

Chapter 1

Nash

“Hit me.” I tapped the felt-covered poker table.

Across from me, my friend, Cole, threw a card down.

I checked it and groaned. “I’m out.” In disgust, I tossed the rest of my cards on the table.

“Good,” Bastian drawled from beside me. “I’m *definitely* in.”

I rolled my eyes and sat back in my chair. Of course he was. Sebastian Thorne was a card shark and won most of our poker games. I wasn’t sure why I bothered.

Cole looked unfazed. My gaze swung from him to where Bastian lounged beside me, looking like a king sprawled on his throne, deigning to mix with the commoners.

Cole and Bastian were like a pair of tough biker boots and an expensive set of Italian loafers. Bastian, who owned the fucking casino we were sitting in, wore a stylish shirt in a light-gray color, tucked into tailored suit pants that were no doubt some fancy designer I didn’t care about. I guessed women would say Bastian was handsome, since he never lacked for feminine company. He had a hawkish face, high cheekbones, and dark eyes, added to thick, dark hair that was always carelessly styled. He had a constant stream of beautiful women who only ever spent

one night in his bed. Bastian had a strict rule: no repeats.

Cole Black, meanwhile, looked like the fighter he was. Broad shoulders, hardpacked muscle, and a rugged face. His nose had been broken before, and he had a wicked scar on his left cheek and neck that could only have come from a knife. He was the kind of guy that made people cross the street when they saw him coming. He looked like he'd chew nails and spit them back at you.

"I'm in, too," another voice drawled.

I arched a brow at the man at the end of the table. Landon rarely played. "You'll lose."

The African-American man shrugged. "I'm feeling lucky."

Landon Bradshaw always had a serious look on his face, like he was contemplating important things. Dark, watchful eyes sat in a strong face, his skin was dark brown, and he kept his black hair short, and his beard neatly trimmed.

"It's your money." I waved at the server hovering nearby. "I'll take another beer."

The young man nodded. "Yes, sir."

We were playing in a private room on one of the upper floors of the Avernus casino. The floor-to-ceiling windows gave us a million-dollar view of the Las Vegas Strip. Outside was filled with glittering, blinking color, beckoning you to come and play, and lose all your money.

Bastian had done well with this investment. The Avernus was one of the newest and hottest casinos on the Strip. It offered the best gambling, the most popular clubs and restaurants, the most-in-demand shows, and had a golf course behind the building.

Only Bastian would use prime Vegas real estate for a golf course.

I accepted my beer and nodded my thanks. I sipped and watched Cole deal more cards. Of course, no one knew that Bastian was the owner of the Avernus. He kept that information well hidden. He'd hired a guy—a handsome actor who'd never moved past playing bit parts in TV

shows that only lasted one season—to play the face of the casino.

Being a retired assassin, Bastian didn't like to show his face or attract attention.

Same as me.

I took another sip of beer. All of us at this table had killed for a living. Some in the military, some CIA or MI6, some freelance.

It was a job that eventually cut too much out of the soul. I had zero regrets. I'd gone from Navy SEAL to assassin for my country. I'd put down some of the worst people on the planet. I wouldn't lose sleep over that.

But I'd discovered the military was made up of people and led by people. And sometimes those people weren't good. They were corrupt, more worried about themselves and their own agendas than the greater good.

I shoved those thoughts away. The past was the past.

Nathaniel Hagen, farm boy from Idaho, turned Navy SEAL and military hero, was long gone.

So was the assassin only known as Nightvision. Known for taking out targets with a single shot at night.

Now, I was retired. I was Nash Oakley. I lived in a plush two-bed villa on the golf course of the Avernus casino. Along with a bunch of other retired assassins. Somehow, we'd all found each other.

At first, it had just been me, Bastian, and Landon. The others had slowly turned up and stayed.

I watched Bastian win the game. With a disgruntled noise, Landon threw his cards down.

"I warned you," I said.

"I'll get him next time."

Cole, never a man of many words, snorted. The former freelance assassin started shuffling the cards again.

“Where’s Alessio?” I asked.

Bastian shrugged. “Off somewhere on one of his jaunts. You know how he is.”

The former Mafia enforcer and assassin had gotten out of the life, but he still ran a few side jobs from time to time.

“And Rafe?” Rafe Archer was the last of our gang.

“I think he’s on the Riviera, or the Amalfi,” Bastian said.

I shook my head. The former MI6 assassin liked traveling. He also loved art and fast cars. He and Bastian had a competition going for designer suits.

“He should be back at the end of the month,” Bastian added.

Landon leaned forward and rapped his knuckles on the table. “I’d better get back to the clinic.”

I raised a brow. “It’s eleven o’clock at night.”

He rose with a powerful move of his hard-packed body. He’d come through the Army, into Delta Force, then into black ops. He didn’t talk much about his old work, but I knew it had left its mark.

