



Chapter One

With the flashlight clamped in her teeth, she finished unfastening the screws and carefully nudged the panel aside.

Shifting carefully in the cramped ventilation duct, River Elliott-Hall pulled her small snake camera from her pocket. She lowered the flexible cord down through the hole she'd just opened up, and pulled her phone out. The screen blinked to life, showing a full view of the room below.

All clear.

Smiling, she tucked the camera and her phone into the pockets at the sides of her tight, black leggings. She gripped the edge of the hole and then tipped forward, rolling slowly down. She let go, landed in a crouch, then rose.

Thanks for the training, MI6.

Thinking of her old job made her belly hard. She shut those thoughts down instantly, and focused on scanning the long room that housed the art gallery.

Her gaze skated over all the priceless paintings on the walls and sculptures resting on ornate pedestals. The wealthy owner of the Constellation Casino in Las Vegas had spared no expense for the private art gallery on the top floor of his casino. In addition to the artwork, there was a lot of imported Italian marble and gold-plated trim.

Despite Chadwick Alton's massive bank balance, the man had no taste. Her lip curled. She also knew he was one step below scum of the Earth for a variety of reasons.

Focus, River. Stomach tight, she tucked back a curl that had escaped from her hair tie. She kept her mass of tight curls pulled back securely when she was working. It didn't pay to have your hair in the way when you were breaking and entering.

She pulled a small, metallic ball from her pocket and then rolled it across the marble floor. It slowed, then broke apart with a click. Blue light shone out of it, illuminating several red laser beams that crisscrossed the hall, part of the gallery's high-tech security system.

The ball beeped. The lasers flickered off.

River smiled. No fancy laser dancing for her. She preferred using the tech she paid a small fortune for to make her job a little easier.

She moved silently down the gallery, shining the light on the paintings. She had a job to do, and she prided herself on her one-hundred-percent success rate.

The gallery was a long rectangle, and on one side, curved windows gave a view of both Las Vegas' blinking lights and the vast desert beyond. Being a new casino, the Constellation wasn't right in the heart of the Strip, but rather, to the northern end.

On the other wall, she spied several well-known and expensive paintings on the wall.

But none of them were the stolen masterpiece she was looking for.

At the end of the room, she stopped in front of the pride of the collection. A dramatic Rubens that she knew was worth just over a hundred million dollars.

River carefully lifted the large frame off the wall and gently set it down. Behind it, sat a sleek, metallic, vault door embedded in the wall.

She pulled her streamlined backpack off and pulled out gear. She pried off the keypad covering the electronic lock and plugged in her sweet little codebreaking device.

With a touch of a button, she set her code-breaking program running. She'd hired a reclusive Russian scientist with an off-the-charts IQ to create it for her.

She watched the numbers tick by on her screen.

Beep.

The vault opened.

River looked at her chunky Rolex. She had two minutes until the guard did his rounds.

She pulled the door open and stepped into the vault.

More paintings were stacked against the wall, and the shelves at the back of the vault were packed with boxes that she knew contained jewelry and other precious artifacts.

River quickly looked through the paintings.

Then she cursed, her stomach curdling. The painting wasn't here.

She'd been hired to do a job, an important one. *Bloody hell.* She looked at her watch again. Time was almost up.

She exited the vault and closed it. Using extreme care, she set the multi-million-dollar Rubens back in place. Then she turned and jogged down the gallery. At the end, she jumped up, and grabbed the edge of the hole. She pulled herself back up and then set the panel back in place.

She paused, and a moment later, she heard the footsteps of the guard.

River smiled. Then, she turned and started crawling through the vent.

After a few tight squeezes, she dropped down through a panel that she'd loosened earlier and into a maintenance closet. She found the bag she'd stashed behind some mops. She slid her smaller backpack inside, then quickly wrapped a red scarf around her neck and pulled on a beaten leather jacket.

Then she pulled the hair tie out of her hair, letting her curls spring free. The tight coils bounced around just above her shoulders.

