



Chapter One

She was hot, dusty, and she'd never felt better.

Dr. Layne Rush walked across her dig, her boots sinking into the hot Egyptian sand. Ahead, she saw her team of archeologists and students kneeling over the new section of the dig, dusting sand away with brushes and small spades, methodically uncovering a recently discovered burial ground.

To her left, the yawning hole in the ground where they'd started the dig was like a large mouth, ringed on one side by a wooden scaffold.

In there, below the sands, was a fantastic tomb, and Layne was only beginning to unravel its secrets.

She paused and drew in a breath of warm desert air. To the east lay the Nile, the lifeblood of Egypt. She swiveled and watched the red-orange orb of the sun sinking into the Western Desert sands. All around, the dunes glowed. It made her think of gold.

Excitement was a hit to her bloodstream. Only days ago, they'd discovered some stunning golden artifacts down in the excavation. She'd found the first one—a small ushabti funerary figurine that would have been placed there to serve the tomb's as-yet-unknown occupant in the afterlife. After that, her team had discovered jewelry, a golden scarab, and a small amulet of a dog-like animal.

Stars started appearing in the sky, like tiny pinpricks of light through velvet. She breathed in again. The most exciting thing was the strange inscriptions carved into the dog amulet.

They had mentioned Zerzura.

Oh, Layne really wanted to believe Zerzura existed—a fabulous lost oasis in the desert, filled with treasure. She smiled as she watched the night darkness shroud the dunes. Her parents had read her bedtime stories of Zerzura as a child.

Thoughts of her parents, and the hard punch of grief that followed, made Layne's smile disappear. Unfortunately, life had taught her that fairytales didn't exist.

She shook off the melancholy. She'd made a life for herself, a career, and spent most of her time off on adventures on remote dig sites. She'd held treasures in her hands. She shared her love of history with anyone who'd listen. She hoped that if her mom and dad were still alive, they'd be proud of what she'd achieved.

Layne made her way toward the large square tents set up for dealing with the artifacts. One was for storage and one for study.

"Hey, Dr. Rush."

Layne spotted her assistant, Piper Ross, trudging up the dune toward her. The young woman was smart, opinionated, and not afraid to speak her mind. Her dark hair was cut short, the tips colored purple.

"Hi, Piper."

The young woman grinned. "Give you a whip and you'd look like something out of a movie." Piper swept a palm through the air. "Dr. Rush, dashing female adventurer."

Layne rolled her eyes. "Don't start. I still haven't lived down that last interview I did." What Layne had thought was a serious article on archeology had morphed into a story that turned her into a damned movie character. They'd even Photoshopped a whip in her hand and a hat on her head. "How's that new eastern quadrant coming along?"

"Excellent." Piper stopped, swiping her arm across her sweaty forehead. "I've got it all documented and photographed, and the tape laid out. We're ready to start digging tomorrow morning."

"Well done." Layne was hoping the new area would yield some excellent finds.

"Well, I *am* insanely good at my job—that's why you hired me, remember?" Piper grinned.

Layne tapped her chin. "Was that it? I thought it was because you kept me in a constant supply of Diet Coke and chocolate."

Piper snorted. "Here they call it Coke Light, remember?"

Layne screwed up her nose. "I remember. The damn stuff doesn't taste the same."

"Yes, you really have to suffer out here on these remote digs."

"Can the sarcasm, Ross. Or I might forget why I keep you around."

Piper laughed. “A few of us are heading into Dakhla for the evening. Want to come?”

Dakhla Oasis was a two-hour drive north-east of the dig site. A group of communities, including the main town of Mut, were centered on the oasis. It was also where most of their local workers came from, and where they got their supplies.

Layne shook her head. “No, but thanks for the offer. I want to spend a bit more time on the artifacts we found, and take another look at the tomb plans. The main burial chamber and sarcophagus have to be in there somewhere.”

“Unless grave robbers got to it,” Piper suggested.

