expression hardened. "I know that I'm not going to let it happen again."

I gave a sour little laugh. "Forgive me if that doesn't fill me with confidence."

"What else do you want, Sophia? I'm sorry beyond words that this happened, and I'm going to do everything I can to make it right."

Tears stung the back of my eyes but I forced them away. "How? How can you possibly make this right? There are people after me, Sebastian, and I'm guessing they're not going to stop just because you foiled them once. My life is officially in tatters and I don't even know why."

His mouth opened and closed but no words came out.

"You know, I lost my job," I said, after a few seconds of silence. My voice sounded strangely wooden, now.

For a moment, confusion flooded his face. "What? When?"

"A few days after I went to your office. Jennifer finally made her move." Surprisingly, I couldn't even muster much anger at her. My being fired already felt hazy, like a distant memory. "When it happened, it felt like the end of the world. All I could think about was the fact that I had to start from scratch. Now, I don't even know if I'm going to get that opportunity."

He looked like he'd been struck. "I promise that you will, Sophia. I'm going to get you through this. You'll get your life back."

"When? When will I be able to go back home and start rebuilding? When can I see my family? My friends?"

He glanced away and gave a little shake of his head. "I don't know, yet."

"That's what I thought. God, it seems like being in a relationship with you should come with an advance warning: may involve significant peril." Realisation slammed into me, and I rocked back in my seat. "Oh my God. Sebastian. The thing with Liv... was that like this?" I didn't know how it hadn't occurred to me earlier. The coincidence was impossible to ignore.

He closed his eyes and drew several long breaths, his fingers clenching into a fist by his face. There was something in that gesture that was stronger than mere anger, a kind of deep seated mental agony. "I don't know, exactly," he said, after a few moments. He spoke slowly, his tone soft and hollow. "We never arrested anyone. As far as we know, there was no kidnapping. It all happened in the house. Not a day goes by where I don't wonder about it, whether it was because of me." His face twisted in pain. I could hear him sucking back tears. "But this here, what happened to you, this is definitely my fault, and I know it's probably little comfort to you, but I'll never forgive myself for putting you in harm's way."

I stared at him, a torrent of conflicting emotions raging through me. Part of me was still furious. He had every right to feel ashamed. After all, if I'd never met him, none of this would have happened. He'd pursued me, despite knowing that there may be risks, and I'd paid the price for that.

But I couldn't ignore the anguish in his voice, the guilt that was etched on his face. He meant what he said about never forgiving himself. He would carry this forever. It was a strange role reversal but suddenly I felt the urge to comfort *him*. Regardless of everything that had happened, I still hated seeing him hurt. The connection between us still blazed like an inferno inside me. It was like his pain

flowed out through his pores and into mine, seeping into me.

~~I spent the rest of the trip gazing out the window, watching the houses roll by. My fear may have eased, but my confusion was at an all-time high. I still had no idea what I was involved in, but I knew it had to be big.~~

Whatever came over the next few days, I suspected that my life would never be the same again.

CHAPTER TWO

Sophia

After driving for another half an hour we wound up at a giant old manor house, somewhere in the depths of eastern Sydney. It looked like the sort of place that belonged in a nineteenth century British period drama. A long driveway, manicured gardens, ivy snaking over the ageing brickwork like a network of veins. It was shielded from the outside world by a tall, concrete wall, with a Gothic looking wrought-iron gate providing the only access point.

"It's a secure location," Sebastian told me as we pulled in, although it was a somewhat redundant comment. One look at the expressionless men with automatic weapons, who were posted around the grounds, said that this wasn't somewhere you stumbled into uninvited.

A voice inside me wanted to know who the hell had multi-million dollar safe-houses just lying around for situations like this, but when stacked next to everything else that had happened, it somehow seemed to make sense. I felt a guilty little rush of excitement. Whatever world Sebastian had tried to keep from me, I was now being taken into the heart of it.

I'd decided to save the rest of my questions until we had a little more privacy. It seemed unlikely his friends would kidnap me, only to break down the door and rescue me a few hours later, but I was going to be cautious nonetheless. I was swimming in unfamiliar waters now. I couldn't afford any mistakes.

Sebastian and I hadn't said another word for the rest of the trip. There was something strangely distant about him now. It didn't make sense, but it almost felt as though he were angry at me.

