

NIKOLAI

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DEDICATION

For David, still my sweet Texan protector.

CHAPTER ONE

With a sharp inhale, I bolted awake. Blinking rapidly, I tried to clear my fuzzy, panicked thoughts. I wiped a shaking hand down my face and shoved up into a sitting position. Still confused from the nightmare, I frantically searched the bedroom until my gaze landed on the nightlight near the door.

It was the same dream that had plagued me since the night I'd been shot. Nearly eleven years had passed since that awful April night but the memories were still so real, still so raw. I rubbed the spots on my chest and belly that ached with the phantom pains of bullets ripping through my flesh.

My gaze jumped to the doorway and I half expected Lena to come running into my room to check on me. Even though she'd been officially out of the apartment for a week, I still hadn't adjusted to her absence. After living together for so long, it was going to take some time for me to get used to being alone again.

Certain I wouldn't be able to sleep, I glanced at the clock. It was a bit early to start my morning run but I couldn't sit here in this quiet, empty apartment with my troubled thoughts. I switched off my alarm, slipped out of bed and went through my morning routine.

A quick peek out the window helped me choose my running gear. Though the streets were dry now, the Houston weather could change without waning. I made sure to wear layers because of the late December chill and chose a thin rain jacket with reflective tape on the sleeves and back.

With my hair pulled into a high ponytail and ear warmers snugly in place, I pocketed my MP3 player and headed for the kitchen. My gaze lingered on the box sitting on the kitchen table. I'd found bits and pieces of Lena's stuff since she'd packed up and left. When she returned from her winter vacation with Yuri, I'd make sure she got it.

I snatched up my keys and cell phone and tucked them into my pocket. Thumbing through the playlists on my iPod, I picked a mix of alternative and electronica and slipped my ear buds into place. My MP3 player fit neatly into the pouch on my ear warmers.

Out in the cold morning, I stretched my arms overhead and yawned a few times. I adjusted the volume of my music before jogging down the sidewalk and across the parking lot. I wasn't at all surprised when two headlights popped on and a silver SUV eased out of a guest spot. I rolled my eyes in annoyance but waved at the poor guy Nikolai had forced to babysit me today.

Such were the "perks" of having a Russian mobster as a guardian. Though I loathed being followed every minute of the day, I understood why I had that SUV shadowing me along my run. I'd hoped things would go back to normal for me after Lena and Yuri survived their harrowing brush with death and the Guzman Cartel had let her father go but it wasn't to be.

In the last week, word had reached Nikolai that my incarcerated father's impending release had been bumped up. Not knowing the exact date of his release left me on edge. Even more troubling for

me? No one knew *how* he'd managed to get early release from the pen. A man like my father wasn't going to earn release for good behavior. Just thinking about what he might have done to get popped from lockup made my stomach sour. Deep down inside, I knew he'd find a way to drag me back down into the shit with him.

As my feet pounded the familiar three-mile path, I let my mind wander. Lately, my thoughts seemed to always circle back to Nikolai. Our odd relationship was one that few people could understand. From the moment he'd appeared in my life that terrible April night nearly eleven years earlier, we'd been forever entangled.

My chest tightened as I remembered the stupid thing I'd done. So desperate to be loved by my loser father, I'd let him talk me into helping him break into a house. He'd sworn the owners were out of town and that we were simply going to take some jewelry and money from a safe. Then he'd take me away from Houston, away from the grandparents who were suffocating me and keeping me away from him, and off to a new life where we'd be happy.

Looking back, I couldn't believe I'd been *that* gullible. Even at the tender age of eleven, I should have known better. Hell, maybe I *had* known better but I'd been so emotionally damaged by the suicide of my mother that I didn't care. I just desperately needed to believe that one of my parents loved me enough to want me.

But the house we'd broken into wasn't empty at all. Someone had been sleeping there. Someone with a gun. Someone with very good aim. Someone who shot me while I tried to flee out a second-story window with a hoodie stuffed with jewelry and cash while my father ran out the back door.

