

Chapter One

Ruger Warner was sitting at the bar of his brother's strip club, Risqué, waiting for his brothers' attention. His two older brothers were twins, who looked and acted nothing alike, but they each had their strengths, and right now Ruger needed both of them.

Blaser finished filling a drink order and came over. When he saw that his twin, Colt, was a few feet away whispering to his fiancée, who was surrounded by Risqué girls, Blaser whistled for his attention.

'So, is the meeting setup?' Blaser asked.

Colt moved down a couple of stools to sit next to Ruger. Leaving the gaggle of women to their business. 'Are you sure you want to do this?' Colt asked.

'It's a trip to Jersey,' Ruger said. 'I'm sure I'll make it back intact.'

'It's not your safety we're worried about,' Colt said, sharing a look with Blaser.

'I know I laid it on pretty thick,' Blaser said to him. 'When I found out that you were mixed up with the people who took Bri, I wasn't exactly thinking straight.'

'You and me both,' Ruger said to his two brothers. 'Bri is the love of your life, Blaser. She was abducted, held captive, raped—'

His brother flinched.

'Bri can say it aloud,' Colt said to Blaser. 'Maybe you should try it too.'

'That's thanks to Doctor Lyssa Cutler,' Blaser said to Colt. 'Your wonderful fiancée... is she keeping her name by the way?'

Colt indicated that he wanted another beer. Ruger wasn't sure if it was a distraction or Dutch courage. Blaser delivered and after Colt had slurped the liquid, he responded. 'We haven't talked it out, but if I have my way she'll become a Warner.'

'Well, your kids will be Warners, so that makes sense,' Ruger said.

'We're not talking about my relationship with Lys tonight,' Colt said. 'Or Blaser's with Bri. We've spent too much time getting distracted recently. Did you find who you were looking for, Ruge?'

'I had to get in touch with some old contacts,' Ruger said. 'I've been trying to track down the man we owe Bri's life to. The man who saved her. A guy named Drew Jansen.'

'Any luck?' Blaser asked.

'Yeah, my contacts have set up a meet for me. I'm leaving tomorrow to meet him.'

'And when you do?' Colt asked. 'What do you plan to say?'

'I plan to say thank you,' Ruger said. 'And then figure out a way to repay the debt. He gave us back Bri. He can pretty much ask me to do anything and I'll do it.'

Colt and Blaser looked at each other and he could tell they were concerned. They were right to be worried; the three brothers were close and he wouldn't want either of the twins walking into a possibly dangerous scenario without backup.

But Ruger didn't like owing anyone anything and at the very least he had to shake Jansen's hand. His contacts were a couple, Rushe and Flick, they had been tight-lipped about Jansen's motivations, though Flick had given some sparse information.

This meeting was important to him and nothing his brothers could say would keep him from going to that hotel room and looking Jansen in the eye to say thank you.

Waiting wasn't Ruger's strong suit. From the moment he'd heard what his brother's girlfriend had gone through because of his actions, Ruger had been eager to set things right, and that started with getting the truth about what had happened.

His meeting with Jansen had been set up to take place in this hotel room in Atlantic City. Jansen was the man who had saved his brother's girlfriend, Bri. It had taken two weeks to arrange this meeting and after traveling up to New Jersey full of questions, Ruger hoped he wasn't about to be stood up.

The standard room had a double bed and heavy brown curtains which he supposed matched the carpet and—cutting his thoughts short, he sat on the end of the bed and let his head fall into his hands.

His work as a fence, a black market trader, wasn't supposed to get anyone he cared about into trouble. He worked away from his family and never revealed to them what he did because he was trying to keep them safe.

When his older brother, Colt, told him about what Bri had suffered, it had plunged a knife into his heart. Blaser, Colt's twin, loved Bri—and he always had—since they were in school together. If Bri didn't forgive him then Blaser never would. Bri had given him a pass; she was working through her issues with Colt's fiancée, Lyssa, who was a therapist. But Blaser had spent the last two weeks scowling at him and Ruger knew this wasn't over yet.

