



Chapter One

The hard blow to his face made him grunt. Damn, that hurt like a mother—

“Mr. Jameson, you *will* do what we want, one way or another.”

Brooks Jameson turned his head and spat out a mouthful of blood onto the bare concrete floor. He wiggled his fingers, which were numb from his arms being tied to a chair for hours. “Not going to happen.”

The man standing in front of him shifted his shiny, black shoes, his face tightening.

These assholes had taken Brooks down and dragged him off a Las Vegas street, then shoved him in a car. He wasn't sure how long they'd driven around, but eventually, they'd dragged him into some half-constructed house. And they hadn't been gentle about it. They were *not* good guys, and Brooks wasn't going to do a damn thing for them.

The man who'd spoken dragged another chair over, dodging some tools and sawhorses. A single industrial light was on, casting a small glow around Brooks.

Brooks had nicknamed the man in charge Mr. Ordinary. He wore a button-down shirt, boring sweater, and pressed trousers. He was probably in his mid-fifties with neat brown hair flecked with gray. He could have been any guy walking down the street, in any American town. A guy with a decent desk job, sweet family at home, and a boring car.

“We are aware of your excellent computer skills, Mr. Jameson. There is no computer you can’t hack.” Mr. Ordinary sat, resting one ankle on his knee. “You graduated from MIT, then entered the Navy, and joined Navy Intelligence. You could’ve gone to work in Silicon Valley, and in fact, several companies made you lucrative offers. You could have made a fortune, but you didn’t go that way.”

Nope. Being stuck in some open-plan office with bean bags for chairs and that offered yoga classes at lunch time wasn’t his thing. Instead, after an interesting and challenging career in the Navy, Brooks was the technical support for a very unique team. A covert, military team of badassess.

He loved his job. And he was badass in his own way. He’d come a long way from being beaten up in the locker room at high school.

He thought of his team now and glared at his captor. They’d be searching for him. Team 52 *never* gave up. They’d track this asshole down and they’d make him pay.

Behind Mr. Ordinary, several broad-shouldered shadows stirred. Ordinary’s goons. There were a few outside as well. Off to the left, a bright light glowed through the darkness. Brooks’ gut tightened. It was the glow of a laptop set up on some boxes.

“You *will* hack into your team’s database and get us information we want.”

Fear chewed at Brooks’ gut. He flexed his arms against his bindings. He kept fit, had been trained by the Navy, and now he trained with his team. He wasn’t a born fighter, but could hold his own. He fought best with a keyboard, not his fists.

Still, he would not let these assholes get any information from Team 52.

“I invented the computer system for my team,” Brooks said. “It can’t be hacked. As soon as I went missing, passwords and protocols would have changed. There is no way in.”

Mr. Ordinary smiled. It sent a chill down Brooks' spine. "Your team isn't aware that you are missing."

Brooks snorted. "Bullshit. When they find you, they'll wipe this dirty concrete floor with you."

"We sent a text from your phone saying that you were busy."

Brooks felt like his chest filled with concrete. "No way you got into my phone."

The man shrugged. "You activated an alert when we took you and your phone was still active. You were unconscious at the time. We managed to send the message before your phone locked."

Brooks swallowed. He'd been so sure that Lachlan Hunter and the guys were out looking for him. Lachlan was known for making bad guys piss themselves with one scary look. All the team were ex-military, and damn good at what they did.

Team 52 was a secret, black ops team tasked with finding and safeguarding mysterious artifacts. Powerful artifacts that could do a lot of damage in the wrong hands. Most people didn't know that human civilization had existed for longer and been more advanced than the history books indicated. The end of the last ice age had wiped those advanced cultures out, but sometimes, pieces of their technology popped up.

Brooks swallowed again. Damn, his throat was dry. "I can't hack the system."

Mr. Ordinary tilted his head. "Can't or won't?" The man's gaze bored into Brooks. "No one's looking for you, Mr. Jameson. You need to help yourself."

Brooks just lifted his chin and glared. He'd fucking faced down bullies before. You never showed weakness.

The man sighed and gave one short nod.

One of the goons moved forward. The guy had no neck and his suit didn't fit well over his bulging muscles. He was a big one.

He stepped in front of Brooks' chair and cracked his knuckles. Brooks braced and the man landed a hard punch to Brooks' gut.

The air rushed out of him, pain making his head swim, and he swallowed a groan. He wouldn't break. He wouldn't let his team down.

The blows kept coming, and soon Brooks' pained grunts echoed through the empty space.

Callie Kimura strode down the street, her jaw tight. Night had fallen, which meant that on the Strip, the evening would be just getting started for the tourists, gamblers, and revelers. Here on this side street in Downtown Las Vegas, things were quieter.

She slid her hands into the pockets of her jeans. Her team was at their favorite bar—Griffin's Sports Bar and Grill—welcoming the team's newest member, and celebrating the fact that their grumpy scientist, Ty, had finally taken the fall and found a woman. Callie thought River and Ty were a damn good match. She hoped it lasted, especially since River—a former MI6 agent—was the newest addition to Team 52.

