



## Chapter One

She smelled blood.

Blair Mason strode out of the elevator and into the marble-lined, ballroom lobby of one of the Spire Casino's tall towers.

Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a bird's-eye view of nighttime Las Vegas far below. Jammed-up traffic filled the Strip. Garish lights blinked on all the casinos, amplified by Christmas decorations as the casinos tried to outdo each other with their festive spirit. There were even lights on the large cranes that arched into the sky from the construction site next door.

The Spire was one of the newest casinos, made up of four tall glass spires all linked by glass bridges at different levels. It made her think of some fantasy palace.

Blair loved living in Vegas. She loved the vibrant, slightly-crazy energy of the city.

But the glitz hid a darker side as well.

To one side of the lobby stood an impressive suit of Japanese samurai armor. Her gaze ran over it hungrily. This armor was old and exquisite with iron scales and an elaborate helmet. There was a huge banner on the wall behind it proclaiming the name of the exhibition in bold, red letters: Soul of the Samurai.

To the other side of the space, a group of men and one woman were huddled, talking. Everything about them screamed “cops”, from their black shoes to their button-down shirts. But no one screamed it more than the man who followed her out of the elevator.

She felt him, like a low-level hum of electricity against her skin. He paused beside her, and despite the fact that Blair was tall for a woman at five foot nine, he towered over her. He had broad shoulders, and messy brown hair threaded with the odd strand of gold. His dark jeans hugged long, long legs, and he had a shiny badge attached to his belt.

Detective Luke MacKade. Las Vegas Metropolitan Police.

A man who regularly set her teeth on edge, and made her blood boil.

She shifted her high-tech, CXM7 rifle on her shoulder and watched the rest of her team—more tall, muscled men and one other woman—exit the elevator.

Team 52.

As always, she felt a quiet sense of pride to be a part of this team. They were some of the best people she’d ever fought with. They saved lives and made a difference.

At the front of the group was their leader, and Blair’s best friend, Lachlan Hunter. He scanned the room with his flat, gold eyes, taking it all in. Beside him stood Smith Creed. The big man was cradling his rifle and scowling. Lean, good-looking Seth Lynch was next, followed by sexy Axel Diaz and dark-haired Callie Kimura. Callie caught Blair’s gaze and hefted her medical kit up on her shoulder. The medic’s face, which was stamped with her Hawaiian heritage, looked unhappy. Callie hated when anyone was hurt.

They were all in their civilian clothes, because they’d been enjoying a night off at their favorite bar until MacKade had tracked them down.

“This way.” MacKade’s voice was a deep, confident rumble.

Of course, it came out sounding like an order. Blair followed him, scowling at his back. “You actually going to tell us anything, MacKade? Walking in blind is always a freaking bad idea.”

MacKade was Team 52’s contact at the LVMPD. And since Blair was the team’s second-in-command, it fell to her to *liaise* with him.

The liaising usually devolved into arguments. Team 52 was a covert, black-ops group, tasked with securing and safeguarding ancient artifacts. What most of the world didn’t know was that human civilization had been a lot more advanced than most historians believed. At the end of the last ice age, those civilizations had been wiped out by flooding. But every now and then, pieces of powerful, ancient technology popped up. In the wrong hands, they could do a lot of damage.

Not surprisingly, bad guys often wanted these artifacts. It was Blair’s job, along with the rest of her team, to stop them. The artifacts ended up out in the secure warehouse at their base, Area 52, hidden in the Nevada desert.

A smile briefly curved her lips. She was good at her job. As a Marine, she’d made a difference, but as part of Team 52, she rocked at bringing down assholes intent on hurting others.

But sometimes, that meant the fight got messy, and MacKade was generally tasked with the cleanup. He made no effort to hide the fact that he disliked it.

MacKade paused and swiveled. Brown eyes hit hers and she felt the impact like an electric shock.

Her fingers tightened on her rifle. She hated the impact this man had on her and she did her damndest not to show it.

He glared at her. “You’ll be briefed.”

She tilted her head. “This century?”

“Blair.” Lachlan’s tone held a thread of warning.

“Samurai exhibit.” MacKade nodded at the banner. “Officially opens tomorrow, but tonight was a VIP, opening-night party with a small group of selected guests. Someone locked the doors, and then screams were heard.”

Blair’s jaw locked. Not good.

“First cops on scene managed to get in. They never came back out.”

