

Chapter One

September

Nothing brought a faster smile to my face than the soft chatter of happy clients and cheerful stylists. As I swirled a brush through the demi-permanent formula I had just blended together, I glanced away from the client seated at the color bar to the nearby makeup station where Savannah St. James, our resident makeup artist and my business partner, taught another client the secret art of shading in her newly shaped eyebrows. I had to lean to the left to get a good view of the cutting floor where four clients were having their hair snipped and shaped.

Billy Garcia, our guest relations manager, glided from station to station, checking in on clients and offering refreshments. She gathered up the occasional damp towel or empty water bottle as she made her round of the stations. The fishtail braid cascading down her back looked fantastic. I made a mental note to snap a photo of it for our hairstyle gallery.

Seeing smiles and hearing only laughter and gossipy chit-chat, I returned my attention to the carefully mixed chemicals I had prepared for another stylist to apply. Nisha Jackson, the best stylist in our salon, was finishing up a haircut so I had pitched in to keep her on track with her appointments.

Even though I had mixed color for clients countless times, I always checked and rechecked my formulas before painting even one strand of hair on a patron's head. A bad bathroom dye job during the summer between my freshman and sophomore years of high school had taught me that painful and embarrassing lesson. Sometimes I couldn't quite believe the girl who had turned her hair violet and then a sickly shade of green before running to a salon with her tail tucked between her legs was now the most popular color specialist in the city.

I placed the small bowl of product on the rolling table with my other supplies and pushed it toward Nisha's waiting client. Hannah was close to my mother's age, but the years hadn't been very kind to her. Stress had eaten away at her self-confidence and left

behind the tell-tale signs around the corners of her mouth and eyes. She smiled timidly at me, almost as if she feared doing or saying the wrong thing, and I ached for her.

Like all the women in our salon this Sunday afternoon, Hannah had come here as part of an outreach program we offered through a handful of domestic violence and homeless shelters. We provided hair coloring, cuts, styling and basic spa services like eyebrow shaping for women who needed a little confidence-boosting pick-me-up or a fresh look to get them ready for job hunting and the new lives they were trying to build. They left with a gift bag of supplies and vouchers for two years of free services.

A day of beauty wasn't going to solve their problems or heal the wounds violence and homelessness had inflicted, but I liked to think the short escape we provided offered a brief reprieve and a little happiness. For the women who were searching for employment after years of being homeless or under the thumbs of controlling spouses, I hoped it gave them newfound self-assurance. I wanted these women to know they were beautiful and worthy and had every right to go after the futures they deserved.

"Would you like another cup of tea before I start on your color?"

Hannah tugged at the neckline of her cape and shook her head. "I'm fine."

"Is this too tight?" I touched the cape. "I can adjust it."

"No, it's fine." Her hands immediately dropped to her lap.

"Let's take a peek, just in case." I could tell the cape was bothering her, but she wasn't about to tell me that she was uncomfortable. I didn't even want to imagine what hell she had endured that left her feeling as if she shouldn't even voice something as simple as her discomfort. "Sometimes these capes get a little frayed on the edges and scratch the skin."

When I unclipped the cape, I spotted a gnarly, thick scar running along her neck, just above the collar of her T-shirt. It was an old wound that hadn't healed well and looked angry and red. I had a terrible feeling she had doctored the injury herself, probably to keep the abuse she had suffered a secret. Not wanting to draw attention to something that had obviously made her uncomfortable, I lied. "Yep! It's a frayed cape. Let me get you a different one, okay?"

I swept away the cape she was wearing and switched it out for a different one from the drawer at the color bar. I grabbed a small towel too and tucked it along the cape's neckline as a liner. "How's that?"

"Much better." She managed another smile. "Thank you."

"No problem." With her comfort assured, I slipped on a pair of black disposable gloves, grabbed a comb and began to section off her hair for color application. I glanced at my watch for a quick check of the time and started working on her hair. Not wanting her to feel pressured to speak, I filled the time by talking about my mother's recent adventures with renovating the older historic home she had recently purchased. "We're going to take a little trip down to Round Top for the antique festival next month. Mama's on the hunt for a hutch and credenza and some light fixtures."

"What does your daddy think of all that renovating and antique buying?" Hannah seemed genuinely curious and maybe even a little worried. "It sounds awfully expensive."

