

# King of the Underworld

## Chapter One

*Sephie*

I hear my white noise app cut off on my phone and my alarm slowly getting louder. I wait for the chiming bells to stop before I roll over and hit the screen. With a deep breath, I muster the energy to get out of bed and drag myself to the shower.

Another glorious day in the life of waiting tables. I stop myself from skipping to the shower I'm so excited at the prospect of being yelled at by angry customers again today. People are just cranky lately.

After my shower, I make myself a quick breakfast, even though it's late afternoon. Working the late shift means I miss the normal breakfast time, but let's be real. Bacon can be enjoyed any time of the day.

Once the dishes are done and washed, I grab my keys and my bag, locking the door on my way out. I live by myself. It's maybe not the best neighborhood, but all my neighbors are really nice, and we keep an eye on each other. When I turn around after locking my door, I see Mr. Turner walking up the steps to his apartment across the hall from mine.

"Hello, Miss Sephie. Going anywhere exciting?" He's slowly climbing the stairs, with his groceries in hand. It's Thursday, after all. Mr. Turner always stops by the grocery store on his way home on Thursdays.

"Hi, Mr. Turner. On my way to work. How was your day? Have any excitement at the hotel today?"

"No, not today, but I'm thankful for boring days, if I'm being honest."

Mr. Turner worked the door at the most expensive hotel downtown. He's been the doorman for 32 years and knows every single influential person in the city as a result.

"Boring days give you more time to find my Mr. Perfect, right? I like boring days too," I chuckle.

Mr. Turner laughs as he reaches his door and sets his groceries down to unlock it. "Don't you worry, Miss Sephie, I'll find you the perfect man one day. You deserve it."

"I don't know about that, but I'll take all the help I can get. Have a great night, Mr. Turner. I'll see you in the morning and as always, if you need anything, you call me." I waved goodnight to him as he walked in his apartment.

My smile lingers as I jog down the steps to the parking lot. Having great neighbors really can make a huge difference in your living situation.

Once I pull into the restaurant's parking lot, I find my normal parking space taken. I grumble to myself as I am forced to park farther away from the building now. I am nothing, if not a creature of habit. Not getting my normal parking space means this is going to be a rough night. *Hooray for Thursdays.*

When I step out of my car, I notice the storm clouds slowly rolling in. Inhaling deeply, I breathe in the sweet scent of incoming rain and relish the last moment of sanity before my shift starts. *I can do this.*

It's not just any Thursday. It's the last Thursday of the month, which means that all the crime bosses in the city meet at this restaurant to discuss "business." They reserve the back room and request that I serve them each time. I don't know if it's because I'm quiet, keep my head down most of the time, or if it's because I can remember what each boss likes and doesn't like, but they always request me. They always give me a fantastic tip, so it makes having to wait on known criminals somewhat manageable. Their tips are single-handedly funding my savings account, which means I'll be able to move out of my questionable neighborhood sooner, rather than later.

"Hey Sephie. Are you coming inside or are you just going to stand by your car with your eyes closed like a psycho all night?"

"Shut-up, Max. I'm coming, I'm coming," I say as I run to catch up to him. Max is the bartender and has his own fan club of women that come to the restaurant solely to be served drinks by him. His drinks aren't special. He's even admitted to watering down their drinks most days. They just want to stare at him while he smiles at them as he serves them their Cosmopolitans.

Max is tall, muscular, but a slender muscular. He looked like he could play in the NBA, not the NFL. His dirty blonde hair was shorter on the sides, but he was letting it grow longer on top. He said the women loved slightly longer hair these days, so he was conducting market research to see if longer hair got him more tips. Max had a boyish charm about him, but he knew how to use his emerald green eyes to get the ladies. One look from him and most women would swoon. I was apparently immune to that look. He tried it often on me, but I would laugh every time. He said I was good for his humility, if nothing else.

"Were you meditating just now? Do you need to find inner peace before the meeting tonight?" he teased as he opened the back door for me.

"I was trying to find the strength not to smack you, a-hole," I laughed as I walked into the kitchen.

"Oh. You wound me."

“I’m positive you will be able to find a woman to nurse your wounds, in... approximately 30 minutes,” I say as I look at my watch to see how long we have before the bar opens. From Thursday to Sunday, the women flock to the bar to see Max.

“But none of them will ever have my heart the way you do, my little gingersnap,” he says as he stands in front of me, leans into me, and gently tucks a loose curl behind my ear. He adjusts my thick braid over my shoulder and pretends to adjust the collar on my shirt.

I stare deeply into his big green eyes, as his fingers linger on my neck. Then I immediately break character into a fit of laughter as he also breaks and starts laughing.

“Go to work, Max.”

The black SUVs start arriving around 8 pm. Max is completely swamped with single women vying for his attention at the bar but still takes the time to run back to the kitchen like he’s a 5-year-old and yells, “THEY’RE HERE” and then runs back to the bar. I shake my head, laughing at his antics, take a deep breath, and steady myself for the night ahead.

The six bosses each come to this meeting with at least 2-4 additional people. Some are bodyguards, some are their children, and some are underbosses. The bosses are all very respectful, as are the bodyguards and the underbosses. It’s the children that I loathe. Sons of mafia bosses have the biggest egos I’ve ever encountered and worse, they feel entitled to act however they please. They’re handsy, they’re rude, and they all think that I should be throwing myself at them, simply because of who their fathers are.

Luckily, they don’t come to every meeting, but they’ll definitely be here tonight. Apparently, this meeting is extra important as the main boss. *the overlord? I don’t know what to call him.* *Lord King Boss? Feels right* – the Lord King Boss – will be here tonight. He rarely makes appearances in public, so I’m a little at a loss as to what’s so important that he would show up tonight, but I’m sure I’ll get snippets throughout the night. Because I’m always the one that takes care of this meeting, I know more about the goings on in the city than I probably should. I keep that information to myself, of course. I’m not an idiot.

## Chapter Two

*Sephie*

There is a steady stream of food to the back room throughout the night and the alcohol flows freely. I’ve gotten four smacks to my ass in the first hour. All the boss’s eldest sons are there. Lucky me.