Really not good. “Why’d you come and get us?”

“You’ll see.” MacKade swiveled, his boots clicking on the tiles as he headed for the cops. “Status?”

One older man lifted his head, rubbing the back of his neck. He wore a rumpled beige shirt over the start of a belly, and had thinning, brown hair. “Shit, MacKade. We got access to the first exhibit room.” The man released a breath, his curious gaze skating over Blair and the rest of her team. Then he straightened. “Everyone was slaughtered. All the VIP guests, security guards, the first cops on the scene.”

*Shit.* Blair shared a look with Lachlan.

A muscle ticked in MacKade’s jaw. His focused gaze moved to the closed double doors.

“Where are the perps now, Baxter?”

“Well, we looked at some security footage. Looks like there is only *one* perp.”

*Double shit.* One person had killed a room full of people. Blair eyed MacKade. That was why he’d called in Team 52.

“Looks like the perp came in as a guest for the VIP preview of the exhibit,” Baxter continued.

“Where is he now?” Lachlan asked.

“He’s crossed over to the second exhibit room.” The older detective glanced at Team 52. “It’s over in the neighboring tower. There’s a damn glass bridge linking the two buildings.”

Blair shifted her feet. Her hands itched to grab her CXM and get in there.

The female cop stepped forward. She had her chestnut-brown hair pulled back into a no-nonsense braid. She looked about ten years older than Blair's thirty-three.

"SWAT went in," the woman said.

"What?" MacKade barked. "I told you to stall them!"

"We tried. Once they saw the dead in there—" the woman jerked a thumb at the closed doors.

"They refused to wait. They wanted in."

"We need to move," Blair said. "Now."

"Who are these guys?" The third cop—a younger, compact man with brown skin and black hair—asked, staring at Lachlan and the others.

MacKade didn't answer. Instead, he spun on his heels and strode toward the double doors.

He threw them open and the scent of blood hit them all in the face.

Blair stepped inside, her chest hitching. Blood splattered the walls, ran over the tiled floor, and dripped off several glass exhibit displays.

"Fuck," Lachlan muttered.

"*Madre de Dios.*" That voice was Axel.

Blair took in the samurai armor, swords resting on racks, displays of old scrolls. Most of the items were safe behind tempered glass. There were more black and red banners and large red lights hanging from the ceiling.

MacKade moved farther into the space and they followed, their boots echoing in the silent room.

Then Blair spotted the first bodies. So much blood. *Fuck. What a mess.* Her gaze took in several bodies lying facedown, arms outstretched, and her stomach rolled.

They'd all been sliced up, and blood was forming significant puddles on the tiles.

She stared at the blood, old memories stirring. *No, you fucking don't.* Rounding a large display case, they saw the bodies of two uniformed cops—one man and one woman—sprawled on the floor. The man had been beheaded.

“Fuck me,” Axel murmured. He stood right behind Blair, and she saw horror in his velvet-dark eyes before he hid it.

He was a former Delta Force soldier, so he'd seen a lot of bad shit. But this was *really* bad shit.

At the end of the long room was a display up on a raised dais. It was a tiered wooden rack, clearly used for holding swords. There was one resting at the bottom of the rack, but three were missing.

Blair moved closer, sidestepping some blood splatter, staring at the empty spaces. A discreet tag sat beside the display. *Katanas by master sword maker, Muramasa.*

She glanced up and spotted MacKade standing beside the dead cops, his hands on his hips. His jaw was clenched so tight she'd thought it would shatter. She felt emotion pumping off him.

“Want to step out?” Blair asked quietly.

He lifted his head, his brown gaze hot and angry. “No.”

She shrugged. “I was just—”

“You aren't even affected by this, are you?”

She pressed her tongue to her teeth. She knew he was pissed and she was a convenient target. “I've seen a lot of shit, MacKade. I can't afford to lose it, or more people might die.”

Suddenly, screams and shouts echoed through the room.

They all turned, glancing toward the arched doorway that led to the glass bridge connecting the spires.

Lachlan rocketed past Blair, and she broke into a run. The rest of the team and MacKade were right behind them. The floor of the bridge was made entirely of glass. Blair wasn't afraid of heights, but as she jogged across it, her stomach rolled.

"The SWAT team needs help," MacKade said.

She focused on the closed door ahead. The sound of gunfire and frenzied shouts penetrated the closed entry. They *needed* to get into the second exhibit room.

