



Chapter One

She ducked through the opening in the canvas and into her tent. The plane was taking off shortly and she needed to be on it.

Dr. January James pulled out her backpack and stuffed a change of clothes inside, along with her tablet and e-reader. Then, she carefully pulled the metal briefcase out from beneath her camp bed, opened it, and checked that the artifacts were secure. Both were securely wrapped in heavy covers and nestled in foam. She closed the case and locked it.

She released a breath. She wasn't happy about leaving her archeological dig again. She'd already made one trip with an artifact that needed securing. Now, she had to leave her team to keep working while she suffered through plane food, airports, and having to sleep in a chair.

She swung her backpack over her shoulder, grabbed the metal case, and stepped outside.

Warm, damp air hit her face.

Dense jungle closed in around the archeological site. A pyramid sat in the center of the space. It didn't look like much yet. Unlike the stunning, restored structures at Guatemala's more famous Tikal, this pyramid resembled a muddy hill, rather than a breathtaking monument.

Her team had worked hard to uncover the lowest foundations, and some of the intricate stonework was now visible. Several of her team were crouched there now, working under a

tarpaulin that had been strung up between some trees. The central staircase leading to the pyramid's peak had also been uncovered, and another tarpaulin protected the team who was inside the structure. The rest of the pyramid was still covered in layers of mud, and several trees grew out of the sides of it, rising up to tangle with the rest of the thick, jungle canopy.

A mosquito buzzed around January's face and she waved her arm. It had taken her team days of hard chopping and slashing to cut the vegetation off the pyramid. It had been buried under the densest concentration of jungle growth she'd ever seen.

Almost like someone had wanted to hide it.

Her archeologists were busy working at various locations around the dig. Kevin had a trench open at the base of the pyramid. Javier had several grad students spread out over a grid on the eastern side of the site. And Krista was no doubt busy in the pyramid.

January should have known that the mysterious Mayan Kaanul Dynasty—known as the Snake Kings—were keeping secrets.

No one had known about their existence until a few decades ago. Even now, they were still shrouded in mystery.

Tikal was one of the most famous and popular archeological locations in Guatemala. But now Tikal's rivals, the powerful, ambitious Snake Kings—represented by the symbol of the snake head—were coming into the light. The power the dynasty wielded was now being rediscovered from the jungle that had hidden it for so long. Excitement spurted through her veins. There was so much still to uncover, and that always excited January.

She headed toward the small bush runway, a tiny strip where the jungle had been hacked back. The plane was waiting.

“January!”

She turned, and a dark-haired woman wearing the same outfit as January—khaki cargo pants and a deep-green shirt—fell into step with her.

“Wanted to say goodbye.”

“Take care of my dig, Qian,” January said.

The Chinese archeologist grinned. “We were planning to sit back and sip margaritas while you were gone.”

January mock scowled. “No slacking.”

“Not to worry. We’ll be here, digging up to our eyeballs in the mud, and waiting for you to get back from a few nights on clean planes and in comfy hotel rooms.”

January grabbed her friend’s hand. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. I promise.”

“Don’t worry about us. You were due for a week off a month ago.”

Tilting her head, January tried to remember the last time she’d been home to San Francisco. Nope, she couldn’t remember. Her apartment would be covered in a few layers of dust. “I don’t need time off.” She loved her work. She loved the primal vibe of the jungle.

Qian’s dark eyes gleamed. “We won’t fall apart without you.”

“You’re supposed to pretend I’m vitally important.”

“You are. Your energy, enthusiasm, and common sense.” Qian smiled. “But we can make it a few days without basking in your presence. Safe flight.”

Smiling and shaking her head, January headed to the small prop plane waiting on the cleared airstrip. She jogged up the stairs and ducked inside. There were two other passengers sitting at the back—one of her students, who was heading home early because a relative had fallen ill, and one of her archeologists, who was due for a break. Tyler, the student, had headphones on,

nodding his head to the music. Dr. Robert Lake, the man in charge of the lidar scanning, was asleep.

“Ready, Carlos,” she called.

From the small cockpit, the pilot nodded.

January settled into a seat and buckled up. She slid her backpack under the chair in front of her, and set the briefcase down beside her.

