



## Chapter One

She hated wearing heels.

Morgan Kincaid scowled down at the offending shoes. She was also wearing a tight, little cocktail dress in a brilliant aquamarine. Eye-catching and bold. Exactly as she'd planned. In addition, she wore far more makeup than usual—which she also hated—but she'd accented her eyes with smoky black and painted her lips red.

She didn't mind the dress that much, except that there was nowhere to store her SIG Sauer. She wrinkled her nose. She hated leaving her handgun behind.

As her heels clicked on the path leading up to the museum entrance, she was glad that she'd at least been able to strap the smallest knife from her collection to her thigh. Not that she should need a weapon for this job.

Morgan looked up and studied the western façade of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. She liked the eye-catching wall of glass. The modern feel contrasted with the amazing exhibitions on display inside. The museum contained everything from history exhibits, to dinosaur fossils, and even a planetarium.

She paused and turned back to see the view. The museum was perched on the edge of City Park, with a view of the city skyline, and the even more impressive outline of the Rocky Mountains beyond. The entire scene was backlit by the setting sun.

"Morgan, I'm entering the party."

The deep male voice of Declan Ward echoed through the tiny earpiece in her left ear. Dec was her boss at Treasure Hunter Security. After a career in the Navy, Morgan had left when they'd refused to let her join the SEAL teams. After a few months adrift, uncertain what to do with her life, she'd answered a knock on her door to find Dec on her doorstep.

The former Navy SEAL and his brother, Callum, had offered her a job she couldn't refuse. Along with their tech-savvy sister Darcy, the Ward siblings had created a security business to provide protection to archeological digs, expeditions, and high-profile or valuable museum exhibits across the globe.

Morgan liked living in Denver, and she loved working at THS.

She discreetly touched her ear, fiddling with her sparkly, dangling earring. "I'm not far behind you."

"Remember, we've been hired to test the exhibit security of the Mughal Emerald Pendant. Get close to the emerald and check the security. You know what to do."

She certainly did. "You got it."

"And keep an eye out for Coop," Dec added. "He's on the inside."

Morgan fought back a snort. You only saw Ronin Cooper if he wanted you to see him. Also a former SEAL and a former CIA agent, the man was an expert at hiding—in the shadows or plain sight.

She smoothed a hand over her short, black hair. She kept it cut short so it stayed out of her way on missions. She continued on toward the doorway, and the short line of people waiting to enter. As she reached the guard at the doorway, she smiled, upping the charm. She watched interest flicker in the man's eyes, and his gaze dropped down, lingering on her legs. *Men*. They were so predictable.

Out of her small clutch, she pulled her glossy invite for the evening's special exhibit. He checked it, eyed her legs again, and then waved her through.

Morgan stepped into the heart of the party. The western side of the museum had several levels that could be hired for private functions. This level was filled with people dressed to impress, wandering through multiple displays that had been set up. Each one showcased the museum's latest acquisitions.

A collection of priceless jewels of the Mughal Rulers of India.

She checked her coat and then wandered through the crowd. The sounds of quiet conversation, low laughter, and clinking champagne flutes mingled in her ears. Outside, the sun had finally set, and the city spread out below them in a twinkle of lights.

Morgan circled the room, noting all the exits, the stairs leading up to the next level, and the doorways into the kitchen and to the main part of the museum. It was second nature to her. She'd worked in Naval Intelligence prior to passing all the physical tests to join the SEAL teams. She'd wanted to join special forces so much, and follow in her father's footsteps.

The thought of her dad was like a sharp slash of a knife. God, a day never went past where she didn't miss the old guy. Because she had the wrong equipment between her legs, her dreams of special forces had been crushed. Mack Kincaid would have protested loud and proud for his daughter.

Morgan fought back the old bitterness and kept her shoulders relaxed. She was doing good work now, and she loved it. She hoped her dad would be proud.

She did another circle of the party, this time paying attention to the artifacts on display. The jewels were incredible. There was a huge sapphire inlaid with gold and other small gemstones. A small box made entirely of carved emeralds. A large, heart-shaped, diamond pendant.

God, Declan's fiancée Layne would go nuts for this stuff. The archeologist was passionate about her work. Morgan liked history as well, and truly believed it deserved to be protected. But at the end of the day, some of the stuff THS helped uncover and safeguard was just old and ugly.

She turned her head and caught sight of Dec. She was careful not to let her gaze linger on him. Although, dressed in a sharp suit, the man deserved a second look. She was used to seeing him in cargo pants and T-shirts. In a suit, the man looked mighty fine. Layne would go nuts for that, too. The two of them couldn't keep their hands off each other.

