

# IVAN

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## DEDICATION

For David, my sweet Texan protector.



## CHAPTER ONE

"Erin, please don't go in there." Sitting in the front passenger seat, Vivian wrung her hands. "This is way too risky."

My gut clenched at her desperate tone. "I don't have a choice. I have to find Ruby."

"We'll do it some other way." Lena twisted in the driver's seat of her red beater and shot me a pleading look. "Vivi's right. Don't go in there."

I glanced out the rear window of the cramped car. My stomach pitched with anxiety at the sight of the warehouse. Stained with rust, the rundown warehouse sported such a deceptive front. That awful looking place housed one of the finest mixed-martial arts training centers in the world. Men desperate to be champions flew into Houston from all over the world to compete for one of the few open spots every year.

But I wasn't here to join a training regimen. No, I was here because I needed help. The kind of help only a man with his fingers deeply submerged in the murky waters of Houston's seedy underbelly could provide. "I need help."

"These are not the kind of men you go to for help," Vivi insisted. "These are the kind of men you usually need help escaping."

"I'm with Vivi on this one. Don't go looking for trouble, Erin." Lena chewed her thumb. "I mean, Vivi should know. My god, Erin! She works for the Russian mob. She would know what kind of person this Ivan Markovic is."

Vivi thumped Lena's leg. "I don't work for the Russian mob! Jesus, don't say stuff like that. You could get me hurt."

Lena rubbed her leg. "You're a waitress at the Samovar. The place is owned by Nikolai Kalasnikov. If that's not mobbed up, I don't know what is."

"You don't know that for sure," Vivi shot back. "No one really knows if he's in the mob or not. You know how secretive those guys are." Vivi glanced back at me. "When I started working for Nikolai, he warned me to stay away from the men who frequent the restaurant—and I do. Ivan Markovic is a regular customer there. Take Nikolai's advice, Erin. Stay the hell away from Ivan."

I appreciated Vivi's warning but it was too late. "I don't have a choice. I'm going in there."

Vivi looked like she was going to burst into tears. Lena sighed loudly. "Keep your phone in your hand and pull up my number. If anything weird happens in there, you hit that button. We'll come in and bust you out."

Any other time I would have laughed at Lena's tough girl remark but, right now, I needed her strength and support. I fished my phone out of my purse and clutched it tightly. "Okay. I'm ready."

Vivi reached back and gripped my wrist. "Whatever you do, don't promise him anything. These Russians are big on honoring their debts. They'll require you to do the same. Remember that he'll expect to collect on whatever you offer."

Armed with Vivi's warning and Lena's promise to save my ass if things went south, I climbed out of the car. A humid May breeze ruffled my skirt. I slid a nervous hand down the front of my dress

and finger-combed my short hair. Gulping down the ball of nerves clogging my throat, I pushed my sunglasses into place and forced my feet to move.

The heavy main door proved almost impossible to push open. I threw my willowy frame against it in an attempt to budge the damn thing even an inch. Finally, it slid inward. A blast of frigid air popped me in the face. Entering the warehouse, I couldn't help but wonder if opening that door was the first test for the fighters who made the trek here in their quest for the best trainers.

Once inside the huge space, I lost my courage. The open layout of the gym and sparring cages stunned me. From the outside, this place looked like such a hell hole. Now I understood just how deceptive the dilapidated façade truly was. The interior, though dimly lit, housed expensive equipment. It was teeming with sweaty, half-naked men, some of them working out and others pounding and kicking away at one another in sparring rings.

My appearance didn't go unnoticed. A couple of muscle-heads stopped lifting weights to gawk at me. Feeling self-conscious, I slipped my sunglasses onto the crown of my head and hugged my right arm across my chest. Maybe Vivi was right. This was a bad, bad idea.

"Can I help you?" An older man, old enough to be my grandfather, approached me from one of the nearby workout stations. His heavily accented voice surprised me. It wasn't the mother tongue of Russia that colored his words. No, it was Spanish. "You're lost?"

I shook my head. "I need to see Mr. Markovic."

His white eyebrows arched with surprise. "Ivan? You want to see Ivan?"

I nodded. "Yes, please."

He studied me for a moment before exhaling and flicking his fingers. "Follow me."

