

## CHAPTER ONE

Light glinted off the long blade as it sliced the air toward Renn St. John's head—the same blade that had already driven him to one knee in the sand. With the flat of his own broadsword, he blocked the blow, sending his attacker staggering backward.

Taking advantage of his opponent's imbalance, Renn leapt to his feet and lunged at him, their clashing blades ringing throughout the arena. With practiced, unrelenting blows, Renn drove the knight back until he stumbled and fell to the sand, disarmed, Renn's blade at his throat.

Lifting his blade and sheathing it, Renn offered the new recruit a hand up. "Perfect. Once you unseated me in the joust, you drove me well away from the rail where the fight could be seen from every seat in the house. Do it just like that tonight during the show."

"Got it," said the former squire now The Joust's newest addition to its stable of stunt riders, his grin wide as the Rio Grande.

Though only a few years younger than Renn, this newbie had a lot to learn. He cuffed the new rider on the shoulder. "Now go after your horse and make sure he knows he did a good job for you."

A smile stretched across Renn's lips as he watched the kid trot off toward the opening at the end of the arena through which the horses were trained to exit once they'd lost their rider. Barely three years ago, he'd been the one facing his first show as a knight at The Joust. Just the memory of it surged excitement through his veins.

Hell, he still got an adrenalin rush every time he suited up for a show. Damn, he loved this job.

Turning for the opposite arena exit through which his mount had left, he caught sight of the Head Knight, his horse hugging the stadium wall. Concerned there was a problem, Renn headed toward horse and rider.

But, closing on them, he saw the attraction...at least what held the *knight's* attention. On the far side of the wall dividing arena from stadium-like viewing area, a serving wench was laying out dinnerware for the night's show.

Her thick mane of black hair hung midway down her back and fell over her shoulder where her off-the-shoulder peasant blouse costume bared a lovely expanse of skin. Something he couldn't help but note as he strode toward her and mounted Head Knight Dugan.

Jack Varga, his boss and owner of The Joust, would call her buxom. Though, her waist was narrow and, judging by what Renn could see above the dividing wall, and her hips gently flared.

Unencumbered by the chainmail and knight's costume worn during shows, Renn easily vaulted onto the ledge separating spectators from jousters. Yup, nothing overly done about the hips under the long skirt the wench wore. He wasn't surprised. Dugan was a man of discerning taste.

Dugan's roving eye also tended to wreak havoc among the younger of the female staff. Renn wouldn't be surprised if the high turnover rate of female clerks, ticket takers, and serving wenches wasn't in part due to Dugan's entanglements. Something Renn intended to head off with this latest hire.

But, when the girl in serving wench costume turned from Dugan to him, her heavy mane slipping back off her shoulder and exposing her face, he amended girl to woman. Deep brown eyes regarded him without humor. No, this one wasn't the usual college co-ed hired to play one of The Joust's serving wenches.

In spite of a sense that this *woman* could handle herself with the likes of Dugan, he gave her a crooked smile with a nod in the direction of the seated rider. "I should warn you, fair maiden,

Dugan here has a way with the ladies, ladies being the operative word here.”

Her dark eyes appraised him. “And you, do you likewise have *a way* with the ladies?”

Dugan’s horse swung its muzzle into Renn’s chest. Cradling the horse’s head and scratching his ears, Renn answered, “I fear I have more of a way with horses than the ladies.”

Dugan snorted. The man outranked him as a knight, but *he* was the man Jack Varga had left in charge in his absence.

Giving the chestnut stallion’s ear a final rub, Renn met Dugan’s gaze. “Shouldn’t you be riding Tuck around the arena, getting him accustomed to it—bonding with him?”

The humor drained from Dugan’s eyes as he held Renn’s gaze a couple seconds too long. Challenge duly noted. Dugan hadn’t taken it well that Jack had chosen Renn over him to run The Joust. With a half-bow to the serving girl, he heeled the horse away from the wall.

