

Chapter One

For weeks, Dax and Ivy hadn't seen hide nor hair of the Stark family or anyone from Dax's former life. That had changed this morning. Dax had been talking to Blaser, his new friend and boss, in the parking lot of their apartment complex when Ivy's hand landed on his abs. He wouldn't have minded his wife copping a quick grope, except gratuitous fondling wasn't what caused her to make the connection, she wasn't even looking at him.

Dax followed her line of sight to see what had her transfixed and was stunned to see a long black limo on the perimeter. It held the attention of the group of residents loitering in the parking lot, but Dax knew why that car was here. Such a show of opulence meant only one thing: the Stark family had come to town.

His assumption was proven correct when the driver left the vehicle and rounded it to open the back door. Brad Stark emerged, buttoning his suit jacket, and he fixed Dax in his sights. Dax despised being a participant in any spectacle and so crossed the apartment complex parking lot in hopes of putting an end to it.

Still shielded by the open limo door, Brad stood with his head held high, proud of the garish display. As irksome as he found it, Dax wouldn't reveal how the exhibition bothered him, so sauntering up, Dax paid no attention to the chauffeur standing at the head of the open door. Coming to a stop, with the car door in between them, Dax said nothing and waited for Brad to explain himself.

'Care to take a ride?' Brad asked, without removing his shades.

The gathering of residents remained outside the apartment building that he'd been living in with Ivy since he tracked her down here about a month ago. Making a scene wasn't part of his agenda, so he granted Brad's request with a single nod. The driver moved aside to let Dax follow Brad into the car, then closed the door behind them.

Dax chose the seat opposite Brad, with his back to the screen covered driver's area. Neither of them spoke until the car began moving.

'You need to come home,' Brad said.

'If that's why you're here you can save your breath and your gas,' Dax said. 'The answer is no.'

'I didn't ask. I told you, you're coming home.'

'What are you going to do? Drive me to the airport? Sorry, no ID.'

'Brought a jet, it's waiting on a private airstrip.'

His first thought was for Ivy. If he got on a jet with Brad, then California was their destination. If he didn't get on the jet, then Brad would keep coming back for him until he got his way, and Ivy might get caught in the crossfire. Resigning himself to the fact that he would end up complying with Brad's request, didn't mean that he would give up without protest.

'You have to give me something, a reason,' Dax said. 'You and Tryst miss me so bad that you had to chase me down?' Brad and Trystan Stark were Maurice Stark's sons, and they had been sort of surrogate brothers to him through the years.

'Mauri wants to see you, it's important.'

'Sure it is,' Dax said. 'I told you I didn't give a fuck and that hasn't changed. I'm not interested in Maurice Stark, or you and your brother anymore.'

'Still with Dune?'

'It's Harrow,' Dax said, correcting Brad's use of Ivy's maiden name.

'Oh that's right, you married the woman you were supposed to be training for Trystan... You're lucky he didn't kill you for that stunt.'

If this was a different environment, Dax might have laughed. 'If he wants to start something, he obviously knows where I am, tell him to come and visit. Ivy might even cook.'

'You are still with her,' Brad said. 'Serg said that you were, but I've got to say, I didn't believe it.'

Serg was one of Mauri's henchmen and a one-time close associate of Dax's. 'We're married,' Dax said. 'You think I'd have fucked around on the family if I wasn't sure she was the only female I wanted?'

‘Do you want us to pick her up? She can join us on the trip.’

‘I haven’t said I’m going anywhere yet,’ he said, clenching his jaw.

Maurice Stark exuded arrogance, he was a superior sonofabitch who taught all of his sons to be assured. Brad managed it with eminence and authority, Dax did it with aloof indifference, and the youngest, Trystan, used overt ostentatious glitz to show the world that he was better than everyone in it.

Truth be told, Dax wasn’t like the other two, he was an unofficially adopted Stark. When he was a kid, Dax had been caught in the act of picking Mauri’s pocket. Mauri didn’t punish him, he brought Dax home to be raised in the servants’ quarters.

