

## Chapter 1

Dak saunters through the vast white gallery. It's at the exact center of Soho. The rent must be scary. By the righthand wall, two men are setting up a bar. The paintings all around him are huge and jarring, also very colorful. They have words on them. LIFE IS NOT WHAT YOU EXPECTED TO EXPERIENCE.

Dak frowns. Not happy about being here, about taking a guard job for extra money. The things you do when business is slow. What the hell. Let's get it done.

Halfway back on the left is a curved counter, sort of a command post. A young man stands behind the counter, watchfully. Dak wanders over, smiles at the young man. "Looking for Mrs. Sutton."

The man, wearing a white shirt and a blank expression, squints at Dak, some kind of appraisal. "I'm Charles," as if Dak would welcome the chance to speak with him.

"Hello, Charles. Where's Mrs. Sutton?"

Faintly annoyed, Charles points to a half-open door further back along the right side. A small sign says: PRIVATE.

Dak walks over, knocks, goes in. He finds a dark-haired woman at a desk. Expensively dressed in deep blues and burgundy. She looks up sharply, giving Dak the same squinty appraisal. Very in charge, Dak decides, except perhaps where it matters.

"Yes?"

"I'm Jon Dak."

"What? Oh, security." She stands up, comes from behind the desk, giving Dak a closer look, frowning. "I distinctly said blue blazer, white shirt, and gray trousers."

Dak gives her his caught-in-the-act smile. Standing there in his Harris tweed jacket 42-long, Oxford blue shirt open at the neck, dark slacks, black Reeboks. "Gee, I'm real sorry," he says finally. "I took this last minute."

Elaine Sutton puts her hands on her hips and hyperventilates a little. She's a sleek, elegant sort, late thirties, hair pulled back, shrewd eyes. "*I distinctly said,*" she repeats dramatically.

Dak tries out the slightly dangerous smile. "You think I look like somebody here to buy art?"

Mrs. Sutton drops her hands, even manages a smile. "Well, perhaps not."

A nice trim figure, Dak thinks. Lots of aerobics probably. Something tense and high-strung about her. Worried, Dak thinks. About something besides him.

"Mrs. Sutton ...how about this?" Dak stands like a cop at an intersection, shoulders squared, hands clasped behind his back, staring resolutely at the horizon.

"Yes, I see what you mean."

"What's the problem anyway? Somebody puts one of these billboards under his coat?"

Mrs. Sutton gives him another sharp look. No jokes about the art, please.

Dak stares pleasantly.

She shrugs. "People mustn't touch. And a guard adds to the tone."

"Oh, I get it," Dak says gamely. "I'm window dressing. Don't you worry. They'll know why I'm here."

"Yes, yes. I suppose so." More squinty looks. "You do have a certain....menace."

"They touch the things," Dak says deadpan, "I shoot them or what?"

"Oh my goodness! No, of course not."

"Just checking." Dak gives her a lazy smile.

She studies him carefully for a moment. Reassessing perhaps. A look Dak has seen many times. "Fine," she says. "Just stand around like that."

"Any particular place?"

Mrs. Sutton starts to tell him, changes her mind. "Whatever you think best." A faint smile.

"What do they cost?"

"The paintings? Eighty thousand, most of them."

"Dollars?"

"Of course."

"Artist be here?"

"Yes, absolutely. Why?"

Dak with a mischievous smile. "Like to shake his hand."

"Trust me, Mr. Dak! He's world-famous. Eighty is a good price." Mrs. Sutton gives him one more squinty look and decides to stop there. "We expect several hundred people," she says. "Many *passionate* collectors, we hope. Thanks for coming."

Dak nods respectfully and backs out.

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Crowd seems to be thinning some. For Dak, an uneventful evening. He tries to find a few paintings he enjoys looking at. He watches all the confident, expensively-dressed people, playing one of his favorite games, *Which One's The Psycho?* All the while, young show-biz hopefuls circulate with endless trays of fancy hors d'oeuvres.

Dak glances at his watch. Not long to go. He looks up. A boy is staring at him. "Hello," Dak says.

"Who are you?" The boy's about sixteen, with intelligent eyes, a strangely serious face. He's not that big but he carries himself like an adult.

"Collector," Dak says.

The boy ponders this. "No," he decides, "you're some kind of cop."

"You got me," Dak says.

"Gun?" The boy peers at Dak's jacket, where it's buttoned.

"Maybe."

"Can I see?"

"No."

"You work for my mother."

Yeah, Dak thinks, same shrewd eyes. Should have seen it right away. "True."

"So I can see the gun."

Dak scowls briefly, then ignores the boy. Mrs. Sutton is thirty feet away. Talking closely to a tall, important-looking man. Her hand clutching his arm. Both very intense, no smiles. Not the way she'd treat a customer. The husband? But this guy came in late

with another woman, young, stunning. Dak searches for her. Yeah, hanging back. But she's there, listening, watching. Could be messy, Dak thinks, but you never know.

He glances down. The boy hasn't moved. He looks Dak in the eye. "I'm Jason Sutton." Puts out his hand. "Who are you?"

"People call me Dak."

They shake. The boy's grip is formal, tentative. "Hello, Dak."

"All right, Jason, what can I do for you?"