Renn kept a watchful eye on Dugan and Tuck for a few more seconds before turning his attention back to the raven-haired beauty who’d attracted Dugan’s attention. He half expected her to have gone on about her job of setting out faux-pewter plates and mugs. Instead, he found her watching Dugan put Tuck through his paces.

“You’re new,” Renn said, his seat on the divider wall putting him eye level with her as she stood in the aisle in front of the first tier of plank tables.

“I am,” she said without taking her eyes off horse and rider. “And that’s a Quarter Horse.”

“That it is,” Renn answered, his chest spontaneously puffing with pride. It’d been his suggestion to use the fast-off-the-mark Quarter Horses for the jousting part of the show.

She looked him in the eye. “An American made breed in a medieval times setting. A bit anachronistic isn’t it?”

He’d have been impressed with her knowledge. But everybody in Texas knew Quarter Horses were American made. Then again, no employee of The Joust before this one had ever bothered to point out the fact. Even though her comment deflated him a bit, he had to admit he was a little impressed.

She raised one finely arched eyebrow at him, reminding him she waited for an answer. Add assertive to the budding list of reasons to be impressed by this woman.

He grinned. “You haven’t seen a Quarter Horse run a joust yet, have you?”

“That’s not the point,” she said, not a hint of a smile to her full lips.

“Ah, but it is,” he said, oddly tempted to kiss some of the sternness from those ripe lips glossed a deep burgundy. “A Quarter Horse can hit full speed in three strides. Makes for quite a show.”

Bracing her tray of dinnerware with both hands to her midsection, she faced him full on. “I know how speedy a Quarter Horse is in the short run. That doesn’t make him any more suitable a mount for a medieval knight than would a Shetland pony.”

Going for humor, he retorted, “Actually, as old a breed as Shetland ponies are, who’s to say they weren’t used by a medieval knight or two?”

With what could only be described as an exasperated sigh, she turned back to her task of laying out plates and cups.

“Some of those knights of old could be rather small,” he called after her as he rose to his feet and strode along the ledge of the divider after her, determined to get at least a smile out of her.

“If you’re trying to impress me with your wit,” she tossed over her shoulder, “save it for some naïve girl.”

“I’m not trying to impress you, just get a smile out of you.”

“I’ll smile for the patrons I serve tonight during the performance,” she said, efficiently laying out dinnerware on the long tables.

“That’d be *my* performance,” he said in a bemused tone. “The one where I dazzle our patrons with a lightning fast ride toward the point of a lance...aseat a Quarter Horse.”

She huffed and moved to the second tier of tables.

“They won’t give a fig what I’m riding,” he said, raising his voice, pivoting on the narrow ledge to keep up with her.

“Quarter Horses are anachronistic,” she repeated, slapping down a mug a little too hard.

What was this woman’s problem? Was she some history teacher who’d lost her job due to budget cuts? Maybe an historian unable to find a job in her field?

“Look, lady,” he called up to her. “We’re just about having fun here.”

She wheeled at him, her skirt swirling against the backs of the first row of bench seats, the mugs on her tray swaying. “Fun. That’s the be all and end all with you guys, isn’t it?”

The vehemence of her question drew him up. “You got a problem with fun?”

“When it gets in the way of responsibility, I do.”

He hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his trews and cocked his head to one side, studying her. He wanted to ask her why she thought fun and responsibility were mutually exclusive. What came out was, “Maybe The Joust isn’t a good fit for you.”

The corners of her mouth lifted into something more akin to smugness than a smile. “Are you threatening to have me fired?”

He held her gaze, noting a glint in her eyes that matched the smug line of her mouth. He didn’t know who’d hired her. But, clearly, she didn’t know that he had the power to fire her and introducing himself now would only sound like a threat.

Good thing for her he wasn’t a man given to rash decisions. Besides, something about this obstinate, raven-haired beauty intrigued him—made him want to prove to her fun and responsibility could go hand-in-hand.

Giving her a courtly bow, he turned and hopped off the rail back into the sands of the arena, the fun area of his job.