She slid out of the door of the maintenance closet and closed it behind her. She sauntered down the empty corridor and then heard the click of heels. A casino cocktail waitress, wearing a tiny slip of sparkly black and some feathers, passed her, carrying a tray. The woman gave River a tired nod.

A second later, River stepped out into the casino. As she sauntered across the main floor, the rush of noise and color hit her—the tinkle of slot machine tunes, laughter, the clack of a roulette wheel.

She moved like she had all the time in the world. Her MI6 partner, Jack, had taught her that the best way to sneak in where you didn't belong was to always look like you *did* belong. *Don't rush, River. Own it.* Her throat tightened.

A man sitting at a blackjack table lifted his head and his gaze caught hers. Appreciation flared, his gaze drifting down her long body.

River shot him a wide smile and a wink. Then she was clear of the tables and moving across the vast Constellation lobby.

Finally, she stepped outside, shaking her head at the approaching valet. She jogged down the front steps and out on the Las Vegas Boulevard. Two minutes later, she moved down a side street and into the lot where she'd left her rental car.

With a bleep of the locks, she slid inside the sleek, sporty Mercedes. The engine vibrated to life, and River zipped out of the parking lot. She joined the traffic on the Strip, and glanced in her rearview mirror. Her gaze stayed on the shiny, black façade of the Constellation, with all the twinkling lights that lit up the side, just like a constellation of stars.

She blew out a breath. Dammit, that had been her best lead. And deep in her bones, she'd wanted it to be Alton. Wanted to expose the charlatan under the expensive suit.

Don't. Get. Personal.

Another of Jack's lessons. She followed the street signs and got onto the highway heading east. As she moved onto the four-lane highway, she sped up, gunning the Mercedes' engine. Back in London, she didn't bother owning a car, so she liked to get the most out of her rentals.

Zipping around several cars, she drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, working out her next steps.

All she could do was follow up on her less-promising lead.

Team 52.

River had heard a lot of rumors about the team. She'd read some classified documents on them back at MI6. Black ops. Highly classified. From what she'd pieced together, their job was to safeguard powerful historical artifacts.

She'd been shocked as hell to discover that civilization had been a lot more advanced than most people, and the history books, believed. Humans had done amazing things before the flooding at the end of the last ice age had ruined it all and acted like a reset button. But a few things had survived.

Now, if something got uncovered that had unexplained abilities, Team 52 swooped in.

No doubt the American government had a nice little vault somewhere filled with fascinating, interesting things for them to test and experiment with. She had no doubt the British government had one too.

It sounded crazy, but she'd seen some inexplicable things as an agent. Hell, she saw some mind-blowing things now that she was freelance, as well.

Jack would have laughed at it all.

Jack. Her hands clenched on the wheel. Her mentor, the man who'd taught her everything, was gone. Long gone.

River pressed her foot down on the accelerator.

Soon, she left the lights of Las Vegas behind. Ahead, stark mountains rose up, nothing like England's green, rolling hills. She turned off the highway and ended up on a narrow dirt road. She stopped at a gate, looking beyond it at the rustic cabin in the distance.

She knew that two Team 52 members called this little cabin home. From her recon, she also knew they were currently away from home and busy with work.

After turning her car around, she climbed out and quickly climbed over the fence. She'd barely taken two steps when her phone beeped. With a low curse, she pulled her high-tech phone out. Dammit, it looked like Smith Creed had a fancy detection system set up around his cabin.

River swiped the screen of her phone and pulled up an app. She touched a button and jammed the security system.

Then she walked toward the front door of the cabin.

“Woof.”

She froze and watched a huge, blue-gray Great Dane lope around the side of the cabin.

Fuck.

“Hey, sweetie,” River said.

The dog growled at her.

Hmm. Luckily, she was always prepared for any situation. She opened a small pouch on her belt and pulled out some jerky. She tossed it at the dog.