I stayed close to the old man as he led me through the warehouse. I kept my gaze glued to the back of his grey t-shirt and refused to meet the curious looks that followed me. Apparently they didn't get a lot of women in this place.

"You wait here." The old man shot me a warning look. "Don't speak."

His instruction made my stomach pitch. Don't speak? What the hell kind of place was this?

Left alone, I dared to lift my gaze to the metal cage before me. It sat on a raised stage and resembled the ones I'd seen on pay-per-view once. Sitting in my then-boyfriend's living room, I hadn't been able to make it through that fight. Seeing it now, being so close I could hear every smack of body contact, left me feeling a bit woozy. Violence and blood had never been things I could easily stomach.

Unlike Vivi and Lena, I'd lived a sheltered life. Until Ruby's recent addiction problems and scrapes with the law, I'd never known anything about the seedy side of Houston. Now I was undergoing a crash course in navigating the very worst the city had to offer.

A shouting man drew my attention. I could hear him clearly even over the music blaring from the sound system. Though I'd never met Ivan Markovic, there was no doubt in my mind that this intimidating man was him.

Standing just outside the cage, he looked so out of place in his perfectly tailored grey trousers and white shirt. The sleeves had been rolled up to his elbows and revealed thickly corded arms emblazoned with tattoos. Even from this distance, the Cyrillic letters were clearly visible. I didn't have to be one of the initiated to understand what they meant.

Ivan clapped his hands and blasted a series of instructions in Russian, the words forceful and demanding. Inside the ring, the fighters didn't dare disobey. They kicked and punched and beat the crap out of one another. As hard as they were going at it, I was glad they were wearing sparring helmets and gloves.

Another man outside the ring whacked together two blocks of wood, signaling the end of the round. Ivan jerked open the cage door and stalked inside. He gestured for the two sweating, panting men to approach him. Hooking his arms around their shoulders, he pulled their heads close together and started to talk to them. I couldn't make out a word he said but the two fighters listened intently.

When he was done with his pointers, Ivan smacked them both on the shoulder and left the cage. He started down the short metal stairs but stopped abruptly. Our gazes clashed. His searing stare burned my skin as it swept me from head to foot. Frowning, he headed down the steps and dipped his head so the old man could speak to him. Not once did his unrelenting gaze leave me.

Trembling inside, I gripped my phone so tightly my fingertips started to go numb. Ivan came so close I could smell the woody hints of his cologne. Though not handsome in the most classic sense, Ivan enthralled me. Maybe it was the power and danger that radiated from him. Maybe it was the way he towered over me, those pale blue eyes peering right through me. I don't know—I just couldn't break eye contact with him.

"Look, sweetheart, we've already filled the secretary position." His thickly accented English rolled over me in waves. Because he scared the living daylights out of me, I let the sweetheart pet name slide. Any other guy I would have had no problem correcting but this one? Oh, hell no. He could call me cupcake and I wouldn't even flinch.

"I'm not here for a job, Mr. Markovic."

Surprise filtered across his face. "You want to train?" He laughed, the sound harsh and staccato. "We don't train girls here. Okay? Paco, walk her out."

Desperate, I grasped his wrist and stopped him from walking away from me. The instant we made contact an electric zing arced through me. From the flash in his eyes, he must have felt it, too.

"Please," I begged. "I need your help."

His eyes narrowed. With a swift tug, he freed his wrist from my grasp. With an imperious flick of his fingers, he indicated I should follow him. I scurried to keep up with his long strides. He led me to an office at the rear of the warehouse and gestured for me to enter first. The door closed behind him. He walked to the big window facing out toward the gym and opened the wide horizontal blinds. Apparently he didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea about what was going on in his office.

Certain I was safe with the blinds open, I relaxed a bit. My mouth went dry when he spun to face me. The annoyed expression he wore deflated my hopes.

"Do I know you?" He strode to his desk and leaned back against it. He crossed his muscled arms against his chest and studied me. "I would remember a face like yours. We're not acquainted."

I shook my head. "No, but we have some acquaintances in common. My name is Erin Hanson and my sister, Ruby, is dating one of your trainers. He used to be a fighter but he got all banged up in that car accident last year."

"Andrei?" He looked taken aback. "*Your* sister is the junkie girlfriend?"

