

Chapter One – No Turning Back

“Christ, I’m late again,” Jensen grumbled. When the hell wasn’t he late? He could never get anywhere on time. His mom always said he’d be late to his own wedding one of these days. He’d been late for the board meeting that morning too; emphasis on the word bored. Now, he was headed to lunch to meet with a few colleagues and he was already ten minutes behind. Jensen had been too busy reading the daily stock quotes to pay any attention to details like time.

Hell, once upon a time, reading the stock market report was actually something he enjoyed; now it barely held his interest. In fact, boredom seemed to be his constant companion of late. He had no idea how that had happened. It wasn’t all that long ago everything seemed to be going his way. A good job to keep him jumping during the day and a few stimulating women to occupy his nights. Suddenly, he’d become totally uninterested in all of it. He needed a change; that was the problem. Something exciting. Even his dates weren’t all that remarkable. It was a sad day when the women in his life couldn’t keep his attention. Jensen vaguely wondered if he’d hit some sort of midlife crisis. He sure as hell hoped not, considering he was only thirty-five.

Jensen continued to contemplate the dull path his life had taken as he walked along the sidewalk of the busy downtown street of Innocence, Ohio. It was noon on Friday, and the sun beat down hard. A trickle of sweat ran the length of his spine, making him wish he’d gone without the jacket and tie. When his cell phone beeped, signaling a text message, he pulled it out of the pocket of his white dress shirt and glanced at the screen. Camille—he recognized the name immediately.

He’d dated the pretty brunette a few times, but they had so little in common that the relationship just sort of died before it really had a chance to get off the ground. Her message asking to meet for drinks surprised Jensen. He hadn’t heard from her in weeks. What was he supposed to say? That her thoughts on the proper makeup foundation held little interest for him? He started to tap out a polite no thanks as he stepped off the curb to cross the street to his favorite deli when out of nowhere someone grabbed him from behind and yanked. Hard. Jensen tripped backward over the curb and landed hard the sidewalk.

“What the—” The blaring horn of a semitruck cut him off midcourse as it barreled down the street directly past where Jensen had been standing only seconds before. “Shit.” He had the wind knocked out of him, but at least he was alive.

He rose from the street and assessed the damage to his navy blue suit, and decided it would be retired to suit heaven. That wasn't altogether a bad idea. He hated the damn thing. It was too tight through the shoulders, and he'd been meaning to replace it anyway.

"Dude, you almost bit it," a tall, lanky teenage boy said, his eyes round as quarters.

"Yeah, no kidding." Jensen rubbed a hand over his face. "Did you see the person—"

"There." An older woman pointed to the left. "The woman climbing into the SUV. She pulled you back just in time. I'd say you owe her a thank-you, young man."

Jensen glanced around and spotted a small, curvy blonde getting into a red Jeep Cherokee. He quickly memorized the license number. It was part of his job to remember numbers, and he was damn good at it. Jensen made a mental note to call Janice, his cousin at the BMV, as soon as he arrived at the office. With some persuasion, maybe she'd tell him the owner of the Jeep. "You're right, I do owe her," he replied as he wondered at the woman's quick reaction. His distracted dumb ass could've been splattered all over the blacktop if not for her.

Jensen smiled. Maybe this was the wake-up call he'd needed to kick his butt in gear and liven up his life. A shame it took a brush with death to get him to reevaluate his situation, though.

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"So, tell me again what happened?"

Jensen sighed as he lined up his cue stick for the shot. After work, he'd stopped off at his apartment to change into jeans and a T-shirt before heading to his brother Jason's house. They'd been drinking beer and playing pool for a good hour when he'd decided to tell Jason about the

woman who'd yanked him to safety. Unfortunately, the nosy shit wouldn't let it go. How many times was he going to have to go over it? "Look, I walked out in front of a semi and lived to talk about it. Period."

"Lived to talk about it only because a cute blonde tossed you on your ass," Jason said as he fought back a chuckle. "She must have been some woman. Hell, at six foot one and full of muscle, you aren't exactly a shrimp. How'd she manage to get you down?"