He bristled, but when she didn't move, he sniffed the jerky suspiciously. Then he licked it and gave her what she could only describe as a dirty look.

River stiffened, but then the dog wolfed the jerky down in a couple of gulps.

She tried not to tap her boot as she waited. She wondered briefly if there was enough sedative in the jerky for such a big dog.

The Great Dane kept his gaze locked on her and she boldly returned it. *I'm the alpha here, buddy.*

A second later, the dog took a wobbly step forward. He let out a whine, then dropped to the ground. She forced herself to wait and make sure he was out.

River moved over and checked him. He was breathing fine and she released a breath, then allowed herself a few strokes of his fur. She traveled too much to have a pet, but she'd always wanted one.

“Sorry, big guy.”

Then she snapped on some gloves and pulled out her lockpicks. It took a little while to get through the locks on the cabin door. Muttering a curse, she made a mental note to remember that Creed did not muck around with his security.

The door swung open and she stepped inside. She liked it. It was rustic, with lots of stone and wood, but touches of cute. There were some perky, yellow flowers on the kitchen counter, and candles lined the shelves.

She quickly moved through the space, searching for anything relevant to her hunt for the stolen painting.

She saw a framed photo sitting on the mantel. She studied the picture of the huge man—Creed was a former Navy SEAL—and the smaller, gorgeous blonde beside him. The woman had a

movie-star smile, and she was looking up at the man beside her like he was her reason for breathing. And the way Creed kept her tucked in tight under his arm stated his claim.

They were clearly in love. River shook her head. She gave them a year. Love was one of life's biggest cons.

She made short work of searching the rest of the cabin. There was nothing about their work. Nothing about the *Salvator Mundi*.

Bugger. River shoved her hands on her hips. She'd known it was a long shot—none of the other Team 52 residences she'd searched had yielded anything either.

Carefully, she walked out and locked the door. As she skirted the sleeping dog, her boots kicking up dust, she ran through her options.

She was too cautious not to finish searching the rest of the team's places. There was a small chance that the team had taken the *Salvator Mundi*. The trail she'd managed to follow from the museum that owned the painting led to Las Vegas. And Las Vegas was the home base for Team 52.

She'd already checked the condo belonging to the team's leader, Lachlan Hunter. His security system had been top-notch and she'd been forced to fork out extra money for some more gear to crack it. After that, she'd searched the house where the team's second-in-command, Blair Mason, lived with her police detective lover. And River had also checked the converted warehouse belonging to the team's scientist.

The man had almost caught her. River sniffed. It had been a little too close for comfort. Especially since he blew all nerdy scientist stereotypes out of the water. Dr. Ty Sampson was big, muscled, and in top shape.

Shaking off her near miss, she focused on the places she still had to check—former Delta Force operator, Axel Diaz, the team medic, Callie Kimura, the team tech guy, Brooks Jameson, and former CIA-agent, Seth Lynch.

Whatever it took, she would find the *Salvator Mundi*. Finding people and things was what she did, and she was the best. She *never* failed.

Well, she had once, and her partner had paid the price.

Jaw tight, River headed back to her rental. Failure wasn't an option. Never, ever again.

Dr. Ty Sampson lifted his goggles onto the top of his head.

He stared at the small, wooden box resting on the bench in his lab. It had just clicked open.

Incredible.

After several hours of careful work, he'd managed to open the old box that had come from a dig in India. And inside, was a large, blue gemstone. This had been hidden from human eyes for hundreds of years.

He narrowed his gaze. He guessed the stone was about seventy carats, and likely a blue diamond—but he'd have to run several tests to confirm it.

And also to see what else it could do.

That was his main role at Area 52. He helped study the artifacts that the team brought in. Some, so he could neutralize them and ensure they stayed safely locked away. Others, to research their powerful abilities and determine if there were ways to utilize them.

Advanced cultures had once possessed ancient technology that was mind-boggling. It was just unfortunate that so much of it had been destroyed, leaving humans to develop so much all over again.

