
РУКУ НА РУКУ
Диана Рейн
продолжение
"Руку на сердце"
12+

Hand in Hand

Companions

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Руку на руку

An English translation of a Russian-language original.

Hand in Hand

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You would think that once soulmates had finally reunited, they were bound to stay together for the rest of their days. But Nina sees it differently. Time and again, she runs away from home, leaving Radiy behind.

Nina sat at the edge of the park, on a bench blanketed in snow. Her hands were buried in the wide sleeves of a man’s windbreaker; her legs, snug in thick tights, were pressed close together, the heels of her heavy boots set side by side. According to the calendar, February was drawing to a close, but the weather couldn’t have cared less. That day it was twenty-five below with a light wind, and there was not the faintest hint of spring in the air.

Yet it was precisely in weather like this that the park stood nearly empty. Only a gaggle of friends kept wandering back and forth, chattering and laughing without a break. Silver serdlets flashed past, jacket sleeves slipping down off them, as if someone were striking a lighter that gave off a cold flame. Nina was almost grateful to that tipsy band of the Lost for being there: it gave her someone to be angry with and something to bristle at, which meant fewer thoughts left in her head.

And yet there was no shortage of things to think about...

Nina had deliberately picked this corner of the park so she wouldn’t have to set eyes on the dome over Minttown, which could be seen from nearly any point in the city. She half feared that if she glimpsed it too often, she would begin to wonder what, exactly, was stopping her from moving to that warm, peaceful place. There were helper robots in plenty, brand-new aerocars, and real food to be had without difficulty in the shops. And besides, no one there would look askance at her mint serdlet — for it was, after all, the city of the Found.

And she was a cursed Found now, a stupid “Mint”—as she had once privately thought of such people. Nina had never meant to find her Soulmate, but fate had willed otherwise. And now she had every right to move to the city of her dreams and never know hardship again.

And Radiy would have been only too glad.

She exhaled angrily, and a small gray cloud of vapor brushed her nose. She was afraid she might have let him change her mind. If her Soulmate ever began coaxing her to come to Minttown, even just for a little while, she wouldn’t hold out for long. Not because she truly dreamed of living there—but because she couldn’t bear to torment him.

Yet Radiy had never once asked. He never reminded her that his family and friends were still there. Never did he marvel that she was, of her own free will, renouncing every blessing life could offer.

Perhaps he kept silent because he was too afraid of losing her. For a Minttowner born and bred, such a fate would have been more terrible, more shameful than death itself. And Nina would have hated him for that weakness—if, that is, it were even possible to hate one’s own Soulmate in the first place.

After their final reunion, Nina and Radiy settled into the dormitory where Nina had once lived with her parents. They rented a cramped little room nearby, kept their mint serdlets hidden from the neighbors, and on the whole presented the picture of a typical couple of Lost—two people who had given up on ever finding their Soulmates and resolved to raise a family with strangers. Perhaps, from the outside, they even looked happy, almost in love with each other.

The truth was, Nina did everything she could to spend as little time at home as possible. Anywhere but there: she visited her parents, ran about chasing odd jobs, attended evening school, dropped in on Igor and Alenka — old friends from the Lost One’s former life. Anywhere

at all, so long as it kept her far from Radiy and his adoring chocolate eyes.

And Nina had no idea whether she would ever grow used to him. For sixteen years she had managed perfectly well without him, so why on earth should she rejoice in his presence now? She treated him with pointed coldness and had no intention of changing her ways — not any time soon, at any rate.

By sixteen she had already learned that the people she let too close to her heart had a habit of dying. Igor and Alenka had themselves come within an inch of their lives simply for getting involved with her.

Her feet were freezing and her stomach was growling, yet Nina sat on stubbornly in the park, watching the light fade little by little. There was no work or school for her today, and she had resolved not to trouble her friends; at the same time, she had no wish to spend the whole day at the dormitory, with her parents on one side and Radiy on the other. And so she announced that she had urgent business and dashed off before her Soulmate could start asking questions. Lying to him was something she could never have done — he would have guessed at once from her quickening pulse, which he could feel beating in his own left wrist. For Nina had no urgent business at all. She simply wanted to be as far away from him as she could manage.

For one thing, she felt sorry for Radiy. It was hardly his fault that his Soulmate had turned out to be a former rebel — someone who had openly defied the Soulmates themselves. A meek, quiet girl with no criminal past would have suited him far better: one who read romance novels devoutly and dreamed of the Finding. She would have spent every waking minute at Radiy’s side, never letting go of his hand, gazing into his eyes, chirping of nothing but the wedding, and declaring a hundred times a day how much she loved him, how lucky she was.

And yet Radiy and Nina had never so much as kissed.