Layne shook her head. “When that local boy discovered this place it was clearly undisturbed.” In between the discovery that had made headlines and her university being awarded the right to dig, the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities had kept tight security on the place. She knew the Ministry would have preferred to run the dig themselves, but they just didn’t have the funding to run every dig in the country. “I’m going to find out who’s buried here, Piper.”

The younger woman shook her head. “Well, just remember, all work and no play makes Dr. Rush very boring and in need of getting laid.”

Layne rolled her eyes. “I’ll worry about my personal life, thanks for your concern.”

Piper stuck her hand on her hip. “You haven’t dated since Dr. Stevens.”

Ugh. Just hearing her colleague’s name made Layne’s stomach turn over. Dr. Evan Stevens had been a colossal mistake. He was tall and handsome, in a clean-cut way that suited his academic career as a professor of the Classics and History.

He’d been nice, intelligent. They’d liked the same restaurants. The sex hadn’t been stellar, but it was fine. Layne had honestly thought he was someone she could come to love. More than anything, Layne wanted it all—a career, to travel, a husband who loved her, and most importantly, a family of her own. She wanted the love she remembered her parents sharing. She wanted the career they’d only dreamed of for her.

Maybe that had blinded her to the fact that Evan was an asshole hiding in an expensive suit.

Layne waved a hand dismissively. “I’ve told you before, I don’t want to hear that man’s name.”

“I know you guys had a bad breakup...”

Ha. Piper didn't know half of it. Evan had stolen some of Layne's research and passed it off as his own. And he'd had the gall to tell her she was bad in bed. Moron.

"Look, go," Layne said. "Head into the oasis, soak in the springs, relax. You've got a lot of work to do tomorrow in the hot sun."

Piper groaned. "Don't remind me."

But Layne could see the twinkle of excitement in the young woman's eye. Layne saw it in her own every day. Being on a dig was always like that. Uncovering a piece of history...she could never truly describe how it made her feel. To touch something that someone had made, used, and cherished thousands of years ago. To uncover its secrets and try to piece together where it fit into the story of the world. To see what they could learn from it that might help them understand more about humanity.

She found it endlessly fascinating. Best job in the world.

After waving Piper off, Layne headed to the storage tent. The canvas door was still rolled up and secured at the top. As she stepped inside, the temperature dropped a little. Now that the sun had set, the temperature would drop even more. Nights in the desert, even in spring, could be chilly. She'd need to get to the portable shower they had set up and rinse off before it got too cold.

She'd lost count of the number of digs she'd been on. In the jungle, in the desert, under cities, by the ocean. She didn't care where they were, she just loved the challenge and thrill of uncovering the past.

Layne flicked on the battery-powered lantern hanging on the side of the tent. Makeshift shelves lined the space. Most were bare, waiting for the treasures they had yet to discover. But the first shelf was lined with shards of pottery, faience amulets, and stone carvings. But it was the locked box at the base of the shelf she was most interested in.

She quickly dialed in the code on the tumbler-style lock and lifted the lid.

God. She stroked the ushabti reverently, its gold surface glowing in the lantern-light. Her parents would have loved to have seen this. To know their daughter had been the one to find it.

The necklace was still in pieces, but back in their lab in Cairo, someone would piece it back together. The chunky golden scarab would fit perfectly in the palm of her hand. She carefully lifted the small, dog-like amulet. It was slightly smaller than the scarab, and the canine had a

slender body like a greyhound, and a long, stiff tail that was forked at the end. She was sure this was a set-animal, the symbol of the Egyptian god, Seth. She stroked the hieroglyphs on the animal's body and the symbols that spelled Zerzura.

Unfortunately, none of the hieroglyphs here made sense. She'd spent hours working on them. They were gibberish.

There was a noise behind her. A scrape of a boot in sand.

She turned, wondering who else had stayed behind.

A fist collided with her face in a vicious blow.

Pain exploded through Layne's cheek and she tasted blood. The blow sent her sprawling into the sand, the set-animal carving falling from her fingers.

