



Chapter One

She was running for her life.

Kinsey Beck's bare feet slapped on the pavement of the dirty alley. Night closed in all around her, massive warehouses looming in the darkness.

Her gut told her she was likely still in Las Vegas, in some industrial area, but she had no real idea where her captors had taken her. They'd hit her so hard when they snatched her that she'd blacked out.

She held back the sob trying to well up in her chest. Her face was one massive throb, and she could only see out of one eye...barely. The other was swollen closed.

A sharp pain speared through her foot. Kinsey winced, but kept running. There were no lights on in any of the warehouses. No opportunities for sanctuary. Just locked roller doors and barred windows. The only sound she could hear was the echo of her harsh breathing.

A shout sounded behind her and her pulse spiked. They were coming.

She pushed for more speed, ignoring the rough ground biting into her feet. She'd known the potential hazards when she'd taken her job. Working for a covert, black ops team carried some risk, even when she was simply an office manager. She ran logistics for Team 52 here in Las

Vegas. Her office was a squat, concrete building called the Bunker, out in a quiet corner of McCarran Airport.

She was no one special. Unlike the badasses of Team 52, she didn't carry an assault rifle, or fly off to rescue people, or safeguard and secure pieces of ancient technology.

That was why the team existed. After signing a stack of confidentiality agreements, she'd learned the historians had some things wrong. In the past, humans had been more advanced than most people knew, and had developed some fascinating, and often dangerous, technology.

When one of those artifacts resurfaced, Team 52 came in.

Kinsey was proud of her job, loved what she did.

Dragging in air, she rounded a corner. *Keep running, Kinsey.*

She'd escaped Sugarview, Tennessee, and the trailer she'd grown up in, her drunken daddy, and her bitter, dried-up mama. Kinsey had come to the bright lights of Las Vegas with dreams of being a showgirl. A star, with her name up in lights.

Except she'd been two inches too short. So what if her dreams had been crushed? She was a survivor. She certainly hadn't been planning to go back to Tennessee. There was nothing there for her anymore.

She stumbled over something in the dark alley and almost fell, but quickly righted herself. Like she always did, she picked herself up and kept moving forward.

Instead of heading home with her tail between her legs, she'd worked hard and eventually found a job she loved. A team she loved working with. Especially one big, tall, rugged former Navy SEAL and mountain man.

The voices behind her were getting louder. Her throat tightened.

"There she is!"

Kinsey sucked back another sob. *Faster. Go faster.*

Then she tripped.

She crashed to the ground, falling onto her knees and hands. Her palms scraped on the rough pavement, and she felt blood trickling down one knee.

She leaped up. She had to keep running.

Then she heard noises ahead of her. Was that music? A burst of adrenaline filled her, and she barreled around another corner and onto a wider street.

Ahead, she spotted a bar nestled in among the industrial buildings. It looked pretty rough, but there was light spilling out from a grimy window. A row of Harleys was parked out front.

She sprinted toward the door. Definitely a biker bar.

She was only feet away from the door when arms closed around her from behind and lifted her off the ground.

No! She fought and kicked.

She saw people inside glance up and look out. Grizzled, bearded faces. No one came to help her.

“Settle down,” a man’s voice ground in her ear.

Hell, no. Instead, she fought harder.

“Quit it.” A fist slammed into her head.

Pain exploded and Kinsey cried out. Dazed, she sagged against her captor. The man turned, and she spotted a second man standing in the shadows.

A second later, she was tossed over a hard shoulder. The men began walking back to the warehouse she’d just escaped from.

Dejection filled her. She was trapped, and it didn't matter how much she fought, she couldn't escape.

The thought reminded her of something her mama had repeatedly told her—that she'd never break free, never get away.

You may have inherited my looks, girl, but you're a Beck. Good for nothing. Going nowhere. You'll end up some man's punching bag, alone and shriveled up.

Kinsey closed her eyes. Well, technically eye, singular since one was already swollen shut. Panic clawed at her chest, and instantly her mind went to the one thing that soothed her, comforted her.

The man of her dreams. Smith Creed.

Big, quiet Smith. Six foot four, broad shoulders, trim hips, long, long legs.

Her muscles relaxed a little. He was usually in jeans, ones so faded that they cupped his firm ass lovingly, and made a woman look and fantasize. He had dirty-blond hair—thick hair with strands of so many different colors. She'd tried to name them all—brown, gold, platinum, whiskey, honey, chestnut, wheat, chocolate. He also had a sexy beard that was shades darker than his hair. She often wondered what it would feel like against her skin.