At least that was the story Dax had been raised to believe for all of his thirty-three years, until Ivy Dune came in and turned his life on its head. After her, he started to ask questions of himself, he rebelled against who the Stark’s had conditioned him to be, and then Mauri had revealed some truths that Dax would rather not have known.

‘Bruno bet money that you wouldn’t come,’ Brad said. ‘I took the bet. I knew as soon as you heard he’d said that, you’d be leaping onto a plane.’

Finding out that Bruno, Mauri’s contemporary and right-hand man, was his real father and the real reason that Mauri had taken pity on him as a kid, made him sick to his stomach. Grinding his teeth, Dax sought distraction in the world sweeping past his view through the window.

‘Why’d they send you?’ Dax asked, still not tempted to return to the Golden State.

‘Can’t trust Tryst to do anything,’ Brad said. ‘The kid flipped out after you left and went on a binge. Mauri got Serg to track him down and drag him back to the mansion. He’s been pretty much locked up since then.’

‘He’ll be loving that,’ Dax muttered. There were only a few months age difference between him and Trystan, but he referred to Trystan as a kid because he still acted like a child in a candy store as soon as drugs and sex were on offer.

‘Mauri wants you back. Serg’s been watching you, we sent him ahead, so he could give us the skinny on what you’ve been doing – working security at that strip joint, Risqué? Got your wife answering phones at an auto garage? Come on, you know you’re worth more than this. Come home.’

‘Why? To jump back into enforcing? You want me running the operation again?’

‘No one did it better.’

‘I have a life here, a wife.’

‘We’re not asking you to leave her behind, bring her. You can stay in the mansion together or move into your old place, I know you haven’t sold it yet.’

‘Been a little busy.’

‘Then it all works out,’ Brad said, opening his arms. ‘If you’re planning on living here you’ll need to come back home to sell your apartment. You’ll need to pack up and move, right? You can stay in the mansion while you do that.’

Sitting forward, Dax propped his elbows on his knees and looked Brad square in his eyes. ‘If you think that I’m going to trust you cock-sucking perverts anywhere near my wife—’

‘Ivy’s safe,’ Brad sighed.

The condescending impatience displayed by Brad retrieving a bottle of water from the fridge was meant to rile Dax and it succeeded. Dax snatched the bottle and tossed it to the floor. The men stared each other down until Brad relented and spoke to reinforce his declaration.

‘Mauri has told everyone to accept her as your wife. All the guys know it, so she’s safe.’

Mauri’s word was absolute, but Dax didn’t trust Brad any more than the motherfucker trusted him. ‘Like when you tried to take her from me at the beach house?’ Dax asked, Brad’s bottom lip twitched. ‘You came to that party and tried to get her to leave with you. What was that about?’

‘Good old-fashioned double cross,’ Brad said. ‘Trystan wanted her, you had her, I was curious as to what all the fuss was about... I also had to test how obedient she was, to see how dependent on you she had become.’

‘And were you surprised?’

‘That she refused? No,’ Brad said. ‘But I didn’t see the love, I didn’t see how dependent you’d become on her. You two played a good game.’

Dax wasn’t interested in impressing Brad. ‘Why now? Why should I come back when—’

‘He’s sick, Mauri is sick... We should’ve figured it out when he pulled that trick about Tryst marrying Ivy, he’s known for months. It’s cancer, stage four, inoperable, he’s got about four months.’

Wiping a hand over his mouth, he sat back. Much as Mauri pissed him off during the Ivy situation he was the closest thing Dax had to a father and no one wanted to receive news like this about family.

His hand slid off his thigh to seek out its mate, its partner, except it wasn't there because his wife wasn't present. Ivy had become his support, and without her here, he was lost as to the appropriate way to react.

'He wants to say goodbye?' Dax asked.

Mauri wasn't exactly the sentimental type, but Dax had grown up listening to the man talk. Mauri had counselled him on everything from girls to his fighting technique. The world wouldn't be any worse off with one less crime boss in it, but Dax would be worse off without his mentor.