Around 9:30, two new bodyguards, who are quite possibly the biggest men I’ve ever seen, walk into the restaurant as I’m waiting for Max to fill my latest alcohol order. Walking in right behind them, I see a man I don’t recognize, but can’t see clearly as the lights are dim in

the restaurant. He steps fully inside the door, and I can clearly see his face. He's tall, surprisingly young for a Lord King Boss, dark hair, two-day old stubble that I find myself wondering what would feel like against my neck, and he turns to look my direction with the most piercing blue eyes I think I've ever seen. He catches me staring at him and a sly smirk comes across his face. Just then, Max steps up behind me and gently pushes my shoulder.

"Hey, you should go escort him to the back room. He might not know where to go. I'll have your drinks ready when you get back."

I take a sharp breath in, broken out of my daze, and practically stumble toward the men at the front door.

"Uh...hi, I'm guessing you're here for the meeting?"

His intense gaze leaves my face to scan down my body briefly and discreetly, as he reaches down to adjust the cuffs of his shirt. He looks up again and nods once.

Okay, man of many words. This, I can handle.

"Please, follow me."

He nods once more, and all five men follow me to the back. There were two more bodyguards behind him that I couldn't see until the first two units stepped further into the restaurant.

Before I open the door to the back room, I turn around to face them, asking "may I take your drink orders, gentlemen?"

One of the first bodyguards says, "yes, water for all of us, please." His very thick, very Russian accent is very apparent.

I was surprised by his answer, so I cocked my head to the side, letting a "different" slip out before I realized I had said anything. My cheeks immediately flushed as I realized I had said the quiet part out loud.

"I'm so sorry. I mean no disrespect," I said as I stared at the floor and stepped to the side while opening the door for them.

The first two bodyguards entered the room first, scanned the entire room, then nodded. The blue-eyed Lord King Boss stepped up closer to me while his bodyguards were scanning, that sly smirk on his face once again, and leaned in close enough that I could smell his intoxicating cologne.

"None taken," he whispered, his Russian accent detectable as he stepped in front of his bodyguards to the welcoming greetings of the entire room.

"*What the fuck is wrong with me,*" I muttered to myself as I rushed back to the bar to get those drinks and to add five more waters to the order.

The mood in the room palpably changed after Mr. Lord King Boss joined the meeting. Everyone was very tense and very serious. What had happened while I was getting those drinks? I did a quick head count as I delivered each individual drink order. Ok, nobody died while I was away. This is a good sign.

I placed a refill of bourbon in front of one of the boss's sons. Anthony, I think his name was. This was Anthony's eleventh bourbon of the evening. Max knew better than to water down these drinks, so Anthony was getting the good stuff, at full strength. In layman's terms, Anthony was drunk off his ass .

No sooner had the glass hit the table and Anthony reached back and smacked my ass with such force that I was thrown forward onto the table, giving the men across from Anthony a full view down my shirt. I caught myself on the table and pushed myself back upright, only to meet those steel blue eyes once again. Only this time he wasn't smirking. Instead, his jaw was clenched.

I could feel my cheeks turning fully red as I apologized under my breath and quickly left the room. As soon as the door closed, I rushed through the kitchen and out the back door. Ugh, I hated the last Thursday of the month.

I walked to the dumpster and back a couple of times when I heard the kitchen door opening. One of the giant bodyguards came out first, quickly followed by the new guy. I stopped my pacing, not knowing how I was going to walk past him to get back to the restaurant.

He turned to his bodyguard, who handed him a cigarette and a lighter. Lazily putting the cigarette between his lips, he tilted his head down slightly as he cupped his hands around his face to light it. When the flame ignited, his face was illuminated, revealing that his blue eyes were focused on me. I was still frozen in the same spot, wondering how I was going to walk casually by this very powerful man back into the restaurant.

*Oh, for fuck's sake, just do it. After all, you have a job to do, Sephie.*

I took a deep breath and walked up to the back door. I kept my gaze down until just before I reached the two men, but quickly glanced up and gave them the best smile I could muster, before reaching for the door. Just as my hand was about to make contact with the door, he reached out and gently grabbed my wrist, causing me to look at him in fearful confusion.

He must've seen the fear in my eyes because he immediately let go and raised both of his hands.

"Hey, not gonna hurt you. I just want to ask you some questions," he said. His blue eyes, now darker, were so intense that it felt like he might be looking into my soul.

"Um, sure. What can I help you with? Did you want to order some food? Can I get you more than water?"

He let out a small chuckle, as did his bodyguard. What was so funny about me doing my job?

“No. But thank you. You’re very good at your job, but I don’t allow my men to drink when they’re working, and I never touch alcohol.”

“Oh...okay. Um, what kind of questions?”

“How well do you know those men in the meeting?”

“Um, I mean, define well? I’m always the waitress that serves them when they have their meetings. I know the older men by name, as they’re here every time. The younger men I have a harder time remembering because they aren’t always here. The sons aren’t always here either...thankfully” I whispered, once again realizing too late that I had said it out loud instead of in my head. “I know them more by their drink and food orders than anything else. I can tell you exactly what they like and don’t like when it comes to food and alcohol, but in the interest of self-preservation, that’s all the information I divulge on those men.”

He smirked at me and asked, “are they always so rude to you?”

“The older men, never. They’re very respectful. Most of the underbosses too are very respectful unless they drink too much. I’m not sure if their bodyguards know how to speak, because now that I think about it, I’ve never heard them say a word. The sons, though? What you saw earlier is a normal occurrence. Especially when they’re all here. It’s like they try to outdo each other.”

He squinted his eyes slightly as he inhaled the smoke from his cigarette. Holding his breath for a second before turning his head to blow the smoke into the air, away from me, his eyes never leaving mine. Why did I feel like I could look in those eyes for hours and never get tired of it?

“Thank you, uhhh...I’m sorry. I didn’t catch your name?”

“Sephie.”

“Sephie? That’s an unusual name.”