Then she turned her head to stare out of the window. Just looking at her dig made her chest fill with pride. They were doing fascinating work here.

It was Robert’s lidar scanning that had uncovered the multitude of unknown Mayan ruins hidden beneath the Guatemalan jungle. Her team was working hard to piece together the story of the Snake King Dynasty.

As the engine started and the pilot ran through his preflight checks, her gaze fell on the briefcase. Her team had uncovered the artifacts in the pyramid. At first, they’d thought it was a tomb, and they’d been excited that it was clearly untouched. The thick tangle of vines covering the entire pyramid had clearly kept looters out.

But it hadn’t been a tomb. It had been some sort of temple, in honor of the artifacts. The amazing friezes had warmed every corner of her archeologist heart. And the multitude of jade artifacts had simply been incredible.

But over the course of her career, January had learned that not everything was what it seemed.

Some artifacts were powerful and very, very dangerous.

A grad student had uncovered a perfect crystal sphere not long ago. It had landed the young woman in the hospital.

Subsequently, when January and her team had found two perfectly formed spheres made entirely of jade, she wasn't taking any chances. Now, she had two more artifacts that needed securing, and she wanted them safe and out of the way so she could get back to her dig.

January loved her job. Her mom had loved history. It had just been the two of them against the world, and Alyson James had loved both her daughter and history. She'd read January history textbooks at bedtime, rather than storybooks.

A pang of bittersweet pain tightened January's throat. She'd lost her mom too young, and in the worst of circumstances. She knew her mom would've loved seeing the work that January did.

Soon, the aircraft was rumbling down the bumpy runway, and they took off, veering out over the jungle. She pressed her head back against her seat and stared out at the sea of green below. Her thoughts turned. Not to the Guatemalan jungle or her dig, but instead to where she was headed.

A place that she hadn't been able to tell any of her team about, not even Qian. A secret base called Area 52 in Nevada.

She smiled wryly. It amused her to no end that Area 51 got all the limelight and conspiracy theories, while right next door, the covert black ops group known only as Team 52 was actually hiding a secret base.

The team had crashed into one of her digs in Mexico the year before. They'd scared the hell out of her, and she'd fought back. She felt a slight hint of regret at giving one of the badass commandos a black eye.

Slight.

Said commando was arrogant, cocky, and drove her insane. On that dig, her team had stumbled onto an ancient Aztec artifact, and Team 52 had confiscated it. As a result, she'd never actually found out what the device was capable of.

Even now, she still had some trouble believing that civilizations on Earth had once been far more advanced than most historians believed. That many cultures had risen, created magnificent cities and temples, and invented amazing technology, and then been destroyed by flooding at the end of the last ice age. Unfortunately, there had been so many bad rumors and New Age myths over the years, like Atlantis, Mu, and Lemuria, that most academics were violently opposed to even investigating any claims that didn't agree with the current accepted theories.

But January had seen parts of the truth. Artifacts with abilities and powers she didn't understand. Whether they predated existing civilizations, or had been passed down and used by cultures like the Aztec and Maya, there was no doubting they cropped up.

And since her run-in with Team 52, she was now their unofficial informant. Any sign of something strange on any of her digs, or her colleagues' digs, she passed it on.

Once again, she thought about the man that she'd hit in the head with a metal bar, leaving him with a black eye. At the thought of seeing Seth Lynch again, a shiver moved through her.

She made a scoffing sound and closed her eyes. So, the man was the definition of tall, lean, dark, and handsome. Even with the terrible scars on one side of his face, he made an impact. In her opinion, the scars added to his appeal.

Of course, he would need a personality transplant before she'd be interested. The man had a callous disregard for other people's feelings. Not to mention being secretive beyond description.

Bang.

A huge explosion jolted the plane and January was tossed forward against her safety belt.

The plane shuddered, veering sharply to the left, and smoke filled the cabin.

Oh, God. She gripped the armrests. She heard Carlos shouting from the cockpit, and Tyler screaming from behind her.

January grabbed the briefcase, clutching it to her chest. The thick, oily smoke made it hard to breathe and she coughed. The plane tilted and started plummeting. She pressed a hand to the window and her stomach dropped to her boots.

She saw the trees rushing closer.

Her throat closed, fear rocketing through her. She was helpless. There was nothing she could do.

