



## Chapter One

The bright Nevada sun speared into Jonah Grayson's eyes. Stepping out of the large aircraft hangar, he slipped on his sunglasses and slid his hands into the pockets of his suit pants.

A hot desert wind made his jacket dance around him. His gaze locked onto the experimental jet-copter that swept into view, preparing to land. For a second, his hands itched, the pilot in him wanting to be the one behind the controls.

As the wide-bodied, twin-rotored X8—able to fly like a jet plane as well as like a helicopter—lowered to the tarmac in front of him, he reminded himself that his flying days were behind him. Ended by the crunch of metal and breaking glass.

Dark thoughts stirred, but he focused on the X8. He had a different job now. Equally as rewarding.

As the jet-copter's rotors slowed, several tall, fit, black-clad bodies exited from the aircraft.

His team.

Team 52.

He'd selected each and every member himself. Jonah was damn proud of his team, and the work they did.

The tall, powerful team leader strode toward him. That same hot breeze ruffled Lachlan Hunter's dark hair, and his gold-brown eyes glittered.

Jonah studied the body armor the man wore. Jonah had just approved the expenses for a new version. The team scientist, Dr. Ty Sampson, was in his lab, several stories beneath their feet in the secret Area 52 base, working on a lighter, tougher, more flexible armor.

“Director, only you would voluntarily wear a suit in this heat,” a female voice drawled.

Jonah saw Lachlan’s second-in-command, Blair Mason, grinning at him. Her blonde hair was in a neat braid, resting over one shoulder. His only response to her comment was a brief quirk of his lips.

Both Lachlan and Blair had been former special forces Marines—Force Recon. Both had been injured in the field, and they’d thought their careers were over. Lachlan had lost an arm, and Blair an eye, on a terrifying mission. Then Jonah had recruited them, and offered them a second chance to serve their country...and the world.

They’d also both received high-tech, experimental prosthetics.

In the bright sunlight, Blair’s eye glinted silver. It offered her better vision than the eye she’d lost. Lachlan’s biomechanical arm was hidden under his armor. It was stronger, harder—a weapon all by itself.

“Did you retrieve the gem?” Jonah asked.

Lachlan nodded. Another member of the team—lean, dangerous, former CIA agent Seth Lynch stepped forward, holding a small containment box. A thick, glass panel allowed Jonah to see the large, pale-pink diamond resting inside.

“The recovery in San Francisco went fine.” A faint smile on Lachlan’s lips. “We ran into an old friend of mine. A former Ghost Ops buddy, Vander Norcross. He’s taking care of the cleanup.”

Which no doubt included some dead bodies. Jonah nodded. “Well done. I assume there aren’t any diplomatic issues or authorities for me to deal with?”

Jonah was well versed in defending his team and their actions to the powers that be.

“Not this time,” Lachlan said.

“Good. Get the artifact to Arlo.”

“On it, boss-man,” Seth replied.

Big, former SEAL, Smith Creed, sauntered past with a nod. Behind him followed former Delta Force soldier, Axel Diaz, the team’s medic Callie Kimura, and former MI6 agent, River Elliott-Hall. River was their newest addition to the team, and living with Ty.

Callie smiled, which lit up the angles of her face that showcased her Hawaiian heritage. “I can’t wait to see my sexy geek.”

Jonah shook his head. “He’s in the computer room.”

“Hope you aren’t still keeping him working overtime?”

Inside the pocket of his suit pants, Jonah’s hand curled into a fist. “Brooks hasn’t finished the task yet.”

“Tracking down your mysterious, redheaded intruder.” River’s accent was a crisp, British clip.

“Yes.” Jonah *would* find her. Whatever it took. He ran a covert black ops team, for God’s sake. He had specialized resources at his disposal.

A few weeks ago, a woman had broken into his Area 52 office and tied him up. She’d managed to infiltrate a secret, highly secure base, without being seen.

And she’d delivered a warning. *Protect his team.*

Jonah’s teeth clicked together. He *would* find her, and get the answers he wanted.

Starting with who the hell she was.

With the team, he entered the hangar, appreciating the drop in temperature. Air Force personnel moved around, and several prototype planes rested in the hangar.

While the world was curious about the secrets of Area 51 next door, Area 52 sat quietly, unassumingly, in its shadow, known to the world as Tonopah Test Range.

Below the hangar lay a secret base that only the president and a select few knew about. Team 52 was tasked with finding, securing, and safeguarding pieces of ancient technology. The world and most of its historians were unaware that advanced human civilizations had once thrived. Myths about them carried on in stories of places like Atlantis and Lemuria. During the last ice age, those advanced civilizations had been destroyed by flooding and earthquakes, setting civilization back into a type of dark ages.