Surprisingly, there were about ten people waiting for us inside, including several faces I recognised. Thomas and Trey both approached as I entered.

"What's with the welcoming party, guys?" I joked, bemused by their presence.

Thomas flashed a quick grin. "Someone called ahead. Said they'd got you. I'm glad you're okay."

"Yeah, you gave us one hell of a scare," said Trey.

"Well, thanks," I replied.

The two men shuffled awkwardly in place, their eyes darting to the floor. There was a strange tension in the air, and it didn't take a genius to figure out why. Whatever Sebastian's secret, the whole room was clearly in on it, and at that point it had to be obvious to everyone that I knew more than I was supposed to. I'd seen too much to still be in the dark.

Thomas and Trey appeared to be taking it in their strides, but not everyone looked so happy to see us. Several more of Sebastian's colleagues, including Ewan, were standing in a nearby doorway, assessing him with dark expressions.

"What's the deal with them?" I asked.

Thomas glanced over and grimaced. "Eh, just office politics. Don't worry about it."

Before I could delve any deeper, Sebastian appeared next to me. "There's a room made up for you upstairs. There's also food, if you're hungry."

I knew I should probably eat, but my stomach was still churning from the enormity of everything that had happened. What I really needed was a chance to process everything.

I shook my head. "I think I'll just hit the hay, if that's okay."

"Whatever you want," he replied.

I nodded farewells to the guys, who flashed tight little smiles before drifting back towards their colleagues. I wondered if they were going to get chewed out for talking to me. I got the sense that I wasn't exactly a guest of honour.

Sebastian led me upstairs and round the corner to a plainly made up bedroom. "There's a bathroom if you want a shower, and something to change into."

"Thanks," I said. That strange sense of hesitation was still there in his demeanour, like he was dealing with a distant cousin he only saw at family get-togethers. The desperation, the burning need I'd felt when he first burst into my prison, was nowhere in sight.

"Is there something else going on?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

I nodded towards the foyer. "I'm not stupid enough to think they're all here for me."

He paused. "Things have been a bit crazy around here. Your disappearance... well, it wasn't an isolated event."

I wanted to ask more, but the way his brow furrowed and his voice shook when he spoke told me that perhaps the other situations hadn't turned out so well. There would be time to discuss it later.

He moved to leave, but paused in the doorway. "Like I said, this place is as secure as possible. You saw the guards as we came in, and nobody outside of us even knows it exists. You're safe here, Sophia."

I nodded, although it felt like a lie. In spite of the virtual fortress around me, I wasn't sure I'd ever really feel safe again.

* * * * *

In the past, I'd always considered sleep a sanctuary. A lot of people in high powered jobs struggle to get enough rest, but no matter how stressed or strung out I was, it had always come easily for me. I love that sense of complete escape, of just shutting down and blocking it all out for a few hours.

But tonight was different. Every time I closed my eyes, it was like being plunged into biting water. I kept remembering the way it had felt that morning, in my house, fading out as the drugs took hold. The brief explosion of dread like a hand closing around my heart as I realised, too late, what was coming. Suddenly the darkness of sleep wasn't soothing, it was terrifying.

And every time I did manage to drift a little, I always woke in a cold sweat, just minutes later, a montage of terrifying images playing through my head. I hated that sense of powerlessness. I was the one in charge of my mind, dammit. The experience had been horrifying, but now it was over. There was no reason to let it affect me anymore. But logic didn't seem to be relevant. This was beyond rationality. Something had broken inside me.

The third or fourth time I woke, it was with a sob. Moonlight cast the room as a series of jagged silhouettes, and despite knowing I was somewhere safe, the unfamiliarity of my surroundings sent something sharp skittering through my chest. Suddenly, it felt like everything was closing in around me. I let out another cry and burrowed deeper under the covers, feeling fresh tears welling in my eyes. I didn't want to be this person, this person who cried at shadows, but I didn't know how to deal with the emotions that were roaring up inside me.

I felt another bolt of fear as I heard the door open, but in a moment there was a familiar weight on the bed, and then Sebastian's arms were circling my body from behind.

"It's okay," he said, his voice soft. "Let it out."

I have no idea how he knew I was in distress, but in spite of everything that was still unresolved between us, I loved that he'd come. The sheer strength of his presence dwarfed everything else, dulling the fear. He was my rock and I clung on for dear life, lest I slip back below the surface again.