Layne couldn't seem to focus. She lay there, her cheek to the sand, trying to clear her head. Her face throbbed and she heard voices talking in Arabic.

A black boot appeared in her line of sight.

A hand reached down and picked up the set-animal.

She swallowed, trying to get her brain working. Then she heard another voice. Deep, cool tones with a clipped British accent that made her blood run cold.

"Move it. I want it done. Fast."

She saw more people come into view. They were all wearing black balaclavas.

They started grabbing the artifacts and stuffing them into canvas bags.

"No." In her head her cry came out loud and outraged. In reality, it was a hoarse whisper.

"Bag everything," the cold voice behind her said.

No. She wasn't letting these thieves steal the artifacts. This was *her* dig and these were her antiquities to safeguard.

She pushed up onto her hands and knees. "Stop." She swung around and kicked at the knee of the man closest to her.

He tipped sideways with a cry.

"Uh-uh." The man with the cold voice stepped into her view. All she saw were his shiny black boots. Before she could do anything else, a hand grabbed her hair and yanked her head back.

The pain made her grit her teeth. Tears stung her eyes. She twisted, trying to pull away from him.

“A spitfire. I do like a feisty woman. Shame I don’t have time to play with you.”

He was behind her and she couldn’t see his face. She tried to jerk away but a hard fist slammed into her head again.

No, no, no. Her vision dimmed, the sound of the thieves’ voices receded.

Everything went black.

Declan Ward strode into the warehouse, his boots echoing on the scarred concrete. Colorado sunlight streamed through the large windows which offered a fantastic view of downtown Denver.

He was gritty-eyed from lack of sleep, and he was still adjusting to being back on Mountain Time.

He’d gotten in from finishing a job in South East Asia sometime around midnight. He’d unlocked his apartment, stumbled in and stripped, and fallen facedown on his bed.

Now, he was headed to work.

Lucky for him, it paid to be one of the owners. He lived above the warehouse that housed the main offices of Treasure Hunter Security.

Most of the open-plan space that had been a flour mill in a previous life was empty. But at the far end it was a different story.

Flat screens covered the brick wall, all displaying different images and scrolling feeds. Some sleek desks were set up, all covered in high-end computers.

There was a small kitchenette tucked into one corner, and next to that sat some sagging couches that looked like they’d come from a charity shop or some college student’s house. Just beyond those, near the large windows, were a pool table and an air hockey table.

“Dec? What are you doing here?”

A small, dark-haired woman popped up from her seat at one of the computers. As always, she was dressed stylishly in dark jeans, a soft red sweater the color of raspberries, and impossibly high heels.

“I work here,” he said. “Actually, I own the place. Have the mortgage to prove it.”

His sister came right up to him and threw her arms around him. He did the same and absorbed the non-stop energy that Darcy always seemed to emit. She'd never been able to sit still, even as a little girl.

"You just got back. You're supposed to have a week off." She patted his arms and frowned. She had the same gray eyes he did, but hers always seemed to look bluer than his.

"Finished the job, ready for the next one."

Her frown deepened, her hands landing on her hips. "You work too hard."

"Darce, I'm tired, and not really up for this rant this morning." She had this spiel down to a fine art.

She huffed out a breath. "Okay. But I'm not done. Expect an earful later."

Great. He tweaked her nose. He'd done it ever since she was a cute little girl in pigtails and dirt-stained clothes tagging around after him and their brother Callum. Dec knew she hated it.

"Hey, Dec. When did you get back?"

Dec clasped hands with one of his team. Hale Carter was a big man, topping Dec's six-foot-two by a couple of inches. He'd been a hell of a soldier, was a bit of a genius with anything mechanical, and a guy who managed to smile through it all. He had a wide smile and dark skin courtesy of his African American mother, and a handsome face that drew the ladies like flies.

But Dec knew the man had secrets too, dark ones. Hell, they all did. They'd all been to some terrible places with the SEAL teams. All had seen and done some things that left scars—both physical and mental.