My gut lurched as the memory of the free fall from that window hit me hard. I jogged in place at an intersection and tried to get a grip on my wild emotions. *Breathe. Just breathe.*

Glancing both ways, I crossed the intersection and hopped onto the curb. The tightness in my chest eased as I remembered the way Nikolai had saved my life. While my rotten, cowardly father had fled the scene, Nikolai and some of the neighbors had been awakened by the gunshots. He'd knelt at my side, cradling my head with one hand and pressing a wadded up towel to my bleeding belly and chest with the other until the paramedics and police had arrived.

Later, when I'd woken up in the hospital, I'd learned that Nikolai and my grandparents actually knew each other from back in Russia. From that point forward, he'd been a shadowy character in the background of my life. It wasn't until my grandmother suddenly passed during my senior year of high school and my grandfather succumbed to an aggressive case of early-onset Alzheimer's that Nikolai stepped out of those shadows and offered his help and friendship.

Generally, people made one of two assumptions when it came to our curious relationship. They assumed Nikolai had taken on the role of my father figure after my own had been thrown in the federal pen.

He hadn't.

Or, they assumed our relationship had some kind of sordid, twisted sexual component.

It absolutely didn't.

The truth was rather simple. Nikolai was my guardian. Not in the legal sense, of course, but in a broader sense. He watched out for me. He kept the heat of my father's connections with the Guzman Cartel and that wretched motorcycle gang he ran with off my back.

When I'd needed a job, he'd offered me a spot as a waitress at Samovar, the extremely successful restaurant he owned. The few times I'd run into problems with my college tuition or health insurance premiums, he'd taken care of it without me even having to ask. How he always knew when I needed help remained a mystery to me.

Looking back, I recognized he'd silently interceded on my behalf on numerous occasions. It was clear to me now that Nikolai had been the source of the funding for my private high school tuition. He'd been the one who paid for my grandfather's medical care and nursing home expenses. He'd even

arranged both of my grandparents' funerals.

Other men would have held those acts of kindness and charity over my head or used them to exploit or take advantage of me—but not Nikolai. He'd always kept me at an arm's length, always ensuring that my honor remained intact and that our friendship was beyond reproach.

And it drove me crazy.

I wanted to be wrapped up in his strong arms, not constantly held at bay. Though I wasn't brave enough to come right out and tell him how I felt, I was absolutely certain he understood that my childish crush had grown into something deeper, something more real. Sometimes he looked me and I swore I could see the same longing reflected in his green eyes.

But, just as quickly as the flash of need appeared, it would vanish, and I'd be left doubting myself. Maybe it was merely a case of wishful thinking on my part. Not wanting to make a complete jackass of myself, I'd continued to cling only to the closeness of our friendship without ever daring to take a step across the line. The last thing I wanted was to drive him away—because I needed him.

Of all the people in the world, Nikolai was among the very few who could truly understand my history and how far I'd come in life. My best friend, Lena, came very close, but even she had been spared the very worst horrors in her childhood. While she'd witnessed gang violence and drug dealing and had been abandoned by her mother, she'd always had one parent—her father—who loved her.

But me? I'd had no one.

My mother's untreated mental illness left her incapable of loving or caring for me. When she wasn't abusing me, she ignored me completely, often going days without even feeding me. My father had been a little better when he was around but that wasn't often. He'd been in and out of prison or running around with the miscreants in the Calaveras motorcycle gang for most of my childhood.

I hadn't known kindness or love until my mother's parents had taken custody of me. Though they were strict disciplinarians, they'd showered me with real love. As emotionally broken as I'd been when I'd come into their home, I'd rebelled and fought them every step of the way. It wasn't until I'd escaped my brush with death that I'd woken the hell up and realized how incredibly lucky I was to have two people willing to fight so hard for me.

Nikolai understood what it was like to be abandoned by his parents. He understood what it was like to be hurt and neglected by the people who were supposed to love and care for him. He knew only too well what it felt like to have that gaping, raw hole of pain swirling in the pit of his stomach.

