

Beep. Beep. Beep.

What on earth was beeping so loudly? And annoyingly.

Sophia Montgomery blinked. Brightness burst through the slit she'd managed to force open. She squeezed her eyes shut tight again and sucked in air.

A strange stench curled her nostrils. It was almost rancid . . . disinfectant mingled with sweat. That made no sense . . .

*There had been two men, banging at the door. Barging in. Knives. Big knives. Grabbing her by the hair and throwing her to the floor. She hit her head against the leg of the chair. The coppery-metallic taste of blood filled her mouth.*

Sophia tried again to open her eyes. W-what? she mouthed, but not a sound escaped. Burning shards closed around her throat as she tried to swallow against a gravelly resistance. *Dear God, what's happening?*

"Shh. Don't try to talk," a woman's crackly voice soothed. "The doctor will be here in a moment."

Doctor? Sophia struggled to sit, but every muscle in her body resisted, a sure sign she'd overdone at practice. Gentle hands eased her still. A cool, damp cloth stroked her forehead.

*"You thought you could get away with it?" one of the men had yelled. His breath hissed against her face. Her neck.*

She blinked again, this time prepared for the light. Or so she thought. The brilliance burned. She moaned and snapped her eyes closed.

"I'm sorry. Let me turn down the light," the woman whispered in her guttural toned voice.

*Click.* The sound echoed in Sophia's head.

"There. This should be better."

Sophia tried squinting a third time. While still brighter than the darkness she'd been comfortable in, the light wasn't so searing. She barely made out the figure of a woman at her side, hunching over her bed.

Wait a minute. Something wasn't right. Where was she? *God?*

"Well, good morning," a man's cheerful voice boomed.

Still squinting, Sophia shifted her gaze to the voice's origin. The fuzzy silhouette moved close to her.

"I'm Dr. Rhoads. Nod if you can hear me okay."

A doctor? What was going on? She nodded and forced her eyes open wider as pain ricocheted around her shoulders.

"Good." Cold hands touched her forehead. She must have reacted in some way because he chuckled softly and said, "Sorry. Everyone says I have the coldest hands in Arkansas."

Arkansas . . . but she lived in Texas. Plano. Close to the gym where she trained.

Training! *Lord, what is going on?*

The doctor shined a light in her eyes, searing them with its intensity. She snapped them closed and turned her head, moving out of his hold.

"I know it's uncomfortable, but I had to check your pupils."

Sophia forced her eyes open, willing them to focus on the man. She could now see his white coat. Dark hair. Big smile—too big.

She opened her mouth to ask what was going on, but razors sliced inside her throat.

“Don’t try to talk. You sustained serious damage to your throat, including your vocal chords. We’re treating the injury, and you’ve responded well, but you won’t be able to talk until the swelling of your larynx subsides considerably.”

She closed her eyes as scattered images raced through her mind. *Pinned to the floor. The bulky man straddling her, putting all his weight on her abdomen. His hands around her neck. Squeezing. Not enough oxygen! Can’t breathe! Tighter. Tighter.*

She sucked in air and reached for her neck, but her arms wouldn’t lift her hands. Red, hot arrows of pain shot from her shoulders down to her wrists. *Oh, God!* She opened her eyes wide and looked into her lap. Everything was in clear focus.

Sophia reclined in a hospital bed, the standard white sheet pulled up to her chest. Her arms sat on top of the sheet. Her hands were wrapped in gauze, big as footballs. Her right arm was in a cast up above her elbow.

*The skinny man holding a knife to Mamochka’s throat. Yelling. Demanding. The bulky one stepping on her right hand with his heavy, big boot. More pressure. The pain! Stop! Harder. Bones snapped. Please, please stop. The sobbing. Hers. Mamochka’s.*

The pounding of her heart echoed in her head, shoving aside the beeping sound getting faster and louder. *No, Lord. Please!*

“Calm down, Ms. Montgomery. Your blood pressure is too high. I don’t want to have to give you anything right now,” the doctor said.