The ball went left of the hole, and Jensen cursed. Jason was already two games ahead, damn it. If Jensen didn't stop thinking about the woman in the red Jeep, he'd lose this one too. For some crazy reason, he couldn't get her out of his head. "I told you, she yanked, and I tripped over the curb." He paused, then added, "And you're getting way too big a kick out of this. I could've died if it hadn't been for that woman." Jensen took a swig of his beer.

"Which is why I intend to find her and thank her."

Jason cleared his throat and quickly looked over at the pool table. "Yeah, that's why you want to find her. To thank her."

Okay, so the woman intrigued him. He could never hide anything from his brother. They were only a year apart in age, but they might as well have been twins. Same close-cropped, dark-brown hair, same blue eyes and the same ability to read each other like a friggin' book. Sometimes it was annoying as hell. "Kiss my ass."

"You aren't my type." Jason winked. "And, just for the record, I've told you a million times that you suck at multitasking, and you're really bad at texting and walking. Or texting and doing anything at all, for that matter. You're going to get yourself killed one of these days."

Jensen frowned. "What are you talking about? I multitask all the time."

His brother's blue-eyed gaze turned serious. "When it comes to math figures or dealing with money and all that bullshit, yeah, you can multitask like

nobody's business. Hell, you're a regular Einstein in that area. But normal everyday stuff like walking and chewing gum at the same time? No, dude, you suck at that."

Jensen eyed him before tilting back his beer bottle and finishing it off. "You're probably right, but it's more than that. Lately, I've been more than just distracted. I don't know, I'm bored. My life is dull."

Jason quirked a brow as he called the left corner pocket for the eight ball. "You mean being a financial analyst isn't giving you wet dreams anymore, huh?"

"Christ, it's all I can do to stay awake all day." When Jason made the shot, winning yet again, Jensen shook his head and tossed his stick on the table.

"What about you? Is being an IT manager everything you thought it'd be?"

Jason put down his own pool cue and leaned against the table. "It's not all bad, but it's not quite enough anymore. I think part of the problem is I'm tired of taking orders from assholes. I want to be my own boss, you know?"

Jensen swung his gaze toward his brother. "So, what do we do about it?"

Jason crossed the room to the refrigerator and took out two more beers. He handed one to Jensen, then popped the top of the other and took a long drink before saying, "Start our own business."

"Seriously?" Jensen's interest perked up. "Doing what?"

His brother shrugged. "No friggin' idea, but I'm ready to try just about anything. I'm not getting any younger, and I'm ready for a change."

Jensen walked over to a chair and sat. “You know, I thought I’d be happy as a financial analyst. It pays well and the job suits me. That’s enough to make a lot of people pretty happy. Somewhere along the line, it became mundane as shit, though.” He sighed. “I feel like Dad,” Jensen grumbled, “bitching about the job and looking forward to the day I can retire.” Jensen frowned at Jason. “When did that happen?”

“Hell if I know.” Jason crossed the room and sat in the recliner next to him. “My job isn’t boring. I don’t hate it. Not really.” He shrugged. “I guess I should be content.”

“Then why aren’t you?”

Jason shook his head. “Because the powers that be hired a new director. My new boss is a damn pinhead who couldn’t find his way out of a paper bag. I swear to Christ, Jensen, this asshole must have gotten his college diploma from a box of Cracker Jack. The one they had before him wasn’t much better. Truth is, I’m fed up with taking orders from these people.”

“Okay, let’s think about this a second. If we’re truly serious about this—and I’m pretty sure we are—then we need to put our heads together. We have skills. What sort of business could we successfully own and operate?”

They both went silent as they thought it over. Jensen started to get jazzed as he imagined going into business with his brother. Jason had always been a hard worker. There wasn’t a man alive who had more drive than his brother. He mentally came up with several ideas, but none of them felt right. A knock on the front door tore both of them out of their brainstorming session.

Jason moved to answer it when the door swung open. “Hey, am I interrupting anything?” The soft, feminine voice of their friend AJ had them both smiling. She wore a pair of black capri running pants and a workout bra. Her short brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and it appeared as if she’d just come from a workout.

“Honey, you’re always a welcome sight,” Jensen said as he greeted her. He and Jason had been friends with AJ since grade school.