When waiting tables at Samovar, I'd watch the happy families enjoying a Saturday night dinner with such envy. Though I'd finally known happiness and security and contentment as a teenager, I'd spent the most impressionable and vulnerable years of my life aching for love and comfort. To see smiling fathers feeding their toddlers and mothers coloring with their preschoolers while they waited for their meals left me feeling so empty.

Sometimes I'd catch Nikolai watching me. We'd share a silent look. Nothing had to be said. It was as if we both instinctively understood what the other felt—yet he insisted on shutting me out and keeping just outside that icy wall he'd erected around himself.

For years, Lena and Erin encouraged me to let my infatuation with Nikolai go. They assumed my attraction toward Nikolai stemmed from those old feelings of hero worship but they were dead wrong. It wasn't simply the allure of a dangerous, mercurial, mysterious older man that drew me toward him. No, it was so much more than that.

After meeting Ivan and falling head over heels in such an intense, short period of time, Erin seemed to have finally grasped what I was always trying to explain. She'd stopped harping on my unrequited love toward him. Lena's new relationship with Yuri, another of Nikolai's friends, had softened her opinion of my untenable position.

They'd finally stopped trying to set me up on dates with nicer guys. Don't get me wrong. More often than not, I had a fantastic time on the dates. I'd been blessed with good luck in the dating game.

Though I'd had a couple of dates during my freshman year of college that probably qualified for Worst Date Ever awards, I'd mostly enjoyed myself.

But I'd never felt that spark. The goodnight kisses were less than exciting and I rarely got asked for a second or third date. Nikolai had ruined me for anyone else. Though it sounded incredibly melodramatic, I realized that it was Nikolai or nothing for me.

Making the final turn toward my apartment complex, I shoved aside my dreary thoughts and glanced at my watch. I'd made good time this morning. Despite running competitively in high school, I hadn't possessed the drive or the inclination to try it in college. I'd accepted the art and language scholarships instead but found a park-based running club to keep me in shape.

As I jogged through the gate of the complex, I glanced over my shoulder to see that silver SUV still following me. It was still too dark for me to identify the driver clearly. From the size of the man sitting behind the wheel, I guessed it was Sergei, one of Nikolai's enforcers. The bear-sized Russian spent at least one Saturday night a month in no-holds barred bare-knuckle fighting matches. After Ivan had retired and bought his way out of the mob, Sergei had taken Ivan's place as Nikolai's champion. If I had to have a shadow, I supposed it was best to have the meanest son of a bitch in Houston trailing me.

After a slow cool-down lap around the complex and a couple of stretches to ease the tightness in my calves and back, I started down the sidewalk to my apartment. I slipped my hand into my jacket to retrieve my keys. With M83 blaring in my ears, I didn't hear the footsteps behind me until it was too late.

The moment a hand touched my shoulder, I freaked out, spun around and instinctively punched my would-be assailant right in the mouth. "Get away from me!"

A second too late, I realized I'd just clocked Eric, my cousin and a Houston PD detective. Eyes wide with surprise, he clamped a hand to his bloodied mouth and staggered backward. I jerked on the cord attached to my ear buds, freeing them in time to hear him shouting at me. "Damn it, Vivian! Do you have keys in your hand?"

I glanced down at the bloody silver keys clamped in my fingers. My hand ached badly from the impact, but I ignored it, thinking only of the damage I'd done to Eric.

"I'm sorry!" I rushed forward and put a steadying hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay? Is it bad?"

He lowered his hand and tipped his head back. Thin streams of blood curved along his jaw and dripped onto his shirt. "I've had worse."

I hurried to my front door and unlocked it. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up."

As he followed me into the apartment, he started laughing. "The guys at the station are never going to let me live this one down. I just got my ass whipped by a girl."

"I really am sorry." I shut the door and led him into the kitchen. "I didn't hear you. I panicked."

