
RESCUING RUDI

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

Huddled on the cold pavement in a shop doorway, the young woman pulled her jacket tighter around her sore and shivering body. It was a cold night and going to get a lot colder.

She hurt, and she was hungry. Very hungry. Pressing a scrunched fist into the growling ache in her midriff, she reached out and pulled her backpack closer.

She should move. She couldn't stay here. The pavement was too cold and hard to lie on, even though lying down and closing her eyes was all she wanted to do. She racked her fuddled brain, trying to think where she could go to find a little warmth and comfort, but nowhere came to mind.

The last few nights she'd spent in a nearby 24-hour fast food restaurant. It was warm at least, and each night she'd bought one cup of coffee and made it last until morning, dozing and sipping until the sun came up.

The worst thing, though, was the smell of the food. It wasn't even that she liked hamburgers and chips especially. She'd hardly ever eaten them in the past, and thought they generally smelled better than they tasted, but she was so hungry that the warm,

fatty, juicy aroma almost drove her mad. It was torture being around so much food and not being able to have any herself.

A couple of times she'd managed to surreptitiously grab some leftovers and eat them unnoticed. She didn't like to do it too often, though, as she was sure she'd get kicked out if any of the staff spotted her scavenging scraps, and then she'd be cold as well as hungry.

Now she couldn't even afford a coffee, and they wouldn't let her sit there all night without buying anything at all. She could find somewhere with a few more people still out despite the late hour and try begging; that sometimes worked. But she didn't feel safe doing it at night.

The streets could be very dangerous for women on their own once the rest of the city had closed up and gone to bed, and she knew just how dangerous. Moments before, she'd been attacked, pushed over, assaulted and robbed. Not that she had had much money for anyone to take, just a few dollars, enough to buy a cup of coffee and a safe, warm place to spend the night.

Forcing herself to move, she drew up onto her knees, wincing from the grazes and bruises. She was lucky, she knew. A few minor injuries were nothing; it could have been her life.

The meagre contents of her backpack were scattered around. The mugger had tipped everything out in the hope of finding something worth taking, but there were only a few dirty clothes, a notebook, pen, empty plastic water bottle, train and tram timetables, five dollars and a bottle of bourbon, which she'd bought earlier with money she'd begged. She'd drunk a third of it. It took the edge off the cold and her hunger and, more importantly, the sorry state of her life.

He'd taken the bourbon and the five dollars, and given her a good kicking for not having more worth stealing. He didn't steal her phone; someone else had beaten him to that a couple of weeks before and she'd had no money to buy a new one.

Biting her lip against the cold and pain, she stuffed her

possessions back into her bag and dragged herself up on to her unsteady feet. She wished she still had the bourbon to help take the edge off the new pain.

What was the point of keeping on struggling? She was broke, cold, hungry, hurt, and had nowhere to go. It had been like that yesterday, a week ago, two weeks ago, a month ago and it would be like that tomorrow and next week.

It started to drizzle. Her clothes were already damp from the pavement, and as the rain started falling more heavily, it reached under the shop awning. Soon she would be soaked.

She looked down the dimly lit street as a car turned into it. She saw its headlights coming towards her on her side of the road and felt a small surge of relief as she realised this might be the help she needed. She moved out of the shadows, standing at the edge of the kerb as the car got closer. Why was it taking so long? It was barely crawling along.

At last it reached her, she recognised the make and thought, “Well, if I’m going to go, I may as well go by Beemer!” Then she stepped off the kerb and into its path.

THE NOISE of people talking loudly woke her. She opened her eyes a fraction, but the harsh lights were too bright. She closed them again. She couldn’t quite get a sense of where she was or what was going on.

“Do you know who she is?” she heard an unfamiliar woman’s voice ask briskly.

“No. Doesn’t she have any ID?” a man’s voice replied. She wanted him to speak again. His voice was rich and warm. It spilled over and around her and nestled there like a comforting blanket.

“No.” The woman’s voice again. “We didn’t find anything

with a name or anything to identify her. No cards. No phone. No documents. Nothing.”