Landon had gotten out and gotten a medical degree. Now, he healed instead of killed.

He ran a clinic on the Strip that welcomed anyone. Well, except for people Landon deemed on the wrong side of his moral code. He helped the homeless, the not-quite-legal, the poor, the rich. Once, he’d been known as the Blade, but now he used his impressive knife skills on the operating table.

“Night,” Landon said. “Catch you later.”

Watching him go, I sighed. “I’d better go, too. I’m running a course with the Avernus security team tomorrow.” Behind the scenes, I did security consulting for the casinos. Mostly here at the Avernus, but I did a few very quiet jobs for some select casinos. It paid well and it got me out of bed.

Mostly, I didn’t care. Mostly I felt tired, empty.

I reached up and rubbed the stubborn tightness in the muscles at the back of my neck. I’d thought leaving the business would be a new start for me. But two years later, I felt...nothing.

I didn’t want to go back, and I didn’t miss it, but retirement was boring as fuck.

“Some female company might brighten your mood,” Bastian suggested. “I know a few ladies who’d be happy to party with you.”

I made a sound. “I don’t need you to find me a woman.”

“Seriously, a decent fuck would help loosen you up.”

I growled. “I neither want, nor need, a female parade like you do.”

Bastian shrugged. “Your loss.” He paused and tilted his head. “I could find you a blonde who looks like that old picture you carry in your wallet.”

Shoving to my feet, my chest tight, I shot Bastian the finger. “I’m going to the head.”

I stomped to the bathroom, and heard the low mumble of Cole’s voice. “Lay off him.”

“I’m trying to help,” Bastian said.

I shoved the bathroom door open. The inside was as slick and stylish as the rest of the casino. Black, glossy tiles contrasted against the bronze fixtures. Round mirrors glowed with bronze lights. The floor was a mosaic of bronze, gray, and black hexagon tiles.

I stared at myself in the mirror. My brown hair was a little overlong and I probably needed to shave. Bastian’s words echoed in my head. I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my

wallet. The old, brown leather was worn.

It had been a gift when I was twenty-one from the prettiest girl I'd ever known. I flicked it open and saw the photo.

Georgiana Linden.

My chest rose and fell harshly. My best friend's little sister. I rubbed a finger gently along her smiling face.

Elliot and I had been best friends since we were ten. Back in our small town of Elk Falls in Idaho, we'd been thick as thieves. We'd ridden our bikes all over town, played baseball together, and one time, even stolen a pack of cigarettes and smoked them until we'd been sick. Georgie had been Elliot's sister. I'd never paid her much attention, but hadn't minded the few times she'd tagged along with us. She'd just been Georgie, with her stained jeans and messy hair.

I'm not sure when that had changed, but one day, I'd noticed that the gangly girl had turned into a pretty, young woman. That her jeans hugged gentle curves and her pale-blonde hair looked like starlight. It had been like getting hit by a bolt of lightning.

In the photo, she wore a white sundress, her hair spilling around her shoulders. It wasn't honey colored, but almost white-blonde. It wasn't curly, but wasn't straight, either, but hung in gentle waves. She was smiling at the camera. You couldn't see her freckles in the picture, but I knew they'd be there, sprinkling over her nose. She looked like she should be running along the beach, about to dive into aqua-blue waters.

Elliot and I had joined the Navy together. We'd gone home to visit, not too long after his mom had died. I'd turned twenty-one while we'd been home.

Georgie had given me the wallet as a gift.

And I'd kissed her.

It had been the best kiss in the world.

I rubbed my temple. Then over the next two years, I'd been recruited into a black ops program and Elliot had been killed.

I'd never gone back to Idaho.

My parents had died, and there'd been no reason for me to go back.

Except pretty Georgiana Linden. But by then, I was an assassin gaining a name for myself. And she deserved the best. Georgie deserved a good life in the sunshine.

I couldn't give her that. By then, I'd already had one foot in the darkness, cloaked in gray.

I knew she'd be living the good life. She'd been smart. I knew she'd gone to college because Elliot had told me. I knew she'd have a good job by now, be married to some steady guy. My gut cramped. She'd have a baby on her hip.

Yeah, living the beautiful life.

I closed my wallet. I'd never looked her up. I knew if I saw her, I wouldn't be able to resist the temptation.

Suddenly, several muffled thumps echoed through the wall. My head jerked up.

I knew that sound all too well.

Gunshots.

I shoved out of the restroom.

Cole and Bastian were on their feet, both tense. Bastian had a cellphone to his ear.

"How many?" His voice cut like a blade. "They blacked out the security cameras?" He emitted a low growl and met my gaze. "No, I'll take care of it. Don't call the police. It'll be dealt with. No one fucks with my casino."