The abrupt knock on the door brought him to his feet. Striding the width of the room, he opened the door without checking who was on the other side of it. Only two people knew he was here and one of them was the man he was supposed to meet.

Jansen came into the body of the room while Ruger closed and locked the door. He didn't expect interruptions, but he wanted to hinder any speedy escape Jansen might choose to make. Joining Jansen, Ruger noted that the lithe guy walked with purpose as he paced to the top of the bed then back to stand next to the TV.

'Rushe and Flick have saved Serendipity more times than I care to mention,' Jansen said. Serendipity was his girlfriend, and the woman he'd been intending to save when he saved Bri and Flick. 'I'm only here now because Flick did the pouty face at Rushe and he got pissed off.'

No one was safe when Rushe got pissed off and he'd do anything to keep his girlfriend, Flick, happy, even if that meant attacking a friend. Rushe was Ruger's only link to Jansen, so when Ruger wanted to meet the man who saved Bri, he had to get in touch with Rushe to arrange the meeting.

'I appreciate you making the effort to be here.'

'Good, 'cause it is an effort,' Jansen said, thrusting his hands to his hips. 'I'm not in the police force anymore, which means I work alone.'

'Like Rushe,' Ruger said, though Rushe "worked" with his girlfriend now. That was a dubious description because Rushe hated to see Flick get into any kind of jam and she managed to get herself into them frequently. Rushe would probably rather see Flick at home safe all the time, but Flick wasn't that kind of girl anymore.

'No, not like Rushe,' Jansen said. 'I leave Serendipity at home. And I don't have Rushe's rep or... manner.'

Rushe's manner had a lot to do with scaring the shit out of people and showing no mercy. 'All I want from you is information.'

'About Victor?'

'Yeah,' Ruger said. 'I know he was working for someone higher up but the feds are dealing with that mess. I need to know, are Victor and his men dead?'

'If you wanted to know that then you should've asked Rushe. He's the one who killed them.'

Rushe hadn't revealed any information, then again, he didn't answer to anyone and distrusted everyone. Luckily when Ruger had gotten Flick on the phone, she had been more forthcoming.

'Yeah, Flick told me how it went down. Victor's men died after the rescue.'

'Look, I worked with Victor and his gang undercover, as a cop. Victor found out who I was, and he kidnapped Serendipity to manipulate me into feeding my superiors false information. I did everything he asked, but it didn't matter. Their trade was in human cargo. They trafficked women to men all over the world; men who ordered what they wanted and had it delivered to them.'

'I heard about a drop. I knew Victor and his guys were sending out a shipment of women. I had to get Serendipity. If I let her leave the country... I had tried everything else, tried to get to her from within, but Victor was too strong. So I went to intercept them when they were on their way to the cargo containers. The van full of women left Victor's mansion, and I knew the route it would take so I lay in wait in a truck big enough to take theirs out. When the time was right, I rammed them off the road. I killed John and Victor's other men, who were still alive, and I freed the women.'

'Freed Bri?'

'Yes,' Jansen said. 'I wasn't being a hero. I was there to get my girl.'

'And did you?'

'No,' Jansen said, slumping down to sit on the bottom corner of the bed. 'Serendipity wasn't there, but Flick was and so was Bri.'

'But you've got Serendipity now, how—'

‘Yeah, Flick and I went back in to get her out. They were holding Rushe too. Once we freed him and Serendipity, we took Victor and the rest of his guys out, and that was the end of it.’

That was far from the end of it if what Flick had told him was true, but that was irrelevant now. Ruger raised his hand toward Jansen who frowned at it and then at him. ‘Thank you. Whether you meant to do it or not, you got Bri out of there. She’s back with my brother, Blaser, and they’re working things out.’

