

Chapter One

It was probably wrong how much she liked mud.

Crouching down to examine a shard of pottery, she smiled. Okay, not mud so much—which was currently coating her work boots and the bottom of her cargo pants. What she really liked was what she *uncovered* in the mud.

Archeologist Hayden Sinclair gently worked a piece of pottery free and briefly studied the engravings before setting it on a tray with some others.

She lifted her head and scanned the dig.

She and a multinational team of researchers were working on a site in Nicaragua.

El Cascal de Flor de Pino, near the town of Kukra Hill, predated the Maya, and they'd found evidence of an ancient town and several outlying villages that dated from almost three thousand years ago. The petroglyphs and pottery were remarkable, and it appeared the town was a center for the production of ceremonial columns used at burial sites.

“Why do you look so damn happy?”

The grumpy female voice made her look up. Maria Rodriguez was about fifteen years older than Hayden, and in her mid-forties. The woman was frighteningly competent, and exceptionally good at her job. Her dark hair was in a tidy braid, and her hands were planted firmly on her hips.

Hayden grinned at her friend. “Because uncovering history, especially undiscovered history,

is why I became an archeologist. There is so much we can learn.”

Maria grunted. “It wouldn’t be so bad if there was less mud, and a decent coffee shop nearby.”

They were fairly remote out here, and there wasn’t a coffee shop in sight. There was a quirky little coffee shop in Kukra Hill, and while the coffee wasn’t great, the food was good.

Smiling, Hayden rose. “I agree, but I’m still happy.”

Her friend leaned in and lowered her voice. “Your father is trying to contact you. He said you aren’t answering your satellite phone.”

Hayden felt a spurt of annoyance. Once again, her father managed to make her feel like a teenager, not a twenty-eight-year-old woman. “I’m working.”

“He’s just checking that you’re all right.”

“I know you give him updates.”

Maria’s dark gaze was unwavering. “Because it’s my job.”

Hayden turned away and ran a hand over her hair. The jungle humidity made it stick to her scalp and the back of her neck. “He wants to lure me back for some political event, and play the happy family. I’m *working*. He doesn’t always respect that. I’m not a pawn to be moved around on a chessboard.”

“Hayden, you *are* a happy family.”

“I know.” She loved her dad, but he still drove her crazy. She sighed. “I’ll call him.”

“Good.”

“Dr. Claire?” One of the Nicaraguan researchers appeared. “Dr. Stephenson’s uncovered some new pottery. It might be a burial. He’d like you to take a look.”

“Thanks, Pedro.”

To everyone here, she was Dr. Haley Claire. Archeologist. Not Hayden Sinclair, daughter of the President of the United States of America.

Maria wasn't really her assistant. She was the highly trained Secret Service agent assigned to protect her.

Her father had wanted her to have a full security detail. Scratch that. He hadn't wanted her to come here at all. He often forgot that she wasn't his subordinate, and that she was an adult. Her mother had died of cancer two years ago. Hayden stood still for a moment, absorbing the piercing grief. She missed her mom something crazy. The grief was an aching wound that had dulled but never went away. Her mother's death had made her father more protective.

Hayden had really wanted to be a part of this dig. She'd argued him down to one Secret Service agent, and that they'd use aliases.

She had no desire to go back to Washington, D.C. Her father had been in politics most of her life. He'd been a businessman beforehand, then he'd seen more than his share of injustices, and he'd wanted to help fix them.

Hayden hated political life. She admired the few politicians who truly wanted to make a difference, but most were sharks—out for power and influence.

She'd navigated those waters since she was a teenager. All the fakeness and insincerity left her feeling ill. All the people who smiled at you, while they lied and manipulated behind your back.

People who betrayed you.

Her belly tightened and she lifted her chin. She shoved the new slash of emotion down deep. This was *her* life. Her dad had to accept that she was doing things her way.

That meant no manipulative men. No drama. Just work.

And the pesky Secret Service agent she loved like a big sister. Maria had been on her detail for over a decade, and while she never forgot Maria had a job to do, it hadn't stopped them from becoming good friends.

"Come on, *Mary*." She used the agent's fake name. "Let's take a look at this new pottery."

The agent groaned but followed. Their boots squelched on the muddy ground.

Hayden glanced at the clouds building on the horizon above the lush green trees that surrounded the dig site. They'd get another storm later in the day. For the moment, the sun was shining, but the humidity was building. Hayden's khaki shirt stuck to her back, and wisps of her shoulder-length blonde hair stuck to her face, no matter what she did.

As they reached Dr. Stephenson's area of the dig, she saw the archeologist waving at her. He was tall, gangly, with a long-boned face that always looked a little bemused.

"He has a crush on you," Maria murmured.

Hayden snorted. "He's two years younger than me."

"So?"

"And somehow he seems ten years younger."

"He is...boyish."