She smiled to herself and tried to move. A strange moaning sound stopped her. People bustled around her, but she couldn't see them.

Then a hand closed over hers. A big hand. Warm. Strong. And there was that voice again.

“Hush, little girl. Lie still. Don't try to move. You're hurt but you're going to be okay.”

His voice was liquid warmth, spreading up through her veins, making her sleepy, so sleepy.

IT WAS WARM. And quiet. And she was in a proper bed. She didn't need to open her eyes to know that much. She had no idea where she was, or why, or how she'd got there, but for the moment she was content to leave those questions unanswered and drift back to sleep.

HER EYES OPENED. She blinked, trying to focus. She was in a hospital, but she couldn't remember why and her head hurt when she tried to think. She wriggled the toes on her left foot, then her right foot. That all seemed to be in order. She wriggled the fingers on her left hand, but something wasn't right. She tried the other hand. No, that didn't feel right either.

She moved her head slightly, wincing as a bolt of pain shot through her forehead, and looked down. A needle attached to a drip stuck out of the back of her left hand, and her right arm was in a sling.

Her attention was caught by the door opening and a nurse coming in. She quickly shut her eyes and lay perfectly still,

pretending to be asleep. She didn't want to talk to anyone. Didn't want to answer their questions. Didn't want to think about what she was going to do next. She was warm and comfortable and wanted to stay right where she was. She was still hungry, though, she realised. Maybe someone could bring her some food.

"Nothing yet?" she heard a voice ask.

"No, not yet." She felt her skin tingle as that warm, honeyed voice washed over her again.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to go home and get some sleep? We can call you if there's any change."

"I'll stay until she wakes. I feel responsible. I want to make sure she has someone who can look after her. That she has somewhere to go."

She couldn't resist the temptation of seeing who this knight in shining armour who felt responsible for her could be.

Peeking through her eyelashes, she saw two people standing next to a chair against the side wall, about three metres from her bed. One was a plumpish, dark-skinned, attractive lady in a white uniform: the nurse.

The other was the man with the beautiful voice. His back was to her, but she could see he was tall, probably a bit over six foot, and lean. It was hard to tell much more, other than that his thick, lush hair was very dark grey with streaks and tips of silver scattered through.

Probably old enough to be my father, she thought, although the way he was casually leaning against the wall, with one foot crossed over the other suggested a younger man, possibly in his forties, she decided.

Seeing the nurse leaving, she quickly shut her eyes again and heard him sit down on the chair. She was facing that way so couldn't open her eyes without him noticing, and it hurt too much to move so she couldn't do a pretend sleeping roll over. She had two choices: keep pretending to be asleep until he left, and

goodness knows how long that might be, or acknowledge that she was now awake. She chose the second option.

Giving a little moan, she fluttered her eyelashes. Through the tiny gaps she could see he was looking at his phone, and he'd taken no notice of her stirrings. For no good reason she could think of considering he was under no obligation to be sitting here watching over her at all, she was annoyed. If he was going to wait for her to wake up, she'd imagined he might at least be alert to signs that she might be doing just that instead of... well, whatever it was he was doing on his phone.

While he was absorbed, though, she took the opportunity to study him. From the front view, she decided her initial assessment of his age was probably about right, somewhere in his forties, probably closer to forty than fifty despite the silver and grey hair.

He was looking slightly dishevelled from being up all night; what she thought was probably usually no more than a three o'clock shadow now looked more like five or six. His thick hair was slightly longer at the front than the back. Parted on the side, it was waving down onto his broad forehead, although it looked like it might still have traces of gel, and she imagined it was usually swept back. It was cut down in front of his ears, so it ran seamlessly into his thick grey and silver sideburns.

Although his beard stubble was flecked with white, his moustache, which he'd allowed to grow, was completely black. The thick eyebrows angling up straight from the top of his nose towards his temple before falling away steeply at the end of his eyes, currently hidden by long lashes as he studied his phone, were also black with, as yet, no trace of grey.