‘You’re welcome,’ Jansen said, getting back on his feet while avoiding Ruger’s handshake. ‘Is that all you wanted to know?’

‘No.’ Ruger lowered his hand back to his side.

‘I didn’t care about Bri. I didn’t even care about Flick back then. I was there to get my girlfriend out. I turned a blind eye to a lot of suffering in the name of keeping her safe. I’m no hero.’

‘Regardless of that,’ Ruger said. ‘I owe you a debt.’

Ruger had worked for Victor himself before he figured out what the thug was into. He’d gotten some items for Victor then he realised what Victor and his crew were doing. As soon as Ruger found out they were human traffickers, he cut all ties and refused to work for them anymore. He’d been unaware that after his abandonment of their cause, Victor had his men abduct Bri and subject her to horrific treatment, all in the name of revenge against him.

‘You owe me nothing,’ Jansen said. ‘We’ve all moved on from that. Dipity, Flick, they don’t deserve to go through that again, and neither does Bri.’

‘I’m not talking about putting them through anything,’ Ruger said. ‘There must be something you need. I heard you went into private practice. Are you a PI now?’

‘No, I never got over fighting injustice; maybe it’s my cop days chasing me, or maybe I still have guilt about what I did for Victor in my attempt to save myself and my girl. These days, I spend my time investigating corruption.’

‘My brother, Colt, was a cop. He spends his time combatting stalkers,’ Ruger said. ‘I understand not turning your back on the job.’

‘Except my current job has the potential to get me and mine hurt,’ he said. ‘Serendipity works freelance as a reporter. She’s uncovered... Ashcroft is crooked, and it looks like he’s in bed with the DA.’

‘Governor Ashcroft?’

‘That’s right,’ Jansen said. ‘He doesn’t know that Serendipity is involved yet, but he knows I’m sniffing around. I can keep her safe. I’m much better at it now than I used to be.’

Ruger would assume that almost losing his love once was enough to make Jansen more vigilant about it. But Jansen’s expression grew pensive, which intrigued Ruger. ‘You’re worried about someone else?’

‘I have a sister in Miami,’ Jansen said, tensing further as he made the admission. ‘I guess... once bitten, twice shy, I know what it is to have someone you love used against you. We lost our mom young, just a week after Layla graduated college. It’s just her and I now... I can keep Serendipity in my eye line almost twenty-four seven. Rushe and Flick are still in Jersey too. They’ve been helping me work through the possibilities and with surveillance...’

‘Wow,’ Ruger said. ‘I didn’t think Rushe was the type to give a rat’s ass about politics.’

‘He’s not,’ Jansen said. ‘The trick to Rushe these days is getting Flick interested and she knows plenty about how to move in society’s highest echelons. Her family is seriously old money. She and Serendipity were the ones who started asking questions. Rushe and I are just trying to keep up.’

‘If Serendipity and Flick are involved, aren’t their families the ones in trouble?’

‘Flick’s family can look after themselves and they’re high up in society enough that they have their own influence. Plus Flick hasn’t had anything to do with them in a long time. Serendipity doesn’t have family of her own; her father split when she was young and her mom died a couple of years ago.’

‘And Rushe doesn’t have anyone to worry about,’ Ruger said, knowing that family was a foreign concept to Rushe.

‘I’ve been the one doing the digging. I’m the only one who Ashcroft has seen ask questions. Rushe spends his time trying to keep Flick out of it.’

‘So if you’re the only one who the governor has seen, then you’re the only one in real trouble.’

Jansen dismissed the threat to himself with a shrug. ‘Which I don’t care about, but I can’t protect Serendipity in New Jersey and Layla in Florida.’

No, he couldn’t, and this presented Ruger with the opportunity he needed. ‘I’ll get her,’ Ruger said.

‘You’ll get her?’ Jansen asked, wearing another frown. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re worried about your sister. I have two brothers, and I see how they care about their women, who I think of as sisters. I can look after your sister.’