“It’s short for Persephone. Most people have a hard time pronouncing it, so I just shortened it. Also, those who know are generally nervous once they find out I’m named after the Queen of the Underworld,” I said, looking down at my fidgeting hands. I really loved my name, but it did come with a weird history.

“Thank you, Persephone. You’ve been very insightful. I’m pleased to have met you tonight,” he said as he extended his hand to me.

I hesitantly placed my hand in his. He gently turned my hand over and brought it up to his lips. When his lips connected to the back of my hand, it was like fireworks went off in my stomach.

I tried not to be obvious about the sharp inhale I took as he kissed the back of my hand, so I said, “yes, you too...mister?” as I looked at him inquisitively.

“Adrik. You can call me Adrik.”

## Chapter Three

*Sephie*

After my short interlude outside, I returned to work and tried my best to act like nothing happened. Anthony had apparently been chastised while I was away because he kept his hands to himself. This was new. Did Mr. Lord King Boss Adrik threaten him after I first went outside? Anthony had never stopped his juvenile antics before tonight.

I think I like Mr. Lord King Boss Adrik.

Most of the men had finished with their meals but were still deep in discussions. The room was tense, to say the least. I was busy picking up empty plates and taking them back to the kitchen. I recruited Max to help me pick up plates, so I wouldn't have to make so many trips. Just as he was about to enter the room, one of the bodyguards stopped him.

“Excuse me, sir. Only the lovely lady is allowed in the room,” he said with his giant hand on Max's shoulder. Max wasn't a small guy either. He obviously worked out regularly and was well over six foot tall, but he looked small next to that absolute unit of a bodyguard.

I looked back at Max and smiled. “It's okay, Max. I'll get them. Thank you for offering to help.”

I let out a sigh as I walked into the room. I glanced in Adrik's direction, only to notice his blue eyes staring at me once again. I quickly tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear and made myself busy.

After depositing another round of dirty dishes in the kitchen sinks, I walked out the kitchen door on my way back to the meeting room. In the back hallway, between the kitchen and the back room, I was met by none other than Anthony. He was coming out of the restroom, completely drunk, and acting like he might fall at any moment. I tried to hurry past him, but he caught my arm and pulled me back to stand right in front of him.

“Please let go of my arm. I have work to do,” I said, trying to pull away from him. His vice-like grip on my arm only got tighter. Did bourbon give him some kind of superhuman strength? Seriously. How was his grip so strong?

“C'mon, you know you'd much rather go into the bathroom with me for a quickie,” he said as he leaned in to try to kiss me, pushing me up against the wall so I couldn't easily get away from him. Ugh, his breath was horrendous and smelled like he'd drunk the entire bar that night. Truthfully, he'd probably had half of it, at least. I turned my head to avoid his lips, which only served to piss him off. He said something in Italian, which I didn't understand

because of his slurring, but he grabbed my other arm, again with his vice-like grip. He stepped even closer to me, as if that was possible. I could feel his entire body pressed against mine. I could even feel that he was getting aroused at standing so close to me.

He didn't say anything for a moment. He just scanned up and down my body, his breath getting quicker, his pupils dilating. He released one arm and reached up to my face. With the back of his hand, he lightly grazed my cheek. I turned my head, trying once again to get away from him. He sighed.

"Do you know who I am? Do you know how many girls would love to be in your position right now?"

"Then why don't you go find one of them. I'll gladly tag her in," I said.

"You have a smart mouth. I've always heard that redheads were firecrackers. Maybe someone needs to teach you a lesson."

"No thanks. School really wasn't my thing. I probably won't pay attention if you try to teach me anything." I was hoping to make him frustrated enough that he would move, and I could escape his grasp. Even if he lost a little focus, I was preparing to deck him and then I was going to make a break for it. I thought about screaming but didn't want to cause a scene. The entire back room was armed with enough firepower that they could level the entire block if it came to it, so making a scene wasn't my finest idea. I was also hoping someone would come out of the kitchen, but most of the staff had already left for the night, as it was a slow night in the front of the restaurant. Max was still at the bar, and he likely wouldn't hear me anyway. I had to figure out how to get out of this mess on my own.

"There's that smart mouth again," he said as he ran his hand up my arm and slowly wrapped it around my neck. "Do you know what I do to women that don't know when to shut up?" he asked as his grip slowly tightened around my neck. My entire body tensed, and my eyes went wide. I knew what was about to happen.

I felt my air being slowly cut off. Well, shi. \* I definitely didn't expect this to happen tonight. With my one free arm, I tried hitting him, but he had pressed his body against mine so tightly that I couldn't get any kind of leverage on him, so my fist was practically useless.

"That's it. I like it when they struggle. I like it when they beg me to stop."

Perhaps my smart mouth wasn't the attribute I thought it was. My mind was racing as I was trying to figure out how to get away from him when I heard the door to the back room open. Footsteps were approaching. No, multiple footsteps were approaching. One last feeble attempt to hit him and suddenly he wasn't there anymore, and I was on the ground coughing and gasping for air.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and instantly panicked. I scooted away as quickly as I could.

"Whoa, whoa, Persephone. It's okay. I won't hurt you. You're safe now."



I raised my gaze and was met with those blue eyes once again. They were darker in this light, but showing nothing but concern, as he reached out to me one more time. This time, I didn't move away. He put one arm around my shoulders, and I leaned into his chest. I realized I was crying. He gently stroked my hair and told me everything was going to be alright.

The next thing I knew, he hooked his other arm under my legs and picked me up, carrying me back to the kitchen. It was empty when we walked in. He walked over to one of the food prep tables and sat me down on the table.

Standing in front of me, he produced a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to me, his hands never leaving my thighs. I stared at his hands while I wiped the tears from my face and tried to compose myself.

I felt his hand, gently, under my chin. He raised my head and tilted it all the way back so he could look at my neck.

“You're going to have a gnarly bruise tomorrow.”

“Perks of being a redhead. You can look at me hard enough and I'll bruise.”