"I don't have a daddy." It was an admission I found easy to make now, but there had been a time when I had burned with shame and embarrassment at having no father to give me a name or claim me as his own.

Hannah glanced back at me and frowned. "Everyone has a father."

"I mean, sure, *technically*, I have a father out there somewhere, but I don't know him and I doubt he knows me."

"That must have been hard for your mother."

"It wasn't easy, but she found a way to balance her career and being a mom. She always put me first though, even if it meant she had to hire a night sitter so she could go in late at night after I was in bed to get caught up on work."

"She sounds tenacious."

I laughed as I considered my spitfire mama. "That's my mother all right."

"It's good that you had a role model like that," Hannah quietly remarked. "My daughters..."

When her voice trailed off, I didn't know whether I should ask about them or let it go. Thankfully, Nisha saved me from having to make that decision by appearing at the color station we were using and bumping me with her hip. Tall and curvy, Nisha displayed

her killer fashion sense with a knockout black dress paired with a silver belt and lots of big, chunky turquoise jewelry.

I so envied her luscious dark curls and her fuller figure. Nisha made looking that damn sexy so effortless. Our clients loved her and her book was six weeks deep with appointments. Without Nisha, Savannah and I never would have been able to make Allure what it was today. I couldn't wait to see Nisha's face on Christmas morning when we surprised her with a piece of the salon as our third partner. She had more than earned it.

"Thanks for pitching in to help me stay on schedule," Nisha said while pulling on a pair of gloves. "I can take it from here so you can help our last client."

I carefully handed her the brush I had been using and peeled off my gloves. I made sure to let her know when I had started the application of color before breaking away from the color bar to the waiting area where our final appointment of the day waited.

A young woman sat in the lobby with her hands clamped between her knees. She wore an ill-fitting ikat print dress with a too-big navy cardigan that looked as if it had been dug out of a donations box. It didn't escape my notice that she had chosen a seat that gave her a clear view of the front door and let her keep a wall against her back. She seemed nervous and afraid so I decided to move slowly and give her some space.

"Hello." I shifted aside a few magazines and sat down on the round white leather ottoman in front of her. "I'm Holly Phillips, and I'm going to be your stylist today."

She lifted her gaze from the hands clamped between her knees—and I was taken aback. We looked so similar! Same eyes, similar noses and mouths. Her hair was longer than mine and showed the tell-tale signs of a botched home bleaching attempt. We would definitely have to correct that during our appointment.

As if seeing the uncanny resemblance between us, she grinned. When she spoke, the words were foreign to me. *Russian*, I realized. It was a language I was hearing more and more around the salon. Our client base had shifted a bit after Erin Markovic introduced Vivian Kalasnikov to our services. Everyone in their husbands' social circles wanted an appointment here now.

"I'm so sorry. I don't speak Russian," I apologized. "Our massage therapist who does isn't here today either." Realizing she probably didn't understand a word I was

saying, I stopped talking. How the heck was I supposed to style her hair if we couldn't communicate?

"My name..." she said haltingly, "is Lana."

"It's nice to meet you, Lana." I shook her hand and got a glimpse of her manicure. It was clean and neat and the soft coral shade looked fun and fresh. Someone had painted an intricate design in the palest shell pink on them. "Your nails look fantastic!"

She understood that, it seemed, and perked up a bit. "Thank you. I do it with...um..." She seemed to be searching for the right word. "Toothpick!"

"Really?" I examined them more closely and fell in love with the lace-like design she had created. "Look, um, can you just sit tight for a second? I need to make a quick phone call." I gestured for her to stay seated and crossed the waiting area to the reception desk. "Hey, Billy, will you keep an eye on my client for a second? I need to pop into my office."

Billy nodded. "I can do that."

Glancing over the styling products she had pulled from the retail shelves, I asked, "Is this the last of the clearance?"

"It is." She picked up a two bottles of a discontinued lotion fragrance from our spa's preferred line and quickly applied bright red clearance labels. "If you want me to stay late, I can tackle the new shampoo and conditioner display tonight."

"You can take care of it in the morning. You didn't take a single day off this week, Billy. When we're done tonight, head home and enjoy your night off."

She quirked a smile. "Whatever you say, boss."

I left the reception desk, glided along the perimeter of the salon to the employee door and ducked into my office. We had a zero tolerance policy for cell phones on the salon floor. I hated to break a rule, even on a day when the salon was technically closed to the public, but I didn't know what else to do.