Although, seeing what the assholes who got their hands on the pieces of old tech wanted to do with it—generally to promote their own foul agendas and line their pockets—it might be best if most of the artifacts stayed locked away in the Area 52 warehouse.

When any of the artifacts proved too dangerous, they went straight in the warehouse, under lock and key.

Ty straightened, tension running along his back and shoulders. He moved his neck and heard it crack, then he blew out a breath. Usually, being in his lab and absorbed in his work soothed him.

Not today.

He was still thinking of the intruder he'd had at his place the other night.

Who was she? What the hell was she doing in his warehouse?

After he'd chased her off, he'd searched his renovated warehouse—both the half he'd converted into an apartment and the half that housed his home lab. Nothing had been missing. And she'd left nothing behind.

Ty scowled. He *hated* people in his space. He *hated* people in his lab.

And more than anything, he hated a mystery he couldn't solve.

Ever since he was eight, and had made his own lab in the corner of his parents' giant, eight-car garage, he'd loved working, loved solving problems. For Ty, there was nothing better than pulling things apart to see how they worked, then putting them back together and making them better.

His lab had horrified his parents. They'd returned from their summer vacation in the south of France, and looked aghast at the mess he'd made. But Ty had fought for it, and they'd finally allowed him to keep that little space.

He thought of his mystery woman again. He wanted to solve this mystery. Who the hell was she?

His gaze ran down the long benches in his lab—a far cry from that crowded, cobbled-together space in his parents’ garage. His lab at Area 52 was top of the line.

Next to the ancient box he’d just opened was a large ceramic jar. It had been confiscated from a terrorist cell in Iraq. It was old and they’d likely dug it up from some ancient ruin in the desert. Scans showed something particularly volatile inside, but Ty was still trying to ascertain the safest way to open it.

At the far end of the bench, a prototype prosthetic arm rested on two metallic clamps.

All of the members of Team 52 were former military, and many of them had suffered terrible injuries that had ended their careers...until Director Grayson, the man in charge of Area 52, had given them a second chance. And Ty had given them all high-tech prosthetics.

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his lab coat. He should be working on that new prototype he planned to use on the team’s leader, Lachlan Hunter. Or on some of the other prototype gadgets he had in the works.

That was his second role at Team 52. He put his penchant for inventing to good use. Jonah Grayson gave him a near-unlimited budget. All the team’s high-tech gadgets and vehicles were Ty’s designs.

He had a lot to do, but today he was just too amped up to get anything useful done.

The lab door opened, and he heard the click of heels on the tile floor. He lifted his head and watched Dr. Natalie Blackwell, Team 52’s archeologist, enter.

“Hi, Ty.” She tossed her long, black hair over her shoulder. It was in loose waves today. As usual, she was dressed in a tight, gray skirt that hit below her knees, topped with a crisp, pale-pink shirt.

He grunted.

Nat rolled her eyes. “Nice to see you, too.” Her soft, Australian accent did nothing to hide her sarcasm. She was gorgeous, smart, and Ty enjoyed working with her.

He grunted again.

“I see you’re in an extra cheery mood today.”

“I’m working.”

Ignoring him, she wandered closer, her gaze falling on the box and blue jewel. She gasped. “You got the box open!”

“Yeah.”

She walked past the stone jar, and suddenly, it moved. Ty straightened.

The lid rose up all by itself.

He frowned. “What the—?”

Flames flashed out of the vase.

Ty dove on Nat. She cried out and he knocked her to the ground, covering her body with his. He felt a flash of heat on his back.

She gave a short scream, then Ty was up, dragging her away from the flames.

Once they reached the far wall, they both turned, staring in horror at the flames licking the lab bench.

Ty lunged for the high-tech extinguisher he’d designed himself attached to the wall. He lifted the nozzle and started spraying the flames. At the same moment, the experimental fire

suppression system he'd designed for the lab came on. It sprayed a gentle mist of suppressant in the exact area of the fire.