“Would it matter if you were?” Jason teased as he went to the fridge to get another cold one. He handed it to her and winked. “Where are your sidekicks?”

These days, their short, quirky friend was never without her two running buddies, Seth Berringer and Ames Dair. From the moment AJ had met the two men a couple of years back, the trio seemed to go everywhere together. Jensen wondered if AJ would ever realize that Seth and Ames had a serious craving for her. The way the pair looked at her, it was a wonder she hadn't figured it out already. Then again, AJ had never really been aware of her own appeal. She'd once told him that she was the ugly duckling who'd never gotten to be a swan. Unfortunately, nothing Jensen said to the contrary had managed to penetrate AJ's thick skull.

AJ sprawled out on the couch as if exhausted. “They're on their way,” she replied as she swiped a hand over her forehead. “We just finished at the gym, but Ames wanted to go home and shower, and Seth had a few errands to run.”

Jason chuckled. “You three work out more than anyone I know.”

AJ took a sip of her beer, then put it on the coffee table in front of her. “It's fun.” She nudged him with her foot. “You should give it a try. Might do you some good.”

“Hey, I work out plenty, little girl. I just don't see the need to kill myself like you do.”

AJ held out her arm and pumped her small bicep. “You're just jealous of my guns,” she said as she wagged her eyebrows.

“Guns?” Jason laughed and squeezed AJ's upper arm. “More like mosquito bites.”

She stuck her tongue out. “Buffoon.”

Jason pushed up his shirt sleeve and showed off his own muscular arm. “Now that’s a gun.”

She arched a brow and propped her foot on the coffee table. “How is it possible that you have muscles on top of muscles when you don’t even work out? It’s not fair.”

“I work out,” he replied as he knocked her foot off the table. “Just not with you three musketeers.”

“You ask me, it’s just good genes.” She pointed to Jensen. “You and your brother both.”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself,” Jason replied. He got up and tossed his empty bottle in the trash before he took his cell phone off the counter and waved it in the air. “Who wants pizza?”

“I do!” AJ shouted. “And Ames and Seth might too. They’ll be here any minute, if you can wait.”

As if on cue, the pair walked through the door. “Knock, knock,” Ames said. They strode over to the couch and sat on either side of AJ. “How long you been here?”

“Just got here a few minutes ago.” She took in Ames’s appearance and frowned. “You showered that fast?”

“Yep. I’m squeaky clean,” Ames said as he slung an arm around the back of the couch and started playing with AJ’s ponytail.

Jensen noticed that instead of Ames’s usual workout shorts and cutoff shirt, he wore a pair of black slacks and a fitted white T-shirt. Even his unruly black hair was combed into submission. The short sleeves on the shirt caught Jensen’s attention. They were tight around his upper arms,

and Jensen knew that the view was for AJ's benefit alone. He had to bite back a smile at how completely oblivious AJ was to Ames's efforts to show off for her.

AJ's focus shifted to Seth. "And how'd you get done with your errands so fast, Mister Speedy?"

"I ran through the bank drive-through." He shrugged and spread his legs out in front of him. Seth wore a pair of ripped-up jean shorts and a black, short-sleeve shirt. His messy, sandy-blond hair obviously hadn't seen a comb in days. "Figured the other shit could wait."

She laughed. "Or you figured you'd try and talk me into doing them for you."

He put his hand on her thigh and grinned. "It didn't occur to me, but now that you mention it..."

She swatted him on the arm. "You're hopeless."

Yep, Seth clearly had it just as bad for AJ as Ames. Jensen spotted Jason watching the display just as intently, a frown marring his brows. What would happen if they both made a play for her? Who would AJ choose? In a way, AJ was like a little sister to him and Jason. Neither of them would care to see her hurt because Seth and Ames decided to play tug-of-war with her heart.

Jason cleared his throat and asked, "So, who wants pizza?"

Everyone started talking at once.

A half hour later, they were scarfing down a large pepperoni and a medium sausage with extra cheese. Once they were nearly finished, AJ asked, "You two seemed pretty serious when I got here. What were you discussing anyway?"