He chuckled softly and I let out a laugh as well. It might not be the healthiest coping mechanism, but humor made everything better for me. I'd endured some hard times and made it through because I never lost my sense of humor.

Adrik tenderly wrapped one of my loose curls around his finger, while he scanned my face, concern still in his eyes.

“Redheads have a special place in this world. Legend has it they stole the fires of Hell and that they carry the mark of Cain.”

“It's all true. I also steal souls, but only on the weekends. Work has been busy lately and I have a surplus of souls, with not enough storage space right now.”

A wide smile came across his face as he laughed. Good grief this man was handsome. I found myself smiling in response to his laughter and in that brief moment I had forgotten the events that led us to this moment.

“You are a unique woman, Persephone.”

“Yeah, that's true too. Redheads are only 2% of the world's population and of that 2%, only 2% have an eye color as unique as mine. So, basically, I'm a unicorn.”

I looked into his eyes as I was talking. His smile faded slightly and the intensity returned. He stared into my eyes long enough that I got nervous. I dropped my gaze and started fidgeting with my hands.

My body does this weird thing in response to trauma. It's like I'm shivering, but I'm not cold. Of course, this was the moment that started up. My therapist had informed me years earlier

that it was a somewhat normal trauma response. It hadn't happened in years, so I wasn't expecting it to start. I couldn't get away from Adrik fast enough and he felt my legs shaking.

"Are you cold, solnishko? I can get you my jacket," he said, his hands running up my arms to cover my bare skin.

"No, it's...I'm fine," I said as I hopped off the table. "I should get back to work. Thank you for helping me." I folded my arms under my chest and walked out of the kitchen without looking back.

The past always has a way of showing up at the most inopportune times.

## Chapter Four

*Sephie*

When I walked back into the meeting room, it was completely empty. Everyone had vanished. I can't say I was disappointed by this development. I busied myself with gathering up the empty glasses and the few plates I hadn't managed to clear already to take them to the kitchen. I hear Max whistling as he's walking down the hallway toward the back room.

"Hey, why did everyone leave in such a hurry?" he asked as he walked in and started to help me clear the tables.

"No idea," I said. I kept my gaze down, as I was once again on the verge of tears, trying desperately to keep them in so I wouldn't cry in front of Max. I hated crying in front of people.

"That was weird. I saw two of those giant bodyguards that came in last take a very drunk guy out front and beat the living shit out of him, then walk back inside like nothing happened."

I dropped the glass in my hand and looked at Max, wide-eyed.

"They did what??"

"Yeah, it was comical. And somewhat sad. But mostly comical. I think it was one of the guys you said was always an asshole to you, so I may or may not have cheered as the bodyguards came back in the restaurant."

"Max, you have to be careful. You know who these people are."

"I know, I know, but I was cheering for the Karma that guy was clearly receiving. Hey, wait a minute – what the hell happened to your arms?? And your neck??"

“This was the reason for the Karma.”

“Holy shit, Sephie! Are you okay? What happened? Why didn’t you come get me?”

“I’m fine. That guy is always handsy, but he took it to a new level tonight. I might’ve provoked him slightly and made things worse, so he choked me.”

“No, no, no. Don’t you do that. Don’t you take any of the blame on yourself. That guy is a dick and he had every blow to the face he got tonight coming for putting his hands on you.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right. I just want to close up so I can go home. I’m really tired.”

“Why don’t you just go? I’ll close everything up.”

“You know I’m not going to leave you here by yourself, Max. You might be a big, strong guy, but that’s still a jerk move. Everyone else is gone already.”

“You’re so stubborn you’d argue with the devil himself.”

“True story.”

Max just shook his head and laughed as he grabbed the last glass off the table and headed to the kitchen.

We quickly got everything cleaned up, put away, and ready for tomorrow’s lunch shift. We’d both been working at the restaurant for a few years now, so we had a routine down and worked together seamlessly. It always took us less time than everyone else to get our list of chores done in the restaurant before closing. We usually laughed and picked at each other during the whole process, so time passed quickly.

We walked out of the back door around 1 am. I stood and waited while he locked the back door, then we walked to our cars together. I was so busy looking at the still cloudy sky that I hadn’t noticed the black SUV parked between Max’s car and my car. I stopped dead in my tracks.

Max hadn’t noticed it yet, as he was looking at his phone. Probably texting whatever girl he was planning on hooking up with that night. He walked a few steps ahead of me, then noticed I was no longer beside him.

“Hey.... wha....” he said as he turned to find me frozen in place, a look of horror on my face as I was hoping the person in that SUV was not who I thought it was. Max looked at my face and then spun around to see the SUV parked between our cars. “Ohhhhh shit,” he said as he took a couple of steps back toward me. Without looking, he pushed me directly behind him as he watched the back door open.

I couldn’t see over Max’s shoulder and I was too scared to peek around him.

“What do you want?” Max yelled. I could feel him trying to be brave for me, but I could also feel how every muscle in his back was tense and rock hard.

“Please, don’t be scared. I only wish to pay Persephone for her excellent service tonight,” a deep and very calm voice said, his Russian accent evident. I recognized that voice. I peeked around Max’s shoulder and sure enough, Mr. Lord King Boss Adrik was walking slowly toward us.

I put my hand on Max’s back and said, “it’s okay, Max. He helped when...you know, Karma. It was his bodyguards.” Max visibly relaxed and inhaled deeply.

“Oh, thank God, I’m not gonna die tonight,” he said under his breath.

I giggled and reached up and kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“You know I got you, gingersnap.”

I walked toward my car and Adrik, who was watching me intently.

“Have you been waiting this whole time? You could’ve just come back into the restaurant. Or dropped it off tomorrow.”

“I had business to take care of. We drove back by and your cars were still here, so we waited. It wasn’t long,” he said as he handed me a fat stack of cash.

“Wha...noooo. This is too much. I can’t accept this,” I said, trying to hand the stack of hundred-dollar bills back to him.

“Please. You earned it,” he said as he once again gently grabbed my chin and tilted my head back so he could see my now darker bruise on my neck.

I could hear him curse under his breath but didn’t quite catch what he said as he inspected my bruise.