Smith was everything Kinsey had ever wanted. A strong man, with a code, who fought for his country. A man who would never get sloppy drunk, knock a woman around, or shout at a kid.

Of course, he wasn't interested in her. She got it. He was tough, gorgeous, and badass, and had spent his life protecting others.

She was nothing.

The men stepped back into the warehouse, their bootsteps echoing on the concrete.

Lights were on in one corner of the space, with a few camp chairs set up where her captors were playing cards.

The man carrying her set her down, and dragged her through a door and into a small bathroom. It wasn't much. Dirty toilet, single sink, and cracked tiles. She heard the clink of handcuffs and felt the cool steel on her wrist. A second later, he attached the handcuffs to the pipes under the sink and turned to leave.

He paused in the doorway. "You run again, I'll break your legs."

He slammed the door closed behind him, cutting off the light.

And Kinsey sat there in the darkness, alone, on her knees on the dirty tiles.

Looked like her mama was right.

Smith Creed was angry.

He paced the computer room at the Area 52 base. He hadn't slept much during the two days since Kinsey had been kidnapped.

He turned and stared at the cellphone on the high counter in the center of the room. The bastards who snatched her had left it, along with a note saying that they'd taken her.

They'd also said they'd call with their demands. So why the fuck hadn't they called?

A muscle ticked in his jaw and he wrestled with the urge to punch something.

Fuck.

He pivoted, well aware that his teammates were watching him warily. His team leader Lachlan was staying close, prepared to contain him if he lost his shit. His teammate Axel wasn't far away, either. The former Special Forces Marine and Army Delta Force soldiers could probably take Smith together. Not to mention, one of Lachlan's arms was a high-tech

prosthetic—strong and deadly. But Smith was big, well-trained, and mad as fuck. It would be messy.

Smith started pacing again. He was trying hard to keep his anger under control. But his damn head kept torturing him with images of what might be happening to Kinsey. Sweet, delicate Kinsey. Always smiling that megawatt smile that could stop traffic. Shit, if they'd hurt one strand of blonde hair on her head...

Brooks, their computer geek and comms guru, groaned and leaned against the counter. He looked exhausted. He'd been running searches for two days straight, trying to work out who had taken Kinsey. The man's rumpled T-shirt had a picture of Darth Vader on it, with the words "Warning, choking hazard" written beneath the image. Brooks dropped his chin into his hand, the tattoos on his muscular arm flexing. He might be a geek, but the former Navy Intelligence officer was fit and in shape.

Data scrolled across all the screens on the wall. Brooks had searches going all over the place. Smith had spent several hours helping Brooks comb through the Bunker's security footage.

But they hadn't found anything that had helped them. The men who snatched her had come prepared, wearing balaclavas and using a stolen car they'd later abandoned. There was nothing on video that could identify them.

Images of the Bunker flashed like photos through Smith's brain. The overturned furniture, the files strewn around, the blood on the carpet.

"Why haven't they called?" Smith growled. He needed action, craved it.

He'd grown up in the Colorado mountains, hunting and tracking with his dad. Smith preferred being outdoors. He preferred *doing*, not sitting on his ass waiting.

"Patience." Lachlan was always the voice of reason.

“Fuck patience.” Smith kicked the counter.

Axel crossed his arms, leaning against the wall. “We’re going to find her.”

“Not sitting around here, we won’t,” Smith ground out.

The computer room doors slid open, and a tall, African-American man strode in, his white lab coat flowing around his muscular body. Dr. Ty Sampson ran the lab at the base. The former DARPA scientist had short, dark hair, a goatee, and a genius-level IQ. He also had an ornery personality, was a medical doctor as well, and spent most of his time inventing cutting-edge tech for the team to use.

Lachlan straightened. “What have you got, Ty?”

“The blood at the Bunker wasn’t Kinsey’s.”

“She fought back.” Smith’s lips curved into a smile. She had to have been scared, but she’d fought them. Then his smile faded. But she wasn’t a trained soldier. She could have been hurt in the process.

All of a sudden, the cellphone on the counter top rang.

They all froze. Smith stared at it, his heart pounding.

The doors opened again and two athletic women ran inside. The taller woman was Team 52’s second in command, Blair. Her blonde ponytail swinging behind her and her tank top displayed her toned arms. Beside her, their team medic Callie was dark to Blair’s light. With her Native Hawaiian heritage, she had straight, black hair and a slimmer build.

Blair charged forward and grabbed Smith’s hand. He met her gaze—one blue eye and one silver prosthetic. She was as tough as nails, but she had a soft spot that she kept well protected. He knew she was just as worried about Kinsey as he was.

Lachlan nodded at Brooks.