"It's my fault." He hopped up onto the counter. "I should have called to let you know I was coming."

I thrust a damp dishcloth into his hands. "Take this. I'll get some ice."

He dabbed at his bloody face while I dropped ice in a plastic bag and wrapped it in another towel. "How's it look?"

I inspected his split lip and bloody nose. "Not so good." I gestured to the deep scratches above his lip and along his cheek. "My keys made some ugly marks."

Shaking his head, he took the ice pack from me and pressed it to his injured face. "You been spending time at Ivan's gym?"

I smiled at his teasing remark. "No. I actually learned that at one of those self-defense courses the university hosts every semester."

"You should carry pepper spray when you run." He reached out and flicked the cord of my iPod. "And turn down the volume on these. You should have been able to hear me come up behind you."

I felt sheepish. "Nikolai's always on my case about running with music. He warned me I wouldn't hear someone sneak up on me. I guess he was right."

Eric just grunted at the idea of Nikolai being right about anything. I didn't know the full history between those two. It wasn't simply my close relationship with the Russian mob boss that irritated Eric. I had the feeling it was something do with a girl but I wasn't brave or nosy enough to ask.

He lowered the ice pack and held my gaze. His worried expression made my gut twist. "Your dad is out."

My arms went slack. "When?"

"Last night."

"But—how?"

Eric hesitated. "He flipped."

My stomach dropped like a runaway elevator. "On the Calaveras? You're sure?" With each question, my voice grew faster and more panicked. "How do you know? Maybe you're wrong."

"I'm not wrong. Prisoners who get popped from federal prison and go into the custody of the U.S. Marshals aren't getting out for good behavior."

My stomach churned nastily. "Why would he do that? All these years, he's put his motorcycle gang first. Why jump now?"

"I've heard there's an internal power struggle in the club. One side wants to get in deeper with the Guzman Cartel. The other side wants to make new alliances."

"What does my dad want?"

Eric shrugged. "Hell if I know. He's only ever looked out for himself. Whatever he's playing at here, the endgame is all about him."

Another horrifying thought suddenly struck me. "But, if he flipped on his club, they're going to want to find a way to hurt him."

His somber expression confirmed my worst fears. "He didn't ask for your protection. I tried to talk to someone in the Marshal's office about having you taken into protective custody, but they won't confirm or deny your father is even out of the pen. Houston PD doesn't have the budget to put a car on you either. Not until—"

"Someone tries to kill me," I finished for him.

He flinched. With a sigh, he confirmed, "Basically. They have to be able to justify the man hours." As if trying to calm my frazzled nerves, he added quickly, "Look, we could be wrong. Maybe the club doesn't care about you. It's clear you dad doesn't care about you, right? So why hurt you to send him a message if he doesn't give a shit?"

Though Eric's words were harsh, he didn't speak them with malice. They were said matter-of-factly. "Because they're crazy? Because they have a stupid honor code? Because they're going to be pissed off? Because they'll want to send a message to every member of their outfit that no one is safe if they betray the club?"

The cold fist of panic squeezed my heart. "Eric, what the hell am I supposed to do?"

Before he could answer me, a loud knock echoed in my apartment. Our gazes jumped to the front door. Without a word, Eric pushed off the counter and yanked his pistol from the holster concealed under his jacket. He gave me a gentle shove toward the fridge so I would be obscured from the open door.

Flattened against the stainless steel, I held my breath and waited. Finally, I heard a loud exhale, the sound a mix of irritation and relief.

"You can come out. It's *him*."

Him? Nikolai.

I stepped away from the refrigerator just in time to see Eric open the door. Still holding his weapon at the ready, he greeted Nikolai with the muzzle of his pistol. Not a word was spoken between the

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men as they glared at each other.

Cool and calm, Nikolai entered my apartment. His gaze flicked around the space until he found me. His green eyes raked down my form. I watched his jaw tighten before he turned to shut and lock the door. "We have to talk."

I had a sinking feeling this was a conversation I wasn't going to like.