“It’s okay, really. I’m fine. I’ve had worse, honestly.”

His eyebrows furrowed into a frown as he scanned my face, once more tucking a loose curl behind my ear. Without realizing it, I leaned into his touch. My eyes closed and I took a deep breath. Just like when we were in the kitchen, I had a moment of complete peace. He placed his palm against my cheek, his thumb lightly caressing my face. I relished in the feeling, in the quiet, in the warmth that I felt in my entire body any time he touched me.

“Are you okay to drive home, solnishko?” His question broke me from my trance, and I momentarily forgot where I was.

“What? Oh. Yes. Yes, I’m fine. Sorry,” I said, quickly looking down at my bag to dig my keys out.

“No need to apologize. I think you need more of that in your life,” he said with that sexy smirk back on his face. If he only knew how correct he actually was...

## Chapter Five

*Sephie*

I woke the next morning, well before my alarm went off, feeling like my throat was on fire. I stretched and immediately regretted it, as my entire body felt like I had been run over by a very large vehicle. Repeatedly.

“Well, that sucked,” I said out loud to myself. Instantly regretting my decision to speak, I started coughing uncontrollably.

I got myself to stop coughing and got out of bed.

*No more outside thoughts, Sephie. Just inside thoughts.*

My phone started ringing as I was walking out of the bathroom. I looked at the caller ID. It was Mr. Turner from across the hall. I immediately answered the call.

“Hey Mr. Turner, is everything alright?” I said in a half-whisper, hoping I didn’t cause another coughing attack.

“Good morning, Miss Sephie. Listen, I don’t want to alarm you, but there was a very large man standing outside your door this morning when I left for work. I asked him what his business was there and he said he’d been assigned to guard you, but he wouldn’t tell me anything else.”

“Well, that’s weird,” I said, biting my lower lip. I tried to think why anyone would be “assigned” to me. Reflexively, my hand went to my neck. “Mr. Turner, was this man the size of a house, with black hair, crew cut and a beard?”

He chuckled and said, “that’s a fitting description of him, yes. You know him?”

“I think I might have an idea. It’s okay, Mr. Turner. He’s one of the good ones. At least I think so.”

“Ok, Miss Sephie, if you say so. If you need anything, you call me right away. I got my old buddy’s son, on the force, on speed dial. I’ll have him to your place in no time if you need him.”

“Thank you, Mr. Turner. I really appreciate it, but I hopefully won’t need that. I promise I’ll call you if it’s not who I think it is.”

We said our goodbyes and I walked to my balcony door. I peeked outside and noticed the black SUV parked in the parking lot below, a few parking spaces from my car once again. The windows were tinted so dark that I could only see a giant hand resting on the steering wheel. As quietly as I could, I walked to the front door and looked through the peep hole. I couldn’t see all of him, but you can’t mistake a physique like that. It was one of the bodyguards that had delivered Anthony’s karma the night before.

I opened the door. He turned around as I said, “good morning, sir. Can I get you a coffee?”

He smiled warmly. “Good morning, Miss Sephie. Thank you, but I’m fine.”

“Don’t be a martyr. You can’t have slept much if you’ve been here since Mr. Turner from across the hall left. Wait, are you on meth? You’re on meth, aren’t you? Is that how you’re awake right now? Don’t lie to me. You might be four times as big as me, but I know kung fu.”

That got a belly laugh out of him.

“No, ma’am. Not on meth. I still have all my teeth – see?” he said in his thick Russian accent, showing me his teeth as proof of his abstinence from meth.

“Touché. But you’ve still gotta be tired. C’mon. You basically saved my life last night. The least I can do is make you a cup of coffee.”

His warm smile stretched across his face once more and he ran his hand through his buzzed hair. “Sure, Miss Sephie. That would be great,” he said.

“Does your pal in the parking lot want one too? You know, while I’m at it, can I get your names? For the coffee order, of course.”

He chuckled and said, “I’m Viktor. The guy in the parking lot is Andrei.”

“How very Russian of you both. Please, Viktor, come inside while I make the coffee. It’s weird to have you standing outside my door. I already give my neighbors enough gossip as it is without a gigantic Russian statue outside my door.”

Another belly laugh from Viktor made me smile as well. He looked like he could kill you with his mind, but I could tell that Viktor had a heart of gold. He walked into my apartment, slightly nervous, but scanning the room like the dutiful guardian he is.

I busied myself in the kitchen, first pulling my wild, previously slept in hair into a bun on top of my head, then I set about making coffee.

“Are you hungry, Viktor? I can make breakfast too. I don’t even know what time it is right now, but it’s always bacon time in this house. Can Andrei come inside too, or do I need to make his to go?”

“No, please, Miss Sephie, that is not necessary.”

“Um, hello. Saved my life. Least I can do. We’ve been over this, Viktor. Don’t argue with me. You won’t win.”

He laughed, shaking his head. He just said one word, “ryzhiy.”

I raised an eyebrow at him, waiting for a translation.

He chuckled. “Redhead,” he responded.

“Damn skippy. Now how do you take your coffee? With the crushed-up bones of your enemies? Or without?”

This time, he slapped the counter he laughed so hard. He threw his head back and cackled.

“You are a funny woman, Miss Sephie.”

“It’s a gift.”

I set a coffee cup in front of him, along with milk and sugar, so he could make it the way he wanted.

“Are you going to call Andrei to come up here too? Or do I have to make you follow me out to the parking lot to deliver his coffee?”

“I will call him.”

“Smart man, Viktor. Smart man,” I said as I winked at him and set about getting the pans needed to cook breakfast.

In seemingly no time at all, there was a knock on my front door. Viktor immediately stood up from the bar at the kitchen counter where he was sitting. His hand instinctively going to his gun at his hip. He held his other hand up to me, indicating that I should stay where I was and to be quiet. For a moment, I struggled to breathe, wondering if it was someone other than Andrei at my door.

Viktor looked through the peep hole and opened the door, visibly relaxing as the door opened to reveal his equally sized cohort.