Lewis Stephenson was a geek, who didn't have much to say unless it had to do with pre-Columbian Central American history. But he was kind and worked well with everyone on the team.

"Besides," Hayden shot her friend a look, "I don't want a man."

Maria was silent for a moment. "You have to get over Douchebag Dillon eventually."

Hayden's stomach tightened. "I *am* over him," she said, through clenched teeth.

"No, you're not."

“I have no feelings for that man.” Catching your loving fiancé banging his assistant on his desk tended to kill most feelings quickly. “Except for anger.”

“You have to let it go, Hay, or it’ll fester.”

The man who had proclaimed to love her, who had no political ambitions, or interest in her father’s office, had wormed his way through her defenses, made her believe what they shared was real.

It had all been a lie.

“I’ll always be angry at him. He’s a liar and a cheat.” The sad fact was, cheating was the least of his crimes. “He wanted access to my father. He was already making deals with damn criminals, convincing them he could influence Dad.” The worst bit had been that Dillon had thought she was his ticket to being president himself, one day. Ugh, she hated him.

“You’re angry at yourself, but it’s not your fault. He fooled us all. Hell, I liked him. He was charming and funny.”

Hayden’s heart throbbed in the center of her chest. Dillon Driskell was nothing to her. Just an ugly footnote and a hard lesson.

She would never, ever be fooled again.

A dark SUV, splattered in mud, suddenly pulled up on the bumpy, dirt road leading into the dig site. She lifted a hand to shield her eyes. “Who’s that? Are we expecting anyone today?”

Maria frowned, gaze zeroing in on the SUV. “There was no one on the approved list.”

Five men in khaki pants and shirts got out of the vehicle.

It all happened so fast. One second, they were walking into the dig, the next, they pulled weapons—automatic rifles—and started firing.

Hayden watched workers fall. Her brain couldn’t comprehend what she was seeing. Dr.

Stephenson waved his arms at the attackers, yelling something.

Lewis' body shook under the impact of bullets.

No. *No*. Horror hit her, freezing her insides.

“Come on.” Maria's hand clamped on her wrist. The agent had her gun drawn and was pulling Hayden in the opposite direction.

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears. Around her, screams mixed with the sound of gunfire. Adrenaline surged into her veins.

“I'm afraid you aren't going anywhere, Ms. Sinclair.”

They swiveled. Three more men stood behind them. Two had weapons aimed at Maria.

The man in the middle had swarthy skin, dark stubble on his jaw, and black eyes. He looked Nicaraguan, but his English was perfect with no accent.

Oh, no. He knew who she was. Hayden desperately tried to keep her face blank.

Maria shifted, angling her body in front of Hayden. “You're mistaken, this is Dr. Claire—”

The gunshot was deafening, and Hayden cried out.

She saw the hole in Maria's forehead, a second before the woman's body collapsed to the muddy ground.

“No!” Hayden screamed. She lunged for her friend. “*Maria*.”

But strong arms grabbed her, yanking her off her feet. She struggled wildly as a black hood was dropped over her head.

Maria. God, Maria.

As she was carted away, she kept fighting. Kicking and squirming. But it was no use. More hands grabbed her legs, holding her still. There were too many of them, and they were all too strong.

“No!”

He turned the wrench and tried to unfasten the bolt. He gritted his teeth. “Come on, you stubborn little mother—” His hand slipped and he scraped his knuckles. “Fucking hell.”

Shepherd “Shep” Barlow straightened from under the hood of the old truck and shook his hand.

“Piece of junk.” He kicked the tire. The truck was an old Chevy that he’d had the idea of restoring.

He was currently regretting that choice.

He had a two-year old Dodge Ram that ran just fine. He didn’t need this old heap of junk.

The phone in his pocket vibrated, and he stiffened. He pulled his phone out. His perimeter sensor alarms had just been triggered. He tapped the phone screen, muttering as he smeared grease on it.

The video feed showed a car coming up his driveway. It was a black, official-looking sedan, not the usual truck or SUV you most often saw in the Colorado Rockies.

His place was three hours out of Denver. He didn’t get many visitors, mainly because he preferred it that way. He rarely invited anybody.

He cleaned his hand on a rag, and watched the black sedan pull up in front of the barn.

This couldn’t be good.

The back door opened, and Shep checked the Glock tucked in the back of his jeans. You could take the man out of the military, but it didn’t happen the other way around. He was always armed.

The man who got out of the car was in his sixties, and fit for his age. He was wearing a suit.

His hair was a lot grayer than the last time Shep had seen him.

Shep strode over. “General Rand. It’s been a long time, sir.”

“Barlow.” The older man looked around. “Nice place you have here.”

Shep’s piece of land had once been a silver mine during the boom times of the 1800s. There was an old, wooden structure still up on the hill, and the hillside was riddled with tunnels.