I didn't have to roll very far through my mental Rolodex of contacts to come up with some names that might be able to help. Vivian was my first thought. She was a faithful client of the salon and someone I had come to consider a good friend. As the wife of one of Houston's richest Russian émigrés, she seemed to be one of the leading ladies of the city's small but very tight-knit Russian community.

But I hesitated to call her on a Sunday—especially *this* Sunday. Last night, most of the people in our overlapping social circles had been at the wedding of Bianca Bradshaw and Sergei Sakharov. Vivian had been the maid of honor, and I could only imagine how tired she was today, especially since she was pregnant. The last thing she needed was me bothering her when she was probably resting.

Kostya.

The moment the name of my mercurial and mysterious Russian neighbor registered in my mind, I felt instantly calmed. Was he in Houston this week? He worked in the private security field and traveled quite a bit, almost as much as my mother. I hadn't seen him at the wedding yesterday, but it was worth a try.

I quickly swiped the screen of my iPhone with my thumb, punched in my passcode and tapped in the number of the only man I trusted to come running if I asked for help.

Sometimes he came running even before I asked for help...

As I waited for Kostya to answer, I toyed with the delicate gold and jade bracelet he had given me for Christmas. The memory of that night still made my heart race. After fighting off the worst blind date of my life, I had been shoved out of a car onto my front lawn and hit with my own clutch. It had been humiliating and terrifying—until Kostya had emerged from the shadows like some kind of dark knight. He had defended and protected me from that jerk before tending my injuries with such tenderness.

“Holly?” The rasp of his deep voice sent a shiver of pure delight right down to the feminine core of me.

“Hey, Kostya.” I drummed my fingertips on my desk. “Um...are you busy?”

“You know that I'm never too busy for you.” His answer left me grinning like a fool. “Is everything all right?” He went straight into alpha over-protective mode, just as he did every time I called. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, but thank you for asking. Actually I sort of need a favor.”

“Of course. You know that you can ask me for anything.”

When he said *anything*, I got the feeling that he meant just that. I wasn't sure if I should find that flattering or terrifying. “You know how we offer special services for the women's shelter on the first Sunday of the month?”

“*Da.*”

I slowly made my way out of my office. “So there’s a young woman here who doesn’t speak much English—”

“She speaks Russian?”

“Yes.”

“And you want me to help translate?”

I stopped on the edge of the cutting floor and bit my lower lip. “Would you mind?”

“Not at all,” he assured me.

“Thank you so much.” I walked to the waiting area of the salon and sat down on the ottoman again. Lana now had a bottle of water in one hand and flipped the pages of a magazine opened across her lap. The cuffs of the too-large cardigan she wore had ridden up a little and revealed nasty bruises on her wrists. I could see the imprints of fingertips and long, thin lines that might have come from cords or ties.

Sweet Jesus! What had this poor girl survived?

She must have felt my stare because she self-consciously tugged down the sleeves of her cardigan and swallowed nervously.

I caught her eye and smiled, hoping to set her at ease. Tapping my phone screen, I activated the speaker and held it between us. “Can you hear us, Kostya? I have you on speaker.”

“Yes.” Kostya introduced himself to Lana who perked right up when she heard someone speaking her language. I noticed the way she relaxed right before my eyes and actually smiled when answering Kostya’s questions. She touched the ends of her hair while she talked, as if describing a shorter cut.

“Holly?” Kostya addressed me. “Are you there?”

“Yep. Right here.” I leaned toward the phone, just in case the background noise of blow dryers and music was too loud.

“Lana says that she likes your hair color and the style of your haircut. She would like to do that if you think it will work.”

“I think they’ll look great on her, but can you ask her what products she’s used on her hair? It looks as if she tried to do a home bleaching kit and then changed her mind

Kostya
Sneak Peek #1
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and put ash blonde over it. I just want to make sure I know what's on her hair before I start her color session."

Kostya chatted with Lana for a few moments and then gave me a quick rundown of the products she had put in her hair over the last few weeks. "She says that she understands English very well, but it's just answering that's a problem for her. Perhaps you should stick to yes or no questions. If you need my help, call or text me."

"All right. Thanks again, Kostya."

"Anytime, Holly."

As I ended the call and slipped my phone into the back pocket of my black skinny jeans, I noticed Lana's curious look. "He's my neighbor," I explained. "We're friends."