He didn't say anything else and so neither did I, but just the act of being together was enough. I lay there, listening to the sound of his breathing, enjoying the sensation of that solid chest rising and falling against my back. Gradually, my turmoil began to dissipate. I had no idea how he had such a calming effect on me. When we were together, nothing else seemed to matter.

He felt like home, and for just that night, I pretended like he still was.

CHAPTER THREE

Sebastian

I hadn't expected Sophia to sleep at all, not after what she'd been through. Trauma like that can break a person. But somehow she'd drifted off. I had no idea where she found the strength to be that tough. She never ceased to amaze me.

For a while I lay there, trying to get some rest myself, but the events of the last two days had thrown my whole world into chaos. It was all happening again. The fact that I'd averted the worst didn't make the situation any better. I was an asshole. I should never have let it get to this point, but I was weak, and it had nearly cost the woman I love her life. How the hell could I sleep, knowing that?

To make matters worse, even now I couldn't stay away. She was as secure here as anywhere, but the moment she'd left my sight I began to feel agitated. I still hadn't managed to shed the mindless terror that had seized me when I first heard she'd been taken. The urge to go to her, to simply hold her and never let go, had been almost overpowering.

I'd tried to distract myself. There was certainly no shortage of work to be done — most of my colleagues were holed up together in the board room, planning well into the night — but I was useless there. My mind only wanted to focus on one thing, and soon I found myself sitting, propped up against the wall outside her room, nursing several fingers of scotch in a heavy crystal tumbler. I didn't know why, but just being close to her helped. I made myself vow not to enter. It had taken an immense level of control to cut her off the first time, and every moment in her presence stretched my willpower just a little more. I would keep her safe and solve all this, and then when it was all over, I'd let her go again. It was the only way.

But the moment I heard her sobbing through the door, all sense of self-control fled. Before I knew it, I was on my feet and in her bed. I expected her to fight, after all, I had to be the last person she wanted to see, but she didn't. Instead she just burrowed into me without a word. I hated how perfect that felt, the way her body fit like a missing puzzle piece against mine. I still didn't understand how such simple contact could make me so content, but it did.

And now she slept. I couldn't help but run my eyes over her again. Truth be told, I'd barely been able to stop staring since the moment I entered the room. She looked so fucking beautiful lying there, her face utterly peaceful, her curves perfectly accentuated by the thin cotton sheet. She'd taken the T-shirt I left her, but not the pants, and now in the throes of sleep she'd managed to knock part of the cover free, exposing one delicate hip. It was a tiny thing, the barest hint of pale skin and black cloth, but the sight took my breath away nonetheless. I felt impossibly low, ogling her after everything I'd put her through, but I was powerless to do anything else. Her body was like a drug, a burning rush through my system that was impossible to ignore. I knew how that hip would feel, if only I'd reach out and touch it. I had every inch of her body charted in my head; so perfectly soft, so perfectly feminine.

Fuck. I had to pull myself together.

Ripping my gaze free, I eased my arm out from under her. I'd done what I came to do. She was resting. There was no reason for me to stay.

She stirred briefly, and I came within a hair's breadth of pulling her back against me once more, but after a few moments she settled. Taking one last look, I moved quietly out into the corridor and

resumed my watch. I'd be there if she needed me, but anything beyond that was too hard. There was no happy ending here, and letting myself think otherwise would only destroy me more.

* * * * *

I spent the entire night in that hallway. After a few hours my back was killing me, but I refused to move until the sun rose. It was stupid — there were many men much more dangerous than I, stationed around the complex — but I felt compelled to guard her personally, just that once, like that could somehow make up for my earlier failure.

At around seven, I heard her stirring. Not wanting her to know about my vigil, I slipped downstairs and headed for the kitchen. I'd sent enough mixed messages for one night.

I had no idea what the day would bring. Ever since I'd heard about her kidnapping, I'd been operating purely on instinct. A kind of base fury that blotted out everything else. But now that I had her, I had to face the reality of the situation. Now the fallout would begin.

She came downstairs while I was eating breakfast. She looked impossibly angelic; eyes bright, hair tussled. God, no wonder I was in trouble where she was concerned. Even first thing in the morning, frightened and bruised, she was utterly gorgeous, and every time I saw her, it was like seeing her again for the first time.