From his face, her eyes wandered down the rest of him. The two top buttons on his blue-and-white checked shirt were unbuttoned and she could see his chest was thinly covered in black curls. His chinos were also black, and he was leaning comfortably back in his chair with his left foot on his right knee. He looked slim, tight, lithe and athletic.

Gosh, she thought, he really is incredibly handsome. And possibly unmarried. What wife would want a hunk like him next to a young woman's bed all night? She wondered if it was worth trying her luck and flirting with him.

She must have moved because his eyes flicked up from his phone and caught her staring at him. Brown, she thought. Big and brown and delicious.

She tried to sit up a bit, but another bolt of pain stabbing through her forehead stopped her.

"Ow." She fell back on the pillow. She didn't even have a hand free to rub it.

"Hey," he said earnestly, walking to her bed and staring down at her. "Maybe don't try to move too much yet if it hurts. Would you like me to get the nurse?"

"Ow." She'd forgotten and tried to shake her head. "I mean, no. There's no need to get the nurse. I'm fine," she shrugged ruefully. "Ow, except when I try to move my head and apparently my shoulder. Oooh."

He scrunched his lips together and then looked at her from under his lashes.

"I'm not entirely sure what the headache is from. You did get quite a bump on the head, but I think it would probably be fair to say you have a hangover as well, wouldn't it?"

"Oh!" Her face screwed into a frown. She'd been so intent on looking him over while he didn't know he was being watched that she'd completely forgotten to wonder why she was in hospital. Had she been drinking? Ah, yes, bourbon. And then... she was mugged! She remembered being pushed over and kicked while a nasty, young thug tipped the contents of her backpack onto the pavement and made off with her bourbon and cash.

What then? She remembered dragging herself to her feet. Being cold and damp. And then it rained. And then she saw the car. And then she—

"Was it your car?" she whispered. "The Beemer."

“Yes, it was. You just stepped out straight in front of me. Didn’t you see me? Or were you trying to get yourself killed and figured I could be the patsy who did it for you?”

And now it all came flooding back. Her dirty clothes and hair. A backpack with a few more dirty clothes in it. Stinking of bourbon. And she was wondering whether she should flirt with him? Oh my God, he must think her completely disgusting.

Tears of humiliation, pain and misery filled her eyes and spilled onto her cheeks.

She looked away without answering his question. He dragged the chair closer to the bed, sat down, leant back and crossed his legs in the same casual style.

“We couldn’t find any identification on you. What’s your name?”

“Rudi.”

“Rudi? Is that short for something?”

She shook her head.

“What’s wrong with my arm? Is it broken? Am I hurt?”

He shook his head and smiled encouragingly.

“No, you’re a very, very lucky young lady. Fortunately, I was travelling so slowly that, despite getting run over, something I couldn’t avoid as you literally stepped under my wheels, you sustained pretty minor injuries considering. A bit of concussion, which could explain the sore head, a sprained shoulder – hence the sling, and apart from that, a nasty bruise on your hip where you hit my car, and some other minor bruising and grazes. I suspect you might be sore for a few days, but otherwise, Rudi,” he paused and smiled, “you should be fine.”

“Have I been here long?”

“I called an ambulance after I hit you. You were unconscious. I think we got here about two last night. It’s getting on for four in the afternoon now.”

“Have you been here all that time?” She frowned.

“Pretty much. I can’t deny I was very shaken. It’s not a nice

feeling, running someone over. I had to make sure you were all right, and then I wanted to be here when you woke up. I dozed a bit on and off, but I will have to think about getting home and cleaning up some time soon. Where do you live?"

The question caught her off guard.

"Live?"

"Yes," he grinned. "Live. Your house, address, where your stuff is and where you sleep."

She blushed and looked away, as much as her aching head would allow her. She didn't want to have to tell him she had nowhere to go.

His brow furrowed. "Do you have family? A husband?"

"No." It hurt too much to shake her head.

"Partner?"

"No."

"Parents?"