'He wants to settle old debts,' Brad said. 'Least that's what I think, he wouldn't give me details... Since you left, he hasn't been the same, and I know he's not happy with the way things ended. Come back, hear him out. Say goodbye to the man who made you who you are.'

He could refuse, but then he'd never know what it was that Mauri wanted. 'Ok,' Dax conceded. 'Take me back to the apartments, we'll leave in the morning.'

'We can go right now, we'll get you on a plane and Serg can pick up—'

'Ivy won't go anywhere with anyone except me; she's a clever girl and my responsibility. She doesn't trust you bastards any more than I do, which is why she won't leave my side for a second. Take me home and come back in the morning.'

'If you're just picking her up then why—'

'She doesn't jump at anyone's command. She'll need time to warm up to the idea of going back to the family who tried to take over her life.'

That was an understatement. Dax knew that Ivy's love for him was real, and if he made a big enough deal of it then she would support him in just about anything. But going back to California, back to the family who had nearly torn them apart... that would take some persuasion.

Ivy put the last plate in the cupboard and glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. Brad Stark coming back into their lives spelled trouble, there were no two ways about it. That he'd come across the width of the country to seek Dax out meant that they were serious about wanting him back. It couldn't be anything else, there was no other reason for Brad to be here.

If Trystan had been the one to show up, he'd have been hell bent on revenge. Brad wasn't so shallow; he did his father's bidding, but he didn't do his dirty work. If Maurice Stark wanted harm to come to her or Dax then he had minions to do that for him.

The image of Dax entering that car without looking back was imprinted on the inside of her eyelids, which was why she'd kept herself busy cleaning up their apartment.

Their new life here was good, they were making friends and adjusting to life in their fresh environment. Dax had even found himself a couple of fights. Much as she didn't like to see him come home bloodied, she knew that his love of the underground circuit was a part of who he was.

But with Brad back and Dax willing to hear him out, she could see their lives here being disrupted. There were too many questions about the past that she and Dax couldn't answer if their new friends asked.

Wiping down all of the kitchen counters, she reminded herself how far Dax had come. The possibility existed that he would tell Brad to go to hell and if he did there would be a major reward in it for him coming from her.

The living-kitchen area of their home ran the breadth of the front of the apartment and had windows flanking the entrance. A narrow corridor at the rear of the property led to the bathroom and bedroom. There wasn't much left to clean up, so her distraction, needed to keep her mind off Dax, was beginning to dry up.

The front door opened, and she tried not to display the flood of relief that overcame her. Coming home so soon, when she'd half expected him to be gone for days, was a good sign. Going to the fridge to retrieve the dinner steaks, Ivy was ready to forget that she'd ever cast her eyes on Brad again.

'I got these from a place Bri recommended,' she said of their female neighbour who she'd become friends with.

'That's it?' Dax asked.

He came up behind her and slid one hand over her hip while the other scooped her hair out of his way, then his warm lips touched the artery pulsing in her neck. Ignoring his actions, she carried on seasoning the steaks.

‘The butcher is supposed to be amazing. The guys at the garage were jealous when I said I’d picked them up, and for what they cost...’

The hand on her hip carried on around to her belly, his other hand skimmed down her arm, and he pried her fingers away from the knife she’d just picked up.

‘Dax,’ she whined, but when he unbuttoned her shorts, she smiled. ‘You have to be at the club in an hour, and I have to feed you before—’

‘I stopped at Blaser’s before I came up, he’s giving us some time off.’

‘For a belated honeymoon?’ she asked, coiling her arm around her body to slip his belt from its restraining loops. ‘Somewhere hot and far away from these shores?’

‘Actually, yeah, that’s one way to look at it. How does California sound?’

‘Like my idea of hell,’ she said, withdrawing her hand before it got to the good stuff. ‘You’re not much of a comedian, tough guy.’

‘I’m not kidding. We’re going to California tomorrow.’

‘Oh no we’re not,’ she said.

‘We are.’