Her blue eyes glinted with skepticism. She didn't believe me anymore than I believed myself. Friends? Sure. We were friends—but I wanted so much more with him.

And it drove me crazy that Kostya seemed completely oblivious. I'd finally discovered the one man I couldn't charm with my Texas sass and flirty smile. It didn't seem fair that he lived next door, tempting and taunting and frustrating me all at once.

Catching myself toying with the bracelet again, I forced my fingers to go still and focused all of my attention on Lana. "I'm going to make sure you have a wonderful experience in my salon. Okay?"

"Yes."

"Great." I motioned toward the color bar. "Let's get started."

While she headed for the closest chair, I bent down to grab a cape from the basket under the counter. When I turned around, I had to stifle the shocked gasp that threatened to escape my throat. Lana had taken off her cardigan, probably to keep it free from any of the bleach that might drip down her neck during the rinsing process. The spaghetti straps of her dress revealed bare shoulders and a neck mottled with bruises in varying stages of healing. The bones in her arms and shoulders were so prominent, and I could only wonder at how many nights she had gone to bed hungry.

Refusing to make her uncomfortable, I schooled my features and draped the cape around her shoulders. I figured she had probably had enough of people digging into her business and asking her uncomfortable questions. For the few hours that she was in my

salon, I wanted her to be able to escape the awful memories of what she had survived. I wanted her to feel like any other young woman enjoying a salon transformation.

I was careful not to touch her or move quickly as I evaluated her hair and formulated a plan to give her the shiniest, iciest platinum white possible. Typically, I made sure my clients understood that going so pale meant a lot of upkeep and expense but I had already decided that this girl was getting whatever she wanted and on my dime.

As I worked on her hair, I was close enough to notice just how young she seemed. More and more, I worried that she might be *too* young. A sick feeling invaded my stomach. What if this poor girl hadn't willingly come to Houston? There had been so many trafficking busts in Houston and the surrounding counties over the last couple of years. A lot of those women came from Southeast Asia, but I had seen a recent news report about girls from Eastern Europe and Russia being at a high risk for trafficking.

But how in the world did I approach a subject so sensitive? Would Lana even tell me if I could figure out a way to talk to her? What could be done if my suspicions were proven true? She was in a safe place now—but was she safe enough? Shelters had security, but the kind of people who would traffic a young woman were the kind of people who wouldn't let a couple of rent-a-cops slow them down.

Kostya was the obvious choice here. Not only was he someone who shared her background and language, but he made a living as a very successful security systems consultant. His business was keeping people safe. Surely he could figure out a way to keep Lana out of harm's way if she needed help.

More than once, I had heard rumors that he was *the* man in Houston to approach if someone needed information of a sensitive nature or needed help getting out of trouble. I tried not to pay attention to the *other* rumors I'd heard about him, but it was difficult not to worry about him when I heard dark things about his friendship with Nikolai Kalasnikov.

People whispered words like *mafia* and *mobster* and *gangster* about that small group of men. I wasn't sure what to believe. From the outside, Kostya and his friends—Nikolai Kalasnikov, Ivan Markovic, Sergei Sakharov, Besian Beciraj, Alexei Sarnov—seemed like upstanding, successful members of the community. But I had heard things.

Things that made me bite my lip with concern. Things that made me wonder if I really knew my neighbor that well...

“I like very much,” Lana remarked with a grin as she checked out her feisty white-blond hair in the mirror. It was still damp from a final rinse but it looked fantastic.

“Just wait ‘til we get it cut and styled!” I finished squeezing the last bit of excess water from her hair before spritzing her strands with a styling product that worked well with her new ultra-blond color. I slowly worked my way through her hair with a comb and then used a few clips to hold up short twists of hair. I gently manipulated her head into the right position. “Can you look down please?”

She did as asked while I picked up my cutting comb and shears. The haircut was a simple one to achieve. I had been wearing my hair styled in a long bob with messy, loose waves and curls for the last few weeks and loved it. I had a feeling Lana was going to enjoy the versatility of the cut and the ease of styling.

While I was cross-checking my cut, Billy wandered over with a broom and dustpan to sweep up the floor. I caught her eye for a second. “Hey, Billy, can you grab my cell phone out of my pocket and send a quick text to my friend?”