“You must relax now, *Milaya Moyna*,” the older lady whispered as she patted Sophia’s head with the cool cloth again. There was something so familiar about her . . . but . . . not.

“There you go,” Dr. Rhoads said. “Breathe slowly. In through your nose and out through your mouth.”

Even breathing hurt, but Sophia controlled her panic. Years of practicing self-control had made her a master despite her fears. Her hands. How would she compete?

“Well done, Ms. Montgomery. I’ll go over your injuries with you in detail, if you’re ready.” Dr. Rhoads stared at her, a single brow raised.

She nodded, sending slicing pain shooting down her spine. Sophia set her jaw and refused to wince.

“Okay.” The doctor reviewed her chart. “You have sustained a laryngeal fracture with some mucosal tearing. We’re keeping you on voice rest to minimize edema, hematoma formation, and subcutaneous emphysema. We will continue the use of humidified air to reduce crust formation and transient ciliary dysfunction. We’ll also continue treatment by use of systemic corticosteroids to retard inflammation, swelling, and fibrosis and to help prevent granulation tissue formation.”

Tears threatened, but Sophia blinked them back and concentrated on what the doctor said.

“Since you sustained compound fractures of the larynx, we have you on systemic antibiotics to reduce the high risk of local infection and perichondritis, which may delay healing and promote airway stenosis. You’re also taking anti-reflux medications to reduce granulation tissue formation and tracheal stenosis.” Dr. Rhoads smiled. “Of course, this means you can’t eat or drink anything for a few more days. Understand so far?”

Sophia swallowed instinctively, and regretted it immediately. She didn’t understand everything the good doctor said, but she got enough to know her throat was damaged enough that she couldn’t talk or eat. Still, it didn’t sound permanent, so it was something.

*He leaned forward, letting his weight add strength to his hands closed around her throat. No! She couldn’t see past his face anymore. His scowl. His eyes. They weren’t filled with rage, but just . . . empty.*

“Sophia? Do you understand?” Dr. Rhoads asked.

She ignored the scattered images and gave a little nod. Her head began to throb in cadence with her heartbeat.

“Good. Moving on . . . you’ve sustained serious, traumatic crush injuries to both of your hands. In surgery, we were able to remove all the tissue we couldn’t salvage. We were able to repair most of the damaged blood vessels to reestablish circulation in your fingers. All the broken bones were realigned and stabilized with temporary pins called K-wires and screws. We repaired the damaged tendons and ligaments. Post-op, you’re doing great. You should be able to begin physical therapy as soon as the bandages are off.” Again, the doctor smiled.

*“Tell us.” He stepped down on her hand. Pain. Bones cracked. Sophia cried out. “Stop!” Mamochka screamed. “Tell us.” He put all his weight on his foot. Bounced. Sophia screamed and tried to roll over to protect her hand. He slung her backward and plopped onto her hips, straddling her.*

The image disappeared. She stared at her hands lying gauzed and lifeless in her lap. Everything within her wanted to scream . . . cry . . . hit something. Why was this doctor smiling? Didn’t he get it? Her hands were her life! If she couldn’t sustain her weight on her hands, her career was over. *Dear Lord, no. Anything but this.*

“О’кей *Милая Моyna*,” the woman whispered.

No, it wasn’t okay. And who was this woman to be calling Sophia *my sweet*? Especially in Russian.

Despite the excruciating pain the movement caused, she twisted her head to meet the woman’s stare. Sophia was certain she’d never met the woman before, but there was something . . . her eyes. They were just like *Mamochka’s*.

Could it be? The woman looked to be about the right age.

“Now,” Dr. Rhoads interrupted her thoughts, “about your pelvis girdle fracture.”