With a heavy heart, she thought of how she would soon return home to find her lonely, bored Soulmate waiting. How he would rush up to her with a flood of questions, try to help her out of her jacket, press a cup of hot tea into her hands, steer her toward the couch... A shudder ran through her. She had made it plain to the fellow early on that she wanted nothing of his help, his support, or his touch, and he genuinely tried not to vex her — though every so often weakness got the better of him, and he would descend on her again with questions and fussing.

Nina did not start for home until the cold had soaked her through. Twilight was falling over the city faster than her feet could carry her, and she reached the dormitory in complete darkness.

She, Radiy, and her parents all shared the third floor — the one floor where the ancient electric lightbulbs burned out fastest. Nina found her room almost by touch, irritably resorting to the serdlet in place of a flashlight. Radiy's pulse beat within the cavity a little faster than usual, though without any sudden leaps. How like him that was. He fretted constantly, with reason or without. Even now, the moment his pulse quickened just a little more, that would be the sign he had heard her.

Nina opened the door and stepped into the dark room. Soulmate's pulse hadn't skipped a beat. She switched on the light and surveyed the shabby furnishings. Her bed and the couch where Radiy had been sleeping stood empty; the armchair was vacant too. Where had he gone?

Not the least bit worried, Nina slowly began peeling off her windbreaker and unwinding her long scarf, glad that Radiy was at her parents' place and not underfoot. A few more blissful minutes of peace and quiet...

Behind her, the door opened a crack, and Nina, still struggling with her boots, nearly toppled over in surprise.

“Mom? What is it?”

Her little mother stood in the doorway, peeking warily into the room. In her hands she kept crumpling a sheet of graph paper torn from a notebook.

“Nin... this is for you... from Radik.”

With a hand that trembled slightly, she held the paper out, and Nina — before she could feel frightened, puzzled, or astonished — took it and unfolded it.

In Radiy’s rounded hand lay such incredible gibberish as no Soulmate would ever have written:

“Nina,”

I am returning to Minttown.

You are right.

It isn’t fair that we should be together when you don’t want it at all, when you don’t love me. I understand everything. And so I simply wish you happiness.

The days I spent with you will remain the best days of my life all the same. Thank you for them.

Nina sank slowly onto the ottoman, clutching the sheet of paper in her hand. All around was utter stillness: her mother said nothing, the clock had stopped ticking, even the neighbors had gone quiet.

And it seemed to her that she could no longer hear her own heartbeat.

Nina paced the dormitory room twice over, unable to settle. Her right hand had closed, unbidden, around her left wrist, fingers gripping it tight. Some dim instinct told her that the moment she let go, her Soulmate’s pulse would vanish.

Her mother stood rooted in the doorway, watching her with a stricken face. How could she possibly understand? She would never find a Soulmate of her own; she lived with a man who was not hers, a man whose pulse she could not feel beating within her own body.

“I have to go there,” Nina muttered, halting at last. “I have to go there right now.”

It did not trouble her that she was speaking aloud, that the words were really nonsense and there was nowhere she truly needed to be — for Radiy had made the right choice, and she knew it.

They should not be together. Not even after the Finding. They had remained strangers to one another.

Because that was how she, Nina, had wanted it.

She stopped short in the middle of the room, turning the thought over. Yes — everything was unfolding exactly as it should. She and Radiy would torment each other no longer; they would go free at last, like the true Lost.

Or perhaps... he had simply been waiting for an excuse to return to Minttown. Things had been so grim for him here that he would sooner renounce his own Soulmate and live out his days alone — but in a warm, well-fed city.

Nina could not hold it against him. In his place, she would most likely have done the very same.

“What will you do now?” her mother asked softly.

Nina sat down on the bed. Slowly, she released her left wrist.

“Go on living...”

The silence was killing her.

For more than an hour, Nina lay in her bed, unable to close her eyes. The dreadful silence pressed down upon her, and she pulled the thin blanket tighter around herself. It felt as though she were the last person left in all the world—and that frightened her.

Only now, for the first time, did she realize that before this night she had never truly been alone. For as long as she could remember, she had lived in this dormitory with her parents. In her previous union, she had shared her quarters with two roommates. Only once—when she, Igor, and Ural had traveled to Minttown on a mission—had she slept alone, in a hotel room there. But her friends were just on the other side of the wall, and had things turned truly bad, she would not have hesitated to go to them.

After Minttown, when she and Radiy returned to Snowgrad, they had begun sharing one room from their very second day there. And whether Nina cared to admit it or not, she had grown accustomed to his presence. Radiy made a great deal of noise. Even at night he would toss and turn, snort, mutter something in his sleep.

And Nina had gotten used to it.

But now she was alone. Completely.

Perhaps... perhaps this was how the Dead felt. People whose Soulmate had died. Their serdlet no longer glows, and there is no pulse in it. It turns black and cold.