She'd felt like this once before, and had vowed never to feel that way again. But once again, her fate had been wrenched from her hands.

As the green hurtled to meet them, she braced for impact.

He flew the jet-copter in low over the trees.

The dense Guatemalan jungle was all he could see. Green, green, and more green.

Seth Lynch touched the controls, trying to stay focused on flying. But his gut was tight and his jaw was clenched.

"We should see the wreck site in a minute or two," a female voice said from beside him.

He glanced at the woman in the other pilot's seat. Blair Mason didn't look up from the controls. She was one of the toughest people Seth had ever worked with. A former member of Marine Force Recon, she was loyal, a straight shooter, and wouldn't hesitate to take you down if you were a threat.

Seth grunted and looked back at the trees. He knew that across this dense jungle, archeologists had uncovered previously unknown Mayan Snake King ruins using lidar scanning.

Then he spotted some white ahead. "There."

Blair leaned forward. "Fuck."

The plane had crashed hard and torn up the trees. It looked like the aircraft had disintegrated on impact. Bits of wreckage were strewn everywhere.

Heart thumping hard, Seth spotted a tiny part of the fuselage that looked intact. But it wasn't much.

"No one could have survived that," Blair murmured.

His gut spasmed. No, they couldn't have.

The plane had been coming from a remote archeological dig, with a certain archeologist from UC Berkeley on board, and Seth's team had been sent in to check on her and recover the artifact.

A potentially dangerous artifact.

Dr. January James had interacted with his team before. They'd had a memorable first meeting when she'd hit him in the head with a metal pipe. It had been several weeks before his teammates had let him live that down. As a former CIA agent, not many people got the drop on Seth.

January James was an outspoken, aggressive, harpy of a woman. The times he'd met her, she'd managed to stretch the limits of his control. As the wreckage got larger, he scanned it, clenching his teeth.

And now she was dead.

There was movement behind his seat and their team leader appeared.

Lachlan Hunter was wearing black body armor like Seth and Blair, his face impassive. His eyes were a deep gold—flat, assessing, and intense enough to give anyone goosebumps. The former Marine, also Force Recon, was very good at his job, and scary as hell.

“We need to rappel down,” Lachlan said. “Trees are too thick to land.”

Seth unclipped his harness. “I’m coming.” He glanced back at Blair. “You got this?”

She eyed him for a second with her bi-colored eyes—one bright blue and one a silver-gray. She’d lost one eye on a mission as a Marine, and now had a high-tech prosthetic. She nodded. “I’ll head for the clearing we identified a few clicks away and wait. Give me the call when you need a pick up.”

Seth followed Lachlan, pushing back in to the main part of the experimental X8 jet-copter. Team 52 was lucky to have an ex-DARPA scientist, Dr. Ty Sampson, who cooked up all kinds of high-tech, trial devices for them. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency’s loss was Team 52’s gain.

The rest of the team was already pulling their gear out for the rappel down.

Axel Diaz turned his head and raised a dark brow, a surprised expression on his good-looking face. His thick, brown hair curled around the neck of his vest, and fell over his forehead. Axel always looked like he was three weeks past needing a haircut.

“Figured you’d stay with the X8 and miss getting muddy,” Axel drawled at Seth.

Seth snatched up his high-tech CXM7 integrated assault rifle from the storage rack and slung it over his shoulder. “Felt like stretching my legs.”

Nearby, Smith Creed—his head almost brushing the roof of the craft—was pulling out extra weapons and sliding additional grenades onto his belt. The big man was all muscle. Colorado

born and bred, he had dirty-blond hair and a beard several shades darker. He always carried more weapons than the rest of them.

The team medic, Callie Kimura, was checking her backpack, her CXM already in place on her back. Her lean body was also covered in her black body armor.

“Ready?” Lachlan asked.

They all nodded. Seth lifted one of the rappel lines, grabbed an anchor, and clicked it onto his belt. Lachlan opened the side door, the sunlight glinting off the metal at his wrist. He’d lost an arm on the mission that had officially ended his military career, but Ty had supplied him with one hell of a sophisticated prosthetic. Their team leader looked over and then jumped out of the aircraft with practiced ease.

Seth followed, his pulse not even increasing.