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Renn banded the last of the paper bills and slipped them into the deposit bag along with the checks collected for the night’s show, from the gift shop, and the bar. Even before adding up the receipts, he knew another month of nights like this one and The Joust was doomed.

Bringing in the Quarter Horses this past year had upped the excitement level of the show. But The Joust needed more than their added energy to bring customers back. The Joust needed marketing...and freshening up.

Renn grimaced. Who was he kidding. The place suffered from far more than fading paint. The Joust was in a sad shape of disrepair, the whole venue needing a facelift before dumping more money into marketing. But that wasn’t his call, and Jack Varga wasn’t a forward-thinking kind of business man, especially now.

Renn rubbed the back of his neck. The man who’d hired him was dying and that fact pained Renn on multiple levels. First and foremost, he was losing his friend. Secondly, it put The Joust in jeopardy. Losing a job, even one he loved as much as he did this one, was low on the list of concerns. Even most of the employees were part-timers and could easily find other work.

But the horses, what would become of them? Highly trained animals that would be cast into a limited market. Much as he hated the possibility of the prime property which The Joust occupied being turned into a housing sub-division or a mall parking lot, the thought of even one of The Joust’s horses ending up as dog food cut him deep. He didn’t have Jack’s faith that his daughter would take over The Joust upon inheriting it. The woman had been absent from Jack’s life at least

as long as Renn had worked the venue, and that told him she was more likely to sell off the business.

And therein lie the problem. Who would buy a broke-down theme restaurant with a stable full of high maintenance horses?

He fingered the printout of meager charge card sales and frowned. There was one thing he might be able to do to save The Joust. Taking advantage of his recent *promotion*, especially the part where ordering new stock had become his responsibility, he'd looked deeper into the overall workings of the business. Stock seemed to be flying out the door while the receipts didn't reflect such robust sales. If he could uncover which employees were stealing from the business...

He cursed and slumped back in the desk chair. He loved his job. Not this part, the adding up of receipts, the sitting behind a desk part. Certainly not the part where he had to figure out who the thieves were and fire them...providing The Joust even lasted long enough to uncover who the thief or thieves were.

Hell, they all could be stealing from their employer. Even when Jack was on site to watch out for sticky fingers, The Joust's inventory was easy pickings. The boss never looked too closely for wrong-doing. One of Jack Varga's shortcomings, trusting too easily. Petty theft had likely started the day he opened The Joust twenty-five years ago.

But, what was going on now went beyond petty. This was enough to put the final nail in the coffin of The Joust's bankruptcy.

The scrape of a key in the office door lock drew his attention. No one else should have a key to the office, at least no one on site and it was highly unlikely Jack had managed to leave his hospice bed for a midnight visit to The Joust. Perhaps he was about to find out who was responsible for the increasing numbers of missing product.

Silently, Renn slipped out of the desk chair and stepped out of the circle of the desk light. The doorknob was turning by the time he flattened himself against the wall to the hinge side of the door. His muscles coiled for action, his senses on high alert.

The first thing he caught as the door eased inward was the scent of roses. A female thief?

Then again, all the knights handled roses, tossing them to favored customers during the show. He hated to think his thief might be one of the men he worked so closely with, trained with. Jack treated the stunt riders like family.

The whishing movement of a long skirt brushed his ears and his evaluation of the potential thief turned back to a woman. His opinion was confirmed as the door swung wide and the hall light cast a shapely shadow across the office floor and up the side of the desk.

She'd barely cleared the door when Renn slammed it shut behind his potential thief and swung her between him and the wall.

"Get off me, you oaf," sputtered a decidedly female voice that didn't harbor the least bit of chagrin as its owner brought a knee up between his legs.

He was prepared, at least for the physical maneuver. The benefit of practicing stunts hours a day quickened a man's reflexes. He blocked the blow, planting his own knee between her legs and pressing her tighter to the wall with his body and pinning her wrists beneath his hands.

She squirmed, her full breasts squashed against his chest. He'd have enjoyed the exercise under other circumstances. He also noted beneath the soft curves was a well-muscled body whose strength was not to be underestimated.

"How dare you," she lambasted him.