I winced at the awful word *junkie*. Sure, Ruby was a pill addict and, yes, she was constantly in trouble trying to support her nasty habit—but I hated to think of her as a junkie. I refused to believe she couldn't be saved or helped. "Yes, my sister is his girlfriend. And, to be fair, Andrei is just as dirty."

Ivan exhaled roughly. His voice was softer, sadder, as he spoke. "Yes. After the car crash, he couldn't fight. I think it was the depression of losing himself that sent him into a pill bottle."

"It was the death of our parents that sent Ruby over the edge. Carbon monoxide," I explained quietly. "I was away at a sleepover but she was supposed to come home that night and probably would have realized something was wrong with Mom and Dad. She didn't come in until after sunrise. By then..."

"I see. You know that Andrei hasn't been in the gym for a week. Maybe longer," Ivan said.

"I know. Ruby has been missing the same amount of time. I went looking for her at Andrei's place but it had been ransacked. So I started hitting up some of the places where I know Ruby likes to score and—"

He held up his hand. "You went to see drug dealers? A nice girl like you?" He shook his head. "This is dangerous. You could get hurt."

I bristled at his insinuation that I was some helpless child. "This isn't the first time I've had to sniff

around Houston's back alleys to find my sister. I'm sure it won't be the last. I know what I'm doing."

He shot me a dubious look. "Then why are you here asking me for help?"

"Because I think Ruby and Andrei are in trouble. Big trouble," I emphasized. "Andrei was taking side jobs protecting and driving cargo shipments around town. Stolen cargo," I clarified. "Something went wrong and he screwed up a delivery or stole it." I squeezed my phone even tighter as the murky details raced through my mind. "I've gotten conflicting stories. Either way, Ruby was with him. Now they're both missing—and I think they're in trouble."

Ivan's jaw visibly tightened and released. "Who was Andrei running cargo for?"

"I don't know. I've heard three different versions and none of them are good." I nervously chewed my bottom lip and decided to lay it all on the line. "It may have been the Albanians."

Not even a man as tough as Ivan could hide the shock of that tidbit. The corners of his mouth tightened. "You're sure?"

"Not absolutely but I think it's true. Why else would people literally run from me when I start asking questions about Andrei and Ruby?"

"So why come to me, Erin?"

"I need someone to help me get information. No one will talk to me anymore. They're afraid."

"For good reason," he interjected. "Do you have any idea what kind of people you're dealing with, Erin?"

My heart stammered in my chest. "Yes, I do."

"Then I don't know why you're here. You think I'm going to get involved with the Albanian mob over a couple of thieving junkies?" He pointed to a sign prominently displayed on his office wall that proclaimed the space clean. "I run a clean gym, okay? No drugs. No steroids. Andrei and your sister brought that poison into my gym. I lost three fighters this week for failing drug tests. *Three!* That's my ass on the line, my reputation." He shook his head. "I left that life behind. I'm not going back."

The last glimmer of hope faded within me. Feeling stupid for even thinking this man might help me, I offered a timid, apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Mr. Markovic. I shouldn't have—well. Thank you for your time."

Facing burning with embarrassment, I headed for the door. I couldn't get out of there fast enough. What the hell had I been thinking? Was I really expecting a man like Ivan to put his neck on the line to help a stranger?

"Erin." He spoke my name in that low, rumbling voice. "Come back."

I swallowed hard before pivoting on my heel to face him. He stood in the doorway of his office. The resigned look on his face didn't exactly inspire confidence. Still, if he was reconsidering, I had to try to convince him.

I slipped by him and back into the room. His scent, that masculine mix of cologne and sweat, enveloped me. I became intensely aware of his body heat and his hulking frame. I was close enough now I could see all the faded scars along his jaw and neck. Lower down, I saw the smallest hint of a tattoo peeking out from the neckline of his shirt.

He closed the door again and put a hand on it. The tattoos on his fingers and wrist looked so stark against his paler skin. His gaze bore into me. I tried not to squirm with discomfort. Finally, he sighed loudly. "Look, I'll ask around, okay? I can't make you any promises."

Overcome with relief, I felt the burning prickle of tears stinging my eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Markovic." I blinked quickly as the wetness spilled onto my cheeks. "I'm just grateful that you're willing to help me."

"Ivan," he corrected. He hesitated before wiping away the slick tears dripping down my face. His rough thumb rasped my skin, his very touch branding me. "You should call me Ivan."