Lachlan rattled the door, his face darkening. "Locked and barricaded."

"Shit," Seth murmured from behind her. "They're being massacred."

The sound of running steps echoed behind them. All of Team 52 swiveled, lifting their rifles.

Baxter and the other cops stumbled to a halt, their faces going pale.

"Who the hell can take on an entire SWAT team alone?" The female cop's voice was shaky.

Lachlan shifted. "Get us in there, MacKade."

Blair gripped her CXM tighter, aiming it at the door. "Now."

"Okay, who the hell are these guys?" the younger cop bit out.

"We're the people who are going to stop this," Blair said.

The cop eyed her for a second, then her high-tech rifle, and finally he nodded.

MacKade checked the door again. "We'll have to knock it down."

Blair eyed him. "You and your guys should stay back—"

"Hell, no. I'm coming with you."

She shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She’d make sure she kept an eye on him. He was on their side, mostly, and Team 52 would have more shit to deal with if he wasn’t around. He was absolutely a pain in her ass, but then again, even she had to admit he was a good-looking pain in her ass.

*Shit. Don’t go there, Blair.*

Lachlan stepped to the side. “Smith.”

The big man strode forward, lifted a boot, and kicked the doors open.

\*\*\*

Detective Luke MacKade followed Team 52 through the broken door and into the second exhibit room. He had his Glock in his hand and aimed.

He watched the team shift from alert to battle ready. They moved together with the ease of a group who worked, trained, and fought together every day.

He knew they were badass and could handle themselves. Against his will, his gaze went to Blair. Especially the former special forces Marine and the woman who knew how to ignite his temper like no one else could. Hell, she just had to arch an eyebrow and it could make him mad.

Her blonde ponytail swung behind her. She was in jeans, simple white shirt, and a black leather jacket. As she looked around, light glinted off her left eye. That eye was silver, while her other was blue. He’d never seen a prosthetic like it before. She was pure power, competence, and focused intensity.

The gunfire had stopped, and he scanned the quiet room, taking in the priceless samurai artifacts in the deafening silence.

“Damn.” It was Baxter’s voice from the doorway.

*Damn* didn’t quite cut it. A dead SWAT officer lay on the floor just ahead of him. The man’s face had been slashed, and blood soaked his dark uniform.

Lachlan lifted a hand and gave a signal. As one, Team 52 moved forward.

More bodies clad in dark green SWAT uniforms. And more blood.

*Shit.* Luke's pulse jumped. Whoever had done this had taken down the *entire* SWAT team.

Suddenly, one man groaned. Luke dropped down beside him, pressing a finger to the man's bloody neck. He felt a faint pulse.

"Baxter, get this man out of here. He needs medical help."

The other cop lifted his radio. "We need paramedics. *Now.* Rivera, help me move him out of the way. Clements, stop that bleeding."

Baxter and Rivera carefully shifted the man off to the side, while Clements tried to stem the flow of blood from the injured man's wounds.

Ahead, Team 52 fanned out.

"Anyone see him?" Lachlan asked.

"Nope," Seth responded.

Blair stood in the center of the room, turning slowly. Then she went still, staring off behind two large displays of armor. "Over there."

Her team turned, their high-tech rifles aimed. Luke swiveled and he caught movement at the back of the room.

A figure burst out from behind a display.

*Shit.* The man wasn't very tall and had a slim build. He looked like a damn accountant. Neatly cut hair framed an ordinary face. He wore a wrinkled suit that was splattered with blood.

He was also holding a Japanese katana.

The man raced at Lachlan and Blair with a roar.

Even from a distance, Luke could see that the man's eyes were red and bloodshot. He looked like he was hyped up on drugs.

As the sword sliced through the air, Lachlan dodged to the side. Blair ducked.

Team 52 opened fire. As the bullets hit the man, his body jerked.

But they didn't slow him down. He swung the sword again.

"No effect," Blair said calmly.

The attacker spun and rushed at her.

Luke's heart thudded. He aimed his Glock, firing. But it was like tossing spitballs at a charging rhino.

Blair moved backward and whipped her CXM up like a sword. The katana hit her weapon with a clang. She and the man danced across the room, trading blows.

But her face was showing the strain. She blocked another hit, her arms shaking.

"Blair?" Lachlan said.

"He has increased...strength." The words were pushed out between gritted teeth.

"Acknowledged," Lachlan said. "It has to be the sword."