Humans had risen again, largely unaware of what their ancestors had achieved before them.

Every now and then, pieces of ancient technology turned up. Often powerful and dangerous ones.

Unfortunately, there was also no end of people who wanted to get their hands on that technology, and use it for the wrong reasons.

Like the priceless pink diamond the team had recovered.

Jonah knew that it was very old, and from the Kollur mine in India, famous for producing large, cursed diamonds. It looked like an invaluable gem—but it had been infused with dangerous power by advanced, ancient scientists.

He followed the team into the elevator. Matte-black walls surrounded them, and Lachlan pressed the button. The elevator descended.

The artifact would be locked away in the secure warehouse, deep in the heart of the Area 52 base.

“What time’s the plane back to Las Vegas?” Smith asked, his voice a deep rumble.

“You just want to get back to Kinsey,” Axel murmured.

“Yep,” Smith confirmed, unfazed.

Kinsey was their logistics manager at their center of operations in Las Vegas. She’d fallen head over heels for Smith, and the man worshiped the ground she walked on.

“I’m pretty keen to get home to my detective, as well,” Blair said.

“Two hours,” Jonah replied. “We’re leaving early today, as I have an event to attend as the president’s special envoy.” That was Jonah’s cover. As the president’s envoy, he had the ear of the president. He attended more Washington meetings than he liked, and wined and dined powerbrokers, as part of his job running and protecting the work Team 52 did.

“Where at?” Blair asked.

“The new Eiffel Tower Restaurant.” Jonah arched a brow. “It’s the grand reopening since the Eiffel Tower was reconstructed.”

On a previous mission, some very bad people had gotten their hands on an incredibly dangerous artifact. The storms generated by the artifact had almost torn Las Vegas apart. The Strip was still rebuilding, but the main pieces were almost back together. Las Vegas didn’t let anything keep it down for long.

“Fancy,” Callie said. “We have to wear body armor and chase bad guys, while you get to wear a tux and drink champagne.”

Jonah crossed his arms. “We could swap.” He would in a heartbeat. “I’m sure Smith would enjoy wearing a tuxedo.”

The man's grunt indicated his displeasure at that idea.

The elevator slowed and they all stepped out. Grumpy-faced Arlo was waiting for them. The older, grizzled man took care of the warehouse.

"No one's bleeding." Arlo sniffed. "That's a first." He held out his hands. "Hand it over."

Seth gave the man the containment box. "We had an easy mission, for a change. I'm happy to get back to my wife and tell her that I didn't get shot at."

"I think you're in more danger from your wife." Blair grinned at him. "I thought she threw a glass at your head before you left? And vowed never to let you near her again. She's more dangerous than the bad guys."

Dr. January Lynch was pregnant with the couple's first child, and the archeologist wasn't enjoying the second half of her pregnancy. It had zapped her energy and slowed her down, and one thing January didn't do well was sit still.

Seth grinned. "She throws things at me all the time, even before she was pregnant."

"I do remember her beaming you with a pole, once," Blair said.

Jonah hid a small smile. The pair had always struck sparks off each other. Seth had gone all-out to rescue the woman on a dangerous mission.

The click of heels made Jonah look up. The team's archeologist, Dr. Natalie Blackwell, appeared. She wore a tight, navy blue skirt, and a crisp, pink shirt. Her long fall of black hair was pinned back at the sides of her head. She smiled.

"You're back! I can't wait to see the diamond. I've been doing more research on its history and I think I found some more information on it." Her Australian accent deepened as she got excited.

Axel broke free of the group, lifted the beautiful archeologist off her feet, and laid a deep kiss on her mouth. She struggled for two seconds, then kissed him back.

When she broke free, she was breathless. “Axel, we’re at work.”

“Don’t care.” He kissed her again. “Missed you.”

“You were only gone a few hours.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Nat’s face softened.

The pair had recently fallen in love. When Nat had been attacked and kidnapped, Axel had finally confronted his feelings for her.

A strange sensation, not quite comfortable, moved through Jonah’s chest. All his team had paired up and fallen in love in what felt like a short time. It had started with Lachlan falling for a woman—Dr. Rowan Schafer—they’d rescued in the Arctic. And it hadn’t stopped.

“I’m going to track down my man.” River headed off to the lab to find Ty.

“Me too.” Callie made a beeline to the computer room where Brooks was.

Jonah sighed. He probably should have implemented a no-fraternization policy, at some point.

Still, they were all happy.

*Love.* It could be good for some, he knew that. But he saw it as a huge risk.

Loving someone, losing them, could destroy. It was a weakness that your enemies could exploit.

