



Chapter One

She slammed into the interrogation room.

Special Agent Elin Alexander strode across the small space, ignoring the nervous look from the man handcuffed to the desk. The heels of her boots clicked on the floor, and she took her time setting her files and coffee down. Then she put her hands on her hips, which pulled the edges of her jacket apart.

The man's gaze jumped to the Glock 23 holstered on her right hip. He swallowed, sweat beading on his forehead.

"Mr. Dennison, you aren't having a very good day, are you?"

The man shifted in his seat. "I don't know anything."

"Right." Elin sat down.

She eyed the man. Mark Dennison was extremely low-level at the black-market antiquities syndicate, Silk Road. But with his slim build, greasy brown hair, and muddy brown eyes, he was very good at being ignored. She knew he'd been around at some of the planning meetings for the group's latest expedition to plunder an ancient site.

"I know about the mission to the Kalahari. I want to know everything you know about it."

He shook his head. "They'll kill me." His gaze met hers for a second before darting away. "And when Claude finds out you're an FBI mole, he'll leave you full of bullet holes and bleeding in a dirty alley somewhere."

Elin leaned back in her chair. Claude Renard, leader of the local Silk Road cell she'd infiltrated, didn't worry her.

What worried her was that this damn group was once again planning to kill and steal, to take pieces of history and desecrate them. Sell them for profit, and not give one thought to the lives they'd ruin in the process.

They didn't care about little girls who were left fatherless, and mothers whose careers were destroyed.

Elin banged a fist on the table and Dennison jumped. "You tell me what you've heard. I know the plan is to find a lost city in the Kalahari. I want to know what else they're after."

Because she knew Claude was after more than the tumbled ruins of a long-dead city. He was after something. Something valuable.

Dennison's throat bobbed as he swallowed. "They'll kill me."

She pushed her chair back and circled the table. The man stiffened, staring at the surface of the desk.

Elin stalked closer, resting her hands on the back of the man's chair, and lowered her voice. "If you tell me nothing, I'll let you go..."

He blinked, his brow creasing. "What?"

She leaned closer, her mouth close to his ear, and when the scent of unwashed body hit her, she hid her grimace. "And I will ensure everyone knows that you were in FBI custody, and that you sang like the prettiest little songbird."

"No."

"Yes." She moved back to her chair. "But, you tell me everything you've heard, guessed, or been told, then I'll sneak you out of here and ensure you do your time at a prison on the other side of the country."

He lifted his cuffed hands to his mouth, nibbling on a ragged nail. "Claude's after a treasure. Something really, really valuable."

"What?"

"I don't know! I swear. He's been careful with what he's said."

"What else?"

"One of the top dogs is sponsoring the trip. Dealing directly with Claude."

Excitement shot through Elin, and she leaned forward. "One of the top leaders of Silk Road?"

Dennison nodded. "Claude's jazzed about it. Said that when he nails this mission and delivers the treasure, he'll finally break into the inner circle."

This could be it. Elin's thoughts whirled. A chance to crack the mysterious and dangerous group open...and finally bring them down. She looked up at the mirrored window.

She pushed a notepad and pen across the table. "Write it all down. Everything."

When she stepped out of the room, her boss was waiting for her.

"Nice work," Special Agent Alastair Burke said.

"Thanks." Elin smiled with grim satisfaction. "This could be it, Alastair."

"We could finally find out who the hell is behind Silk Road." He stared through the window at Dennison. "If we can trust this guy."

Burke was tall, dark, and slightly too intense for handsome. With brown hair cut short, green eyes, and a faint shadow of stubble on his hard jaw, he was the poster child for dedicated, dangerous FBI agent. Elin respected the hell out of him, and never regretted her decision to join the Art Crime Team under his leadership.

If there was anyone more determined to bring down Silk Road than her, it was Alastair Burke. Sometimes, she wondered what drove him.

"You ready for the mission to Africa?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm ready. I'll be traveling tomorrow to Cape Town to meet Claude and the others." She smiled. "Sure you won't spring for Business Class? It's a long flight."

A slight smile. "Suck it up, Alexander."

She glanced at her watch. "One last thing I have to do is meet the Treasure Hunter Security agent you're sending in with me."

"Hale Carter," Alastair said with a nod. "He's solid. Former Navy SEAL with good skills."

"You're sure it's necessary to bring THS in?" She knew the security company had skilled people and specialized in providing security for archeological digs and expeditions, but this was *her* mission.

"You're FBI, Elin. You'll be operating in South Africa and Namibia only with the cooperation of the local agencies. I can't take a large team into foreign nations without stepping on a hell of a lot of toes. But, I do want you to have backup I can trust."

"I'm going to stop Silk Road. And if Dennison is right, we'll bring down one of the heads of the snake at the same time."

Alastair nodded. "You do this, Elin, and that promotion to the Interpol task force that you've been wanting is all yours."

She barely controlled her reaction. For the last two years, that promotion was the thing she'd been living and breathing for. It would give her greater reach to take down Silk Road and other organizations like it. "You can count on me."