"Think so," she said.

Luke frowned. He knew in vague, general terms what Team 52 did, but as he stared at the silver sword and the perp, who should have been laid out by the number of bullets sent his way, Luke's brain was having difficulty understanding just what he was seeing.

Suddenly, Seth and Axel stepped forward, the men going down on their knees. They rolled several small devices across the tiled floor.

The small metal balls bumped over the tiles, then exploded. An amber fluid pooled on the floor.

Blair saw it and angled in that direction. As she neared, she leaped over the goo.

The attacker stepped right in it.

And couldn't lift his feet.

He growled, slashing out with the katana and trying to lift his shoes. With a roar, he jerked one leg up, his face going red from the strain.

He turned, just as Blair swung her rifle like a bat. It collided with the man's head. He let out another enraged roar, shaking his head. He tore his other foot free and charged at Blair, face twisted like a demon.

*Hell.* Luke moved closer, but he knew his damn handgun was useless. He hated feeling helpless.

As the deadly sword arced through the air, he watched Blair bend backward. The blade passed over her. With the next swing, she jumped back.

But the very tip of the sword touched her bicep, leaving a line of blood on her skin.

She lifted her chin. "You've made me really mad now, asshole." As the sword whirled again, she dodged and dropped to her knees. She rammed a punch into the attacker's gut.

The man doubled over, air rushing out of him.

Blair leaped to her feet. "Time to end this, motherfucker." She kned him in the face, then struck his arm with a brutal, powerful kick. She moved with complete control of her body.

Luke sucked in a breath. She was a sight to watch.

The man cried out and dropped the sword. The katana clattered on the tiles.

She kicked his other arm, the sound of snapping bone clear. She lifted her fists, dropping into a fighting stance, and smiled. The man snarled.

He rushed at her, and she kicked and punched him. The man tried to fight back, but she ducked his sloppy swings. He was getting slower and slower.

Blair was relentless. Power and strength. Luke couldn't drag his gaze off her.

"Come on!" she said. "You will *not* be hurting anyone else. Ever."

With a vicious front kick, she sent the man flying into a display. Glass shattered.

He didn't get up.

Luke strode forward. The man was sprawled on his back and not moving.

"Seth, restraints," Lachlan said. "Callie, check him."

The pair moved closer to the man, and Callie leaned down to assess his wounds. Seth was already restraining the man's hands.

Luke was staring at Blair.

She was breathing heavily, still in a fighting stance. She rose and tossed her blonde ponytail over her shoulder.

Their gazes locked, and Luke felt like he'd been hit by a live wire. Pure, electric heat.

He suddenly realized he was as hard as a rock.

*Dammit.* Blair Mason wasn't how he liked his women. She wasn't soft or easy or pleasant. She was tough, violent, and abrasive.

But right now, watching her fight, seeing her strength. It rocked him to the core. He wanted her. Under him, over him, spread for him.

He shook his head, hard. Now was not the time to be thinking with his dick.

"Fuck me." The quiet murmur was Baxter's voice.

Luke looked over and saw his detectives looking up from where they were clustered around the injured SWAT team member. They were all staring at Blair with awe.

Rivera wiped a fist across his mouth. “That woman is...”

“Badass,” Luke answered.

“I’d consider leaving my husband for her,” Clements murmured.

Luke shook his head again, and forced himself to look at the downed attacker.

Callie lifted her head and gave one shake. “He’s dead.”

“Shit,” Blair said.

“You didn’t kill him,” Callie said. “The bullets did. They clearly had no effect at first, but once he dropped the sword, he had no hope. His insides were shredded.”

“What the hell is going on?” Baxter demanded. “How can a man function while he’s filled with bullets?”

Lachlan looked at Luke and raised a brow.

Luke turned to his detectives. “Baxter, you, Clements, and Rivera work with casino security and the paramedics. Organize for the bodies to be bagged.”

His people hesitated. Baxter looked belligerent, and Clements looked like she wanted to argue. But they finally nodded and left.

“What are we dealing with?” Luke asked.

Lachlan shook his head. “No idea, but whatever it is, it isn’t good.”

Blair shifted, her gaze scanning around the room. “Especially since there are two swords missing.”

Luke felt a gnawing in his gut. He knew the feeling. He’d first felt it when he’d discovered the body of his murdered mother as a teen. It was the one telling him that things were going to get a lot worse before they got any better.