

DIMITRI

ROXIE RIVERA

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DEDICATION

For Patricia, little sister extraordinaire.

CHAPTER ONE

With a loud grunt, I tried to drag the heavy sack of flour from the unloading dock to the storeroom. I'd already moved six of them and felt what little energy that remained with me start to drain. My four o'clock alarm and a full day of running from the kitchen to the bakery counter had done a number on me.

An irritating heat prickled my eyes as the stress of it all started to beat me down. I stretched my neck, hoping to ease my tense muscles, and closed my eyes while I drew a slow, steady breath into my lungs. Giving in to the panic of my craptastic situation wasn't going to help me.

My ears perked to the sound of someone coming in the side employee entrance. *Finally!*

"Johnny? Is that you?"

There was a long pause before my younger brother finally shouted back at me. "Yeah."

I frowned and let the sack of flour slump against my leg. "You're three hours late. I needed you to help me close today. Where have you been?"

"Hey, I got here when I could." He appeared in the doorway of the stockroom looking every bit the hooligan and scowled at me. "Get off my case, Benny"

I bit my tongue at the sight of his baggy jeans and that god-awful tank top. His sneakers were immaculately clean and bright white, of course. The gang tattoo on his neck still infuriated me. When he'd come home a few days before his high school graduation with that ugly thing emblazoned on his skin, I'd almost had a stroke.

"Look, I need your help. The supply truck was late today and I've got to get everything into the storeroom."

He didn't move. "Why didn't you have Marco or Adam do it?"

"I can't afford the overtime, Johnny. We're barely making ends meet." I wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know. We'd discussed our financial difficulties numerous times over the last few months but I don't think he gave it much thought. Apparently he assumed I would fix the problems—just as I always did.

"Maybe you should think about selling to that real estate guy," Johnny suggested and finally started to help me. He tossed the bag of flour onto his shoulder and carted it into the storeroom.

The thought of the slick real estate developer who had been pushing a sale contract at me for the last few weeks made my jaw tighten. Gentrification my ass! "We aren't selling, Johnny."

"Why not? It's good money, Benny."

"Money isn't everything, Johnny. This bakery isn't just part of the neighborhood's history. It's our history. Three generations of our family have worked here. Our grandparents built this *panaderia* with their blood and sweat and tears." I shook my head. "We're in a rough patch and we'll get through it."

We are *not* selling."

"That's what the yarn shop lady and the furniture guy down the street said before they got smart." Johnny brushed by me to grab another sack of flour. "That's your problem, *nena*. You don't think big. You know what we could do with that kind of money?"

I rolled my eyes. Lately, Johnny had all these big plans. What he lacked was follow-through and drive. It was so easy to make concoct schemes but even harder to put in the work required to make them a success.

"First of all—stop calling me *nena*. And secondly? There wouldn't be that much money left over after the sale."

He frowned as he carted the heavy sack into the storeroom. "What do you mean? I saw what the guy offered us. That's a shitload of money, Benny."

"Yeah, it is but how do you think we paid for Abuelita's chemo and all the hospital bills? Before that, she'd taken out lines of credit on the building to pay for grandpa's diabetes problems. There are lines of credit and second mortgages." I rubbed the back of my neck as the stress of it all made me tense. "It's complicated, Johnny."

His eyes narrowed accusingly. "Why did you let her get all those loans?"

"I didn't, Johnny. I didn't find out until she opened the books to me. By the time she told us she was sick, she'd already gotten in way over her head."

"But the bakery makes good money."

"It's not that simple. The costs of supplies have increased. We had to replace all the ovens and the proofing boxes. We lost a quarter of our breakfast and lunch income when the layoffs at the gas plants hit." I couldn't even bring myself to mention what kind of a nosedive our business would take if the rumors of a Starbucks going in down the street were true. "Our health insurance premiums are way up."

"So cut them off," he coldly suggested. "Let them pay for their own doctor visits."

I glared at him. "Do you ever listen to the crap that comes out of your mouth? Some of our employees have been with the bakery since the day our grandparents opened, Johnny!"

