

Chapter Eleven

Sephie

I didn't want to stop the kiss, but I knew I needed to stop the kiss. I pulled back from him and looked at him, expecting him to look angry that I had stopped. Instead, he almost looked like he was in a trance. I could feel his strong, but soft grip on my hips. I just scanned his entire face. He was so handsome. His blue eyes always so intense that I felt like he could see inside me. I lifted my hand to his face and traced my finger along the features of his face. His thick eyebrows, his long eyelashes, his cheekbones, his stubble that was as pleasant against my skin as I had originally thought, his plump lips that felt so soft against my own. I didn't understand it, but I felt safe with this man. I shouldn't. I knew I shouldn't. He was the king of the criminal underground of the city. People feared him. Most people didn't even know his name. Yet, he told me his name without hesitation. He sent his personal bodyguards to protect me from a man I thought was just

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a douchebag, but as it turns out, probably wants to kill me now. He made a special trip to my apartment to bring me arnica. He could easily have hundreds of women that would likely throw themselves at him, but he's standing in my kitchen after putting cream on my bruises like I was going to break. Little does he know how insignificant these bruises are compared to what I've endured in the past.

I leaned my forehead against his, my thoughts still racing through my head. I inhaled and sighed. I felt him wrap his arms around me even tighter and pull me as close to him as possible. It was such a small gesture, but I found myself fighting back tears once more. I just wanted to stay like this for as long as possible.

A knock on the door meant that moment didn't last nearly as long as I was hoping. Adrik kissed my forehead before walking to the door to see who it was. He unlocked it and opened it, stepping aside for Misha to enter the apartment.

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“Ivan just got a call. New lead on Anthony. This one looks promising, so he wants to go check it out himself. It’s close by.”

Adrik was quiet for a moment, while he pondered this news. “You stay. Ivan can take Stephen and go check it out. Do not engage. I just want him to gather information right now.”

“Yes, sir,” Misha said as he left the apartment, closing the door behind him. Adrik walked back over to me, placing himself in between my legs again.

I was biting my bottom lip, worried about what I had just heard Misha tell Adrik. He swiped his thumb over my bottom lip to get me to stop biting it. “Don’t worry. We will find him.”

I was trying to keep it together, but I was scared. I just nodded and stared at my fidgeting hands. My legs started to shake, despite my attempt at composure. He had his hands resting on my thighs, which meant he

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felt the shaking. Without a word, he scooped me from the counter and carried me to the couch. He laid me down on the couch but lifted my shoulders so he could sit, and I could use his lap as a pillow.

“You should be resting, not worrying,” he said as he settled into the couch beside me. I laid my head in his lap. He reached for my hand and intertwined my fingers with his. With his other hand, he rubbed my forehead gently. “We will find him.”

I tried to relax with his words. I closed my eyes and concentrated on his warm touch against my cool skin. His fingers moved into my hair. “Can I take your hair down?”

Without opening my eyes, I reached up and pulled the elastic out of my hair. My hair fell in a pile across his lap. I felt his hand return to my hair, running through the long strands. It wasn't very long, and I had fallen asleep again.

That was a trick my mom used to use when I

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was a kid and didn't want to go to sleep. She would always lay next to me and run her fingers through my hair to relax me. It was usually only a matter of minutes, and I would be sound asleep. No one had run their fingers through my hair in a very long time.

When I woke, I was in my bed. It took me a few minutes to remember that I had fallen asleep on the couch, with my head in Adrik's lap, his hands running through my hair. I sighed at the memory and realized that I hadn't had any nightmares this time.

Thank God. I'd rather not have to relive that ever again.

I stretched and went to the bathroom to splash some water on my face. I walked back to check my phone. Four messages, three from Max, one from Adrik. I opened Adrik's first.

Sleep well, solnishko. I will see you again soon.

-Adrik

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I found myself hoping that soon came quickly. I smiled, remembering the feel of his lips on mine. I opened Max's messages as I headed out to the kitchen to find out if Andrei and Viktor were back or if I was still stuck with Misha and Grumpy McGee.

I have an epic tale to tell you about Kim tonight.

How you doin? Want me to drop some food by your place on my way home?

Ok, I'm guessing you're asleep by your lack of response. No soup for you!

Just as I was about to close my phone, another message from Max came in.

Holy shit, Sephie! Did you hear that explosion? It was really close to your apartment. Are you okay? If you don't respond this time, I'm for real coming to check on you. I don't know exactly where that building was that just exploded, but I know it was close enough to you that you should've felt it.

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What explosion? I didn't hear anything, nor feel anything. But I also didn't want him coming to check on me, so I responded right away.

I'm still alive, Max. I was sleeping last night when you texted. What explosion are you talking about? I didn't hear anything or see anything, so I have no idea what you're talking about. Clearly it wasn't as close to me as you thought.

Max: There was a warehouse a few blocks from you that exploded a few hours ago. Firefighters are still working on putting the fire out. I just heard about it on the news at the gym. I'm glad you're okay, gingersnap.

Aw, you love me. You really love me, Maximus Decimus Meridius.

Max: If by "love" you mean that I want to strangle you, then yes. Yes, I do. Too soon?

Haha only you can get away with that. Maybe a little too soon. Let the bruises heal next time.

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Max: *You know my world would crumble without my gingersnap. <3*

Nerd. Thanks for checking on me.

I walked into the kitchen to find Andrei, Viktor, and Misha still there. They all looked very tense and were speaking Russian quietly.

“You guys wouldn’t be tense about that building that exploded close by, would you?”

They all turned to look at me with wide eyes.

“How do you know about that?” asked Viktor.

I held up my phone and jiggled it. “I’m afraid I have bad news, boys. The whole city knows about it now. Is that why you all look like you want to kill someone right now?”

Andrei chuckled and instantly relaxed. “We’re sorry, sestrichka. Come, please. I make you coffee this time.”

“Seriously. That marriage proposal is still on

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the table.”

It was Misha’s turn to look shocked as Andrei and Viktor both laughed.

“Where’s Ivan? And Stephen, was it? I didn’t meet him. I just heard his name last night.”

“Ivan is on his way back here. He was at that building that exploded, yes. We think it was a trap,” said Viktor.

Misha clicked his tongue at Viktor and said something in Russian to him. Viktor just shook his head and said, “she will find out sooner or later. Boss wants us to be honest with her, so I am honest with her.” He looked at me like a proud older brother, winked, and added, “she’s stronger than she looks.”

“You know I can only marry one of you, right? Andrei already got the proposal. Are you trying to steal it from him? That’s rude, Viktor. But I might warm up to the idea of you two fighting over me.”

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He laughed as there was a sharp knock on the door. Misha went to the door, gun in hand. Andrei covered him and Viktor stood in between me and the door, his hand on my arm like he was ready to pull me away at a second's notice.

Misha just said, "Ivan" as he opened the door. Everyone relaxed as Ivan's imposing figure filled the doorframe. His bald head and face were covered with soot. If he wasn't already wearing all black, I would've bet good money that his clothes were covered in soot as well.

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