‘No offense, Ruge, you’re a big guy and I sure wouldn’t want to take you on in a fight...’

‘But?’

‘But you’re not security, you’re not a cop, you’re a fence. What do you know about taking care of an asset?’

Thinking about this, Ruge could see his point, but he’d seen his share of action over the years even if he wasn’t specifically trained in combat. ‘I don’t have to fight anyone,’ Ruge said. ‘I can pick her up and bring her to you.’

‘You can’t bring her to me,’ Jansen said, shaking his head. ‘That just brings her into the path of trouble. Ashcroft might not be looking for her, yet. If you bring her to me, it could put her in more danger than she is at the moment in Miami.’

‘But you’re worried about what happens when Ashcroft realises you’re on to him. If he thinks you and Serendipity have threatened his way of life then he might try to get to Serendipity or to Layla in order to get you to back off.’

‘Yeah, but I have Serendipity covered.’

‘Then I’ll cover Layla,’ he said. ‘Do you have an address, somewhere I can find her?’

‘Why would you—’

‘Because you took care of Bri, whether you meant to do it or not. You running that van off the road and getting her out of it, you saved her from being trafficked to god knows where. As far as I’m concerned, I owe you.’

‘You think you can take care of Layla? That you can look after her? You’d have to get her out of Miami.’

‘That I can do,’ Ruge said, fishing his phone from his back pocket. ‘Do you have your phone?’

‘Yeah,’ Jansen said, taking out his own.

‘Turn on your AirDrop and send me the most recent picture you have of her. If you give me her address, I’ll track her down.’

‘She doesn’t know that any of this is going on,’ Jansen said, searching through his phone and doing what Ruge said. ‘She’s stubborn. Picking her up won’t be easy.’

‘Oh, I know about stubborn women,’ Ruge said. ‘I’ll keep an eye on her until I figure out the best way to approach her.’

‘Then what will you do? You’ll have to get her out of Miami, but you can’t bring her here. If Ashcroft decides to look for her, she won’t be safe at her friends’ houses or—’

‘That’s easy,’ Ruge said. ‘I’ll take her to a place where she’ll be safe. A place filled with guys who can watch her back and won’t let a thing happen to her. Trust me, this isn’t just an important assignment to me. It’s important to Blaser and Bri and to Colt and Lyssa too. We’ll keep an eye on Layla for you. No one will harm her. You have my word.’

‘Ok,’ Jansen said, putting his phone away once all of the information was transferred. ‘I’m trusting you because Rushe does, because from everything I hear you’re a good guy. Once you have Layla, get her to call me. I’ll try my best to get her to give you a break. If I call her before you go down there, she’ll be expecting you and probably go into hiding before you get the chance to get her. Like I said, she’s stubborn.’

‘I can handle it,’ Ruge said. ‘I’m not worried about picking her up or looking after her. I can be persuasive when I have to be.’

‘Layla knows every line in the book,’ Jansen said. ‘She’s used to guys and their attention. She’s had more marriage proposals than most guys have pairs of shoes.’

‘Proposals? Does she have a thing for engagement rings, or—’

‘No, she never accepts. As soon as a guy gets down on one knee, she ends it and runs, usually moving to a different state, or at least a different city.’

‘Why’s that?’ Ruge asked and Jansen shrugged.

‘Got me. She’s always been independent and thinks she knows best about everything. If you ask her, she’ll tell you she doesn’t need a man.’

‘You think different?’

‘I think she doesn’t need any of the losers who have tried to coerce her into marriage, but one day, when the right guy takes charge... she’ll figure it out.’

'Ok,' Ruger nodded.

Her relationship status and attitude toward marriage was irrelevant to what he had to do. But when Ruger glanced down at the picture Jansen had just sent, he saw sultry almond eyes and glossy dark hair. He recognised the allure that had ensnared the men who wanted to marry her. Looking after her was his mission and it didn't involve cracking the code required to break into her heart.

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