His mother’s death had almost shattered a sixteen-year-old Jonah. It had just been the two of them for years, his beautiful mom, with her long, dark hair, high cheekbones, and velvet-brown eyes. She’d been a member of the Chickasaw nation, and raised in Oklahoma. She’d always been smiling.



Until a boyfriend had beaten her to death.

Jonah shook his head. Love had led his mother astray, left her alone, pregnant, and abandoned by her family. Then it had killed her.

*Work.* Jonah's only love was serving his country, keeping people safe.

He strode to the computer room—Brooks' domain.

The doors slid open. Screens covered all the walls, and there was a high work table in the center. It was where Callie was kissing the hell out of Jonah's tech guru.

Jonah cleared his throat. "Definitely needed a no-fraternization policy."

Callie broke the kiss, and pushed some of Brooks' brown hair off his face affectionately. "Too late now." She winked. "See you later, baby." She stalked out.

With a goofy grin, Brooks watched Callie's ass as she left. "Hey, boss-man."

"Any progress on the search for the woman?"

Brooks' smile evaporated. "Sorry, Jonah. Nothing yet. The woman is a damn ghost, and clearly good with tech. Somehow, she tampered with the base's cameras when she got in, but left no sign of it." Frustration, and reluctant admiration, filled his voice. "Your redhead is good."

"She's not mine." Jonah's fingers curled into his palm. "Keep searching."

Brooks nodded.

Jonah was going to find her. Whatever it took.

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Jonah strode into the sumptuous lobby of the Paris Las Vegas Casino. Large, glittering chandeliers hung from the ceiling, making you feel like you'd stepped into a French palace.

A woman in a little black dress strode past him, her lips parting, and she shot him a flirtatious grin.

He kept moving. Tonight wasn't about pleasure. He had to keep his cover intact. Hobnob, listen to wealthy and powerful people who wanted him to pass information on to the president. Plus, he kept his ear to the ground for any murmurs about rare or strange artifacts.

He stepped inside the elevator and it whizzed him up the repaired replica Eiffel Tower. Entering the restaurant, he admired the incredible view of the lights of the Strip, and the Bellagio Casino across the road.

From up here, it was impossible to tell that it had been the scene of destruction not that long ago.

The president had not been happy with that mess. Occasionally, Team 52's missions got messy. Still, they'd beaten the bad guys, secured the artifact, and saved a lot of lives. That was what was important.

All around the elegant room, people dressed in tuxedos and eveningwear sipped champagne, talked, and laughed politely.

Jonah took a flute of champagne from a server and sipped. *Mmm. Dom Pérignon.*

If only his mom could see him now. In his custom-tailored tuxedo, sipping expensive champagne. She'd been a teenaged Native American girl, kicked out of her home for getting pregnant by an older man who'd used her. But she'd loved Jonah. She'd worked multiple jobs, leaned on her neighbors to babysit him, and even when they'd been penniless, she'd showered him in love.

*You're going to be someone one day, Jonah. My beautiful, smart boy.*

After her death, he'd vowed to make her proud.

"Grayson." A middle-aged man with steel-gray hair and a designer tuxedo moved forward, hand outstretched. "Good to see you."

“Winkleman.” Jonah shook the wealthy casino owner’s hand.

“There are some people I’d like to introduce you to. Been discussing the redevelopment plans for the Westgate Project.”

Time to start hobnobbing.

Jonah shook hands and talked politely, smiled, and gave vague answers when required. He also turned down several requests to dance, and one more blatant invitation where a woman in a slinky, gold dress slipped her room key into his pocket.

His work kept him too busy for dating. He kept sex simple, without entanglements, when he had the time. He sipped his champagne again. Lately, he had no time, or inclination.

He caught a glimpse of bright aquamarine. A woman with long, long legs in a tight, glittery, blue dress was moving through the crowd.

The partygoers shifted and Jonah found his gaze searching for another glimpse of her.

*There.* Her back was to him, but he appreciated the view. She had killer legs and a toned ass. His gaze moved up and he stilled. Copper-red hair fell just past her shoulders.

God, he was seeing his redhead everywhere. His fingers tightened on the stem of his glass. Damn, now his team had him calling her his.

The woman turned her head, looking back over a slim shoulder.

Their gazes met.

Jonah stiffened.

It was *her*.

He took a step forward. The crowd shifted and he lost sight of her.

*Dammit.* He set his glass down and shoved past people, earning him a few startled exclamations.

There was no sign of her.

He scanned the room. *There*. A flash of aquamarine heading out through the glass doors onto the restaurant's new balcony.

Jaw tight, Jonah followed.

*You're not getting away this time.*