More recently, the place had been turned into holiday cabin rentals. The cabins were still in pretty good repair—except for getting shot up recently, when he’d helped out an old military buddy. Shep lived in one cabin, kept another one maintained for guests—which he tried to limit as much as possible. Spending time with people was at the bottom of his priority list.

“How did you find me?” he asked the general.

“Vander Norcross.”

Shep straightened. Vander was Shep’s old Ghost Ops commander. They’d served together in Delta before they’d been recruited for the government’s top-secret special forces program.

They’d done jobs that no one else could do. In places no one else had wanted to go.

Vander was a man Shep trusted with his life, but his old commander had also accused Shep of hiding up on his mountain. And he’d vowed to do something about it.

Shep was fucking fine where he was.

“My little slice of the Rockies,” he said. “It’s quiet, peaceful.” He cocked his head. “I thought you’d retired, General?”

The man gave him a faint smile. “I am retired. Officially.”

And unofficially, he probably did something black ops.

Yeah, this couldn’t be good.

“Come in.” Shep gestured toward his cabin. “I’ll make some coffee.”

The general followed him inside. The cabin was all gleaming wood, with a decent kitchen Shep had renovated himself, and a large, stone fireplace. In the kitchen, he set the coffee machine going.

Once the machine was finished, Shep poured coffee into two mugs. He handed one to Rand, then leaned a hip against the counter. “Still take it black, I assume?”

“Same as you.” The general sipped.

“You want to tell me what you’re doing here?”

“I always liked that about you, Shep. Frank, and straight to the point.”

Shep snorted. “Got my knuckles rapped a few times for not keeping my mouth shut.”

“Not that you cared.”

Shep sipped his coffee. “Nope. Still don’t.”

“We have a situation. A woman’s life...and national security, are on the line.”

Shep frowned. “Go on.”

“Dr. Hayden Sinclair was abducted off an archeological dig in Nicaragua this morning.”

Taking another sip of his coffee, Shep wondered why that name sounded vaguely familiar.

“Dr. Sinclair is the president’s daughter.” The general pulled out a photo from his jacket pocket and put it on the counter.

She was attractive. Blonde hair brushing her shoulders, and large, brown eyes. Her hair was lots of different shades, and reminded him of the homemade caramels he sometimes bought in town. He could tell she was smart. She had that direct look that said she was one step ahead of you. The best thing about her was the strong jaw line that made her face interesting. Not just another blonde, plastic socialite.

Her chin was tilted in the photo, like she was saying a silent *fuck you*.

He met General Rand's gaze. "The President of the United States?"

"That's the one."

"What the fuck was the president's daughter doing in Nicaragua?"

"Working on a dig site."

Shep's eyebrows winged up. "With no security?"

"She had a Secret Service agent with her." The general's mouth flattened. "Agent Rodriguez was shot in the head and killed."

Fuck. "So is the president sending a team in to retrieve her?"

"Things are...delicate with US and Nicaragua relations right now. They have elections coming up. We can't be seen to be interfering. The president can't send a sanctioned team in."

"Bet the president isn't too happy about that." Shep took another sip of coffee.

"No, he's beside himself. She's his only child, and he lost his wife not too long ago. But this goes beyond Ms. Sinclair's well-being."

Shep felt that all-too-familiar prickle at the back of his neck. The one he always got when shit was about to hit the fan.

The general set his coffee mug down. "We got word that whoever has her is shopping her around. As potential leverage against our country."

Shep shook his head. "Shit."

"If they sell her to a terrorist group, or an unfriendly nation, they could use her against the president."

Shep shook his head. "Sounds like a mess."

"It is. One I need you to fix."

Now Shep froze. "Me? I'm retired."

“I know, but you’re one of very few men I know who has the skills to pull this off. Alone.”

Shep shook his head. *Fuck, no.*

“Go in and get her out. Quietly. We’ll give you whatever support we can, but there has to be no tie to the government—”

“Go in, alone, and if I get caught, you have no knowledge of me.”

The general nodded.

“This is a suicide mission.” Shep had stopped doing those a long time ago.

The general tapped the photo. “A young woman’s life is on the line.”

Shep looked down at the picture again. At the tilt of Hayden Sinclair’s chin, her half smile. She had soft looking lips.

He cleared his throat. “There are other people—”

“She needs you, Shep. Vander recommended you. You can save her. Vander said you were the right man for this.”

Fuck. He was going to punch Vander next time he saw him. “Why?”

“Because you have the skill set. Because you would never leave an innocent woman in enemy hands.”

Fucking fuck. He looked at that picture again. Blonde hair, brown eyes, and that stubborn jaw.

“And because one of the groups looking to buy her is a Taliban cell run by Khalid Mohammad Omari.”

Cold swept through Shep. The man who had killed three of Shep’s Ghost Ops friends. A sadistic monster. Suddenly, there weren’t nearly enough fucks to cover this situation.