Jensen snagged the last piece of pepperoni just as Jason reached for it, which earned him the finger. “We’ve decided we hate our day jobs and we’re ready to win the lottery so we can retire and move to Bali.”

Ames laughed and moved to toss his paper plate in the trash. “Win a few million for me while you’re at it, will ya?”

Jason closed the box and tossed his napkin on the table. “To be honest, we’re trying to figure out what sort of business we could run.”

“You want to own your own company?” AJ asked. “Since when?”

“Since a semi nearly ran me down today,” Jensen answered. An image of the blonde woman sprang into his mind. He wondered if Janice would have a name for him yet and tapped out a quick text, then waited for her to reply.

AJ’s soft brown eyes filled with concern. “Seriously?”

“Yep.” Jensen winked at AJ. “If it weren’t for some woman pulling me out of the way, I wouldn’t even be sitting here right now.”

“Oh my God,” AJ cried.

Jason quirked an eyebrow at him. “We need to get him a slightly less boring job so he’ll stop daydreaming.”

Jensen rolled his eyes. “Whatever,” he grumbled. “It’s never going to happen if we can’t figure out what the hell to do.”

Seth leaned forward and said, “You two interested in another partner for this yet-to-be-decided business?”

Jason swung his gaze toward him. “Why, are you interested?”

“I might be,” Seth replied in a low voice as he studied Ames. “What about you?”

Ames pointed to himself. “I’m a roofer, guys. I’m already my own boss. And it keeps me pretty busy.”

“True, but you were just saying that you’d like to have something more permanent for the winter months.”

He nodded. “It can be tough to find work once October’s cold weather hits.” He stared at Jensen. “I’m in if you don’t mind me being seasonal.”

Jensen chuckled. “We don’t even know what this fictional business is yet.”

AJ grabbed the empty pizza boxes off the table and started cleaning up their mess. “How about you start a maid service? Since, you know, you’re both so good at cleaning up after yourselves.”

Jensen knew she was kidding. AJ’s playful, sarcastic tone made that plain enough. Still, the idea somehow didn’t seem so ridiculous to Jensen. When he peered over at his brother, he could see the same spark of interest in him as well. “An all-male maid service,” Jensen said, voicing his thoughts aloud.

“Why do I like that idea?”

“Hell if I know, but it’s growing on me too.”

Ames held his hands up in the air. “Whoa, cleaning toilets for a living? Seriously?”

Seth laughed. “You’re kidding, right?”

Jensen let his silence speak for him. AJ gave each of them a slow once-over before saying, “You know, this might not be such a crazy idea.”

“Really?” Ames asked. “Because I have to say, it sure seems nuts to me.”

A slow smile appeared at the corners of her lips. “Think about it. The four of you are tall, muscular, gorgeous men. Put a feather duster in your hand and a tight black T-shirt with the words *We Polish It until It Shines* scrawled across the front, and you have yourself a hit with the women. This could be like Hooters, only the women’s version.”

Seth glanced over at Ames. “We’ve been reduced to lady porn. I feel so objectified.”

“Yeah, but lady porn sells.” He winked at AJ. “You’re a genius.”

“This is just weird enough to work,” Ames replied as a spark of excitement lit his eyes.

Jensen shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe we’re actually considering this.”

Jason rubbed his hands together. “Well, believe it, brother, because we’re about to go into business for ourselves.”

“Cleaning houses,” he helpfully reminded him. “What the hell do we know about cleaning?”

“What’s the big deal? It’s just a sponge, a bucket and some hot, soapy water.” Jason shrugged. “How hard can it be?”

Jensen sighed. “Why do I feel like you’re going to end up regretting those words?”

They spent the rest of the night going over details. Jensen agreed to spend the weekend working up a budget and figuring out how much they were going to need to borrow from the bank. And even though it wasn’t exactly what Jensen had imagined when he’d originally thought of running his own company, he had to admit a certain amount of excitement at the idea that he was finally going to get his chance to shuck the suit and tie.

His cell phone beeped, indicating he had a new text message. He pulled it out of his pocket and saw a name on the screen. Janice, and she’d found his blonde savior. First thing tomorrow morning, Jensen planned to meet her face-to-face. Oh yeah, things were definitely looking up.

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