He snorted. "How dare *I*? You're the one breaking in."

"I'm not breaking in," she said, blowing a lock of black hair back from her face with a breath

sweet as honey. “I have a key.”

He eyed her plump, burnished lips and big, dark eyes. As if he couldn’t have guessed which serving wench she was just by the curves melding into his body.

“You’re the new girl,” he said, without giving her an inch of breathing room and not because of the enjoyment he got from her curves pressed against him...so he told himself. “You have no business having a key.”

She brought her chin up between them and her dark eyes blazed at him in the dim light. “I’m about to become the new owner of The Joust. I’m Gabrielle de la Santo Varga, Jack Varga’s daughter. Now, release me.”

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The man pinning her to the wall didn’t so much as blink. He didn’t move, either, making it difficult to ignore the sandalwood scent of his freshly showered body. She should be thankful he and his damp, shoulder length hair wasn’t reeking of *knightly* sweat.

She should also be pleased this employee responsible for the venue’s receipts didn’t readily take her at her word. Her eyes adjusting to the dim light, she recognized him as the *knight* who’d jumped up on the arena wall and sent the one called Dugan back to work. A lot of responsibility for a man she’d judged to be not much past his mid-twenties.

She’d also watched him off and on as she’d served the evening show. He rode his *Quarter Horse* full out in the tournament whether jousting or spearing rings, and wielded his sword with lethal force in the melee. But then the *knights* had always been handpicked by her father in large part because they liked to *play*. Hard training only refined the hard bodies the *boys* already possessed. And, judging by the hard, lean muscles pressing her to the wall, this one hadn’t shirked his training in the least.

But enough was enough and she huffed. “What are you waiting for, a picture ID?”

He tipped his head so it no longer blocked the light from the desk lamp and studied her face a moment longer before releasing her with a quippy, “A picture ID would have helped.”

He released her and took half a step back. She straightened from the wall, annoyed by his cheekiness...and that he still stood close. Too close, him and his sandalwood-scented muscles.

She sidestepped him and shook out her skirt as though it was enough to shake off the memory of his hard body pressed the length of hers. She knew the pitfalls of physical attraction. Something her mother never let her forget, always quick to point out how her failed marriage to Gabrielle’s father had begun with physical attraction.

*Her* knight, currently clad in jeans and tee, turned with her, a quick grin stretching across his lips as he added, “Would have helped even more if you’d introduced yourself this afternoon down in the arena.”

“But then everyone would have known I was here,” she said, squaring her shoulders.

“You were snooping around to see who was doing their job and who wasn’t?” he stated more than asked, his stance loose—unguarded.

Of course. He didn’t need to be guarded. Everything was a game to his kind. A good time. Nothing deeper.

She headed for the desk, brushing at her skirt where his leg had pressed intimately between hers. “There’s nothing wrong with my scoping things out before announcing my presence.”

She stopped between the desk and chair. He stopped at the corner of the desk and leaned back against it, hands braced to either side his lean hips. “Didn’t say there was anything wrong with it.”

She glanced at the desk’s untidy surface. “So, what finally convinced you I was who I said I was?”

“Jack keeps a picture of you on his desk,” he said.

She spotted the framed photo on the far corner of the desk. It was from her twelfth birthday holding the bridle of the three-year-old Friesian her father had just given her. It’d been the happiest day of her life. Six months later, her parents divorced and she and her mother moved away from her father and her beloved horse.

“I don’t know how you recognized me from that picture,” she said.

“It wasn’t easy,” he said, one corner of his grin quirking further upward. “You had much friendlier eyes back then.”

She gave him a censoring look. “Careful, Knight. I’ll soon be your boss.”

“Your father is still the boss here, and he trusts me,” he said, that quick grin of his disappearing.

She winced and turned her face away. Her words had come out far more calloused sounding than she intended. As if she should care what one of her father’s stunt riders might think of her. It wasn’t like she intended to stick around and run the venue.

Fingering the deposit slip on the desk, she ventured, “Maybe he’s already signed over power of attorney to me.”