He shrugged. "Yeah. So? People should pay their own way."

Frustration welled up inside of me. "I guess I should have made you pay all the lawyer fees for your last arrest, huh? I mean, you want to pay your own way, right?"

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "How many times are you going to throw that in my face?"

"Oh, I don't know, Johnny. As many times as it takes for you to realize what a dumb ass you are with all this gang bullshit."

"It's not bullshit, Benny. My crew is my family."

"Your family?" Anger surged through me. "I'm your family, Johnny. I'm the one that loves you just the way you are. I'm the one who has been there for you since we were little."

"You don't get it, Benny. You never will."

I couldn't even look at him. Glancing away, I said through gritted teeth, "Just finish moving the heavy stuff, okay? I can get everything else."

He started to argue with me but slammed his mouth shut and got back to work. We didn't say a word as we carried the stacks of baking supplies from one room to another. I'd learned that arguing with him only pushed him farther away from me. There was nothing I could say that hadn't already been said.

For some reason I couldn't fathom, he liked playing homeboy with the Hermanos. Some days I got the feeling it was all a big game to him. Only it wasn't a game. Not even close. The Hermanos were a brutally violent street gang that ruled over a huge section of Houston. I worried that Johnny would soon find himself in over his head—and then what? There was no walking away from the life he'd stupidly chosen.

His cell phone chirped and he dropped the buckets of shortening he carried to answer it. A second later, a car horn started blaring in the back alley. He shoved his phone back into his pocket. "I gotta go, Benny."

"What? No! You've got to help me finish this."

As if bolstered by the close proximity of his crew, he snapped, "I don't have to do shit for you, Benny."

Before I could even respond, a harsh male voice growled, "Don't talk to your sister that way!"

Both of our gazes jumped to the open doorway leading to the loading dock and alley. Dimitri Stepanov, our family's longtime tenant, loomed there. Tall, blond and rugged, he narrowed those icy blue eyes at Johnny. "You apologize to your sister."

"Fuck you, Dimitri." Johnny shot him the finger.

"Fuck me?" Dimitri took a step into the room and never let his unwavering glare leave Johnny. "Those are tough words, Johnny. You want to step out into the alley and see if you can back them up?"

"No." I moved between the two men and tried to put a lid on the simmering tension. "We're not going to have a street brawl behind my bakery."

Dimitri's harsh gaze softened as he glanced down at me. "He should not speak to you like that."

"Tell your boyfriend he better back up out of my business," Johnny warned.

My face went hot at the mention of Dimitri being my boyfriend. As if a man like Dimitri would give a short, thick-hipped girl like me a second look!

"When you disrespect Benny like that, you make it my business."

"I'm about to make whipping your ass my business, Dimitri."

"Johnny!" I gawked at him. "What is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" He stepped closer and poked his finger down into my face. "What's wrong with you? Why do you always take his side over mine?"

"What? Johnny, that's not—"

He threw up his hands. "I don't need this shit. I'm outta here."

"Johnny!" I chased after him but he darted out the back door and disappeared. Moments later, I heard the squeal of tires. Shoulders rounded with defeat, I stared at the empty doorway.

"I'm sorry, Benny. I shouldn't have gotten involved." Dimitri spoke gently, his words colored by his light Russian accent. "I didn't mean to make things worse."

I pivoted to face him and shrugged. "Johnny was in the mood to fight. You simply gave him a target."

Dimitri closed the distance between us. His familiar scent wrapped around me and left me yearning for his touch. Towering over me, he dared to touch my cheek. The feeling of his rough fingers moving over my skin made my belly do wild somersaults. "I'm sorry that I upset you."

I smiled and grasped his wrist. "You didn't upset me. I'm fine."

His hand fell from my face. Instantly, I missed the warmth of his touch. "Let me help you get all of this moved."

I shook my head. "No, Dimitri, this isn't your job. You're not my employee."

"No, I'm your friend—and I don't mind."

After five years of friendship, I recognized that arguing wasn't going to work. "Thank you."