"Uh uh."

"Is that why you were on the street last night? Are you homeless?"

The question was blunt and direct. She winced.

"Your head?" he asked quickly, his brow furrowing in concern.

"No." She managed a small, wry smile. "I remembered not to move it."

He reached out, but not wanting to jolt her injured shoulder, touched her face just below the short-cropped, brown hair that was stuck to her head.

"Do you have anywhere to go?" he asked with such sincere concern, she felt a lump in her throat. She swallowed it and set her mouth in a hard line.

"I'll be fine."

"Will you?" He sounded completely unconvinced. "Well, to make sure, when you are discharged, I will drop you off at your

place. Unless someone else comes to pick you up. But you have no family? Friends? Anyone?"

She blushed. Was he ridiculing her? He made her sound so... What? Pathetic. Well, maybe she was, but she didn't need some pitying stranger telling her that!

"I will be just fine, thank you," she said through tight lips. "I'm sorry I caused an accident. I hope your car was not too badly damaged. I'll pay for the repairs. Thank you for staying with me, but I can manage on my own now."

He grinned, annoyingly. "Well, if you are going to pay for the repairs to my car, I'll need to be able to contact you. Do you want to give me your full name? Address? Phone number?"

He had her there. She glared, briefly wishing her eyes had the power to shoot fireballs at him, but then her brain kicked into gear.

"No. Uh uh," she managed a very small shake of her head without too much pain. "You give me your contact details, and I'll contact you."

He laughed, stood up and stretched his arms above his head, pulling his shirt tight against his lean, hard chest and muscular abdomen.

"Nope. I've got a better plan. Unless you can direct me to your house or flat or whatever, and I can see you safely inside, you are coming home with me until you are fully recovered, and I know you have a safe place to go. And that doesn't include back on the streets."

"What? No!"

"I think you mean 'What? Yes!'" he replied calmly and sat down again, relaxing back into the chair. "I've already spoken to the staff and you should be okay to go home this evening."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," she began hotly, but he interrupted.

"Don't forget, I have to give the police a statement about the accident. I can tell them I think you were waiting to cross the

road and stumbled, or I can tell them that you deliberately stepped in front of my car so I would hit you—which is what I think the truth really is. There’s no CCTV near there, so it’s your word against mine, but the hospital has a record of you being intoxicated when brought in, so my word will probably beat your word.” He turned his hands palm up and shrugged.

As much as her aching body would let her, she drew herself into as small a huddle as she could manage and looked up at him with her eyes wide and staring. Her brain was racing: what would that mean? If the police determined she was trying to commit suicide? Was that a crime? Would they insist she have a mental health assessment? Would they run identity checks? She’d have to give her real name. It was too dangerous. She needed as low a profile as possible.

“Well?” he prompted. “While you’re thinking, let me introduce myself. My name is Denver Bane. I am forty-two years old.” His mouth tightened. “Widower. No children.” He looked away briefly, and she could see the tension in his throat. He relaxed and turned back to her. “I have a nice five-bedroom house in Emerald, and it even has a separate studio with its own bathroom and a locking door. You are welcome to use that if you don’t feel safe in the house with me. It’s actually my office, but I can work elsewhere for a little while if need be. Oh, and I drive a BMW with a dent in it,” he finished with a grin.

She frowned. “But why?”

“Why am I offering you a place to stay?” He smiled gently. “Because I figure anyone so despairing that they’d throw themselves under the wheels of a passing car needs a helping hand. And as I was the car you chose to throw yourself under, it feels like my responsibility to offer that hand. And I have the means to do so.” He shrugged. “Simple, really.”

Her frown deepened. “But you don’t know anything about me. I could be a murderer or thief or drug addict or...” A loud guffaw interrupted her. “What’s so funny?” she snapped.

He stopped laughing and tried to suppress a smile.

“I’m sorry, little girl. I didn’t mean to make fun of you, but honestly if you could see yourself: thin, scruffy, battered, and those big brown eyes staring up at me – you look more like a little doll that’s fallen into the gutter than a murderer. But, if I’m misjudging you, and you really are a serial killer on the loose, I’m prepared to take my chances. Are you, by the way? A serial killer?”