“Not for business purposes.”

Her attention snapped back to him. “Excuse me?”

“He’d have to revoke the one he assigned me before transferring it to you and I think I’d know about that.”

She drew a deep breath, giving herself time to stifle her annoyance. “My father gave *you* power of attorney over *his* business?”

“He didn’t fill you in on who he’d left in charge?”

She looked hard at him, trying to ignore the strong jaw that promised to grow stronger—more appealing with age. “You’re just one of his stunt riders. You can’t be out of your twenties. Why would he choose a boy to run his business?”

He straightened from the desk and crossed his arms over his chest, albeit loosely, not a hint of amusement in his demeanor as he informed her, “He chose someone he could trust.”

She peered up into the eyes she’d noticed earlier in the arena were blue as a morning sky, trying not to remember how they’d twinkled when Dugan’s horse nuzzled him. The only man who’d ever looked at her with that much affection was her father.

Except, she also knew how undependable that affection could be. A lesson learned at too early an age.

She craned her neck at the knight with the clear, blue eyes, silently damning him his height as she demanded, “And I’m supposed to trust that you’re telling me the truth, a man whose name I don’t even know?”

“Renn St. John,” he said, extending a hand.

“What kind of name is Renn?”

“Long story. I’ll tell it to you if you stick around long enough.”

Was that some sort of dig because she hadn’t visited her father in a couple years?

He dipped his chin toward the far side of the desk, his dark blond hair brushing one broad shoulder. “Top drawer, left hand side. You’ll find a copy of the power of attorney there.”

She pulled out an official looking envelope and read its contents. When she looked up, he gave her a maddeningly I-told-you-so smirk.

Stuffing the document back into its envelope and the drawer, she turned her attention to the deposit slip.

“Tell me the bulk of sales tonight were done with credit cards.”

“The bulk of sales were done with credit cards,” he all but recited.

She eyed him, particularly the smooth, firm-looking lips through which he’d issued his answer, searching for some tell-tale sign he was being a smart-aleck with her. She almost wished he had been mocking her, but those lips betrayed not a ghost of a tease.

“Where’s the credit card tally?” she asked.

He stepped close, the scent of sandalwood once more engulfing her. His arm brushed hers as he slid a printout of numbers from beneath the deposit slip and bag, the contact snapping at her like a charge of static electricity releasing itself.

“It’s not computerized?” she asked, distracting herself from the sensation of their contact with a scan of the desktop and noticing the absence of any such electronic equipment.

“Jack likes to do things the old way,” he said, his arm sliding away...which caused a whole new set of sensations she didn’t want to experience with this man. Her mother’s example had taught her the heartbreak of a chemistry-based attraction.

Holding the paper under the desk lamp, she scanned the numbers, then studied them, calculating the how many people those numbers added up to. She sorely wanted her lack of concentration to be due to her long day, not the nearness of some cocky, fun-loving stunt rider.

She rattled the paper in his face. “Tell me these aren’t typical figures, that this was an off night.”

He sucked a breath and she swore she heard the threads of his t-shirt stretch across his chest. “I’m afraid the credit card figures as well as those of the deposit slip are pretty typical of the past month.”

“Was this a slow month?”

He shook his head.

“Is it my father’s illness—his going into hospice that has caused sales to fall off?”

“It’s been like this since well before Jack got sick.”

“Show me the breakdown of the cash sales. How many adult, children, and group tickets?”

“All group tickets are by credit card. Very little of the cash comes from show tickets.” He slid out a ledger, pointing out how much of the cash sales were credited to the bar and the gift shop. What remained was easy to break down in her head and something didn’t add up.

She faced him, arms folded across her chest. “Do you have an explanation why you comped over fifty meals tonight?”

His head snapped back. “I’ve never comped anything since coming to work here. Why do you think fifty meals were comped tonight?”

She snatched up the credit card tally and cash deposit slip and shook them both in his face. “Because these numbers are short compared to how many seats were filled tonight.”

He blinked at her. “You counted how many seats were filled...and did the math on those—” he flicked the papers she held up at him “—in your head?”