With her hands on the counter, Ivy used all of her weight to push her body back into his, giving her space to escape. After shoving him aside, she went to the sink and washed her hands, using the reprieve to subdue the strength of her reaction to what he’d said.

Tossing the towel aside, she turned to face him. ‘You’re going back to them?’

‘We,’ he said, trying to encroach on her, but she removed herself from his path and headed into the living room.

‘I am not going back to Maurice Stark, and what about Trystan?’

‘What about him?’ Dax asked, his face set in a frown. ‘You’re not afraid of him, you’re not fucking afraid of anyone.’

‘It’s the fucking part that I stick on. You didn’t tell me about what happened the night you walked away, at that midnight meeting, but I can guarantee no one floated their congratulations, did they?’

‘Maurice has taken care of it,’ Dax said. ‘Brad told me that Maurice has told everyone about us and told them to keep their hands off you.’

‘Oh well if Brad told you that then I guess it’s ok.’

‘Why would he lie?’

‘Why would he tell the truth?’ she demanded. ‘And Bruno, what about him?’

His eyes went one way and his chin went up while his tongue darted out to moisten half of his top lip, she didn’t like that tell, not one little bit.

‘Forget about him.’ Dax spoke in his company voice, in that blunt, intimidating tone, and then he went to the living room window. None of his actions were encouraging reassurance.

‘There’s too much going on here that you haven’t told me about,’ she said. ‘I can’t go back there.’

‘I can’t leave you here, if they want to divide us, then me going to California leaves you wide open.’

‘I thought you just said that Maurice had taken care of things for us. Either you trust the guy or you don’t.’

‘Fine, if you want to stay here, then stay here,’ he said. Whipping around, he began to march toward the bedroom, but she hurried over to block the head of the hallway.

‘You do still trust him? How can you—’

‘Maurice never lied to me,’ Dax said. Grabbing her arm, he tried to wrench her aside, but she got hold of him to keep herself in his way.

‘Maurice didn’t tell you that he took care of it, Brad told you that he did. Do you trust him?’

‘Brad? No. I don’t trust that bastard.’

‘Then why should we get on a plane with him?’ she asked, reaching up to cup his cheek. ‘He’s manipulating you. Whatever he wants you to do, it can’t be worth the risk, can it?’

‘He doesn’t want me to do anything, Maurice wants to see me.’

‘Then he can get his ass on a plane and come here,’ she said, though she wasn’t keen on having Maurice Stark sniffing around in their new life.

‘He can’t get on a plane.’

‘Why not? Is immigration looking for him?’ Her joke fell on deaf ears, and he tried to look away again, so she slapped her other palm onto his other cheek. ‘What aren’t you telling me? How did Brad upset you like this?’

‘He’s sick.’

‘Brad?’

Dax shook his head. ‘Mauri is sick, he’s only got a few months.’

Lowering from her tiptoes, her hands fell away. In the same moment that they lost eye contact, he put a hand on her elbow to move her aside, and this time Ivy let him walk away from her. If Maurice Stark was sick then she could understand why Dax wanted to go and see him. He had acted as a father to Dax, and Dax had always respected him.

Letting go of his relationship with Mauri was the hardest part of Dax’s decision to be with her. Something had happened at the midnight meeting on the night that Dax left the Stark mansion for good. He had never told her about it, but she’d always suspected that there had been an exchange between her husband and his father figure that plagued Dax to this day.

Mauri had thoroughly trained Dax to follow his orders without question and for twenty years that was exactly what Dax had done... until he got entangled with her.

Heading for the bedroom, she found him packing things into a suitcase that lay open on the bed. ‘Devil’s advocate,’ she said, ‘what if this is all a ruse just to get you back there?’

‘You’re not playing devil’s anything,’ he replied. ‘You’re your own advocate.’

‘Do you blame me? The last time I was with them—’

‘Nothing sinister happened, I kept you safe.’

‘Yeah, the days I spent in the beach house basement were a ball, and Bruno—’

‘You don’t have to worry about him,’ Dax said, zipping the partially filled case. ‘And I promised that you wouldn’t spend a night in that basement again, didn’t I? We’re going to my apartment in the city, you don’t have to go anywhere near the Starks.’