He waved it off and grabbed the nearest sacks of sugar. As if their combined hundred pounds of weight were nothing, he hefted them onto his shoulders. "You should have told me you had a delivery coming today. I would have come home early to help you."

"I already asked you to help me with the plumbing when the sinks were leaking last week." I followed him into the storeroom with two boxes of sprinkles and colored sugar. "I feel like I'm taking advantage of you."

Dimitri snorted with amusement and dropped the sugar sacks into place. "You can take advantage of me anytime you want, Benny."

I was glad my back was turned. His double entendre made me blush with embarrassment. I could tell he was only joking with me but I couldn't help but wonder if my crush on him was that obvious. Clearly, Johnny had picked up on it. He'd made that cutting remark earlier because he knew it would hurt me. So much for brotherly love...

With a nervous laugh, I turned around—and slammed right into Dimitri's chest. He grabbed my shoulders to steady me. The scent of him punched the air right out of my lungs. All that soothing body heat radiated from him in waves, washing over me and filling me with such a longing need. Years of denying my attraction to the dead sexy Russian were finally starting to take their toll.

"Careful, Benny," he murmured.

"Sorry."

When his hands dropped from my shoulders, they skimmed my arms. The sensation of his fingertips gliding over my skin left me momentarily dizzy. I tried not to let my mind go to the dirty place it wanted to visit.

He stepped away from me and glanced around the overstuffed storeroom. "This is a bigger order than usual."

Finally getting a grip, I said, "It's for that Tasting Houston thing Lena convinced me to do."

A few weeks earlier, an old college friend, Lena Cruz, had traipsed back into my life. By the strangest coincidence, one of her friends was dating one of Dimitri's friends. She currently worked at one of Houston's mega PR firms and offered to do me a huge favor by helping me drum up business.

"On Saturday, right?"

I nodded. "She thinks it will be a good way to build our brand. I'm not so sure about all that marketing and branding talk but she seems to really know her stuff."

I didn't add that I was desperate for her marketing plan to work. We needed to increase our customer base and grow our revenue stream if the bakery had any hope of surviving this tight spot.

Deep down inside, I feared that nothing would work. Jonah Krause, the real estate developer who wanted my building wasn't the kind of man who liked the word *no*. I'd managed to fend him off for a few months but I was starting to worry that he would ratchet up the pressure on me. I'd heard some eyebrow-raising tales from my neighbors about the tactics he'd used to strong-arm them into selling.

Glancing around for my clipboard and checklist, I realized I'd left it in my office. "Be right back. I need to grab my list. Marco supervised the delivery but his eyes aren't what they used to be. Sometimes he miscounts."

He nodded and I scooted by him, careful not to bump into his arms or chest. Every time we made accidental contact, it made it harder and harder for me to ignore the throbbing heat in my lower belly.

It was stupid, really, my infatuation with Dimitri. Over the years, I'd had the misfortune of seeing some of the bombshells he'd dated. Nothing made this petite Latina with a slightly too-curved figure more self-conscious than a mental comparison of myself with the leggy, willowy beauties I'd seen on Dimitri's arm.

All thoughts of my wicked crush on Dimitri fled the moment I stepped into my office. The bank bag on my desk was upside down and the papers under it had been disturbed. One of my desk drawers, the one where I kept important contracts and papers, was slightly ajar. Even before I grabbed the bag and unzipped it, I knew what I would find.

My stomach dropped like an out of control elevator as I counted and recounted the day's takings. Three hundred dollars were now missing—and I knew exactly who had taken it. At the time, I hadn't given a second thought to Johnny coming in the side entrance instead of the alley door. Now, of course, I understood why he'd come into the bakery that way.

Awash in ugly feelings, I crashed down into my squeaky office chair. His betrayal left me shaking

with anger and such profound sadness. What the hell was wrong with him? The knowledge that I didn't know my brother anymore hit me hard.

But it was the realization that I'd failed him and broken my promise to my grandmother on her death bed that made my stomach churn so painfully.

Like a dam bursting, a flood of stress exploded inside me. With my head buried in my hands, I started to cry. Big, ugly loud sobs tore through me until I was choking on them.