“Hi, Andrei,” I said from the kitchen, as he walked into my apartment.

“Good morning, Miss Sephie. Thank you for your hospitality,” he said in an even thicker Russian accent than the one Viktor had.

“It’s nothing. It’s the least I could do. You guys were so kind to me last night,” I said as they both took a seat at the kitchen bar. I set a coffee cup down in front of Andrei and noticed that both of them seemed to be...blushing? Of course, I doubled down.

“Max told me what you did to Anthony last night.” I reached out and grabbed one of Viktor’s hands and one of Andrei’s hands, giving them both a squeeze. “Thank you.”

They both turned as red as my hair. I smiled at both of them and quickly turned around so I wouldn’t laugh at how flushed their cheeks were. You’d think they’d never been touched by a girl before.

## Chapter Six

*Sephie*

I grabbed the coffee and filled both of their cups, along with mine, to help ease the awkwardness of the moment. As I stood sipping my coffee, waiting for my soul to return to my body, and relishing the warmth on my very sore throat, I cocked my head to the side and asked, “so.... why are you two guarding me exactly? I mean, I’m not complaining, but I’m also confused as to why you’re here.”

They both exchanged a quick, uneasy glance and Viktor cleared his throat. He said, “Um, Miss Sephie, we are following orders. Boss was very clear that we were not to let you out of our sight.”

“Boss? You mean Mr. Lord King Boss Adrik?”

This time, it was Andrei that looked in surprise at Viktor. He asked Viktor a question in Russian. Viktor replied, his eyes now almost as wide as Andrei’s were. Andrei ran his hands through his dirty blonde hair, clearly surprised by whatever information he just learned. I cleared my throat to remind them that they were in my kitchen, and I was still waiting on an answer.

“Mr. Lord King Boss??” they both said in unison.

I laughed at myself for saying the quiet part out loud yet again.



“Um, yeah. I didn’t know who your boss was until last night and I didn’t know what to call him, so I came up with the title Lord King Boss. I mean, it’s authoritative. Strong. Monarchical, if you will. I feel like he should use it freely.”

They both looked at me with their mouths open, too stunned to reply.

“No? Too much? Ok, but it’s his loss,” I said, nonchalantly, as I plated their food.

As I turned to set their plates down, they were still somewhat stunned. I just started laughing at the absurdity of the whole situation, really. They both started laughing along with me, although I’m not sure they knew what to say to me in that moment.

“Oh, come on, boys. They don’t have sarcasm in Russia? It was a joke. If you boys have been assigned to me, for whatever reason, you’re going to be busy because this mouth gets me in a lot of trouble most days,” I said with my most demure smile I could muster.

They both shook their heads and laughed as they attacked their bacon and eggs like it was the first time they’d eaten in days.

We ate in silence. I only picked at my food, as it hurt to swallow too much at one time. The coffee initially felt good, but even that was beginning to burn the more I drank.

Viktor noticed my discomfort and said, “soup. Soup will make it feel better.” He pointed to his throat and then pointed to mine.

“Yeah? You say this like you have experience?”

“Da. I’ve been choked out many times.”

“Okay, so that’s terrifying and fascinating all at the same time. Is this a common problem in Russia? Like you’re just walking down the street and ‘oh fuck, I’m being choked again?’”

Both men started laughing again. Andrei stood up and grabbed both empty plates. There was not a morsel of food left on either plate. For a second, I was considering not even washing them because they already looked so clean. However, Andrei walked to the sink and began washing them himself.

“You can leave that. I’ll wash the dishes,” I said.

“No, Miss Sephie. You cook, I clean.”

“Wow. Do you want to get married?” I said as Viktor laughed at Andrei’s stunned expression. He almost dropped a plate when I asked him that question.

I just winked at him as I went to wipe off my counters.

Viktor pulled his phone from his pants pocket and walked into the living room to answer it, leaving a still stunned Andrei and I alone in the kitchen. He finished washing the dishes and

was drying his hands off when he turned to me and asked, “he really told you his name last night?”

“Who did? Viktor? No, he told me this morning.”

“No, Boss.”

“Oh, Adrik? Yes, he told me his name last night when we were in the parking lot. Why?”

“No one outside of his closest bodyguards knows his name. He usually tells people his name is Ghost.”

I started to say something and then stopped, not sure how to take that news.

“Huh. I don’t know?” I said shrugging my shoulders.

Viktor hung up the phone and spoke to Andrei in Russian. It sounded very serious, but honestly, I couldn’t understand any of it. I was just leaning against the counter, hoping I’d get a translation at some point.

They had a tense exchange, but it didn’t look like I was going to get that translation, so I announced I needed to shower to get ready for work.

“No, sestrichka. No work tonight. We cleared it with your boss already. We stay here for now.”

“Okay, weird. But I’m still gonna go shower. If you need to shoot anybody, please don’t do it on the carpet. Blood stains are hard to get out of carpet. Much easier to clean up from the tile, so let’s keep the killing to the kitchen only, hmmm?” I said as I walked back to my bedroom. I could hear both of them chuckling and speaking Russian when I closed my bedroom door.

I leaned against my closed bedroom door and sighed. I was strangely totally fine with having two gigantic Russians in my living room that had been “assigned” to me for some unknown reason. My mind wandered to Adrik. Why was it seemingly a big deal that he had told me his name last night? Why did I feel like I was missing him? Why did I long to feel his warm touch against my skin again?

*You really need a social life, Sephie. You’re becoming somewhat pathetic.*

I shrugged off the thoughts and made my way to the shower. A nice, hot shower sounded a little like heaven for my sore body right now. Since I apparently wasn’t going to work tonight, I took an extra-long shower and deep conditioned my long, curly hair.

When I finally came out of my room, only Viktor was in the living room.

“Where did Andrei go?”

“He went back outside to keep an eye on the building. We need to know who’s coming in and out of the building.”