“Sure.” She picked my phone out of my back pocket and typed in the text as I dictated it to her. I needed Kostya to translate the hair upkeep instructions for Lana in an email that Billy could print. “Sent.” She made a big production of tapping my screen before tucking my phone back in my pocket. “Anything else?”

“Go to the front and grab my favorite hair products. Shampoo, conditioner, toning shampoo, hair mask, blond-friendly styling products...”

“Will do.” She finished sweeping up the last bits of hair from the floor before heading off to complete her task.

My cut complete, I dabbed a little more styling product on Lana’s hair and reached up on tiptoes to grab the blow dryer dangling over my station. I finger combed her hair as I blasted it with some heat to dry away the lingering moisture. She paid close attention as I worked with a small straightener to achieve the right look, pulling down and curling just a tiny bit at the end to develop an easy, loose curl.

After putting away my tools, I unclipped the cape and offered her a mirror so she could see the back of her hair. The happiness lighting up her face convinced me I had

Kostya
Sneak Peek #1
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given her exactly what she wanted. We had found a common language—fashion and beauty—and no longer needed a translator.

“Beautiful.” Lana primped happily. “I like very much.”

“You look fantastic.” I folded up the cape and draped it over the chair. “This is a good look for you.” I gestured for her to follow me. “Let’s go play at the makeup counter.”

Like two little girls sneaking around in our mother’s makeup stash, we dug through the colorful drawers and displays until we found the perfect shades of blush, eyeshadow and lipstick. As I watched her apply makeup, I confirmed my earlier suspicion. If this girl was a day over eighteen, I would do cartwheels in the parking lot. She was a kid, just barely this side of childhood, and it pained me to think of the misery and suffering she had known. It wasn’t right, and she deserved better.

As our appointment drew to its close, I started thinking of ways to keep in touch with Lana. Women at the shelter were known to disappear, either returning home to their abusive partners or running away in fear. My instincts screamed Lana was still in trouble. She needed people she could trust. She needed a safe place that wasn’t the shelter. She might even need my connections someday soon.

I caught sight of her beautiful manicure and an idea struck—but I’d need some time to pull it off. “Listen, Lana,” I stopped her before we reached the reception counter, “how would you like to come work for me?”

Her face reflected comprehension and then surprise. “Work?” She gestured around the salon. “Here?”

“Yes. Here.”

She winced. “My English...”

I cut her off before she could sell herself short. “We’ll figure something out.”

She started to protest but the ear-piercing squawk of the security system interrupted her. We both jumped, and I scowled at the ceiling. This was the fourth time in the last two weeks this frustrating thing had just randomly blasted us during business hours.

“Lana,” I touched her arm to get her attention and had to shout over the siren, “come see me tomorrow.” I glanced at the reception desk where Billy stood with her

hands clapped over her ears to drown out the siren. “Billy, make sure Lana gets her bag and the instructions for upkeep.”

Billy shot me a thumbs up and then answered the ringing phone. “Security guys,” she mouthed while pointing at the phone.

“Tell them to shut this thing off!” I quickly turned on my heel and sprinted to the back of the salon where I found Savannah smacking and cursing at the box mounted on the wall there. “What set it off this time?”

“Hell if I know!” She slapped the keypad twice and growled. “I was looking over our notes for the Monday morning staff meeting, and this thing just flipped out and started screeching. Now I can’t get it to take our code.”

Figuring she was about two seconds from ripping it off the wall, I gently shouldered her aside. “Let me try.”

“It’s all yours!” She threw her hands up in the air and stormed away in a huff.

I fished my phone out of my pocket and quickly dialed the security company’s support line while trying to reset the system manually. If Billy couldn’t get them to shut it off, I wanted to be already on the line with a representative. I was still waiting on hold when I managed to get the system to accept our override code. I stayed on the line for another twenty-seven minutes troubleshooting the ongoing issues with the representative who answered.

When the representative couldn’t offer an explanation for why our system was on the fritz, I hung up in frustration. Using a nationwide company was proving to be a pain in my ass. More and more, I wondered if choosing a local security company wasn’t the better choice. Conveniently enough, I had an expert in security living right next door.

Speaking of doors...

I noticed the double doors to our main supply closet were open and walked over to close it. Savannah must not have seen it when she was back here beating on the security system keypad. If she had, my phone would be vibrating with a new email alert because she would have sent out a company-wide email reminding everyone to close doors, turn off electronics and flip light switches. As the salon’s money maven, she watched our utility bills like a hawk and was fanatical about conserving energy.

