

Chapter One

New Caney, Texas

October, Thursday, Current Day

Therese

The shrill ring of my mobile phone jolted me awake at 2:00 a.m., a haunting prompt that emergencies seldom emerged in daylight. Someone had ventured into the wilderness and needed me to lead a rescue mission. My skills of trekking over precarious terrain to find victims who suffered from physical injuries, dehydration, starvation, or all three, kept me on alert. At times I viewed my life like a *Star Trek* tagline, “Where no man has gone before.”

I grabbed the phone off my nightstand. Unidentified caller. “Hello?”

“Ms. Palmer, this is Professor Rurik Ivanov from Houston Leonard University. We met nearly a year ago. You taught a course in wilderness survival as an adjunct professor.”

I captured a mental image of the Russian man—gray-blue eyes, stone-gray hair, angular face. “Yes, sir. How can I help you?”

“I apologize for the hour, but I’m in a desperate situation.”

The angst in his voice zapped me into guarded mode, especially when I barely knew the man. I snapped on my bedside lamp. “Are you all right?”

“No, ma’am, which is why I’m calling you. Do you remember my wife and daughter?”

“I met them both at a faculty dinner last Christmas. A lovely family.”

“My wife was murdered today, and kidnappers have taken my daughter.”

I inhaled sharply, and alarm for the professor’s family fired hot from the soles of my feet. “Daria? Alina? What happened?”

“A man called me late this afternoon while I prepared to leave for home. He said he’d taken Alina. Then he sent a link to a video showing my wife’s execution—”

He stopped abruptly, his final words drumming into my senses. The seconds ticked by, and I waited.

“I watched Daria grab her chest and struggle . . . The blood rushed from her precious body—my dear Daria’s life gone forever.” He grappled again to control his tear-filled voice. “He said they would release Alina unharmed if I paid three million dollars. They’d call with instructions. When the man hung up, I hurried home thinking it had to be a terrible mistake or someone had used AI to generate the video. On the way, I phoned Daria and the call went to voice mail. I also redialed the man who’d contacted me. The phone rang repeatedly, but the number offered no way to leave a message. I contacted Alina’s school and learned Daria had picked her up before noon.

“At home, reality rooted. A lamp and a table in the living room lay in pieces. Daria would have fought hard, but there were no signs of blood. I didn’t recognize the place in the video where they killed her. I even checked for geotag information on the clip, but it had been stripped. I later clicked on the link . . . the video had disappeared.”

I ached for his loss. “What do the police say?”

Silence answered me, then Rurik finally said, “Contacting them is impossible. The man

warned me against telling anyone who works in law enforcement, or I'd never see Alina again." He sobbed into the phone. "Please, give me a moment."

"Take all the time you need."

The professor taught Russian language and literature at Leonard University and was highly respected and liked among faculty and students. I'd enjoyed our occasional chats, and he'd observed some of my classes. What had he done to upset the wrong people?

"Thank you. I can talk now," he said. "I have no idea where the killers have taken Daria's body or how to find Alina. Neither do I suspect anyone."

I willed my pulse to slow. "Professor, the police are trained in handling confidential matters and how to find who is responsible. They have families and understand what you're going through."

"And endanger my daughter?" Panic throbbed in his ragged voice.

"I'm sorry." My grief over losing Kate many years ago surfaced raw and bleeding. "Are you alone?"

"Yes. At home."

"Are there family or friends who can stay with you?"

"My family is in Russia, and I do not trust anyone."

"You could very well be in danger too."

"My welfare is unimportant."

"Who are these people, and why has your family been victimized?"

"I have no idea. The man refused to identify himself, but he did say 'we.' Maybe he thinks I have money or believes I have done something criminal to my country or to the US."

What was he not telling me? I tossed off my blanket and stood in my bedroom, shivering, not from the cold but the horror of this unfolding story. "Professor Ivanov, I'm confused. Why call me? This is a job for the police or the FBI."

"I cannot risk my daughter's life. You are my only hope to find Alina. You have the skills to get her back."

I ran my fingers through my hair. "I'm a wilderness-survival specialist, nothing more. I'm not equipped to carry out a hostage negotiation without backup, which is another reason you need to involve the authorities." More questions bolted into my mental space like a landslide. "How would I find her?"

"That's where I can help you. Alina has GPS trackers hidden in her shoes. Not even Daria knew about them."

"Why would you track your young daughter?"

"Alina's biological mother died when she was a baby, and I've been consumed with protecting my daughter ever since. I checked my phone app and learned at one thirty this afternoon, Alina was taken to a private landing strip west of Houston. I called there, and a woman who worked in the small office said no one had filed a flight plan. But she made a mistake. The tracker had stopped registering." He coughed and asked me to wait while he got a glass of water.

A connection at Harris County Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Management popped into my consciousness. They had the technology to confirm the date and time a plane took to the skies and where it landed.

“I’m better. I apologize for my lack of control,” the professor said. “My app showed tracking again near an abandoned airstrip in a remote area south of Hobbs, New Mexico. The tracking indicated ground-speed movement for two and a half hours to a section on the north side of Guadalupe Mountains National Park called Dog Canyon. That’s where the tracking ended, and I’ve detected nothing since. I assume the kidnappers parked the vehicle and proceeded on foot with Alina. Research shows the area is off-grid. Ms. Palmer, did they remove her shoes? How would they expect her to walk in bare feet?”

My thoughts trailed to the worst possible scenario. Why take Alina to a remote location unless they planned to dispose of her body there? Another argument lay with logic. Why go to the expense of transporting a kidnap victim there when they had the ability to dispose of her body in their backyard? A morbid idea, except true. Whatever the reason, they risked exposure from security cameras until they reached an off-grid area.

“I can’t stress enough how the authorities have technology and skills to find Alina. They can unravel valid threats and comprehend the danger of taking your story to the media.”

“The man who called me said they’d be watching my every move. I bought a burner phone tonight to call you.”

His anguish rippled through me, interfering with my ability to think clearly. “What about the ransom?”

“I can liquidate assets here and in Russia to meet their demands, but the statistics on kidnappers returning my Alina alive are not good. Perhaps they would accept what I can put together now. I’m sorry . . . I wish I had an answer. Why harm an eight-year-old little girl?”

“I have empathy for your grief.” Daria’s lovely face and the white-blond-haired little girl refused to leave me alone. “Although I could lead you into Dog Canyon, I have no idea how to pull her out of the clutches of dangerous men. You’d need armed law enforcement and possibly a negotiator.”

“That would draw attention. I’ll pay you whatever you want.”

“Money is not the issue, Professor—”

“Alina means more to me than anything else in this world. What is love but to take ownership of a problem and do all I can to stop those men?”

“What if I fail?” The terror of not finding his daughter alive resurrected an echo from the past that had shaped my career.

“Can you live with yourself if you don’t try?”

Unaware, he’d pressed my weakest button. “I’ll hear you out. But I don’t believe you’ve given me the whole story, and I need the truth before I risk my life.”

“I’ve . . . I’ve given you all of it.”

“You’ve stated what you *want* me to know. What have you done or not done in this tragedy that Daria is dead, Alina is missing, and you can’t go to the police?”