



Chapter One

He'd been conned.

Ronin Cooper stepped out of the warehouse and shook his head. Somehow, Darcy Ward had tricked him into doing a coffee run for the entire Treasure Hunter Security team. He jogged down the front steps of the building that housed the THS offices. As a former Navy SEAL and CIA agent, he should have seen it coming. Still, Darcy could get pretty mean and sneaky when it came to her caffeine.

As he headed down the sidewalk, he pulled in a deep breath of air. Spring had hit Denver with a vengeance, and all around, the trees were bursting with green leaves and any lingering chill of winter had left the air. The renovated warehouse that housed THS was on the edge of LoDo, not far from Coors Field, home of the Colorado Rockies. Ronin wasn't a huge baseball fan, but when he wasn't off guarding some archeological dig or museum exhibition, he and the gang sometimes caught a game.

As he turned a corner, the city of Denver rose up ahead of him. Overhead, the sun shone, as it always did here. It was nice to be in the light, and most days, he realized he was getting used to it.

No more blood-soaked battlefields or dark back-alley activities. His muscles tensed, one by one, and Ronin stuck his hands in the pockets of his cargo pants. He'd spent so long working in the dark—on his SEAL missions, for the CIA. Hell, he'd been born in the dark.

He set his shoulders back and pushed those thoughts away. He'd gotten out—maybe not without losing a few chunks of his soul—but he worked for THS now. He worked with people he liked, and most of the time he enjoyed the job. He even liked Denver. He could cycle in the summer, and snowboard in the winter. Many a weekend, he went climbing with Callum Ward, one of the owners of THS. After walking in the shadows for so long, he was coming to realize that he liked his life just the way it was.

As he approached the baseball park, traffic got a little busier. Suddenly, the hair on the back of his neck stood up and every one of his instincts told him he was being followed. The government had spent a hell of a lot of money ensuring Ronin's instincts were finely-honed.

He kept his stride and body relaxed. He didn't want to alert his pursuer.

He wondered who the hell it was. THS had royally pissed off Silk Road on their last mission in Africa. They'd even finally managed to take down one of the top people in the dangerous, black-market antiquities group. His boss, Declan Ward, had warned them all that Silk Road would be out for payback, and to stay sharp.

Ronin paused at some stop lights, waiting to cross the street. He casually turned his head and scanned his surroundings. He spotted a flash of color. Hair that was a deep copper hue that made him think of the rising sun.

It was *her*.

He'd spied her three times before. Once, at Dec and Layne's wedding. Mystery Woman had gatecrashed the reception and had been watching the THS gang. When Ronin had spotted her, she'd taken off. Another time, he'd seen her watching him cycling on one of the bike paths he used a lot. The third time, he'd seen her at the bar where he and his friends sometimes grabbed a beer after work. Once again, she'd disappeared before he'd reached her.

Who the hell was she?

Ronin strode across the street. Now, he was in the heart of LoDo, with its brick buildings and renovated warehouses. Ahead, he spotted the narrow entrance to an alley and turned into it. Brick walls rose up on either side. There were a handful of doorways and puddles on the ground, but other than that, the alley was empty.

He walked deeper into the shadows that he knew so well. Then, he quickly moved into a doorway, crouching so he was hidden by darkness.

Moments later, he heard footsteps—light and quick. Definitely a woman. Then he heard a feminine curse and he raised a brow. That wasn't very ladylike.

He let out a slow breath, his heartbeat calm and controlled. He charged out of his hiding place and grabbed the woman.

He saw wide blue eyes, and blunt, copper-colored bangs above them.

As he tightened his hold on her, she cursed like a sailor again. Before he could speak, she landed a sharp kick to his knee.

Surprised, he stumbled. Hell, *no one* surprised him.

By the time he'd righted himself, the woman was running out of the alley.

Oh, no, you don't. Ronin broke into a sprint.

She was fast, and he guessed there was a fit body under her jeans and shirt. Seconds later, he wrapped his arms around her from behind and lifted her off her feet.

She started kicking and struggling. "Help! Someone help me."

"Stop. I'm not going to hurt you," he growled.

"Let me go!"

"Not until we talk."

"Help! Fire!"

Her struggles increased. Damn, she was strong, too.