Alastair gripped her shoulder and squeezed. It wasn't common for him. He wasn't a toucher. "You've never let me down."

She nodded. "I need to get to this meeting with Carter."

"Elin?" His green eyes flashed. "Stay safe."

She nodded again. "Will do."

She and Alastair parted ways, and Elin stopped by her borrowed office to grab her things. The Art Crime Team had permanent offices in DC, but they were used to flying all around the country and borrowing space in the local FBI offices. The team in Denver was getting pretty used to her and Burke.

The slim folder on her desk caught her eye and she flicked it open, even though she'd memorized all the information in there.

A picture of Hale Carter rested on top.

It was a formal military shot. He was in his Navy dress whites, smiling for the camera. The man had a hell of a smile. Dark skin she knew came from his mother, handsome face inherited from his father, and intelligence in his gorgeous velvet-brown eyes.

She'd been through his file. She always did her research before a mission. Hale Carter had been a very good Navy SEAL, but when his final mission had gone bad, and his team had been killed, Carter had been the only survivor. He'd spent a month in a military hospital recovering, and after they slapped a medal on him for bravery, he'd left the Navy. She wondered what demons that smile was hiding.

He'd ended up with the Ward family—former SEALs Declan and Callum, and their tech-savvy sister Darcy—who'd started Treasure Hunter Security together. Now Carter worked security for them.

She closed the file. The man also had an engineering degree, owned his one-bedroom condo in LoDo in Denver, and enjoyed snowboarding and the ladies. He apparently didn't keep any particular woman around for very long.

She hoped to hell he was more loyal to his partners in the field than he was to the women he dated.

Elin packed up and headed out the door. She was meeting Hale at the FBI firing range in twenty minutes. As she jabbed the button for the elevator, her phone buzzed, and with a curse, she pulled it out to read the text.

A sharp pain sliced through her gut. It was from a friend back in DC. Apparently, her ex-husband had just gotten engaged.

Elin paused, staring blankly at the silver elevator doors. Barely a year since they'd signed their divorce papers, and Matthew was going to marry someone else.

She lifted her chin. Oh, she didn't miss Matthew. He'd taken master classes in passive-aggressive bullshit, and finally he'd given her an ultimatum—him or her job. She made a rude noise and shoved her phone back in her pocket. It had been an easy choice for her. Of course, he'd never do anything to jeopardize *his* career as a successful chef, but he'd expected her to adjust her work.

It had only taken two years of marriage for her to realize that she hadn't loved him. He'd just been a part of the plan she'd set for herself. Career, marriage, and eventually children. God, she hated herself a little to think Matthew had just been a box she could check off.

Now she had a revised plan. No men or relationships. She was focused on her career, and on nabbing her promotion. But she wouldn't lie to herself. The thought of Matthew remarrying, of making a life with someone else...it didn't make her jump for joy. *Maybe you're just jealous?*

Maybe, but she knew she needed to focus on what was important. If she completed this mission, she'd get what she'd been busting her butt for over the last two years. Hell, she'd been working hard since she was thirteen years old and Silk Road, still in its infancy, had stolen a painting her art restorer mother had been working on.

And killed Elin's father in the process.

She swallowed back old grief and was happy when the elevator dinged its arrival. She stepped inside and leaned against the wall. When her phone started to ring, she welcomed the distraction.

"Alexander." The elevator slowed.

"Hi, Elin."

She smiled and stepped out of the elevator. Caleb was a sexy lawyer she'd been dating casually back in DC. "Hi. You got my message."

"That you were heading out of town and didn't know when you'd be back."

His tone was cool and Elin winced. "I'm sorry. It's for work."

Caleb sighed. "I'd complain, if I hadn't had to cancel on our dates a lot as well. Pot and kettle, and all that."

That's why she thought they worked well. They caught up when they could, but didn't mind if the other had to reschedule. "I should be back in a few weeks."

"From where?"

"It's—"

"Classified," he finished with a sigh. "Look, Elin, you're smart and beautiful."

Her stomach took a nosedive. *Uh-oh*. "You're breaking up with me."

A pause. "Yeah. I've always been a workaholic, but you take it to the next level."

Elin strode out of the lobby. "Bad guys don't take evenings and weekends off, Caleb."

"I know. Look, dating you has made me see that I'm ready for something long term."

Her mouth tightened, and she stared up at the clear, blue Denver sky. "And that's not me?"

"That's not you."

"So I've been told before." Ahead sat the nondescript door heading into the warehouse that housed the firing range. "Look, Caleb, I have a meeting to get to. A classified one."

"I'm sorry, Elin. Goodbye."

She stabbed a finger at the phone and headed into the range. She was pretty sure the universe had it out for her today. *Let's make sure Elin knows she really sucks at relationships.*

Looking up at the long lanes set up for shooting, the scent of propellant from fired guns hit her, and she smiled sharply. She still had ten minutes until Hale Carter arrived. She was really in the mood to shoot something.

Hale gunned his Triumph and slid into a parking spot in front of the nondescript warehouse in Stapleton. He kicked down the stand and pulled off his helmet.