"I want to see your gun."

"Why?"

Jason shrugs. "I don't know."

"Not good enough."

"Dak. You work for my mother. Technically, I'm a part owner, I have some stock. You must do what I say."

"It's been a long day, Jason. You can be nice or you can go somewhere else."

Except to smile his mother's faint smile, Jason hardly reacts. Dak likes that.

He glances up to see Mrs. Sutton and the tall man talking more heatedly, working their way toward the PRIVATE door. Mrs. Sutton giving tight little smiles to the people she passes. The man not bothering with appearances. He's got a large imperious head, hard eyes. Dak can tell he's a *big* fan of himself.

The boy follows Dak's gaze. "My parents," he says.

Dak waits to see what the boy will say next. He doesn't say a thing. Dak likes that, too. A tight, little, self-contained guy, this Jason.

The parents disappear into the office. "Will they be all right," Dak asks.

Jason shrugs, not sure. His face very serious. The eyes a shade darker.

Dak scans the gallery. About fifty-sixty people left. A steady movement toward the front. Nobody stealing the art, as far as Dak can see. He drifts toward the PRIVATE door. Yes, there's the girl friend, drifting the same way. Dak gives her a good look. The cover girl face, the long, leggy figure.

He stands cop-like near the door. Catching the murmur of voices from inside. Jason moves with him, looking up at Dak, taking it all in. Something odd about his adult manner and the childish concentration.

Dak thinks the voices are louder. "Divorce," he's sure he hears that.

The gorgeous girl starts to slide by. "Private," Dak says, deadpan, nodding at the sign.

The girl looks at him for the first time. Apparently not too pleased with what she sees. "I'm with the owner," she says aggressively.

Dak nods at Jason. "Gee, the owner's right here. What do you say, boss?"

Jason's smile is quick and faint. "Private," he says, nodding rapidly.

The girl looks at Jason. "Oh," she says. "Are you ...uh ...Greg's son?" Big smile.

"Yes," Jason says. "And who are you?"

Dak knows the voices are louder now. They're screaming. Sounds like they're throwing things. The girl peering past Dak.

"Oh, she says to the boy, "I'm Cindi Williams. A friend of your father's." And maybe, Dak thinks he hears the thought, *your swell new mom*.

"Jason," Dak asks, "do we help out?"

"I want to go back," the girl insists.

Dak smiles. "Now, I know that's a bad idea."

Jason looks confused, for the first time. Dak backs closer to the door. "You no-good sonofabitch," he hears. *Crash!* "The hell with you," he hears. "Who do you think you are, coming in here with that bimbo," he hears.

Dak sees the hurt in Cindi's face, then anger. Her lips press together, and she's tough again. Suddenly the voices break out of the little office. Dak looks to his left and the Suttons, still snapping, are coming at him.

The tall man glares at Dak. "Who the hell are you," he demands.

"Security."

"Name?"

"Dak."

"Dak? Dak what?"

Dak just stares at him, as pleasantly as he can.

Mr. Sutton glowers. "Yeah, well, get out there and protect those pretentious paintings." He hugs the boy, kisses his cheek. "Sorry, Jason. We'll talk about this."

Mrs. Sutton snaps, "Leave him alone," seizing the boy's elbow.

For a second each has an arm. They start to pull, then realize how silly this looks.

Mr. Sutton smirks at his wife, says, "Cindi! Let's go!"

Mrs. Sutton stands there in a shivering trance. Her fists clenched. Her mouth moves but no words come out.

Mr. Sutton and Cindi stride across the gallery's shiny floor. Jason stares after them.

Dak can't think of anything useful to say. He walks to the bar.

"Everything's packed," a slim bartender insists.

"I really need a drink," Dak says.

The young man makes a big deal out of finding a bottle in a box on the floor. He fills a glass with white wine.

"Oh, my," Dak murmurs, "and I was dreaming about a *drink*."

The bartender gives Dak a tight little smile: *oh, aren't we butch?*

Dak gets this and says, "Thanks, old buddy." He takes the wine and moves back toward the center of the almost empty gallery. The paintings are still large and jarring.

Mrs. Sutton strides toward him. Moving with an easy grace. Must have been a dancer, Dak thinks. Her composure almost back.

"So, Mr. Dak. An interesting evening of culture." She doesn't wait for Dak to decide how to react to that. "Maybe I'll use you for the next opening."

Across the room he sees Jason watching them. Tough little guy, Dak thinks, feeling sorry for him.

"Mrs. Sutton, I'm very sorry about your problems. But let's understand. I was helping out a friend. You'll get billed whatever you pay, which isn't what I work for. If you ever have any real problems, give me a call."

A little more hyperventilating but without much enthusiasm. "But I've gotten used to your...*look*." Gesturing at the clothes she didn't like two hours before. "I think it might be the next thing."

Dak can see that she's serious.

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Dak walks toward the Spring Street subway, going uptown to see his girl friend. He thinks about the opening. A funny world. Paintings selling for several times what most people make in a year. Not many happy faces. Dak doesn't think he'll mention this little job to Katie. Sort of embarrassing the things he gets into. People with steady jobs don't understand.

The night's warm. Dak can feel Spring in the air. Business will start picking up, he thinks. It better.

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end Chapter 1

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