He’d leaped out of helicopters and planes too many times to count. He’d joined the CIA, wanting to defend his country and make a difference. He snorted at the memory, warm air rushing at his face, and felt the scars on his cheek tighten.

Instead, he’d learned that everyone—young or old, sweet or antagonistic—had secrets. No one was ever who they seemed, and it was best to never trust anyone. Ever.

The heat and humidity hit him like a wall as he slid down to the ground. As soon as his boots hit the dirt, he unclipped and whipped up his rifle.

The rest of the team landed beside him, and were now moving across the wreck site. The X8 flew overhead.

“See you soon.” Blair’s voice echoed in Seth’s microdot earpiece.

These were the only people Seth trusted. The members of Team 52 had proven they had his back, time and time again. That was all he needed.

He followed Lachlan, as the team leader made for the main part of the fuselage.

This wreckage was a case in point for people's dishonesty. Some assholes had brought the plane down. This was no accident.

"RPG impact." Smith was crouched, rubbing his gloved fingers over a sheet of mangled white metal.

"You sure?" Lachlan asked.

"Yeah."

"What a fucking mess," Axel ground out.

"Poor January." Callie looked around shaking her head. "I really liked her."

His team had all liked the archeologist, and found his frustration with her amusing. Seth's chest was so tight it hurt. However much the hellcat had clawed at him, he'd never wanted her dead. She'd been filled with life, and he hated knowing that was gone.

Seth wandered through wreckage, glass crunching under his boots. There was nothing here but scrap metal and death.

"Any idea what the artifact she was carrying was?" Axel asked.

Lachlan shook his head. "Might have been similar to the crystal sphere she brought in the other week."

But they didn't know for sure.

Historians and archeologists didn't always have things right. The current timeline of human civilization was not entirely correct. At the end of the last ice age, rising flood waters had destroyed many human cities and settlements. Cultures far more advanced than current academics accepted—and their advancements—had been wiped out.

But sometimes, pieces of their advanced technology turned up. And sometimes the cultures that had risen to power and prominence after had also gotten their hands on it.

Just weeks ago, they'd locked up a dangerous artifact in the Area 52 secure storage facility in Nevada. Scientists had pulled it from the ice in northern Canada. That mission had gone bad. Really bad. People had died, but in the end, they'd recovered the artifact, and Lachlan had fallen head over heels for the lovely Dr. Rowan Schafer whose scientists had discovered the artifact.

Seth shook his head. He couldn't believe scary, focused Lachlan had succumbed, although Seth had grown to like Rowan. Love was a dumb risk, and it was just asking for trouble. But Rowan was pretty nice, and Lachlan was happier than Seth had ever seen him.

"I've got a body," Callie called out grimly. "Male. Wearing a uniform. My guess is that he was the pilot."

Seth thought of finding January's body and bile filled his mouth.

January James had first found a crystal sphere that had electrocuted one of her team, and she'd handed it over to Team 52. Then, she'd sent a message saying that she'd found something else and was bringing that in, too.

What the hell had it been? Without even a tiny clue, they were doing nothing more than looking for a needle in a damn haystack.

"Search the rubble," Lachlan ordered. "January carried the first artifact in a secure case, so if the second one is in a similar case, there's a good chance it survived the crash."

"Unless someone else already recovered it," Axel muttered.

With his gloved hand, Seth shifted pieces of metal aside. His head filled with disconcerting images. He wondered what January's last terrifying minutes had been like. He hated that she'd probably been terrified.

Lachlan pulled out a fancy scanner and started moving it over the wreck site. It made a series of low beeps. Another of Ty's creations.

"Wait." Smith crouched. They all turned toward the man.

Seth knew that Smith was a hell of a tracker. His crotchety, mountain-man father had taken him hunting since he was a boy.

Smith was hunched over by the largest part of the wreckage. Seth could see a seat from the plane, tipped over on its side.

"What've you got?" Lachlan asked.

Seth moved closer, and saw what Smith was looking at. He sucked in a breath. "Blood."

Smith nodded and rose. He moved steadily, staring at the ground. He headed toward the tree line.

"Smith?" Seth said.

The big man looked up, his gaze meeting Seth's. "There's a blood trail. Someone survived."