It was the first thing Ty had worked on when he'd been recruited from DARPA—the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—to join Team 52. The last thing he needed was his inventions, lab equipment, and the priceless artifacts being doused in water that could damage them.

The flames died and Ty straightened. *Fuck*. He set the extinguisher aside.

“Well, I guess we know what that jar does, now.” Nat pushed her tangled hair out of her face and pulled on the hem of her shirt. Nothing ruffled Nat for long.

But he heard the tremor in her voice. He tipped her chin up and looked into her dark eyes, checking she wasn't injured.

“Okay?” he asked.

She nodded and rose to her full height. “Thanks for the rescue, Ty. I'm surprised you jumped on me and not one of your prototypes.”

He tapped her nose. “I can rebuild prototypes.”

She smiled. “I think I'm going to get a drink.” She sighed. “I wish Jonah would allow alcohol on the base.”

“You'll survive.”

She poked her tongue out at him and headed out.

Ty picked up the phone and made a call to maintenance. He needed them in here to fix the bench and fire damage, and take away the ruined gear.

It wasn't long before three men in black uniforms and tool belts appeared.

“Fix the fire damage, but don't touch anything else,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

Ty crossed his arms over his chest and as one young man got too close to Ty’s equipment, he scowled. The man grew more and more nervous under Ty’s stare.

One of the other men cleared his throat. “It might go quicker if you left us to it.”

Ty released a breath. “Fine, but remember—”

“Don’t touch anything else. We know.”

Spinning on his heel, Ty headed for the computer room. If he couldn’t work in his lab, then he’d go and harass the team’s computer guru about what he’d discovered about Ty’s intruder.

Because more than anything, he wanted to know who the hell she was, and why she’d been in his place.

The door to the comp room whispered open, and the man standing at the large, central table raised his head. Brooks was a computer geek, but he also had a muscled body and ink running down his arms.

Today, the former Navy Intelligence officer wore a T-shirt that stretched over his chest with “Support the troops” written on it, and a picture of a stormtrooper helmet. Ty shook his head.

Brooks smiled. “Hey, Big T.”

“I’ve told you not to call me that.”

Brooks grinned at his tablet, before turning to look at the screens covering the walls.

That’s when Ty noticed the camera footage that was playing. Team 52, all in their black body armor, were standing in the empty fuselage of a large cargo plane.

“Three, two, one go!” Lachlan yelled.

The team all leaped out of the open Hercules one at a time.

“Training session,” Brooks said. “HALO dive.”

Ty watched the feed from Lachlan's helmet cam, as the team moved in formation in the air. They were all talking calmly through their earpieces, even though they were jumping out of a perfectly good plane.

"Any updates on the woman who broke into my place?" Ty asked.

Brooks frowned. "Nothing, man. Sorry." He turned and swiped his tablet. An image appeared on a second screen.

"She messed with your internal security cameras. She's damn good. But I did catch this image from an external camera. But this was it."

Ty leaned forward. It was a picture from the outside of his warehouse. It was more shadow than anything, but he could just make out the impression of a tall, long body.

Her head and face were covered, so he had no idea what her hair or features looked like.

Who the hell was she?

"No prints," Brooks continued. "Like I said, she's good."

Yes, she was. This was no regular thief. She was well-trained, experienced, and after something.

He'd watched her scale the damn wall in his warehouse lab like a spider and climb out a tiny window.

On the main screen, he watched Team 52 make their landing somewhere in the desert. As they scooped up their billowing parachutes, he heard Axel making a joke about always hitting the spot.

Team 52 did dangerous, important work. There were a lot of bad people out there who wanted to get their hands on artifacts that had the power to help them do terrible things. The team took their job seriously.

Ty turned his attention back to the shadowy image of the woman. It was likely that she was one of those people.

He'd find her, and whatever the hell she was doing, he'd stop her.