Damn, she'd purred like a wildcat for him today. It had helped him shake off the cobwebs of a bad night's sleep. His jaw tightened and he swung off the bike. He wasn't thinking of the nightmares he couldn't seem to shake. They'd fade. Eventually.

He took a deep breath. After this mission, he might have to take a long ride up into the mountains and really test out his new toy. Cal had talked him into upgrading his bike, and so far, he wasn't disappointed.

Of course, now that Cal Ward was attached to a certain sexy photographer, he didn't seem quite as interested in all his adrenaline-fueled toys and activities. Hale didn't blame the guy. Dani was pretty awesome.

Not that Hale wanted a woman of his own. Nope. He pushed open the door to the FBI firing range. All his colleagues were falling in love left, right, and center. Hale was doing everything he could to avoid that particular bullet. He liked his life just the way it was.

Right now, he had a mission to think about.

He walked over to a counter to check in with the agent there. Adrenaline spiked in his blood. There was nothing Hale liked more than that sense of anticipation before a mission. Sure, they were no longer in war zones and under fire, but his expeditions with Treasure Hunter Security were almost always interesting. And on this one, he'd still get to nail the bad guys.

But there was one other thing that had him anticipating this mission. A certain cool, blonde FBI agent who would be accompanying him.

The agent behind the counter slid something across the scarred surface. "Hearing protection. Lane Ten," the agent told him. "Agent Alexander is waiting for you."

Hale took the earmuffs. "Thanks."

Several suited agents were in the range, firing different weapons. He looked around with interest. It was a good setup. A few standard lanes with paper targets, and a few with what looked like a high-tech electronic system. He itched to take a closer look.

Suddenly, he heard the distinctive sound of a M4 firing. Hale's footsteps faltered, and he barely stopped himself from flinching.

It was the preferred weapon of the SEALs.

Memories tried to crowd in, and like he always did, he shoved them back ruthlessly. He dragged in a deep breath. The past was the past. It was done, gone, and he couldn't change it.

His gaze snagged on a long, blonde ponytail.

He slowed to watch Elin firing. She was holding a Glock 23 handgun. Her stance was perfect, and she didn't flinch or jerk.

She finished firing and lowered her weapon. She pressed a button and her target zoomed in closer, running on a wire.

All the holes were centered around the crosshairs on the chest of the person-shaped target. Except for one perfect shot right in the center of the forehead.

God, she was good *and* a badass.

"You're good."

She turned and pulled her earmuffs down around her neck. "I know."

Hale tried not to smile. She wasn't very tall, but her confident manner made her seem taller. She was wearing a sharp pantsuit, and he appreciated that the trousers gave him a decent view of compact curves. Her face was attractive, and combined with her gold-tinged skin, bright-blue eyes, and blonde hair, she made an impact. Add the gun and her confident posture, and she made him think of a Valkyrie.

"Your balance is slightly off," he said. "Not by much. But if you move a little more of your weight forward, you'll counteract the kick of the gun even better than you do now."

She calmly reloaded her weapon. "Why should I take your advice? Because you have a penis?"

Hale pressed his tongue to his teeth. "No. Because I used to be a Navy SEAL, and carried a weapon every day."

"Right, your big, bad SEAL credentials." She raised a brow. "I'm guessing you manage to slip that into most conversations, especially when you're chatting up pretty young things at bars."

Well, yeah. "Most women find it interesting and intriguing."

Her brow rose higher. "I work around men who carry guns all day long. Takes more than that to impress me."

Your balls have officially been busted, Carter. And he still wasn't turned off. The more Elin Alexander talked, the more intrigued he was.

Suddenly, she stepped closer and the scent of her hit him—fired gun and cool water. Now, why would that combination appeal to him so much?

She held out a gun to him. “Impress me.”

He took the Glock, a twin to hers. “I prefer a SIG Sauer.” He pulled his ear protection on, and stepped up to the line.

She touched something and several targets popped up. He realized it wasn’t a simple, stationary target, but multiple moving ones. She was really testing him.

Hale let himself fall into the zone. It was a place he’d learned to find before a mission. Before he’d leaped out of a plane, rappelled out of a helicopter, or dived off a boat.

He squeezed the trigger, taking his shots, moving steadily.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

As he learned the weapon, he adjusted his grip and balance.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The targets stopped, and he lowered the gun. They all popped back up. Every target had a single shot through the chest.

He pushed his ear protection off and smiled at her. Her gaze dropped to his mouth for a millisecond, and she blinked her cool, blue eyes. Then her gaze met his again.

“Are you going to tell me ‘I told you so?’” she asked.

“Nope. A gentleman doesn’t boast when he kicks ass. Even one as fine as yours, Agent Alexander.”

She snorted. “Come on then, Mr. Carter. Let’s discuss our mission.”

“You got it, partner.”

He got another cool look. Oh yeah, Hale was excited for this mission. And knowing he was headed into the desert with Special Agent Elin Alexander by his side just made it all the more stimulating.