"Fire! Fire!" she yelled.

Fire? She'd obviously heard the old adage about people being more likely to help if there was fire, but not an unknown threat. He spun her, pushed her into a doorway and backed her up against the wall.

She lifted her chin. She was a little over five-foot, but acted like she was six feet tall. Her blue eyes flashed. Again, she opened her mouth to scream—

"Stop it," he said. "Tell me who you are."

Shit. She'd seriously underestimated him.

Peri Butler looked up into the dark, lean face. It was a little too sharp and dangerous to be considered anything as civilized as handsome. But there was something about him that made you want to look at him. And keep looking at him.

There was sexy stubble on his strong jaw, and eyes that she'd thought were black or brown, but were actually a very dark blue. He watched her with a steady, intense gaze that left her feeling stripped bare.

This was a man who would dig and dig until he knew every one of your secrets.

Shit. Shit. Peri repeated her favorite curse word a few more times in her head. From her research on Treasure Hunter Security, she knew his name was Ronin Cooper. But she didn't know him, and she certainly couldn't trust him.

She dropped her weight, and, once again, she realized she'd surprised him. He staggered to catch her, but she twisted, pressed a palm to the dirty ground—*yuck*, she so wasn't going to think about that right now—and managed to jerk away. With a spin, she broke out from between his hard body and the wall.

But she'd barely taken one step when he grabbed the back of her shirt and yanked backward. Arms wrapped around her, feeling like hard bands of steel. She was yanked back against a hard, muscled body that radiated heat.

"Name. Now." His deep voice was a rumble against her left ear.

"Screw you."

"Why have you been spying on me and Treasure Hunter Security?"

He'd seen her? *Damn.* She knew he'd spotted her at the wedding, but not the other times.

"Do you work for Silk Road?" he demanded.

That name made her stiffen. "No!"

His voice lowered. "If I find out you do..."

His tone raised goosebumps on Peri's skin. He didn't need to finish the threat. She believed he was a dangerous man capable of anything.

She worried her lip. It didn't sound like he liked Silk Road much. So, he and THS probably weren't a part of that horrible organization... God, she was so confused, and didn't know who to trust.

She couldn't risk her twin sister's life.

The thought that Amber was hurt—or, God forbid, dead—filled Peri with despair. She *had* to find her sister, and she'd do whatever she had to.

"Tell me your name," Ronin Cooper said again.

Could she trust him? After watching him and the others he worked with, she was pretty sure they were the real deal. But Amber's life hung in the balance...

"All right, fine. We'll do this the hard way," he ground out.

Just as Peri stiffened, the world spun, and she was lifted off her feet. He tossed her over a hard shoulder.

For a second, she was speechless, dangling upside down.

"Hey!" She banged a hand against his back. Beneath his shirt, he was as hard as a rock.

"I gave you a chance to talk." He strode out of the alley. "You didn't take it."

Back on the sidewalk, he headed back toward the THS offices. Peri let out a stream of curses, some in a few different languages.

"You talk to your mother with that mouth?" Ronin drawled.

Peri lifted her head and looked around. Surely someone would help her. “My mother taught me some of those.”

As her captor stomped down the path, people eyed him curiously, but no one intervened.

“I’ll talk,” she said. “Just put me down.”

“You’ll talk.” His tone was dark.

Peri screwed up her nose. “Are you always this bossy and unforgiving?”

“Yes.”

She huffed out a breath. “You’re not very nice.”

“I don’t care.”

Peri grumbled under her breath and looked down. She had to admit she had a very good view of a deliciously firm ass encased in dark-gray cargo pants.

Jeez, Peri. Don’t look at his ass.

She twisted and saw the warehouse just ahead. She knew it had once been an old flour mill, until siblings Declan, Callum, and Darcy Ward had purchased it. They’d renovated it and started their security business together. Peri had researched all she could about them. They appeared to be legit, and their business well run. But they were often linked with Silk Road in the press, and she wasn’t sure if Treasure Hunter Security was just another front for the dark, shadowy, black-market ring.

Her gut cramped. She knew she needed help to find Amber. A part of her prayed that Mr. Dark-and-Unfriendly, and the others at THS, could help her...because she was running out of options.

Peri squeezed her eyes closed. Amber was running out of time.