Dec never pried. He offered jobs to the former soldiers who wanted to work—ones where they normally wouldn't get shot at while doing them—and he didn't ask them to reveal all their demons.

Some demons could never be vanquished. He felt his gut tighten. Dec had accepted that long ago.

"Got in last night. Nice to be home." But even as he said the words, Dec knew it wasn't true. He was already feeling the itch to be out, moving, doing something.

It had been two and a half years since he'd left the Navy and stopped heading into the world's worst war zones. Hell, he didn't leave—they'd booted him out. He'd just barely avoided a dishonorable discharge, but they'd wanted him gone anyway, and he didn't blame them.

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. In those two and a half years, he'd put together Treasure Hunter Security with his brother and sister, and he'd never looked back. Or at least, he tried not to.

Hale was one of their newest recruits and had fit right in.

Dec made his way to the kitchenette and poured a cup of coffee from the pot. Darcy would have made it, which meant it was barely drinkable, but it was black and strong and had caffeine, so it ticked the boxes.

He saw his best friend slouched on one of the couches, his boots on the scarred coffee table and his long legs cased in well-worn jeans. He was flicking a switchblade open and closed.

“Logan.”

“Dec.”

Logan O'Connor was another SEAL buddy, and the best friend Dec had ever had. They hadn't liked each other at first, but after a particularly brutal mission—followed by an equally brutal bar fight in the seedy backstreets of Bangkok where they had saved each other's backs—they'd formed a bond.

Logan was big as well, the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt showing off his muscled arms and tattoos. From the day they'd left the military, Logan had let his brown hair grow long and shaggy, and his cheeks were covered in scruff. He looked exactly how he was—dangerous and just a little wild.

His friend eyed Dec up and down, then raised a brow. “How was the job?”

“The usual.”

Actually, the jobs were never the same, and you were never sure what was going to happen. Providing security to archeological digs, retrieving stolen artifacts, occasionally turning some bad guys over to the authorities, doing museum security, or running remote expeditions for crazy treasure hunters...it kept things interesting.

“Anyone shoot at you?”

The female voice came from over by the computers. Morgan Kincaid sat cross-legged on top of a table. She was one of the few females to pass the rigorous BUD/S training for the Navy SEALs. But when the Navy had refused to let her serve on the teams, she'd left.

The Navy's loss was Dec's gain. Morgan was tough, mean, and hell in a firefight. She was tall, kept her dark hair short, and had a scar down the left side of her face from a knife fight.

"Not this trip," Dec answered.

"Too bad," Morgan murmured.

"All right everyone, listen up." Darcy's voice echoed in the warehouse.

They all headed over to where Darcy stood in front of her screens. Logan and Hale dropped into chairs, Morgan stayed sitting on top of the table, and Dec pressed a hip to a desk and sipped his coffee.

"Where's Cal?" he asked.

"He flew out a few days ago on another job. An anthropologist got snatched by a local tribe in Brazil."

"Hate the jungle," Logan said, his voice a growl.

"And Ronin?" Dec asked.

Ronin Cooper was another full-time Treasure Hunter Security employee. Dec kept a small full-time team and hired on trusted contractors when he needed more muscle.

"Coop's in northern Canada on an expedition."

Dec raised his brows, trying to imagine Ronin in the snow.

Hale hooted with laughter. "Shit, not too many shadows to hide in when you're in the snow."

Dec sipped his coffee again. Ronin Cooper was good at blending into the shadows. You didn't see him coming unless he wanted you to. Another former SEAL, Ronin had gotten out earlier than Dec, and had done some work for the CIA. Lean and intense, Ronin was the scary danger no one saw coming.

Dec settled back against the desk. "What's this new job?"

"An archeological dig in Egypt got attacked yesterday." Darcy pointed a small remote at her screens. A map of Egypt appeared with a red dot out in the Western Desert. "It's being run by the Rhodes University out of Massachusetts."

Dec raised a brow. Rhodes had a hell of an archeological department. They had their fingers in digs all over the world and prided themselves on some of the biggest finds in recent times. Every kid with dreams of being the next Indiana Jones wanted to study at Rhodes.