She shot me a small smile, but it was cautious, deflated. I didn't blame her. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," I replied. "Sleep okay?"

She nodded, apparently unsure if she should say anything about my visit. "Eventually, yeah. I'm starving now though."

"I expected you might be. There's toast or cereal. I'm sorry it's not scrambled eggs, but we're a little unprepared here."

She blinked a few times, her expression unreadable. I don't know why I made reference to that morning. It felt like a lifetime ago.

"That'll be fine," she said, and set about making herself something. A minute later, she joined me at the table.

We ate in silence for a while, but I knew that was temporary. She had that glint in her eye again and the curious little curve of her mouth that I'd seen so many times before. It was the first thing I'd noticed, months ago, when she snuck into our party. I'd known that curiosity was dangerous, but somehow when I opened my mouth to send security after her, I found myself dismissing them instead. The worst part was that, even now, I couldn't make myself regret it.

"So," she said, after a few minutes. "What happens now?"

I grimaced. I didn't know what to tell her. All of this was unprecedented. Her very presence here went against every rule in the book. "Now, we try to find who did this."

She nodded slowly. "And what about me?"

"You'll stay here until it's safe for you to go home."

She stared for several seconds. "And that's it?"

I shrugged and nodded.

"You're still not going to give me any kind of explanation?"

I knew it was pointless, but I tried to fend her off nonetheless. "Like I told you before, Sophia, these secrets, this life, it isn't mine to share. Nothing about that has changed since I wrote that letter."

Her jaw tightened. "Nothing has changed? Are you kidding me? I just got kidnapped, Sebastian. Kidnapped! If that doesn't change things, I don't know what does."

I didn't know how to reply. She was right. Of course she was right. But that didn't give me license to break two millennia of tradition. "I'm sorry," I said, but even I knew it sounded weak.

"That's not good enough. It was one thing to keep me in the dark when it was just our relationship on the line, but it's more than that now. This is my life, for Christ's sake. I didn't ask for this, but like it or not, I'm here now. I deserve to know what the hell I'm involved in."

I stared into my coffee. There were no right choices. If I told her, I'd be betraying my brothers. But if I didn't, I'd be betraying her. She wasn't going to take that lying down either. If I didn't give her answers, she'd try to find them on her own. And who could blame her? If I were in her position, I'd want to know. But if she started digging, it would only make things worse.

"This isn't a secret like other secrets, Sophia," I said, feeling impossibly heavy in the chest. My heart and my brain continued to wage war inside me, but I think the battle was already decided. I wanted her to understand why I'd made the decisions I'd made, why I'd caused her such pain. "This isn't the kind of thing you promise to keep to yourself, then get drunk and spill to your friends."

She rolled her eyes. "I kind of figured that when it caused a couple of men to break into my house and drug me. I get it, this is serious business."

I exhaled slowly and glanced towards the door, realising exactly how dangerous this was. Most people were still asleep, but all it would take would be one early riser to overhear, and both of Sophia and I would wind up in the firing line. The severity of everything else that was going on here had allowed me a little leniency with the rules, but that would only extend so far. Sharing our secrets was one of the most serious breaches possible.

I got up and checked the corridor, then shut the door. "You can't let the others know I told you. I mean that. They're not stupid. They must already realise you know more than you should, but there's a difference between suspicion and confirmation. If they even catch a hint of this discussion, they'll have grounds to take the matter further, and at that point I doubt I'll be able to protect us."

Her breathing quickened a little, and for a few seconds I could see her wrestling with herself, but eventually she gave a quick nod. "I understand." I couldn't help but smile. Told that this information could get her killed, she barely blinked.

I closed my eyes. I felt a little like I was about to jump out of a plane. "I'm... part of something," I said. "Something very old and very big. We're called the Alpha Group."

"That's what the 'A' stands for?"

"Yes."

She nodded to herself. "Okay. So what is it?"

"It's tough to describe. The best phrase would probably be a secret society, but thanks to Dan Brown, that now conjures up images of religious cults and portals to other worlds. The truth of it is a little subtler than that."

"A secret society?" she said, enunciating each word carefully. She didn't look surprised, in fact she seemed incredibly calm. "Like the Freemasons?"