I held my breath as his thumb wiped away the last remnants of my relieved tears. He seemed impossibly tall and so primal and male as he loomed over me. I gazed up into his harsh face and saw



the briefest glimmer of something in his light eyes. I couldn't place it. Sadness? Longing?

He pulled away suddenly and stalked to his desk. He returned with a notepad and pen. "Write down your number and address."

"Okay." I neatly printed my information on the yellow paper and handed it back to him.

"You will go home and you will wait."

"For what?"

"For my call," he explained. "You will not involve yourself in this matter again. Understood?"

"But she's my sister and I—"

"No." He interrupted me with a slash of his hand through the air. "These are the terms I require."

I sensed he wasn't a man used to being defied. "All right. I'll go home and wait."

"Good."

Something he said made me curious. Vivi's warning echoed in my head. *He'll expect to collect.* "Ivan, what other terms do you require?"

His gaze snapped to my face. Eyes narrowed, he asked, "What do you mean?"

Awash in anxiety, I clarified, "Are you going to want to be paid for your services?"

He looked annoyed. "Let's find your sister first. We'll worry about compensation later."

I wanted to press him for specifics but he ushered me to the door. Uncertainty settled into the pit of my stomach. What would he want when this was all over and Ruby was safe? Better yet, would I be willing or able to give it to him?

Silently, Ivan walked me to the middle of the gym. I took the hint and quickly scurried toward the exit. Every gaze in the place seemed glued to me. I kept my gaze fixed forward and put one foot in front of the other, my caramel-colored ballet flats moving whisper-soft against the gleaming wood floor.

This time I managed to open the door without too much of a fight. I cast one final glance over my shoulder and met Ivan's piercing gaze. I slipped my sunglasses back into place and left the building.

But as I walked to Lena's car, I couldn't shake the feeling I'd just made a deal with the devil.

\* \* \*

Ivan watched Erin as she hurried to the exit. He didn't blame her for moving so quickly. That she'd been brave enough to come into his gym and ask for his help still shocked him. There weren't many people who would do something so brazen.

Try as he might, Ivan couldn't stop his gaze from dropping to the enticing swing of her hips. The pale blue skirt of her dress swished against her thighs. Those shapely legs and her tight ass were hard to ignore. Innocent as she looked, Ivan had no doubt that Erin was going to be big trouble.

"Kostya." He gestured for the wiry, dark-haired man to come close for his instruction. "Follow the girl. Keep her out of trouble."

Nodding, Kostya left to trail Erin. Ivan caught Dimitri's gaze. They'd been friends long enough to communicate silently. Ivan didn't even check to make sure Dimitri followed him back to the office. The certainty that Dimitri would be there was absolute.

Dimitri shut the door behind him. In rapid-fire Russian, he asked, "What did she want? Who the hell is she?"

"You know the girl Andrei dates?"

"The junkie?"

Ivan remembered the pain that flashed across Erin's face when he'd used the word. It was the first time in a long time that he'd experienced any guilt, however fleeting. "Yes. That's her sister, Erin. Ruby is missing and so is Andrei."

"They're probably passed out in a crack house."

"Possibly," Ivan agreed. "Erin asked for my help in finding them. She thinks it's something more sinister."

"And that would be?"

"The Albanians."

"You're not serious." Dimitri looked perturbed. "You told her no?"

"I told her I'd look into it. I made no promises."

Dimitri cursed in frustration. "What happened to your number one rule? Huh? Don't get involved, right?"

Ivan asked himself the same thing. There was something about Erin. He couldn't put his finger on it and couldn't explain it. Wiping the tears from her face had left his heart racing and his lower belly clenching. Was it her soft, green eyes imploring him to help that melted through the icy shield he'd erected around himself? Was it her pink pout and the thoughts of claiming her full mouth? Was it that bright citrus scent of her perfume that wound around him and invaded his senses? He didn't know. He only knew that he felt a connection to her, one that couldn't be denied.

"I'm making an exception." Ivan shot Dimitri a look that warned him to let this one go and not point out his hypocrisy. "Get out on the street and find Andrei and this girl, Ruby. Okay?"

"Yeah. Fine." Dimitri sounded pissed but he would do as told. "And you?"

Ivan rolled down his sleeves so he could slip into his jacket. "I'm going to the Samovar. I have to see Nikolai."