“The dig is excavating a newly-discovered tomb and surrounding necropolis,” Darcy continued. “They’d recently found some artifacts.” She pointed again and some images of artifacts appeared. “All gold.”

Hale whistled. “Nice.”

Dec’s muscles tensed. He knew what was coming.

“And now the artifacts are gone.” Darcy leaned back on the desk. “The head of the dig was working on the artifacts at the time and was attacked. She survived. And now, we’re hired. One, to ensure no more artifacts are stolen, two to ensure the safety of the dig’s workers, and three—” Darcy’s blue-gray gaze met Dec’s “—to recover the stolen artifacts.”

Dec felt a muscle tick in his jaw. “It’s Anders.”

“Ah, hell.” Logan tipped his head back. “This is not good.”

Hale was frowning. “Who’s Anders?”

“Dec has a hard-on for the guy,” Morgan muttered.

Dec ignored Logan and Morgan. “Ian Anders. A former British Special Air Service soldier.”

Hale’s frown deepened. “Heard those SAS guys are hard-core.”

“They are,” Dec confirmed.

Darcy stepped forward. “Declan and Logan’s SEAL team was working a joint mission with Anders’ team in the Middle East.”

“Caught the sadistic fucker torturing locals.” Even now, the screams and moans of those people came back to Dec. A nightmare he couldn’t seem to outrun. “He kept them hidden, visited them every few days. Men, women...children.” Dec let out a breath. “No idea how long he’d had them there.”

“You saved them?” Hale said.

“No.” Dec stood and took his mug to the sink. He tipped the coffee he could no longer stomach down the drain.

“You did the right thing, Dec,” Logan growled.

Silence fell. Dec was not going to talk about this.

Darcy cleared her throat. “The British Military gave Anders a slap on the wrist.”

“Shit,” Hale said. “So what’s he got to do with stolen artifacts?”

“When he left the SAS, he got into black-market antiquities,” Declan said. “We’ve run into him a few times on jobs.”

“The guy is whacked,” Logan added. “He likes to hurt and kill. And he likes the pretty cash he gets for selling artifacts.”

“And you think this is his work?” Hale looked at the screens.

Dec had learned to trust his gut. Sometimes despite the facts or evidence, despite the fact you had nothing else to go on. “Yeah, it’s Anders.”

“Logan, Morgan, and Hale, this is your assignment,” Darcy said. “You’ll head to Egypt to meet Dr. Layne Rush.”

Another screen filled with a photo of a woman.

Dec blinked, feeling his belly clench, even though he’d never seen this woman before.

He wasn’t even sure what warranted the gut-deep response. She was attractive, but not the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. In the photo, she had sunglasses pushed up on her dark hair. Her hair was chocolate brown and straight as a ruler. It brushed her shoulders, except for the bangs cut bluntly just across her eyes. Her skin was so incredibly clear, not a blemish on it, and her eyes were hazel.

She had smart stamped all over her. *Hell*. Dec had a thing for smart women.

But he usually steered well clear. He wasn’t made for hearts and rainbows. He’d just seen too much and done too much. His relationships generally lasted one night, and he enjoyed women who wanted the same as him—uncomplicated, no-strings sex.

“I’m going.” Dec’s voice echoed in the warehouse.

Darcy’s beautiful face got a pinched look. “Declan—”

“No arguments, Darce. I’m going.”

“You’re going because of Anders,” she said.

Dec glanced at the photo of Dr. Rush. “I’m going to pack.”

His sister sighed and looked at Dec. “You’re sure you won’t change your mind.”

“Nope.”

Another sigh. “The jet’s fueled and waiting. Logan, please keep him out of trouble.”

Logan snorted. “I’m good, but I’m not that good.”

Darcy shook her head. “All of you, have a good trip...and stay safe. Please.”

Dec smiled, trying to break the tension. “You know me.”

A resigned look crossed her face. “Yes. Unfortunately, I do. So when the trouble hits, call me.”