"Kind of, but not really. These days, they're more of a social club than anything else. It's difficult to be a secret when everyone knows you exist."

Her eyes were focused intently on me, quietly processing every word I said. "So, what do you do that's so different?"

I gave a wry smile. "That's not easy to summarise. We have our fingers in a lot of pies. In a nutshell, we try to steer things in specific directions."

"What sort of things?"

~~"Whatever we think is important,"~~ I replied. ~~"You have to understand, this isn't some two-bit~~ little operation, Sophia. What you've seen here is the tiniest fraction of the group as a whole. We have people all over the world. Government, finance, entertainment, you name it. Each member is carefully selected for the influence they bring to the table and, through that network, we can pull whatever strings we want."

She closed her eyes briefly, pinching the bridge of her nose between two fingers. "I'm not sure I understand. I mean, I knew you had to be involved in something big, but this is some conspiracy theory stuff you're claiming." She shook her head slowly. "So, what, are we talking like rigging elections and starting wars?"

I licked my lips. "Those are pretty extreme examples. We tend to be a little more low key than that. I'd rather not go into the specifics — I'm breaking enough rules as it is — but everything we do has a larger purpose."

"And who decides on the larger purpose?" she asked, a hint of disapproval in her voice. "If what you're saying is true, aren't you basically just a group of people who conspire to use your connections to do whatever the hell you want?"

"It's a little more complicated than that. You're judging us without knowing anything about us."

"So explain it, because it seems to me that a group like this is basically corrupt by definition. No wonder you and your friends are richer than sin."

I sighed. It was almost impossible to make her understand in the space of a single conversation. People were normally brought in slowly, over a matter of months. It had taken me nearly a quarter of a year to fully wrap my head around it all. "It's not like that. Most people in the group are recruited *because* of their wealth and power, not the other way around. The group is fundamentally about doing good."

"In what way?"

Apparently I was going to have to give more details. I wracked my brains for an example that would get through to her. "Remember the town I told you I grew up in?"

She nodded.

"Well I made that my first project when I joined, before I came to Australia. The group worked wonders over there. We got the government to pave actual roads, had them install better water filtration, even got the town on the electricity grid. It's still dirt poor, but the people there actually have a chance now. Our work isn't all that overtly philanthropic of course, don't think I'm sugar coating it, but our overall goal is to fix glaring inequalities, to protect people who can't protect themselves."

"But those sorts of responsibilities belong to the government. You know, the people we actually *choose* to run things."

"Come on, Sophia. Someone as smart as you can't really believe in the effectiveness of the government when it comes to protecting the individual. There's as much corruption there as anywhere in the world. Look at the GFC. Millions of people were financially ruined, and yet nothing came of it. Nobody has really been punished, no changes have been put in place. And that's just the tiniest tip of the iceberg."

She pondered this. "Okay, that might be true, but if you're so concerned with the lives of the everyday worker, why didn't *you* do something about that?"

I grimaced. "That's a sore spot for us, actually. The truth is we just didn't see it early enough. We're powerful, but we're not omniscient, and the big banks are particularly hard for us to break into."

at a high level. The kinds of guys who are happy to swindle people for billions aren't generally the sort of members we want to recruit."

For a few seconds she sat in silence, her face impassive.

"You know me," I continued. "You know the sort of person I am. Is it so hard to believe we might actually have good intentions?"

Her expression softened, although she still seemed somewhat unsure. "Let's say I believe you," she said. "There's still a lot of questions unanswered. Like how are you not discovered?"

I shrugged. "We're very good at staying under the radar. We've had a lot of practice. The group is over two thousand years old."

Her eyes widened. "Two thousand?"

I nodded. "This sort of thing doesn't just spring up overnight. We started in ancient Greece — hence the name — as a way to keep the government in check, and it kind of grew from there. Democracy was new then, and there were... teething problems. When those problems didn't go away with time, we hung around. Anyway, with the amount of influence we've now got, keeping our activities out of the limelight is actually fairly easy, as long as we don't do anything too bold."

"So what about Fraiser Capital then?"

"It's a real company," I replied, "but it's also our main front, here in Australia. Venture capital firms throw money at all kinds of strange projects. Having it as a legitimate entity makes financing and directing our operations much easier."

"So that party I snuck into...?"

"A meeting for potential new recruits."