“Ha! Just ask Ms. Jackson in the apartment underneath mine. She spends her days spying on everyone. She’s already written your license plate number down and is waiting until Mr. Turner, from across the hall, gets home so she can give the number to him and have him call his buddy’s son who is a policeman to run the plates.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. It’s partly why I’ve stayed in this crappy building so long. It’s not the best neighborhood, but the neighborhood watch is superb.”

Viktor just stared at me while he pulled his phone out of his pocket. He dialed a number and spoke Russian when the person answered. He then ended the call and put his phone back in his pants.

“Please tell me you didn’t just order a hit on Ms. Jackson.”

He chuckled and said, “No, no. We just need to take precautions. We technically don’t exist, but we can take precautions that will satisfy your superb neighborhood watch.”

“Cryptic. How do you not exist? Are you not standing in my living room? Am I having a psychotic break and I just made breakfast for three when it’s really just me in here? Was I really that hungry?”

Okay, that was only partly a joke. How did they not exist?

“We are real. We just don’t officially exist in anyone’s database,” he said, adding air quotes around the last word, for effect.

“Oh, right. The whole Ghost thing, right?”

“You are a very smart girl, sestrichka.”

“It’s a gift,” I said as I winked at him.

## Chapter Seven

*Sephie*

Since I didn't have to work, I decided to turn my television on and mindlessly watch a movie. I was still quite tired from the festivities the night before, but I didn't want to go back to sleep. I consulted with my giant guardian, and we decided on an action movie. As soon as the action started, Viktor was critiquing the hero's every move. Actually, Viktor's commentary on the movie turned out to be more interesting than the movie itself.

Even though I tried hard not to, I eventually fell asleep. When I awoke, I heard hushed voices in my kitchen. I assumed it was Viktor and Andrei, so I didn't think before I said, "ok, which one of you is making me dinner?"

The talking stopped and there was silence for a moment, so I sat up on the couch and looked into the kitchen. That was definitely not Viktor standing in the kitchen and he was definitely not talking to Andrei.

"Shit," I mumbled to myself as I leapt off the couch and tried to put distance between me and the two new giant Russians in my kitchen. "Who are you? Where did Viktor and Andrei go??"

"Calm down. I'm Ivan and this is Misha. We replaced Viktor and Andrei so they could get rest."

I looked Ivan and Misha up and down. Misha was slightly taller than Ivan, but both men were just as huge as Viktor and Andrei. Ivan was bald, with a black goatee. He also had tattoos on his neck that I hadn't noticed the night before. Misha looked younger than the other three. He looked less threatening than the others, too. He had soft green eyes that gave the impression he was always smiling, even when he wasn't. They were a striking contrast to his black hair.

Misha said, "Ivan was just filling me in on information and then he was going back outside. We're sorry we woke you," he said in a rather mild Russian accent.

"No, it's okay. I didn't mean to fall asleep. Will Viktor and Andrei be back?" I asked. I felt weird missing them, but I suddenly felt a little empty knowing they weren't in my apartment.

Misha smiled gently, "Yes, Sephie. They'll be back in the morning. They needed sleep. We're working in shifts."

"So, they're really not on meth," I said scratching the back of my neck and stretching my arms over my head.

Ivan turned to me with the most intense gaze I think I'd ever seen. "WHAT?!?" he said as he started toward me. Misha grabbed his arm to prevent him from moving closer to me as I took a few more steps backward and ended up against the wall.

Misha stepped in front of Ivan, to both physically and visually block him from me. "Ivan, it's a joke. She was making a joke. Viktor told me she makes jokes, especially when she's nervous. No one is on meth, especially not Viktor."

“I feel vulnerably diagnosed, but he’s right. I was joking. I said Viktor was on meth because he couldn’t have slept much before coming to my apartment before my neighbor left for work this morning.”

Ivan took a deep breath. His body somewhat relaxed but his gaze was still burning holes in my soul. He turned his back to me and left my apartment.

I stayed against the wall for a few more seconds, just to make sure he didn’t come back.

“Is he always such a jovial guy?”

Misha rubbed his face with his hands as he inhaled deeply. “Ivan didn’t mean any harm. Ivan has very strong feelings about drug use.”

“Noted.”

Instead of making small talk with my new guardians, I gave up and just went to my bedroom. I was still tired, even after my nap. I figured extra sleep wasn’t going to kill me.

I checked my phone. Three messages from Max, asking where I was, then giving me shit for not coming to work, and then genuinely asking if I was ok. I thought of Max like an older brother. He always gave me a hard time, but he also always made sure I was okay.

*I’m fine, Maximus. My throat is still really sore, so the thought of having to speak all night long was too much for me.*

Max: *Pics or it didn’t happen, gingersnap.*

I snapped a quick selfie of my now very colorful neck and sent it to him.

Max: *Holy shit, Sephie. That looks amazing in the most painful way. I’m glad you decided to stay home. Nobody wants to look at that hot mess. You would’ve scared the customers away. I mean, more than you normally do.*

Ass. *Your concern for both my well-being and more so your source of income is touching.*

Max: *Lol. You know I’m just giving you shit. Seriously, that looks bad. Do you need anything? Want me to bring you some food when I get done tonight?*

*Nah, I think I’m just going to go to bed. Sleep cures everything, right?*

Max: *Alright. If you change your mind, let me know. I’ll be your delivery boy any time.*

*Thanks, Max. I’ll be fine though. Try to not have too much fun without me tonight!*

Max: *Yeah, you know it’s not going to be fun – Kim came in to cover your shift.*

*Oh shit. I'm sorry man. I didn't know they were going to call her in. She usually only works days.*

Max: *You're going to owe me for this one.*

I locked my phone and put it on the charger. I went to the bathroom to wash my face. My neck really did look horrible. My bruise was a nice shade of purple and was so deep you could see the outline of his fingers.

*Ugh. How am I going to cover this up tomorrow at work? I'm going to have to wear a turtleneck. Long-sleeved turtleneck too.*

I lifted the sleeves of my shirt and looked at my arms, that were also a very nice shade of purple. The contrast of the color of the bruises to my porcelain white skin was striking, which just served to make the bruises that much more obvious.