He ended the call. "Three men in the High Rollers Suite next door pulled weapons." He

tapped his phone screen and pulled up video feed. “They spray-painted the security cameras.” A cold smile curled his lips. “But they can’t cover the secret ones they can’t see.”

Cole and I leaned forward.

“How did they get weapons through security?” Cole frowned as he studied the three guys.

The attackers wore black balaclavas. I saw one guy gesturing at the uniformed dealer and the players in the room. The players were all scared, holding their hands in the air. My gaze zeroed in on the weapon the guy was holding.

“The weapons are plastic,” I murmured. “Probably 3D-printed.”

Bastian’s phone pinged with a message from the security team.

“They caught them on security cameras in the elevator before they put their masks on,” he said. “They’re low-level thieves. Been arrested for hitting some of the seedier casinos.”

“Now they’re trying to make a name for themselves hitting the bigger places,” I said.

A muscle ticked on Bastian’s icy face. “You two up for helping me teach these assholes a lesson?”

Cole and I both nodded.

Bastian had saved my life twice—although he maintained it was three times. He could annoy the shit out of me, but he always had my back, and I always had his.

Cole had saved Bastian from a bad situation once, too, back when he’d just been known as the Darkwolf. He could track his prey, silently and relentlessly for days, weeks, months. Whatever it took to take them down.

For better or worse, these men were my brothers.

“Entrances?” I asked.

“They blocked the front door.”

“I can get through that,” Cole said.

Bastian nodded. “The service entrance at the back leads into a small kitchen and bar.”

“That’s mine,” I said.

“Good. I’ll come through the ceiling.”

Bastian was former CIA. The guy could sneak in anywhere. Once, he’d been called the Reaper.

He was the last thing you faced before you died.

All of us pulled out our weapons. None of us went anywhere unarmed.

Bastian had a Glock 19.

Cole had a Springfield Hellcat.

I had a custom SIG Sauer P226. I nodded at the others, and we split.

I went to the kitchen, where the server who’d been taking care of us was loitering, looking worried.

“Stay in here and stay down.”

The young man’s head bobbed rapidly.

A door led into the kitchen of the High Rollers Suite. I quietly opened it, slid through, then closed it behind me.

I heard loud voices and yelling.

“I want everyone’s money, phones, jewelry. Everything!”

I waited a beat to give Bastian and Cole time to get into position. The familiar feeling washed over me. A cool focus that flowed through my veins. I felt connected to all my senses.

Everything sharpened.

My fingers melded into the grip of my weapon. Making us one.

That should be enough time.

I whirled around the corner and whipped my weapon up.

Before I finished my next breath, I aimed in a fluid move that was second nature and took the shot.

A stocky man with a gun standing closest to me went down.

My next shot was for the man shouting at the front of the room near the dealer. But he was already moving, and I only clipped him. He dove down behind the table.

The man by the door swung around, aiming his gun my way.

I dove and rolled across the black-and-bronze carpet. I came up on one knee, and saw terrified clusters of gamblers.

“Get down,” I clipped.

Almost as one, they dropped to the carpet.

Bullets hit the poker table nearby. Bastian would be pissed.

Crash.

I saw Cole burst through the front door. He slammed into the shooter like a linebacker and took him to the floor.

The previous shooter I’d clipped rose, blood on his arm.

“Drop your fucking weapons or I’ll kill everyone.” He waved his handgun around.

He was so busy shouting, he didn’t see the danger drop down from the ceiling panel behind him.

Bastian quietly hit the floor and rose.

Bang.

One shot to the back of the head and the man went down.

I pushed to my feet. “Everyone stay down. The threat is neutralized, and security will be here soon.”

I glanced over at Cole who was standing by the door. His target was sprawled on the floor, his head at the wrong angle. Snapped neck.

The security team arrived, rushing through the front door. I nodded at them. They’d been handpicked by Bastian, and trained by me. Security at the Avernus was a well-oiled machine.

I moved to the side with Bastian and Cole. Security hustled the dealer and high rollers out of the room.

Bastian glanced dispassionately at the dead bodies. “Theo.”

“Boss?” The head of security stepped over to join us.

“Dispose of them. Where no one will find them.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Theo Garrett was older than the three of us, ex-military with some time as a mercenary thrown in. He was a shade under six feet, with a fit, muscular body, and salt-and-pepper hair. He always got the job done, no exceptions.

I suddenly felt bone-tired. “I’m heading home.” At least the walk to my villa on the casino grounds didn’t take long. Except for Bastian who had the penthouse, all the guys had villas.

Yep, it was like a fucking retirement village for retired assassins.

“Thanks for the help, Nash,” Bastian said.

I lifted my chin, then slid my gun into its holster and headed out.

Nope, my life was not sunshine. I knew I wasn’t living, I was surviving, but it was all I had.

At least I knew Georgie was living her perfect life.

Then, shoving dreams of things I couldn’t have out of my head, I headed out of the casino.