“Yes.”

He snatched the tallies from her, turned the calculator toward himself, and began punching in numbers. “You had to have figured wrong. There’re different prices for adults and children. Did you take into account the group sales are discounted?”

“I calculated close enough to know the receipts are over fifty seats short.”

“How many adults were in the audience and how many children?”

She told him. He pulled the tape from the calculator, laid it next to the deposit slip and credit card tallies and studied them. He shook his head. “Damn, you’re right. We’re missing receipts for

easily fifty seats.”

“Where’s the money?”

He straightened and faced her, his eyes narrowed. “Are you accusing me of something?”

“You claim to be in charge,” she said.

Something shifted between the heavy lashes framing his narrowed eyes. “I order stock and sign checks.”

“And fill-out deposit slips,” she said, her tone pointed.

He looked away from her, rubbed the back of his neck, and shook his head. “You think I’m skimming off the cash sales?”

She squared herself. “I don’t know. But my father’s never been known to have the best sense where business is concerned and you are part of his business.”

He met her gaze and all but challenged, “He’s pretty good about knowing who he can trust.”

“Evidence is still out on that one,” she leveled back at him.

His, “You doubt me?” lacked the conviction of someone who completely disagreed with her.

She stood her ground, holding his gaze.

He nodded. “Okay. Fine.”

Stepping back from her, he dropped into a chair beside the desk. One at a time, he tugged off his boots, upended them, and shook them. “No cash falling out of that one,” he said, “or this one,” he said of the second boot before dropping it to the floor beside the first with a loud thump. “Maybe I’m smuggling the money out in my socks.”

He peeled them off and tossed them at her. She batted them away.

He crooked a smile at her—or rather, she was sure, at her discomfort and chirped, “You might want to feel them up for stashes of cash.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

He stood and took a step toward her, his tone way too amiable under the circumstances. “You walked in on me unannounced. What better time to see if you’ve caught me skimming?”

With that, he peeled off his t-shirt, dumped it into her hands, and held up his arms. “No money taped to my chest. How about my back?”

He circled before her. All she saw was the strength popping across his shoulder muscles, the developed arms from swinging swords and axes, and the definition of his washboard abs with their thin trail of hair leading a path down past his belt when he once more faced her. It all reminded her she’d never been this close to a man this well built and in this stage of undress.

Okay, there’d been that one time her friends had coaxed into going to an all-male strip review. Those men had revealed far more than her cowboy of a knight had so far. But she hadn’t been this close to any of the strippers and she sure as hell hadn’t been alone with any of them.

“Perhaps I have your cash in a money belt,” he said, his eyes filling with humor as he unbuckled his belt.

“Stop,” she commanded, flattening a hand at him. “I believe you.”

“You sure you don’t want to make sure?” he asked, one eyebrow raised above a twinkling blue eye. “I’m not shy. I’ll strip for you.”

*Strip.* The word brought back images of overly-muscled men gyrating in G-strings. She shuddered. Though the sandalwood scent of the tee she clutched to her chest and a glance at the lean, muscled knight of a man standing bare-chested within arm’s reach of her elicited an errant thought about how enjoyable it might be to see him...

No, no, no. She’d already seen too much of him.

She lifted her gaze to eyes which gleamed with amusement. “What the hell is your name?”



“Renn,” he said, not bothering to buckle his belt before extending his hand. “Renn St. John.”  
Gingerly, she accepted his handshake.

A smile twitched at one corner of his mouth. “You certain you don’t want to make sure I don’t have on a money belt or maybe wads of cash taped to my legs?”

She glanced down at his legs. “Given the cut of those jeans, I don’t see them hiding much of anything.”

When she brought her gaze back up to his, he was grinning; and the full meaning of what she’d just said brought a heat to her cheeks she thought herself long past capable of.

She threw his tee back at him and kicked his socks to him. “Get dressed, Mr. St. John. Given you’ve been running The Joust this past month, you’ve got a lot of questions to answer, starting with shortages like these.”