Brooks swiped something on his tablet, then touched the phone.

“We have something that belongs to you.” The voice sounded like a robot, altered by a voice changer.

Brooks tapped his tablet’s screen, no doubt scrambling to trace the call.

“Is Kinsey okay?” Lachlan asked.

“She’s alive. If you want her to stay that way, you need to do exactly as we instruct.”

Lachlan pressed his hands to the counter. “We’re listening.” His voice was calm, but Smith knew him well enough to know that his boss was pissed.

“You will deliver a device to us. In return, we will give you the woman.”

Smith clenched his teeth together so hard he was sure his jaw was about to crack. The woman. Like she was just a fucking bargaining chip.

“I want proof that she’s alive,” Smith said.

Lachlan shot him an annoyed look.

“Don’t listen to them.” Kinsey’s voice. “Don’t give them anything!”

Smith surged forward, like he could reach through the phone and grab her. Blair and Axel gripped his arms, holding him back.

“We want an artifact that was recovered from Tibet,” the robot voice intoned.

Lachlan’s head snapped up. “I don’t know what—”

“You do know, Commander Hunter. Don’t play games with us. Bring it to the Pinnacle Industrial Park in Las Vegas. Warehouse 112. You have exactly twelve hours, or we’ll kill her.”

The line went dead.

Lachlan spun. “Brooks? You trace the call?”

The man shook his head. “Wasn’t long enough.”

“Check out that address,” Lachlan ordered.

“Already on it.”

Lachlan speared Smith with a sharp look. “You got a grip, Creed?”

“No.” Smith breathed deeply. “But I’m holding. I want Kinsey back.”

Something worked through Lachlan’s golden eyes. “You and Kinsey—?”

Smith shook his head. “I just want her back safely.”

“It’s all right, big guy,” Blair said. “We’ve all seen you watching her.”

Smith had watched Lachlan and their other teammate Seth fall in love recently. Seth was still on his honeymoon. The team had given both men a lot of good-natured shit about it. They all had fucking happy endings in their heads.

But Smith knew not everyone got happy endings. His bitch of an ex-wife had seared that particular lesson into him.

“I want Kinsey back safely, that’s all.” That’s all he’d let it be.

“Got the address,” Brooks said. “The industrial park is in northern Vegas. Near Nellis Air Force Base. Warehouse is empty. Up for lease.”

“What’s this artifact?” Axel asked.

Lachlan sighed. “I have no fucking clue. Do you know how many things are stored in the warehouse? Some from well before our time. Call Nat in.”

Moments later, there was the click of heels outside, and a dark-haired woman entered. The Team 52 archeologist, Dr. Natalie Blackwell, always looked like she’d just stepped off a catwalk. Today, her fitted skirt was red, and her shirt a creamy white. Her black hair fell smoothly over her shoulders, framing a face that hinted at Asian ancestry.

“You got a call?” Her voice held a soft Australian accent. “Is Kinsey okay?”

“She’s alive,” Lachlan said. “Kidnappers want a device from Tibet.”

Nat’s face tightened.

“What is it?” Smith asked.

“It’s a sound-producing device. It looks like an instrument.”

“Pretty sure these assholes don’t want to make music,” Smith said.

“It’s ancient levitation technology,” Nat said.

Smith crossed his arms. “It’s what?”

“Tibetan monks have known for centuries how to use sound to levitate large objects.”

“Shit, this job never gets old,” Axel muttered. “I’ll say the obligatory ‘you can’t be serious?’”

Nat shot him a look. “There are several ancient documents that talk about past civilizations using sound to move large blocks. It’s been a theory on how the Egyptians managed to build things as vast as the pyramids for years.”

Axel snorted. “But it’s wrong, right?” He straightened. “Right? They used mud ramps.”

Nat lifted a slim shoulder. “We don’t know. There are plenty of theories, but a mud ramp large enough to build the Great Pyramid would have to have been several times larger than the pyramid itself, and an engineering feat all of its own.”

Axel leaned against the bench. “Damn.”

“Levitation is a real thing?” Blair asked.

Nat nodded. “Acoustic levitation is very real. Utilizing the correct sound waves, you can suspend an object in the air. I could go into detail about standing waves, and nodes—”

Lachlan held up a hand. “Please don’t.”

A grin flickered briefly over the archeologist’s face. “NASA’s been experimenting with anti-gravity for years. Scientists in Japan successfully levitated a metal screw. Scientists in France

have levitated droplets of water. In China, a team managed to levitate small animals—ants and tiny fish—without harming them.”

“Okay, so only small stuff,” Lachlan said.