Her pelvis was busted, too? *He straddled her. Mamochka yelled out. Sophia kicked, trying to buck him off of her. She had to help her*

*mother! He pinned her with his weight. Pain shot through her midsection and hips as if she'd missed a dismount and fell off the balance beam. "You aren't going anywhere. Ever," he whispered as he leaned over her and wrapped his hands around her neck.*

Unaware of her agony, the doctor continued. "There's only one breaking point along the pelvic ring, with limited disruption to the pelvic bone and no internal or external bleeding. This means your pelvis is still secure despite the injury, and we can expect a prognosis of a quick, successful and complete recovery."

Great. So her pelvis would have a complete recovery. She could live without being able to talk. But would her hands totally recover? If so, when?

She closed her eyes, refusing the tears access. All her life, coaches and instructors had drilled into her head crying was not an option. Tears were to be saved for her pillow.

So many before her had sustained injuries and left the circuit, only to never return. Was it her fate? *Abba!*

"The rest of your injuries are minor cuts and bruises that should heal without incident. Several areas required stitches. You have a laceration at the back of your head where you were hit from behind—"

"Doctor," a man's deep voice cut off Dr. Rhoads.

Even though things were a little fuzzy to Sophia right now, even she didn't miss the frown etched into the doctor's brow.

Dr. Rhoads smiled at her. "Ms. Montgomery, you were very lucky. With the extent of your injuries, you could have been in a coma."

The other man cleared his throat.

The doctor frowned as he looked at her. "Now, if you feel up to it, there's a detective here who would like to ask you a few questions. Only if you feel up to it. Do you?"

A detective? She swallowed, then regretted it, but still nodded.

The doctor nodded and stepped back. “Keep it brief, please, Detective. She needs her rest.” Dr. Rhoads patted the bed beside her feet. “I’ll be back later to check on you.”

“Ms. Montgomery, I’m Detective Frazier.” There was the deep voice again, authoritative, but with a hint of danger.

Sophia stared at him as he stepped into her line of vision, and took a full inventory of her first impression of him. Hard to gauge his height since she was in the bed, but he stood taller than Dr. Rhoads. His black hair held a wave, even though it was short. He had broad shoulders and muscular arms apparent under the short-sleeve, button-down Oxford shirt he wore. He was probably no more than twenty-eight or so, at least in her estimation based upon the weariness in his face covered in stubble. His chin was cut and his cheekbones well defined. His nose had been broken at least once. But it was his eyes drawing her attention. They were so dark they appeared like a bar of dark chocolate.

Then again, maybe it was just her distorted vision.



Detective Julian Frazier had been silently assessing Sophia Montgomery from the corner of her hospital room since she’d been brought here following her surgery. Over the last two and a half hours, he’d gotten over the shock of her appearance. He’d been a cop for enough years that the damage a victim sustained shouldn’t have affected him, but he’d seen the pictures of Sophia Montgomery before the assault and to see her now . . .

He pushed off the wall he’d been leaning against and approached her bedside. “I have a few questions. Do you know who you are?”

She nodded, and unless he was imagining things, she actually rolled her eyes.

Attitude. Good. She'd need it. According to the doctors, she had a long, painful road to recovery in front of her. "Do you know where you are?"

She stared at him from her swollen, cut, and bruised face. There wasn't one square inch of her face and neck without some visible sign of her assault. Even her lips were cut and cracked as she tried to lick them. With her head resting on the pillow, she gave a nod.

"Do you know why you're here?" he asked, flexing and unflexing his fingers against the coolness of the hospital room. It might be June outside, but the nurses had set the thermostat low enough it felt like winter in the critical care ward.

She blinked.

Then again.

He met her stare with his own. Something about how small she was and the damage inflicted on her, yet she'd survived, nearly undid him. He'd overheard the nurses talking. They'd seen more people struck by vehicles with less damage than Sophia had endured. Whoever had attacked Sophia Montgomery and her mother had been especially vicious. Julian couldn't stand it. Whoever was responsible would face justice.

"Do you know why you're here?" he asked her again.

She tilted her head to the side. With her injuries, it had to hurt.

"You're unsure?"

She nodded.