‘You know that it won’t work out that way,’ she said. ‘I want to support you, and we can’t show them weakness or they’ll jump all over it and use it to their advantage.’

‘So what is your problem?’ he asked. ‘You don’t trust me, is that it? You think that I’ll just hand you over to them if they ask?’

‘You’ve tried that before,’ she said.

‘I didn’t do it.’

‘No, you let me walk out of your apartment and we were separated for seven weeks.’

‘I stood up to them, that’s what happened at the midnight meeting. I told them to go to hell, that I wanted nothing to do with them.’

‘They obviously didn’t believe you,’ she said. ‘Otherwise, why are they here?’

‘Mauri knew he was sick, he’s known for a while, but he didn’t tell anyone. It’s part of the reason he wanted to see Trystan settled before he...’

Dax wouldn’t break down, he wouldn’t reveal just how losing Mauri would affect him. But Mauri had been the only consistent man in his life. Mauri was the man that Dax respected above all others. She couldn’t tell Dax not to go; she just had to hope that it was true and that this wasn’t some elaborate plan to hurt them again.

‘Did Bruno know?’

‘I don’t know.’

Fixated on the case, he balled his fists at his sides, which was the closest Dax would get to telling her he was upset. Crossing the room, she rubbed his back and pressed her lips to the dragon tattooed on his arm.

‘If you want to go then we’ll go,’ she said. ‘But don’t forget what I said to you at the garage.’

‘This is my last chance,’ he said, bringing his eyes to hers. ‘So you’re telling me if I fuck this up you’re going to leave me?’

‘I’m sort of used to the idea that you’re the only man allowed to touch me. If Bruno or Trystan lay their hands on me again—’

‘Listen to me,’ he said. Twisting the quarter turn to face her, he took hold of her upper arms. ‘I know that you won’t admit to being scared, that you won’t give an inch. That stubborn, wilful front of yours—’

‘Uh, Kettle? Pot is calling.’

‘I’m not going to let them hurt you.’

‘And how do I make you the same promise?’ she asked. ‘They’re hurting you already and most of them are still a continent away.’

‘I’ve been dealing with the Starks and their crew for twenty years, I can handle them now.’

‘You dealt with them while you were working with them and you were all on the same side. Neither is true anymore. What if they set you up with Rita or Fifi or—’

‘Other women? You have nothing to worry about there, I won’t bow to their pressure, and we’re solid, babygirl. We’ve been together for almost five months, and the way I feel about you hasn’t changed. In that garage I told you I wouldn’t let you escape again, you made your choice my prison or theirs.’

‘Did you really think that you were holding me against my will? Did you doubt how I felt about you?’

‘I was used to Mauri being the one to tell me how it was, and when he told me that you were using me, it was easier to believe that and maintain the status quo than it was to believe you.’

‘Because I wanted to wreck your entire world.’

‘Which I don’t think I ever thanked you for,’ he said. With his index fingers, he touched her temples and traced down to move her hair back over her shoulders.

‘Thanked me?’ she asked. ‘You’re pleased that I...’

‘That we got together, yeah, I’m damn pleased about that.’

‘Good, maybe you won’t fuck it up this time,’ she said. ‘But if we get to a point where you have to make a choice, I’d appreciate it if you let me know if that choice involves dropping me.’

‘Not gonna happen,’ he said, pulling her body into his to hold her in his arms.

‘I should just ask you for a divorce now,’ she said, her lips squashed into his torso.

‘That’s not gonna happen either... You want me to pack for you?’

‘No,’ she said, pushing out of his arms and bending to unzip the case he’d put on the bed. ‘If I let you pack for me all I’ll end up with is lingerie and flip-flops.’

‘I trust you to handle it,’ he said, smacking her ass. ‘I’ll get the steaks on.’

He left the room and she flipped open the case then stared down at his strewn clothes. Going back to California and the Starks was going to test them and passing that test wasn’t guaranteed.