"Benny?"

*

Finding Benny sobbing into her hands caused such a painful tightness in Dimitri's chest. He crossed the distance between them in a few quick strides and crouched down in front of her. Tears ran down her face and dripped onto her shirt.

"I'm sorry." Her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment. "I'm being stupid."

"Don't," he whispered softly. There were tissues on the corner of her desk and he plucked a handful of them free. "You're not being stupid." Ever so gently, he dabbed at her face. "What's wrong?"

Lower lip wobbling, she gestured to the bank deposit bag and the stacks of cash on her desk. He took one look and figured it out. Swearing roughly, he vowed to kick that little bastard's ass the next time they crossed paths.

"How much?" Dimitri demanded.

"Three hundred," she said and sniffled loudly. "I can't believe he would steal from me."

Dimitri could. Even though Benny knew Johnny was getting into trouble, she had no idea the extent of his criminal behavior. She didn't know because Dimitri had been shielding the ugliness from her. She'd been through so much in the last few years. He couldn't bear to see her heart broken anymore by her worthless little shit of a brother.

"Dimitri?"

"Yes?" He fought the urge to cup her beautiful face and kiss the sadness out of her.

"Why do you think he needs money?" She nervously licked her lips, drawing his gaze to her pink pout. "Drugs? Worse?"

"I don't know," he lied. "It could be anything. Maybe it's something stupid like buying alcohol or gambling."

She held his gaze. "I don't think so. I think it's something much more serious."

He couldn't bring himself to confirm her suspicions. Three hundred dollars would be enough to buy an unmarked piece and a box of ammunition from one of the backstreet dealers who worked the area. If Johnny thought he needed a gun to defend himself, it meant Benny wasn't safe. His gut twisted at the idea of Benny being hurt by her brother's stupid choices.

"Listen," he said and rubbed his hands over the denim covering her thighs. "Why don't you come up to my apartment? Let me cook you dinner."

And keep an eye on you...

"Oh, Dimitri, you don't have to offer to make me dinner. I'll be okay."

"I want to make you dinner." He didn't add that he wanted so much more than that with her.

For more than a year, he'd been secretly in love with Benny. The change from friendship to infatuation had come upon him so slowly; he hadn't even fully realized how he felt toward her until the day her grandmother had passed.

Overcome with grief, Benny had rushed into his arms and he'd cradled her on his lap as she wept. Holding her felt like the most natural thing in the world—and he'd never wanted to let her go. He'd been overwhelmed with the realization that he loved her.

But he hadn't been brave enough to say it then. Nor had he found the courage to do it any day

since. The few times he'd come close to asking Benny out for dinner or a drink, he'd lost his nerve. He was keenly aware of the huge burdens she shouldered and he liked that she felt comfortable coming to him for help. The idea that making his move might upset the balance of their friendship and push her away from him stopped Dimitri from taking a chance.

Moving his hands to her jean-clad knees, he said, "We'll open a bottle of wine and you can relax while I cook you something delicious. And we'll talk. We'll figure out a way to deal with Johnny and his mess. Okay?"

Something flashed in her dark eyes. Interest, perhaps? He didn't dare hope for anything more.

With a smile, she acquiesced. "Okay."

"Wonderful." He stood and gestured to the desk. "You recount the money. I'll go check the list and lock up the back."

She handed him the keys and clipboard. Their fingers briefly touched and the searing heat of it made his gut clench. He couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to have her soft, small hands touching other parts of him.

Taking a step back, he said, "Come find me when you're ready."

"I will."

He quickly retreated from the office and returned to the storeroom. List in hand, he checked and rechecked the delivered supplies before locking up and shutting off the lights. He heard her come into the back room of the bakery and waited for her to find him. The sweet smell of her, the bare hints of vanilla beans and cinnamon, curled around him and heightened his awareness of her. It took every ounce of his control not to reach for her hand and pull her toward him in the darkness.

Her gentle voice rolled over him. "I'm ready."

God, how he wished that was true.