“No, of course...”

“A thief?”

“I am not! I hate fucking thieves!”

She saw his mouth set and for a moment thought he was going to scold her for swearing, but then he gave a small shrug, relaxed and went on with his questions.

“A drug addict? That’s not a deal breaker by the way.”

“No!” She was on safe ground again.

“An alcoholic?”

He caught her by surprise. That damn bourbon. She blushed again.

“No.” He didn’t reply, just kept watching her. She sighed. “Okay, you know I’d been drinking last night, but I’m not an alcoholic. Maybe I drink a bit too much sometimes, but I’m not an alcoholic.”

“Right, then. It’s settled.” He rubbed his hands together. “There don’t seem to be any problems there, and I’m not a murderer, rapist or slave trader, so you’ll be quite safe with me.”

Her bottom lip trembled. He sat back down and put his hand on the bed, not quite touching her.

“Look, Rudi. You don’t have anywhere else to go, do you? Tell me the truth. Do you?”

“No,” she whispered.

“I promise not to pry. You can tell me whatever you want whenever you want. I don’t know what’s happened in your life for you to be living on the streets and jumping out in front of

cars, but that's your business. But it was my car that ran you over, and I feel responsible for you until you are fully recovered. I just want to make sure you have somewhere safe and comfortable to recuperate and then you can decide for yourself what you are going to do and where you are going to go. There are no strings, I give you my word. I am not going to try and take advantage of you or anything like that. How does that sound?"

How did it sound? Like she had either died and gone to heaven, was still asleep, or in a coma and dreaming. This gorgeous man, with a voice like a gentle waterfall, was offering to let her stay in his house in Emerald. She had no idea where Emerald was and had certainly never been there, but it sounded like something out of a magical story.

"Where's Emerald?" she asked. "Is it as lovely as it sounds?"

"It is indeed. Every bit as lovely. It's in the Dandenongs, about an hour pretty much east of Melbourne."

So, allow this incredibly handsome stranger to whisk her off to his fabulous house in the magical Emerald or... Well, what was her alternative? Back onto the street with no money. Perhaps the sling would garner sympathy if she tried begging again, but she really didn't want to have to do that anymore. She hated it. Hated the looks of sympathy perhaps even more than those of disgust.

Besides, he'd said he'd tell the police that it wasn't really an accident, that she'd done it on purpose. She needed to stay away from the police at all costs. She couldn't let them find out who she was and where she was, and a house in the hills sounded like a good place to hide.

"Well?" he prompted her gently. "Are you going to come quietly and allow me to assuage my guilty conscience by taking care of you for a while before you go off on your own back into the big wide world?"

She ran through her options again: refuse and wind up having to undergo a psychiatric assessment, try and sneak off

and wind up back on the streets in the cold and wet with no money and her arm in a sling, or accept the offer and have a week, or maybe even longer, in comfort to think about how she was going to get out of the mess she was in. But could she trust this good-looking stranger? More to the point, she thought wryly, could he be more of a danger than being alone on the street every night or being found? Probably not. She'd risk it.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Excellent," Denver sprang to life, jumping up and clapping his hands together as he strode to the end of her bed. "Well, let's get on with it, shall we? I'll just go and speak to the nursing staff and find out how quickly we can get you out of here. I know I need a shower, and I suspect you'd quite like to get cleaned up too. How does a nice hot bubble bath sound?"

He said it kindly, but Rudi's heart skipped with shame; did she look that bad? Smell? No doubt she did. The hospital staff hadn't bathed her or washed her hair, so she must still be grimy and dirty. How did a 'nice hot bubble bath sound'? Like heaven.

IT WAS GOING to be a while, though, before she slipped into that nice hot bubble bath. The wheels of hospital administration grind more slowly than the proverbial mill, and permission for Rudi's discharge had to be given by her doctor, who was busy elsewhere and couldn't get there for some time.