Great. If she didn't remember anything, it would make his job so much more difficult. As it was, he was at a loss how he'd proceed at this point. With her extensive injuries, she couldn't speak and couldn't write, so how he was supposed to get her statement was more than a little confusing. He'd definitely have to think outside the box on this one.

She mouthed something. He couldn't tell what. She mouthed it again. It was one syllable, but he couldn't make it out. She mouthed it a third time.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand.” He snapped his fingers. “Let me get someone to help, okay?”

She nodded, but not before she shot him a look of pure frustration.

He could relate. Ever since he’d been called to the crime scene at almost eleven last night, frustration had been his constant companion. Frustrated this had happened. Frustrated no one had gotten there in time. Frustrated there were no immediate suspects.

Julian turned and stepped out of the hospital room, grabbing his cell phone from his hip. He quickly called his partner.

“She awake?” Brody Alexander asked without greeting. His partner was not one to waste time or breath with small talk when there was work to be done.

“Yep. Listen, we need to get Charlie up here ASAP to read her lips, so I can take her statement.” Julian stared over his shoulder at Sophia’s small and broken form lying so helplessly in the hospital bed. “And send some uniforms. I want someone posted by her room twenty-four-seven until we know what’s going on.”

“Got it.” Brody hung up, business concluded. He might have an abrupt personality that had earned his reputation as an unappealing partner, but he suited Julian. After what happened with Eli, he wanted someone like Brody Alexander: all business.

He needed someone like Brody.

Julian put his cell back in its belt clip and strode back into the hospital room and observed. It had taken the police some time to locate Alena Borin as Sophia’s next of kin, only finding the connection through Sophia’s mother’s maiden name. The older woman fussed over Sophia, but Sophia didn’t look like she recognized her grandmother. Maybe she had suffered some sort of brain injury in the attack. It would make his job much more difficult.

But not impossible. Because Julian refused to let whoever was behind this go unpunished. Someone would pay for this violence. He owed it to Sophia and her mother. The image of Sophia at the

crime scene was one he would never forget. It would probably haunt him forever.

He returned to Sophia's bedside. Her eyes were guarded as she watched Alena Borin's every move: straightening the covers, gently bathing Sophia's forehead with the damp cloth. Sophia shifted her focus to collide with his gaze.

The uncertainty in her stare tugged at something buried deep within him. Something he didn't want to pull out and inspect. He cleared his throat until Ms. Borin gave him her attention.

"I've called in a lip reader to take Ms. Montgomery's statement," he said to her privately, in a low enough voice Sophia couldn't hear him. "This will take some time, and I'm sorry, but you can't be present. Why don't you go have some lunch?"

The older lady scowled at him, shaking her head.

"Ma'am, you don't have a choice. This is official police business."

She glanced down at Sophia, then back to him. "I will not leave her alone."

"She won't be alone. I'll be here the entire time, and there will be officers outside her door within the hour."

A long moment passed. She didn't say anything, nor did she move.

"Ma'am . . ."

Ms. Borin snatched up her purse. She smiled at Sophia. "I will be back in less than an hour, *Milaya Moyna*." After patting the foot of the bed and throwing Julian another glare, she marched out of the hospital room.

Julian pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat. Sophia stared at him from behind her swollen face. He could read the wariness in her eyes as if it were a blazing neon sign.

"Do you know who that woman was?" He made a deliberate effort to speak just above a whisper level. The nurses had mentioned she'd probably have a horrible headache when she woke.

She shook her head—no, tilted it.

“You don’t recognize her?”

She tilted her head again.

“You aren’t sure who she is?”

A nod.

Julian stopped. Maybe he should wait for the lip reader, so he didn’t misunderstand. She wasn’t sure if she recognized and knew who Alena Borin was.

Sophia made a sound, but the pain it caused her marched across her face. She mouthed a single word, and this time, Julian understood exactly. “Who is she?” he asked.

She nodded.

He sat up straighter and looked her dead in the eye. “She’s Alena Borin, your grandmother.”