

Excerpt from Chapter 1

When Rico knocked on Jean's door he was happy to hear the sound of footsteps. At least she was there. Maybe it was a good omen. Jean, a stunning redhead with a figure that made the heart leap, looked through the peephole, opened the door, and greeted him wrapped in a towel. She was even more tantalizing than she'd been in the car earlier that day. She wasn't completely dry, and here and there tiny droplets of water glistened on her arms and shoulders. Rico inhaled the subtle fragrance of her shower gel, but before it could distract him, a voice in his head reminded him, "Point one percent."

"I wasn't expecting you back so soon," she began, a playful, sultry smile on her face.

From the doorway Rico scanned the living room and saw nothing amiss. He walked in and closed the door behind him. Too bad. He only knew how to do this one way. "Jean, how long have you known me?" he asked stoically.

She was baffled. "You know as well as I do. What kind of a question is that?"

"I never tried to hide from you how I make my living, true?" They stood face to face, inches apart, before she took a few halting steps backward. "So you know what happens to people who don't tell me what I want to know, don't you?"

"Rico," she stammered, her voice trembling, "you aren't making any sense. What's this all about? I don't know what you're accusing me of, but I haven't done anything, I swear."

He took a straight razor from his coat pocket and opened it. As he walked toward her, she covered her face with her hands. He stepped behind her, thrust his left arm through the triangle formed by her hands pressing against her face, and grabbed her right shoulder. With his right hand he held the blunt side of the open razor against her right cheek.

"Where is it?"

"Please, Rico," she sobbed. "I don't know what you're talking about." He pressed harder and tightened his grip on her shoulder. "Please, please!"

"I don't believe you." He turned the sharp side to her cheek.

"Rico, not my face, please! I swear I don't know what you're talking about." Her tears puddled where the razor met her skin.

“Sorry, baby.”

As Jean cried out he let the razor fall from his hand and, in one uninterrupted motion, expertly muzzled her scream with the same hand before the razor hit the floor. She fainted.

When she came to, she was lying on the couch where Rico had carried her. He stood with his back to her, talking to Jerry on the phone. Jerry hadn't been able to get past lobby security in Robert's building.

“He palmed it, right?” Jerry asked.

Rico glanced over his shoulder at Jean. “I'll be there in a few minutes.” He hung up. “I had to be sure,” he said unapologetically.

She shivered in her towel and glared at him, anger roiling in her eyes. He went to the bedroom and returned with a blanket, which she allowed him to drape around her shoulders.

“Sorry, baby. It was just business.”

Still too furious to speak, she defiantly turned her back to him and silently dared him to say anything about it. A small victory but it was something. Ignoring the gesture, Rico walked out and closed the door softly behind him.

She was enraged, as much at herself as at him, because she knew that the next time he called she would answer. She tried to justify her emotions by telling herself that he'd stopped short of actually harming her and that he never would have. But who was she kidding? She could hope but she could never know for sure.

When the cab pulled up in front of Robert's building, Jerry was standing outside smoking a cigarette. It was an expensive high rise on the city's Gold Coast along Lake Michigan's north shore, with a security guard on duty twenty-four hours a day. There was no way around it; if they wanted to get into Robert's apartment, one way or another they'd have to deal with him. This was admittedly a minor detail, more of an annoyance than anything else.

Jerry knew Rico hated cigarette smoke. An icy stare from him whenever Jerry lit up was as effective a deterrent as a punch in the gut, so he put the fag out as Rico left the cab. Rico kept his body rock solid by lifting weights at a neighborhood gym, jogging regularly, and minimizing his intake of junk food. He didn't like the idea of second-hand smoke undoing any of his hard work.

“So what happened?” Jerry asked.

“She didn’t have it.”

“I could’ve told you that. She’s good people.”

“Don’t start with me.”

“But—”

“But nothing. Anybody can cross the line.”

“Including me?” Jerry hoped Rico might exempt him but didn’t expect it.

“Yeah, including you.” The two men stared at each other for a long moment before Rico smiled. “No, not including you.” The smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared and his eyes narrowed. “You know better.”

The comment stung and Jerry hung his head a little, but it was true and he knew it. It wasn’t easy to get close to Rico and not many people did. He was loyal to a fault, yet distant and brooding. Deadly as a cobra but with a dry, sometimes biting sense of humor. Brutally honest, he lacked guile. Hated hypocrisy. Loathed arrogance. If you were in a fight for your life against hopeless odds and could pick just one person to help even them out, he would be your choice every time. But if you needed a shoulder to cry on or even a pat on the back, you’d have to think long and hard before you settled on Rico.

“Now, about this guy...” Rico said, ignoring Jerry’s reaction.

Jerry snapped out of it. “You have to tell the security guard who you want to see. He rings the apartment. If the person answers, the guard buzzes you in.”

“High-class joint.”

“No wonder he’s always out of money.”

“How much traffic in and out?”

“Not too bad so far.”

Taking in as many details as his eyes could process in one sweep of the area, Rico slowly turned in a circle, looking for anything out of the ordinary, anything that counseled against getting on with the business at hand. Outside, there were pedestrians and cars passing everywhere, but it was a busy street, so there was nothing unusual about that. Inside, the foyer was empty except for the security guard. Nothing looked menacing. Nothing looked out of place. He nodded. "Okay?" Jerry nodded back. "Let's go and talk to the man."

They walked briskly to the entrance, donning sunglasses almost in unison, then glanced behind them one last time before opening the door. Rico nodded to a spot inside. Jerry planted himself there. Without slowing, Rico continued toward an oak-paneled counter facing the door, behind which sat an unarmed security guard casually reading a newspaper. He was about forty, with a gaunt face and stringy hair reaching below his collar. He was the kind of guy who went through life trying to keep from stepping on anyone's toes and hoping everyone would try to avoid stepping on his. He looked up in time to see Rico, advancing quickly in his direction, throw open his coat and jerk a .45 out of a powder-blue shoulder holster. He leaped to his feet and raised his hands above his head. Rico slammed the gun on the counter.

"Put 'em down," Rico said. Eyes bulging and hands shaking, the guard complied and his face took on the look of a condemned man who had just received word of a reprieve. "That's right. Relax," Rico said. "Now buzz Robert McDuffie's apartment." There was no answer. "Try again." Still no answer. "Get the key and take me up there," he ordered, then nodded in the direction of the .45 resting on the counter under his hand. "This'll be pointed at the back of your head on the way. Any questions?" The guard shook his head. "Then let's go."