She nodded to herself. "Right." She was much calmer now that the initial disbelief had worn off. She was calmer than I'd expected.

Her eyes flicked to mine, and she hesitated. "So I'm guessing that a group like this probably has its share of enemies," she said slowly.

I could see where she was going with this, connecting the dots. "We do."

"Enemies that might do things like kidnap your members' girlfriends?"

My shoulders slumped. "It's possible." Instinctively I reached out to clasp her hand, but managed to stop myself. *No more mixed messages.* "Believe me, I've been wracking my brains trying to work out why this happened. I have no idea what anyone would hope to gain from taking you."

"Is there anyone out there that might want to hurt you personally?" she asked.

It wasn't like I hadn't been through that a thousand times too, both now and when Liv was killed, but I always came up empty. "Not that I can think of."

She pondered for a few more seconds. "What about whatever's going on here then? The other disappearances. Is there a connection there?"

I closed my eyes briefly, feeling a fresh surge of anger. With everything that had happened to Sophia, it was easy to forget that there was more at stake than that.

"Maybe. Those situations were a little different," I replied, struggling to keep my voice level. "They weren't disappearances. They were murders."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh God," she said, and this time she was the one that reached for me. That simple contact felt wonderful and, although I knew I should, I didn't pull away.

"The first one happened a few days ago. Charlie didn't show up for an appointment. We didn't think too much of it, until the next day, when someone went to his house and discovered his body."

"Jesus," Sophia replied.

"We were still trying to figure it out, but then yesterday, the same thing happened with Simon."

At that point we knew we were under attack, so we followed protocol and gathered our senior members here." It felt strange to be saying this stuff out loud. It made it seem more real. I'd known Charlie and Simon for the better part of ten years. They were my friends, and although saving Sophia had briefly blotted out everything else, I felt their loss as keenly as anyone.

"I'm sorry," she said.

I nodded in thanks. "Perhaps there's a connection there," I said. "Perhaps it was the same people and we just got to you before..." I couldn't finish the sentence. "Anyway, we're using every available resource to work out who is responsible. And I swear to you, I won't stop until you're safe and you can leave all of this behind."

She stared at me for what felt like an eternity, her jaw set tightly, her eyes flickering with some emotion I couldn't identify.

Eventually, I heard the sound of a door closing upstairs. People were starting to wake up. Realising she still held my hand in hers, I reluctantly pulled away and got to my feet. "I have to go. There will be a meeting soon and I have to prepare. Just try to lie low, okay? I'll check in with you later."

She gave the barest hint of a nod.

I felt better, having told her the truth. Now she understood. It didn't make up for the pain I'd caused, but it was something.

On my way back to my room, I ran into Trey, who was just coming in through the front door.

"Just the man I wanted to see," he said. He wasn't part of our senior council, so he wasn't staying in the house. He was out on the street, working leads and keeping the rest of Alpha's ventures running smoothly.

"Oh yeah? What's up?" I asked.

He handed me a file he was carrying. "Just got these back from our team. None of those guys that took Sophia came back with any kind of match. Whoever they were, the computers of the world do not know them."

I let out a long sigh. Everything we'd run so far on Sophia's kidnappers had come back negative. Nobody should have been that hard to track. We had access to every database that mattered.

"Thanks," I said to him. "Keep at it. Something has to give eventually."

"Will do." He hesitated, like he was afraid to ask what came next. "How's Sophia doing?"

I gave a weary shrug. "I don't know. It's hard to tell. I think she might still be in shock, to be honest."

"Yeah, I can imagine all of this is pretty difficult for a civilian to process."

"That's one way to put it," I said heavily. I had no idea how she was going to react to everything I'd just told her once she had some time to digest it. It could go a thousand different ways. "Anyway, should go. Meeting in a few minutes."

"No worries."

I turned to go, but then a thought occurred to me.

"How do you do it, Trey?"

He cocked his head to one side. "Do what?"

"Keep your private life and your professional life separate?" A few years ago, Trey had been just like me. One empty fling after another. But then he'd had his own Sophia moment. He'd met a girl who made him give all that up, but unlike me, he managed to keep her in the dark. I didn't think I'd even met her. He kept her totally separate from anything group related. I always wondered how he pulled that off.

He flashed me a half smile. "I just have a girl who understands me, I guess."