Standing alone in the back hall near the rear entrance, I suddenly had the strangest sensation of not being alone. It was an odd flutter in my stomach that spread into my chest. Hand on the supply closet door, I held my breath and listened for....well. I wasn't sure what I was listening for actually.

Quit being such a baby! There's nothing in there but shampoo and towels.

When I heard nothing, I rolled my eyes and shut the door. Feeling silly for letting my imagination run wild, I headed back to the salon's main floor. Lana had disappeared along with the last few straggler clients. Billy was shutting down our registers and books for the night while Savannah wiped down the makeup counter. Nisha glanced up at me and smiled as she straightened up her station. I went to my own and went through my usual end of night routine so I could start my morning off right.

Soon, only Savannah and I remained at the salon. I wandered back to my office and kicked off my heels before sinking into my desk chair to tackle the backlog of paperwork waiting for my attention. There were vacation requests to sort, new stylist applications to pick through and vendor literature piling up to be read.

"Hey, Holly?" Savannah called out to me as she stepped into my office. "You busy?"

"No." I swiveled around in my desk chair and discovered Savannah leaning against the door frame. I grinned at the sight of the mannequin head clamped under her arm. "Is Nisha starting her Halloween pranks a few weeks early?"

Laughing at the reminder of Nisha's ghoulish pranks, she gave the male mannequin a little shake. "No, I found Harry in the stockroom and thought he looked lonely." She sauntered across my office and plunked the practice mannequin down onto my desk. With a saucy wink, she flashed her whiskey brown eyes at me and said, "I'm embracing my inner matchmaker. I think Harry is the perfect guy for you."

I snorted softly. "How's that, Savvy?"

"For one, he doesn't talk back. And look!" She gestured to him. "He doesn't have hands so we don't have to worry about him getting grabby or overstepping the line, right? Plus he has fabulous hair." She ran her fingers through Harry's wavy dark locks. "See? You love a man with thick, wavy hair, right?"

I shook my head at her silliness. "I love you, Savvy. Don't ever change."

“I’m too stubborn for that.” She leaned back against my desk and crossed her arms. My envious gaze settled on her ample bust and killer curves. Even dressed in simple skinny jeans and a flirty high ponytail, she was a knockout. “You, on the other hand, could use a little change in your life.”

I rolled my eyes and sagged in my chair. “Not this again...”

“Yes. *This*. Again.” She nudged my leg with the toe of her red ballet flat. “We missed you last night at the wedding reception. You should have come.”

“You know I don’t like receptions.”

“It’s not about liking or not liking them. This was about networking and building our business and being a good friend to Bianca. She and her mother own the most successful bridal boutique in this city. They see a lot of brides and recommend our salon to those bridal parties. We see a lot of word-of-mouth business because of them.”

The financial and marketing brains behind the salon, Savannah framed the issue in a way that hit home for me. Chagrined, I nodded contritely. “You’re right. I should have gone and pulled my weight as an owner of the salon.”

“It’s more than that, Holly. Bianca and her mother have been clients at this salon since we opened our doors. We’re all friends and colleagues. You even came in on your day off to help with the bridal party’s hair and makeup. I thought for sure you would stick around after the ceremony, but when we got to the reception, I looked everywhere and couldn’t find you.”

I shifted uncomfortably beneath her perturbed stare. “I didn’t have a date.”

“So?”

“So I hate being the single girl at the wedding.”

Savannah rolled her eyes. “There were plenty of ladies there without a plus-one, and there were so many great single guys there last night. *Hot* single guys,” she added with a saucy smile. “All those big, delicious, sexy fighters from Sergei’s gym were there.” She fanned herself. “You missed one hell of a party!”

“Apparently,” I said giving her an appraising glance. “And which one of those fighters did you take home?”

“Now, now,” she replied rather primly, “you know me. I’m a good Catholic girl.”

I leveled a look her way. “Mmm-hmm.”

“Hush.” She playfully chastised. Then, more serious, she said, “Holly, you’re one of the prettiest women in this whole city. You’re sweet, smart and funny. You own the most popular salon and spa in Houston. Men are *tripping* over their feet to get in front of you so you’ll notice them. If you weren’t so dang picky, you could have any man in Houston.”

“I don’t want just any man in Houston,” I replied rather indignantly.

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “Is this about *him*?”