Now she watched the slow pulse at her own wrist—Radiy's pulse—and could not tell which feeling was stronger. Anger that he lay sleeping soundly in his warm house? Resentment that she was no different from any ordinary, foolish "mint girl" who could not live without her Soulmate? Or the pain of being left alone? The knowledge that she herself, with her own two hands, had destroyed the very happiness that had never been within the dead Ural's reach?

Be that as it may, the blend of all these emotions was deadly.

And as though that weren't enough, Nina's memory set about helpfully dredging up recollections of how Radiy had always been kind to her and her parents — and how she had never once repaid that kindness. Her Soulmate was, in general, one of those rare people who

can find something to rejoice in even in the most hopeless of situations, the most dreadful of dead ends. And sure enough, having found himself in an open-type city for the first time, Radiy had marveled at the snow and the cold with a child's naive delight. When the weather turned milder for a few days, he discovered, with unbounded joy, every pleasure a snowball fight could offer. Nina nearly died of shame the day she caught him with the Little Octobrists, who had staged a pitched snow battle in the courtyard.

He never complained about the cold, and he never complained about the synthetic food, either. In the "silver" city of the Lost, real food was a luxury beyond the means of most residents, while the artificial kind was never in short supply. Radiy could not quite conceal how strange and unpleasant the taste of "synthetics" seemed to him, yet he never breathed a word of protest — not even when a slight allergy broke out in red, itching spots on his hands.

Of course... Nina didn't deserve anyone so kind and sweet.

She cast one last glance at the serdlet, then tucked her hand beneath the blanket and burrowed deeper into its folds, wrapping herself tighter still. Had the room truly grown cooler with the weather outside, or had her body played yet another "surprise" on her by reacting to her separation from her Soulmate?

Right now she could have believed in any superstition or omen with which the unfortunate Lost fill their heads while dreaming of Soulmates.

Several times she almost drifted off, only to jolt awake whenever footsteps sounded in the hallway. Her heart would leap — but every time, the people simply went on past her door.

In the end, sleep claimed her after all: she lay curled into a tight ball, her left wrist pressed to her chest.

In her dream, Ural came to her — Ural, who had died a month before. His slanted eyes were full of reproach, and without a word he turned and walked away. Nina tried to catch up, but her legs were mired knee-deep in the snow and refused to move. She opened her mouth, yet her throat clamped painfully shut, and all she could manage was a hoarse rasp, while her eyes stung and smarted as though in a blizzard.

She woke with the feeling that she could still smell snow. She cracked her eyes open and at once caught the mint-colored glow of a serdlet. She tried to move — and in that instant understood several things at once.

This was not her serdlet.

Someone was holding her.

From behind her came the sound of sniffling.

For the first few seconds Nina lay frozen; then she rolled sharply onto her other side and found herself face to face with her midnight intruder.

Radiy was awake. He had lain down on her bed just as he was — sweater, trousers and all — holding her where she lay bundled in the blanket. His breath whistled pitifully through his nose, and the moment Nina turned to him, he opened his eyes and sniffled.

“Oh... sorry... I’m sorry, please...”

He sniffled again, quite unable to hide his tears, and pressed his hands to his own body, as if to keep himself from touching her once more.

“I just... I just...”

For the first few moments, Nina decided the whole business with the note had been a dream — that Soulmate had been with her all along. But before she could entertain this version of events and calm herself, Radiy began to babble, crushed by shame and fury at himself:

“I honestly thought I’d never come back! I didn’t want to be a burden, didn’t want... you to suffer on my account. There’s nothing in my life that matters more than... I’m sorry — you don’t care for all these ‘minty’ words... But the truth is, I had no intention of ever returning. I’m so sorry...”

Nina watched him wordlessly in the darkness, wondering where, in that case, he had been all this time. Strange to say, all she felt was a deep tranquility and a faint drowsiness. Anger, hurt, resentment — all of it had dissolved without a trace. Heart, mind, and body alike had settled the instant she was reunited with Soulmate. Whether she willed it or not.

“But I never even made it to Minttogorsk,” Radiy confessed, passing a palm over his face. “I couldn’t... it was as though something physical bound me to this place, to you... The last thing I wanted was to cause you pain. I held on until the very last moment, until I could return. And when I did...”

Another loud sob broke from him, and he buried his face in the pillow. Instinct told Nina that Soulmate simply hadn’t been able to resist touching her the moment he saw her again. He had needed so desperately to be certain she was truly there that he defied her prohibitions and held her while she slept.

“I’ll go back to my room now,” Radiy whispered. “Forgive me... again...”

He made to rise from the bed, but Nina gave his sweater a feeble tug, and he sank back down.

“Enough chatter—go to sleep now,” she murmured. Then she stretched up and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “And never frighten me like that again.”

She closed her eyes, heavy with sleep yet happier than she had been in a long, long while.

And drifting off in Soulmate’s embrace would likely become her new favorite thing of all.