~~He made it sound so damn easy.~~

CHAPTER FOUR

Sebastian

I'd always known there were protocols in place for if a situation ever got really bad, but I'd never experienced them first hand until now. All of our key personnel were currently gathered here in lockdown. It was part strategy meeting, part protection detail. We couldn't afford to leave ourselves exposed, not when we were completely on the back foot. Whoever was behind the attacks was clearly well connected. So far, they'd been like ghosts.

After a quick shower, I headed to the back of the house. We'd set up a makeshift board room in the study, and the bulk of the inner council was already there when I arrived. Thomas, and one or two others, nodded greetings, but the rest either ignored me or scowled pointedly before turning away. I hadn't done myself any favours rescuing Sophia the way I had. It went against several key group rules and a good chunk of the room wasn't in a hurry to let me forget it. If the situation had been any less dire, I'd probably have faced disciplinary action; but, for now, they had to settle for dirty looks and snide comments. We had bigger things on our plate.

"How you holding up?" asked Thomas, coming over to join me.

I shrugged. "How do you think?" I tried to keep the frustration from my voice, but I didn't do a very good job.

He studied me for several seconds. "You got her out, man. That's what matters."

"Is it? Then why do I still feel like shit?"

"Hey, I don't blame you. I'd be angry too. But try to go a little easier on yourself. You couldn't have known."

I felt my hands contract into fists. "Of course I could have. You know, I really thought I was smart enough not to put anyone else in this position again, but apparently I'm a slower learner than I thought."

He flinched a little at my tone, but his voice remained calm. "I thought we were past this. You know as well as I do that the situations are completely different. What happened to Liv was a tragedy but there's nothing tying it to any of this. It was a freak accident, that's all. You have to let it go. Stop blaming yourself."

I gave a bitter little laugh. It wasn't like I hadn't tried. Objectively, I knew he was right. Our investigation had never found anything to indicate that Liv's death was more than a standard break and enter gone wrong. But no matter how much evidence there was to the contrary, the heavy sensation I carried in my stomach since that day refused to dissipate.

From the moment Liv and I became something more than a casual fling, part of me had felt uneasy about it. There's no hard and fast rules about relationships within the group. As long as our secrets remain hidden, you're allowed to do whatever you want. Most Alpha members simply choose to forgo that kind of companionship to make their lives easier, and I'd been firmly in that camp. Then I met her.

Liv had a vibrancy to her that was completely infectious. I'd never known anyone like her. She was passionate and energetic, and she seemed to genuinely care about me for more than just my money. In retrospect, I could recognise more than a little youthful infatuation in our relationship, but

at the time it felt like something deeper. A little voice in the back of my head constantly told me that was leading her down a dangerous road, but I was too selfish to stop. I don't know why I was surprised when it blew up in my face. Even if her death was an accident, I still broke her heart, and I hated myself for that. I swore I'd never be responsible for that sort of pain again.

But now there was Sophia. If my attraction to Liv was the firm pull of a magnet, my attraction to Sophia was like gravity; unyielding and inescapable. Something about her just rendered me utterly powerless. From the moment I met her, I felt like I was trapped in a whirlpool, swimming in vain against the current as it gradually sucked me down. It scared me. It felt like only a matter of time before it drowned us both.

"Either way," I said, "I still put Sophia in danger. You're not going to try and absolve me of that, are you?"

He sighed. "Just because you're involved doesn't make it your fault."

I wished I could believe that. He was just being a good friend, but no amount of support could fix this.

I gazed around at the roomful of men I'd given my life to. From the moment I joined the group, they'd been the world to me. Even when I was with Liv, I'd never considered a different path. "Do you ever regret all this?" I asked, my tone softening. "Because I have to say, right now, for the first time, I'm actually starting to doubt my choice."

He flashed a sympathetic smile. "I think we've all felt like that, at one time or another. This isn't an easy road, by any means. But you know how important it is."

I nodded, though it was more for him than me. Truth be told, I wasn't sure I knew what was important anymore. Nothing made sense now.

A few minutes later, everyone had arrived. We took our seats.

"So," said Ewan, "give me some good news." Although he wasn't in charge in any real sense, as the longest serving member, he ran the meetings. He was also the most visibly upset person in the room. Sunken eyes spoke of sleepless nights, and his hands roved restlessly across the table, as if just staying in motion might somehow speed things up. The two men we'd lost, Simon and Charlie, had been close friends of his.