“Him?” A nervous burst of energy rippled through my belly. “Who?”

She saw right through my act. “You know damned well I mean that Russian fox who lives next door to you.” She exhaled in frustration. “You’re still pining after Kostya Antonovich.”

I huffed at her. “I’m not pining.”

She gave me a look. “Oh really?”

“It’s not pining,” I insisted defensively. “Pining is what happens after a break-up. I haven’t even gotten as much as a date with him!”

“And whose fault is that?”

“What?”

“You heard me.” She hitched her shoulders up as if itching to argue. “I’m going to ask you something and I want your honest answer.”

“All right.” I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like what I heard next.

“Do you really want *this* man, Holly?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “What does that mean?”

“It means that I’ve heard things about Kostya. Things that make me nervous for you,” she added with concern.

“What things?”

“Holly..”

“Savannah.” I sat up straighter and held her gaze. “What things? If it’s those mob rumors, I’ve heard them. They’re all nonsense.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s *not* nonsense. Come on, Holly! Open your eyes. What the heck was that attack that happened last year? The one where Vivian Valero was dragged

Kostya
Sneak Peek #1
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out of a car and Nikolai Kalasnikov was beaten half to death? Doesn't that sound a little mobbed-up to you?"

"The paper said it was because of her dad. You saw the news coverage when he got away from those US Marshals."

She rolled her eyes at me. "Okay. We'll chalk that one up to dear old dad, but don't you think it's a little suspicious that Vivian's husband is *that* rich just from owning a restaurant and some other small businesses?"

"Maybe he came here with a little money in his pocket and made some good investments," I offered. "There was a lot of money to be made in Russia. Look at Yuri Novakovsky and some of the other oligarchs. It's plausible that Nikolai got his hands on some of that money."

"Fine. I'll give you that one. But what about Erin Markovic's husband? The guy was a straight-up brawler, Holly. I've heard he even used to beat people up for money! Somehow he buys the ugliest warehouse in Houston and has all this money to fill it with high-end equipment and hire all that staff? And have you seen the tattoos on his hands?" Her eyes widened with something very close to fear. "When Erin was in here for her mani-pedi, he dropped her off and came in to wait for her. He paid her bill, and I got a good look at the ink on his hands. Those tattoos scared the shit out of me. That ink means something, Holly. It means something *bad*."

I didn't want to dig into the dark and complicated history of Erin's husband. Ivan was a big, scary guy, and I had no problem believing he had done some less than savory things. Even so, he had never shown me anything but kindness and respect. I believed in second chances, and he seemed to have earned his. Turning the conversation, I insisted, "Kostya doesn't have those tattoos."

"Maybe not on his hands or arms but who knows what's under his shirt?"

"Well I haven't seen him naked yet so I wouldn't know," I replied rather testily.

"It's not just the mob rumors, Holly. There are some not-so-nice things about Kostya that are facts."

"Like?" Even as I asked for information, I feared what she would say. Savannah was the biggest gossip in the salon and had an uncanny knack for getting people to divulge their secrets.

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“He owns strip clubs.”

I blinked at that unexpected revelation. “How do you know that?”

“Nisha recognized him outside the church at Bianca’s wedding. She told me that he co-owns a bunch of clubs around town with some gangster loan shark guy.”

“How does she know that?”

“Her uncle,” Savannah said. “You know he’s into all that shady stuff down in the Fifth Ward. Her ex is in the pen for all sorts of the same kinds of awful shit so when Nisha tells me that someone is trouble, I believe her.”

I swallowed hard. Honestly, I didn’t know how to feel about the discovery that Kostya made money from strip clubs. It was a dirty, exploitative business. “I don’t know what you expect me to say, Savvy.”

She stared at me for a long moment before exhaling slowly. “I expect you to say that you have your eyes wide open and you understand that Kostya has a complicated history. He’s probably done some bad things, Holly. Maybe he’s doing bad things right now. I need to know that you’ve thought long and hard about that before you go chasing after him.”

“I’m not chasing after him.”

“Not yet,” she retorted, “but you will. If you want him, you’re going to have to go and get him. Quit waiting for him to make the first move and make it yourself.”

“This isn’t high school, Savvy. It’s not that simple.”

“You’re right. It’s not high school so stop acting like a scared teenager whose never been kissed and act like a grown ass woman who knows what she wants and what she needs.”