Brooks had blown off drinks with the team. It wasn't unusual, because no one could get lost in his computer geekery quite like Brooks. The man had a giant brain and liked to use it.

But it didn't feel right to Callie. They'd talked earlier during the day, and he'd been looking forward to tonight. A career as a combat medic in the Air Force had taught her to trust her instincts when they were screaming at her that something was wrong.

That career had ended in the fiery crash of a helicopter, but she was forever grateful for the time she'd spent as a pararescueman.

She'd called Brooks. No answer. She'd stopped by his condo—just east of the Strip and north of the airport—but he wasn't home. She'd even been into the computer shop where he'd gone to pick up some super-duper part that he'd been waiting for. The store owner had been closing up but happy to gush over Brooks. No doubt because Brooks regularly spent a small fortune in the store.

Callie had been to the store once with Brooks. The man looked at computer parts the way she did shoes. She might have been Air Force, and now Team 52—which meant she usually wore combat boots—but she had an unholy addiction to pretty shoes that she rarely got to wear. She wasn't sorry, not one little bit.

The owner said Brooks had been in and left. But something didn't smell right, and Callie's combat-honed senses weren't just tingling, they were on fire.

Where are you, Brooks?

Across the street, she spotted several people gathered in a small group on the sidewalk. She instantly picked up on the tense atmosphere.

Her heart skipped a beat and she crossed the street.

“What's happening?” she asked one onlooker.

“There was a fight.” Excitement and curiosity drenched the man's voice. “And it was *rough*. A bunch of guys dragged some dude off the street.”

Shit. Callie's muscles went tight. Her instincts were on the money. *Dammit.*

“God, who was it?” she asked.

“Don't know. Some guy.”

Not exactly confirmation it was Brooks, but still. She pivoted and walked away, pulling out her phone. She stabbed the screen.

“Hunter.” The deep voice of their team leader came over the line.

“Lachlan, I’m near the computer store where Brooks was picking up his computer part. People are saying that a man was in a fight. They say he got dragged off the street by a bunch of guys.”

She heard the noises of the bar in the background, and Lachlan muttered a curse. She could imagine his tall, muscled body on a bar stool, his golden eyes aglow. “Wait, Callie. Blair, what is it?”

Callie heard the murmur of Blair’s voice. Blair Mason was one of Callie’s closest friends and the second in command of the team. She and Lachlan were both former marines.

“Fuck,” Lachlan said. “MacKade just got a call. Report of an abduction of a man in his late twenties or early thirties from your location.”

MacKade was Detective Luke MacKade, Team 52’s Las Vegas Metropolitan Police contact and Blair’s lover.

“Any more details?” Callie asked.

“Nothing yet. Cops are pulling CCTV from the shops nearby.”

“Can we hack them right now?” Callie asked. It would be quicker than waiting for the police.

“Not as fast as Brooks could. Look, meet us at the Bunker. We need to confirm it was Brooks, and ensure that he’s not holed up somewhere communing with his computer. If someone did take him...”

The menace in Lachlan’s voice made Callie shiver. If someone had taken Brooks, they’d regret it.

“See you soon,” she said.

Clenching her teeth, she slid her phone away. Brooks was a good guy, and a key part of their team. He was also her friend.

He smiled often, guzzled too many energy drinks, had a sweet tooth, and kicked ass playing *Call of Duty*.

If they'd hurt him...

Her belly churned. He'd be okay. She spotted a crumpled box on the edge of the sidewalk. Crouching, she flicked it open and stared at the electronic component inside.

Fuck. A spurt of fear hit her. *Hold tight, Brooks.*

"You looking for the boy they took?"

From her crouch, Callie swiveled her head, clutching the box to her chest. She spotted a homeless woman sitting at the mouth of an alley. The woman had a wild mass of matted, salt-and-pepper hair covered by a battered, knitted hat. Beside her was a cardboard box overflowing with things and a smaller box resting at her feet with some coins in it.

"Did you see something?" Callie asked.

The woman coughed, a harsh, hacking sound. "Maybe."

Callie rose and walked closer to the woman. She shoved a hand in the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. She dropped it in the small box near the woman's feet.

"What did you see? I think it might be my friend."

"Good-looking boy with lots of tattoos."

Shit. Callie squeezed her eyes closed. Brooks had a hell of a collection of ink.

"Thick, brown hair, and muscled buns, too," the woman added.

Callie's lips twitched. She'd noticed Brooks' fine ass a time or two, herself. "That's him."

"They put him in a car. A red one."

Callie wondered how many red cars there were in Vegas. Too many. It wasn't much, but it was something. More than they'd had.

"Thank you."

The woman's bushy eyebrows rose. "You want the plate number, girly, or what?"

Callie's breath hitched. "You got the plate number?"

"Might be old and live on the street, but nothing wrong with my eyes. Always had a thing for numbers." The woman rattled off the plate.

Callie yanked out her phone and tapped the combination in. "Thank you. Thank you so much!"

"Hope the boy with nice buns ain't hurt."

"I hope so, too."

Callie pivoted and sprinted for her car.