I decided not to stress about it too much. With the extensive tip that Adrik gave me, I could afford to miss a couple of shifts and still be able to pay my bills.

I heard my phone chime again and went to check it, thinking it was Max again.

*How are you feeling, solnishko? -Adrik*

Wait, he has my phone number? When did that happen? Well, he knew where my apartment was, so I guess also having my phone number isn't completely out of the realm of possibility. Who am I kidding, he probably has my bank account and entire record at this point. There is really no limit to the power these people possess.

*I'm fine, Adrik. Thank you for asking. Tired, but fine.*

Adrik: *Good. You should get rest. Put arnica on your bruises – it will help them heal faster. I'm sure by now they're quite dark.*

*You ain't joking. My entire neck is purple. I'll have to go to the store for arnica. I don't have any.*

Adrik: *I'll have some sent over. You rest. It will be there when you wake. Good night, Persephone.*

*Thanks. Good night.*

I locked my phone again and put it on my bedside table. I sat on my bed, lost in thought. Why did I suddenly have that warm feeling in my stomach again? Why was the top guy in the mafia checking on me? Why did he send his personal bodyguards to keep an eye on me? What was really going on? What happened in that meeting while I was out of the room?

# Chapter Eight

*Sephie*

I fell asleep some time later. It was not a restful sleep, as I felt trapped in panic-laden dreams. In one dream, I relived the events of the night before. I struggled against Anthony, to try and get away from him, feeling once again the air leaving my lungs, feeling like my life was slowly slipping away. I couldn't talk in my dream. I kept looking toward the back room of the restaurant, but no one was coming. There was only darkness. Silence. The darkness even consumed Anthony in front of me so that it was just me, not able to breathe or move. I don't know where I got the strength, or air, to do it, but I screamed. I screamed as loud as I possibly could.

As soon as I woke up and realized it was a dream, my bedroom door was thrown open. Two men came rushing in and toward my bed. I screamed again, still not fully awake and aware of what was happening. One man came toward me, the other checked the rest of my room.

A vaguely familiar scent filled my nose, as I felt a warm touch on my arms and the bed dip beside me.

"Shhhh...you were having a nightmare. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you ever again," Adrik said as he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to him.

"Adrik?"

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

I couldn't stop the flood of emotions that came out as I leaned into his broad chest. I buried my face in his chest and cried.

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

I took a deep breath in and wiped my face. I leaned back, with my eyes still closed, trying to find the courage to go through it one more time. He reached up with his thumb and gently wiped a few stray tears from my eyes as he waited for my answer. I opened my eyes and found his deep blue eyes, filled with concern, focused intently on me. I just stared into his eyes for a few moments, not able to speak. Why did I feel like I've known him for longer than 24 hours? Why did I feel safe in his arms?

When I didn't answer, he gave me a smile and gently brushed my hair out of my face. "You're even beautiful when you cry," he said.

I blushed and looked down at my hands. I felt his hand under my chin, lifting my gaze back up to meet his. "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."

At this point, I knew my face was turning a nice shade of red. I didn't know how to respond, so I said the first thing that came to mind. "Wait, how did you get here?"

He chuckled. "I brought you arnica. For your neck. I was discussing a matter with Ivan and Misha when we heard you scream. We thought you were in trouble or being kidnapped."

"Why would anyone want to kidnap me?"

He cocked his head to the side and smiled slyly at me. "I could think of a few reasons."

I clearly didn't fully comprehend his answer. "I'm nobody. There's no reason to kidnap me."

"You're not nobody, Persephone. And unfortunately, you've been marked by a powerful mafia boss's son as an enemy. A petulant child of a son, but still the son of a powerful man. He won't stop until he has his revenge for the disrespect he feels you caused him."

"He thinks I disrespected him?? HE TRIED TO KILL ME!!"

"I know this. All the other bosses know this. Even his father knows this, but Anthony doesn't take having his ass handed to him in public very well. No matter how deserved it was. His ego was wounded."

I just stared at him as he spoke, trying not to think about how handsome he was, how gentle his touch felt, or how pragmatic his explanation of my impending doom was. "This is why you sent your bodyguards to stay with me? What about you? Aren't you in danger without them?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "I just told you that someone wants revenge on you, and you're worried about my safety?"

"Well, yeah."

"I'm well-protected, solnishko. I have other bodyguards, but Viktor, Andrei, Ivan, and Misha are my best, which is why I assigned them to you. I have complete trust in them."

"How long will they be here? When can I go back to work?"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea yet. We can't find Anthony yet. He disappeared after the meeting last night and no one seems to know where he went. We need to find him first before I feel confident about you going back to work." He saw my eyebrows furrow and added, "don't worry, solnishko. Your bills are covered."



“What? No. I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t. I offered. Now accept my offer,” he said giving me his gorgeous smile.

I got lost in his eyes. They were even more beautiful when he was smiling. While they could be cold and lifeless when he was in boss mode, when he smiled at me, they practically sparkled in the dim light of my bedroom. I found myself smiling in response to seeing the joy in his eyes. It made me want to see that joy every day.

“Fine. But I don’t have to like it,” I said, crossing my arms across my chest like a little kid, pouting.

He laughed again and this time, leaned in and kissed my forehead. My whole body felt warm at his touch, but when his lips pressed to my forehead, it was a new level of warmth. I was somewhat stunned at the gesture, but still found myself wanting more.

I grabbed his hand and held it between both of mine. “Thank you.”

“Of course, solnishko. You should get some rest again.”

“Yeah, so about that, I’m gonna forego the whole nightmare thing for a while. I won’t be able to sleep again for a while.”

“Then, come. We will put some arnica on your purple neck,” he said as he grabbed my hand and stood up. He pulled me up before I could stop him.

“Oh... wait...” I said as I stood up, revealing that I was only wearing a large t-shirt and no pants.

He slowly looked down my body, as I tried to pull my t-shirt as low as it would go. His eyes got darker. I noticed his jaw clench slightly and he made a fist with his hand that was not holding mine. His gaze returned to my face, and he leaned in to kiss my forehead saying, “apologies. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”