

Chapter Nine

Adrik

I sat at my desk, staring at my phone screen like a lovesick teenager. I wanted to go to her. I wanted to hold her, make her feel safe, protect her from everything that might cause her anything but happiness.

Not being able to find Anthony was making me crazy. I had spies everywhere throughout the city and no one had seen him. Or worse, they weren't talking. That meant Anthony had paid them off somehow. My spies were incredibly loyal to me. They all knew the consequences of betraying my trust. How could Anthony convince them to betray me?

Inhaling deeply, I stood up. I can't sit at my desk any longer. I looked at the clock. It wasn't late yet. I could stop by the pharmacy for some arnica and take it to

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her apartment. Ivan had an update for me anyway. I would sleep better knowing she had something to help soothe her bruises when she woke. Better yet, I would sleep better knowing Ivan had found something that would lead us to Anthony.

Most of the other bosses in the city were Italians. We were the only Russians, so we could get away with speaking Russian in front of the others without fear of them understanding us, but when it came to electronic communication, we never discussed business. Conversations could be recorded and translated. It was better to speak in person on sensitive matters.

I decided to go to Ivan for an update. At least, that's what I told myself. I felt silly wanting to go check on a girl I had only just met. There was something about her that I couldn't shake. I'd barely spoken to her, but she was beginning to consume my thoughts in a way that no other woman

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ever had. She was so full of life, so vibrant. Like she could make the flowers bloom just by walking through a meadow.

I thought back to the night before, in the kitchen, with her sitting on the table. The lights were bright enough that I finally saw her eyes clearly. I had never seen someone with unique eyes like hers. She had rings of different colors, each distinct and clearly visible. Her eyes were three different colors – a ring of brown, a ring of green, and a ring of blue. It took every ounce of self-control I had to not get lost in those eyes last night. She captivated me. I needed more.

I walked out of the office and motioned for my bodyguard to follow me. “Come, Stephen. We’re going on a trip.”

“Yes, sir.”

We pulled into the small parking lot of her apartment building after a quick stop at

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the pharmacy.

Is this really where she lives? I could give her so much better.

I shook my head, silently scolding myself for getting so caught up in a woman so quickly. I had a reputation for being ruthless, when necessary, not emotional. I noticed the curtains of the first-floor apartment part just enough that someone could peek through them as I got out of the SUV. That would be Ms. Jackson, I thought to myself. I politely waved to her. I couldn't quite see her face, but I saw a wrinkled hand wave shyly back and the curtains closed.

I had already had Andrei talk to her and explain enough of the situation that she wouldn't call the police. Most residents of this city knew that my people walked among them but couldn't pick us out of a lineout. Many were loyal to my

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organization, as I made sure to fund the local community as much as possible. My associates – the other bosses – had become greedy in some parts of the city and had instead decided to keep that money to themselves. I had a feeling it was the greedy little sons, but I still needed proof. The opinion of my organization was changing in the city and I didn't like it. I had always worked diligently to make sure the people of the city were happy with my dealings. It's much easier to run a criminal organization when the people of the city loved you than if they hated you. I liked the easy way of doing business. Have the people love you and be respectful with the cops. You can do whatever you please. It had worked for 10 years, but now the other bosses, who were much older than me, were getting older and wanting to hand over their areas of the city to their sons.

Anthony was already on my shit list, but after last night, I decided to make an

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example out of him. He had been trying to usurp power, albeit quietly, for at least a year now. I let it go on too long, honestly. He was smart about it, though. Little bits here and there that went unnoticed until it was a much larger problem. I also heard rumors that he was dealing in human trafficking and that was unforgiveable as far as I was concerned. He needed to be put in his place. His father, Salvadori, had served me well, as well as my father before me, but Anthony was out of control.

I tried to clear my thoughts as I climbed the steps to her apartment behind Stephen. Two sharp knocks on the door and we were greeted with Ivan's substantial frame. My men were well trained, but most of all, they were physically intimidating. Each of them was 6'3-6'5 and well over 250 lbs of solid muscle. They had trained with some of the most elite forces in the world. My life was in their hands every single day and I

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trusted them completely. I still didn't quite understand why I didn't hesitate to assign them to Persephone, but I wasn't going to change my mind. I wanted her protected. I needed her protected.

We stood in her kitchen, discussing the latest update on Anthony. They'd heard two tips on his possible whereabouts, but both ended up being dead ends. It felt like we were being fed misinformation on purpose. I didn't like it. Ivan had just finished giving me the information and we all heard a scream from her bedroom. I looked at Ivan and we all jumped into action.

Ivan and Stephen covered the outside of the apartment while Misha and I ran to her room. I didn't think she had outside access from her bedroom, but I wouldn't put it past Anthony to order a roof breach. Misha drew his gun, one hand on the doorknob. He briefly looked back at me, as

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I nodded my head. Misha burst through the door and immediately checked the window, bathroom, and any possible way someone could've gotten in.

I ran to her side. It felt like I couldn't get there fast enough. I just wanted her in my arms, to know she was okay. I had never felt this way about a woman before and I didn't understand why I felt this way about her, but I wasn't going to fight it at this moment. I just wanted her to be okay. I wrapped my arms around her as I sat on the bed beside her. It looked like she had just woken from a nightmare.

"Shhhh...you were having a nightmare. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you ever again," I said, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her to me.

"Adrik?"

"Yes, solnishko. You're okay. You had a nightmare, but it wasn't real. You're okay

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now.”

Her body was shaking slightly. I noticed she did that last night too. When I sat her on the table in the kitchen, after that piece of shit dared to lay his hands on her, she started shaking uncontrollably. It wasn't to the same level now, but she was definitely shaking. I felt a tightness in my chest that I was not accustomed to. I wanted to make it stop. She was sobbing softly into my chest now. God help me, I loved having her so close to me, even if she was upset.

“Let it out. You've had a big couple of days, but you're okay now. I promise,” I said. I ran my hand slowly up and down her back, trying to calm her raw nerves from the nightmare. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

She took a breath and leaned back away from me. I instantly regretted asking her the question as it put distance between us.

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She wiped tears from her face, but kept her eyes closed like she was fighting back more tears. I reached up and wiped a few stray tears from under her eyes. She finally opened her eyes. I felt like I was drowning in her beautiful eyes, and I didn't care. The dim light of her bedroom made her teary eyes sparkle, each color catching the light in its own way, making the three colors appear to dance in her eyes. My heart skipped a beat. I reached up and brushed her curls back from her face. "You're even beautiful when you cry."

She blushed and looked down at her hands. No! I needed her to look at me again. I gently raised her chin up, seeking her mesmerizing gaze once again and said, "Don't hide your beautiful eyes from me, solnishko. I could stare into your unique eyes all day and all night and never get tired of the view."

She struggled to accept my words. I

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noticed her shyness before at any mention of her beauty. She would usually change the subject quickly or use her quick wit to make light of the situation. Viktor and Andrei were smitten with her because of her sense of humor. They thought of her like a little sister already. I knew they would die trying to protect her, if needed.

“Wait, how did you get here?”

Subject change, as expected. I smiled at her. She was something worth protecting.

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Victoria Stone

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