Hating that she was right to call me out for being so ridiculous but unwilling to concede defeat so quickly, I frowned up at her. “Well aren’t you just Miss Bossy today!”

“I’m too tired for my usual grace and charm. I had to get up super early to grab a spot in the confessional before Mass this morning.” Smilingly mischievously, she admitted, “After the fun I had last night, I deserved every single one of those Hail Marys.”

Her nearly blasphemous remark made me twitter with nervous laughter. “You are *horrible*.”

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“Oh, please.” She tipped her nose up in the air. “You know you’re jealous.”

“I am. Completely.” Poking her with my pen, I said, “You know I want the details of all that fun you had, right?”

“Tomorrow,” she promised. “Right now, I have a date with Netflix, my jammies and a bottle of moscato.”

“Fair enough.”

She shoved off my desk and headed for my door, leaving Harry behind to keep me company. “Don’t stay too late. We have a staff meeting tomorrow.”

“I won’t.”

“Follow me out and lock up behind me?”

“Okay.”

“Oh!” She hovered in the doorway of my office. “What did the alarm folks say?”

“Nothing helpful! I think we may need to find a new company.”

“I’d offer to call around for bids but something tells me you’re looking for a reason to go knock on Kostya’s door. Far be it from me to deny you the chance to get your flirt on...”

“Get out of here,” I said while dramatically shooing her away from my office. Her laughter echoed down the hallway as I followed her to the rear exit. After a quick hug and goodbye, I made sure the shop was locked tight behind her and detoured into the employee kitchen to grab a can of soda from the fridge. I cracked the tab, took a sip of the fizzy lemon-lime sweetness and returned to my office.

I had just started sorting through vacation requests when I heard the first shrill chirp. *Oh, no.* I recognized the sound instantly as the low battery alarm for a smoke detector. Flopping back in my desk chair, I pinched the bridge of my nose and exhaled roughly. Every few seconds, the smoke alarm chirped.

Shoving out of my chair, I walked out of my office and down the hall to the supply closet for a step ladder and battery. I hefted the ladder around the salon, working my way from the back of the building to the front in search of the chirping alarm. Standing in the reception area, I waited patiently for that annoying beep but heard nothing. I waited and waited but there was only silence.

What the hell? I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was screwing with me. More and more, I became convinced that someone had hacked our system or something. *This isn't normal*, I thought as I dragged the ladder back to the supply room and tucked away the battery.

Back in my office, I sat at my desk and picked up my soda. As I took a long drink, I tried to piece together the timeline of strange occurrences around the shop. It had all started a ten or eleven days ago. Either the security company wasn't telling me the truth about all the issues we were having—or someone was maliciously targeting our business.

Unfortunately, the latter possibility wasn't too far-fetched, not for Houston at least. Not that long ago, one of our clients, Benny Marquez, had nearly lost her life when a greedy developer had hired arsonists to force her out of her building. This town had a dark, seedy underbelly that encouraged terrible deeds in the name of money.

But who in the world would want to attack my business? The building was owned outright by my mother. Savannah and I had a good relationship with the businesses on either side of us, a little coffee shop-slash-café and a clothing boutique. We'd never had any issues with salons in the area so it definitely wasn't a professional jealousy thing, and we hadn't fired an employee since our first year of being open. We had experienced the usual ebb and flow of employees, stylists leaving for new opportunities in different cities or choosing to devote their time to their new babies and young children.

I took another sip and then tapped at my keyboard and got back to work. The easiest option would be to simply replace the entire system and switch providers. If that didn't solve our strange issues, well, then I would start to worry.

Yawning loudly, I rubbed at my tired eyes. The words and numbers on my computer screen seemed so blurry. I blinked and picked up my can of soda, hoping the jolt of sugar would give me the energy I needed to get through this last bit of paperwork before calling it quits and heading home.

I should have grabbed something with caffeine...

Focusing on my bright computer screen, I tried to make sense of what I was reading but there was a weird disconnect between my eyes and my brain. Suddenly, my eyelids felt heavy, so very heavy, and I felt my body starting to relax. Whether I wanted

Kostya

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to or not, I was going to fall asleep. My sluggish brain urged me to give in and accept the drowsiness. A nap now was better than falling asleep while driving, right?

As I leaned forward and rested my head on my arms, I thought maybe, just maybe, I had detected a hint of movement reflected in the computer screen.

Shadows, I convinced myself. It's all just shadows and dust...