“Right. But, our more advanced ancestors knew how to levitate much larger things,” Nat added. “Like blocks of stone weighing tons. I’ve read an account by an Arabic historian describing the ancient Egyptians using a metal rod to strike stone, create sound, and levitate large rocks.”

“Wow,” Callie murmured.

“Even in the Bible, it mentions the sound of trumpets bringing down the walls of Jericho.”

“So, the Tibetan device?” Smith prompted.

“The knowledge of sound levitation was passed down and protected by monks in Tibet. In the 1930s, a Swedish doctor was visiting in Tibet. The monks allowed him to witness them using instruments to levitate huge rocks up a cliff face. Hundreds of feet up.” Nat tucked a strand of dark hair back behind her ear. “We have one of those devices. Unfortunately, the Swedish doctor shared his amazing experience with others, and it was about the same time that a certain man in Germany had pseudo-archeologists searching the world for ancient objects of power.”

“Shit,” Lachlan said.

Nat nodded. “Yes. The Nazis made a play to get their hands on the levitation devices, but the U.S. government sent a team in to protect the monks. The monks hid or destroyed their instruments, and gave one to the U.S. team.”

“So it’s dangerous?” Blair asked.

“It could be,” Nat answered. “Depending how it’s used.”

Smith looked back at the screens. “And we have no idea who these bastards are?”

“How the hell do they know about us?” Blair added, frowning. “And the artifact.”

“Will Grayson approve the trade?” Smith asked Lachlan.

Jonah Grayson was the Director of Team 52. His background was a bit of a mystery, but Smith knew the guy wore a suit like a second skin, and navigated Washington politics like a pro. Still, something about the man told Smith that he could handle himself in a back alley as well.

Lachlan drew in a deep breath. “No chance in hell.”

Smith cursed. “So, we just throw Kinsey under a fucking bus.”

“I didn’t say that—”

“I won’t approve handing a dangerous piece of ancient technology over to criminals,” a deep voice drawled.

Smith turned his head and watched the man himself stride into the room.

The big boss wore dark trousers and a snow-white shirt that Smith suspected cost as much as Smith’s entire wardrobe of jeans and T-shirts. He had coal-black hair, piercing green eyes, bronze skin, and a sharp face Smith guessed women would find appealing.

Smith’s hands curled into fists.

“But I will approve a rescue mission,” Jonah said.

Air shuddered out of Smith.

The director looked at Ty. “You have six hours to create a reasonable copy of the artifact, then we need to prepare to get back to Las Vegas.”

A wide smile broke out on Ty’s face. “You’re going to trade a fake for Kinsey.” The scientist nodded. “I’m on it.”

Smith relaxed a bit. It was risky, but it could work. He’d make it work.

“We have an incoming call,” Brooks called out. “Las Vegas Metropolitan Police.”

Beside Smith, Blair stiffened. “Shit.”

A man’s rugged face appeared on the screen. He wore a black shirt, and had a shiny badge hanging from a chain around his neck. The police detective was their contact at LVMPD.

“Detective MacKade,” Jonah drawled.

“Director Grayson.” MacKade’s brown gaze moved across the room, lingering for a second on Blair, before he zeroed in on Lachlan.

“I have intel for you. Last night, some bikers reported a woman running from two men at a bar in northern Las Vegas. Rough area. Mainly industrial.”

Smith straightened. “Anyone help her?”

“Shit,” the detective muttered. “So, she is yours. From the description, I guessed.”

“Did anyone help her?” Smith repeated, a little louder.

MacKade shook his head. “My informant was an undercover cop. He’s been undercover with a biker gang for months. The bikers had no interest in wading in, and my man couldn’t risk blowing his cover.”

Smith gritted his teeth and slammed a fist onto the counter. “So they fucking left her.”

“Smith.” Lachlan waited a beat. “We have a recovery plan. You know who these guys were?”

MacKade shook his head.

“You get any more sightings, we’d appreciate a heads-up,” Lachlan said.

MacKade nodded, then hesitated. “My guy said she’d been beaten up pretty badly. He barely held out from going after the guys who nabbed her. Said she was fighting them.”

Smith looked down at his boots, sucking in air. Kinsey beaten, fighting for her life.

“Thanks for the info.” Jonah inclined his head.

“Good luck,” MacKade said. “Bring her home.” He ended the video call.

“I’ll get to work on the artifact decoy.” Ty headed for the door.

Nat rose to follow. “I’ll help.”

Smith raised his head, his gaze hitting Lachlan’s. He wanted to get out there. He wanted Kinsey back.

Lachlan nodded. “We have a rescue mission to plan.”