It had been nine that evening before she'd finally been discharged. In the meantime, Denver had left her alone to run some errands, saying he'd be back in an hour or so. As soon as he was gone, Rudi had called for a nurse and asked for a shower. It was a slow and painful process, and barely effectual, but by the time he'd returned she was at least somewhat cleaner and her hair was washed.

Coming back into her room and handing her a bag, Denver's

eyes had told her he'd noticed the change. Rudi had looked at him in surprise when she'd opened the bag to reveal a pair of grey tights, a long-sleeved white T-shirt, a warm, dark-blue jumper, and underwear.

"I wasn't sure you had any clean clothes," he'd shrugged. "The ones you were wearing when I hit you were pretty wrecked. I think they went in the bin. I couldn't be sure of your size, so I tried to err on the side of being too big rather than too small. No, don't worry," he'd waved away her protest, "it's the least I can do, and you have to have something to wear home. We can sort out the rest later."

When she'd finally had the all-clear, Denver had pushed her to the front entrance in a wheelchair, picked her up and carefully put her into the passenger seat of his waiting BMW. As he'd lifted her into his arms, she'd felt his bulging muscles holding her so securely and yet so gently, that for a few seconds, she'd laid her head on his chest as he lowered her into her seat.

As the car pulled out of the hospital grounds, she'd been suddenly acutely aware of being alone with this attractive older stranger who was so unlike any other man she'd ever met. Not that she hadn't known older men who drove expensive cars; she'd known all too many, and just the thought of them made her feel ill. Ugly, vain, chauvinistic bullies, most of them, and they'd all got their money from dealings that were either shady or downright illegal.

But the silence between them was as warm and comfortable as the car, as they made their way out of the city and into the hills. It didn't take long before Rudi was lulled to sleep, not waking until they arrived at Denver's house a little over an hour later, and he'd again picked her up, and then carried her inside and into a spare bedroom.

Sitting her on the bed, he told her to wait a moment while he ran a bath and brought the rest of the things out of the car. He

returned with more bags, which he put on the floor, then went back into the bathroom before helping her up off the bed.

She winced from the pain in her hip.

“Will you be okay in the bath? Do you need a hand with anything?” he asked, concern furrowing his brow.

“No. I’m fine, thanks,” she assured him quickly, blushing at the thought of his helping her undress, not that she was usually shy about being naked in front of men. She wasn’t sure why this time felt different.

She let him help her off the bed and to the bathroom, then hobbled in by herself and closed the door behind her. Next to the bath, he’d laid out a soft, fluffy bath sheet, and a lovely new pink nightdress and a big, warm dressing gown. Rudi stripped off, turned off the taps and slid in.

As she stretched out in the luxurious bubbles as best she could without getting her sling wet, she felt her tired, battered body finally really begin to relax. She couldn’t believe it was only twenty-four hours ago that she was standing in the cold and rain about to be mugged before throwing herself under a car. She smiled. She’d done one thing right by the look of it; she’d picked the perfect car to throw herself under.

Now here she was in what appeared to be a beautiful home, with an incredibly handsome, apparently wealthy, single man who was also an absolute gentleman. She grinned again, running her hand over her now clean and soapy body. If this gorgeous bathroom, with its raised oval bath, blue glass splash-back and Romanesque tiles was any indication, she was currently ensconced in a mansion.

Her hair was a mess since she’d hacked off all the blonde, leaving only the very short natural brown, but she knew she was still pretty; she’d been told often enough. Maybe she was even beautiful. But more importantly, she was a very skilled flirt.

She was quietly confident she could make him forget her terrible haircut by using her other assets: big eyes she knew how

to cast down and then bring slowly up, long lashes she knew how to bat, small but full, high breasts she knew how to draw attention to, and a firm, very plump bottom she knew how to wiggle.

Maybe, if she played her cards right, she could stay here permanently. If Mr. BMW liked playing the role of saviour and protector so much, she could happily play the part of princess in need of rescuing.