Marcus, the youngest member of the group, grimaced. He was our point of contact for the investigation. "We don't know much more than yesterday, unfortunately. Our guys went over every inch of Simon's house, but it was the same as Charlie's. No signs of forced entry, security footage wiped. Whoever it was did one hell of a job."

"What about the autopsy?" asked Thomas.

"Still coming," replied Marcus. He glanced at Ewan. "He didn't go gently, though, I can tell you that much."

Ewan slammed his fist down on the table. "I'll make sure *you* don't go gently, you little shit."

"I don't mean to be disrespectful," replied Marcus, looking a little pale. "But it's important. This wasn't just about taking them out. Someone went to a lot of effort working them over, which means that, chances are, they wanted to know something."

"Were the two of them working on any projects together?" I asked. "Anything tying them together?"

But before Marcus could reply, Ewan cut in. "Well, look who has decided to rejoin us," he said, making a big show of looking surprised to see me. "Does that mean you're ready to focus on what's important again?"

"I'm sorry about my absence last night," I replied, trying to remain calm. "I had other things on

my mind." He was right to be angry, and if I'd been in his position, I'd have reacted the same way. I had an obligation to these men, an obligation that couldn't just be cast aside on a whim. But the suggestion that anything was more important than finding Sophia made everything inside me tense.

"That's exactly my fucking point," the older man replied. "We've got a major crisis going on, and your head isn't in the game. It's busy burying itself between a pretty pair of thighs."

Thomas' hand flew out, firmly holding me in my chair. He knew me well. Rage poured through me. "If you keep talking like that," I said, my voice sharp enough to cut glass, "the group will be down another member before too long."

"Is that right?" Ewan asked. He didn't look even slightly perturbed. "You'd put her before one of your own? You're even further gone than I thought."

Guilt and anger seethed in my stomach. Ewan and I had never gotten along, and I knew most of his aggression was just frustration at the loss of his friends, but there was a tiny part of me that thought he might be right. Perhaps my priorities really had changed. "Why do you care so much what I do?"

He laughed. "You flatter yourself. Honestly, Sebastian, I don't give two shits what you do. But what I do care about is you using Alpha resources to rescue your girlfriend when they could be out there finding the bastards that did Simon and Charlie in."

I opened my mouth, unsure exactly what I was going to say, but Thomas jumped in ahead of me. "You still don't think there's a connection there, Ewan? The people that took Sophia were organised, efficient, and clearly backed by some serious money. Exactly the sort of operation that might have been able to take out our guys."

Ewan shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "That doesn't prove anything."

"That's true," Thomas said, "but it is a pretty big coincidence, and I, personally, don't care much for coincidences. In any case, we have very little idea what's going on here yet. Let's not lose our heads until we know more."

Ewan seethed in his chair for a few moments. "Maybe you're right. Maybe. But you want to hear what I know already? I know that the group is under attack, and yet there's a civilian girl walking around in our headquarters, seeing everything, overhearing God knows what." He turned his gaze to me and raised his eyebrows ever so slightly, as if to say, 'Or being *told* God knows what.'

"Where do you want her to go?" I asked, desperation creeping into my voice. "You know the kinds of people we deal with. Sending her back out there may well be a death sentence."

For a moment, I thought I'd gotten through, but then Ewan's expression hardened further. "I don't know, but she doesn't belong here."

"For now, I say she does," Thomas said. "At least until we know what we're up against. Someone wants her, and if it is the same people who did that to Simon and Charlie, then it's in our best interest to deny them what they want, wouldn't you say?"

Ewan glared around the table. Several others seemed to share his disapproval, but nobody could come up with a counter. It was hard to argue in the face of sound logic.

I shot Thomas an appreciative smile. "I'll make sure she stays out of everyone's hair," I said to Ewan.

He nodded curtly, and the meeting turned to other matters. Despite my best intentions, however, I couldn't focus. All I could think about were Ewan's words. In truth, he was right. Bringing her here had been a mistake. Even if I'd told her nothing, her curiosity would eventually have gotten the best of her. The moment she'd walked through those doors, everything had changed. But all other paths led to the unthinkable. I didn't know what other option I'd had. It was a no win scenario.

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