Morgan sighed. She'd seen Declan wet, muddy, sweaty, and—once or twice—naked. While she could appreciate his rugged looks, she wasn't attracted to him. He was like a brother to her. All of her colleagues were: from Dec's flirty brother Cal, to big, tough Logan.

It was just her luck that she worked with some prime specimens of the male species, and didn't feel a spark with any of them. She frowned. Most days she wondered if she'd ever find the right guy. She was the queen of the first date. She'd been on a long string of them, and rarely had a second one. She just couldn't find a guy who made her melt, and who could keep up with her at the same time. Most guys glimpsed her guns or knives and ran in the opposite direction.

She paused and spotted a guy checking her out. He was staring at her legs. She mentally rolled her eyes. Who needed a guy, anyway? They were all so boring and predictable.

“A drink, Miss?” A waiter paused beside her, holding out a glass of champagne.

Morgan was about to refuse, when she glanced at the waiter again. It took her a second to realize it was Coop. She accepted the glass with a smile, knowing it wouldn't actually be champagne. She tried to work out what he'd done to make himself look different. Padding in his cheeks, maybe? Shaping on his chin?

“Thank you.” She took a sip. Sparkling water.

Coop pulled out a cloth and started to wipe a nearby table. He leaned close to her. “Keep flashing that smile and those legs. Every man in the room is watching you.”

“They always do,” came Dec's dry voice through the earpiece.

Morgan sniffed. She didn't dress up very often, but when she did, she knew she cleaned up pretty well. “Tell me more about this emerald pendant?”

“The Mughal Rulers of India were renowned for their gemstone collections. Especially their carved emeralds. The emerald pendant is hexagonal-cut, just shy of one hundred and fifty carats, and intricately carved with lotus and poppy flowers.”

Morgan took another sip of her drink, her gaze falling on the largest pedestal at the front of the room. The emerald pendant was the star of the show.

“We were hired by Dr. Zachariah James,” Dec continued. “He's a well-known archeologist and has made a name for himself finding very rare artifacts that were considered lost forever.”

Morgan lifted her glass to cover her lips. “A regular Indiana Jones.”

“My father speaks very highly of him,” Dec said.

Instantly, she imagined Zachariah James to be an older, professor-like man with graying hair. Dec's dad might be a silver fox—fit and gorgeous—but Morgan was well aware that most historians and archeologists looked nothing like Dr. Oliver Ward.

“The emerald is on display just ahead of you,” Dec continued. “It's on an open stand. No covers.”

*Risky.* She headed in that direction, instantly spotting the sparkle of green under the lights. She passed two younger men who were gawking at her, their mouths open. She flashed them a flirtatious smile.

Then she reached the emerald.

“Wow.” As she circled the pedestal she didn’t need to fake her amazement. The jewel was damn impressive. The large emerald was carved with exquisite flowers and circled by small diamonds. It would fit perfectly in the palm of her hand.

She leaned forward, no longer looking at the emerald. Now she was searching for any sign of the security system—alarm or pressure sensors. Nothing was visible.

“One hundred and forty-two carats. Intricate design of flowers that matches designs you’ll find in the Taj Mahal. She’s a beauty.”

The deep voice, edged with a hint of playfulness, made her look up.

Across the emerald’s stand, her gaze collided with a man’s. Something inside Morgan went very still.

She sized him up in a second. A few inches over six feet, broad shoulders that filled out his white dress shirt, fit and lean, with tanned skin that suggested he liked the outdoors, and the sharp, handsome face of a fallen angel. He had tawny hair, filled with brown and gold strands, that looked like it was well beyond needing a cut, and green eyes the same shade as the emerald in front of them, which watched her with blatant interest.

Morgan finally found her voice. “It’s gorgeous.” *A little bit like you.*

He smiled. “I have a weakness for beautiful things.”

She fought back the urge to blink. Damn, the man’s smile was a weapon. He had straight, white teeth, beautiful lips, and dimples. Morgan was a sucker for dimples.

*Pull yourself together, Morgan.* She raised a brow and smiled. “Does that line usually work for you?”

He lifted a shoulder. “I’ve had more luck with it than you’d expect.” He extended a hand to encompass the room. “I work here. I helped create this exhibit.”

Morgan forced herself to focus on the job and not this man’s charm and good looks. “Oh? Well, congratulations. It’s a great party. I almost didn’t come.”

He circled the stand. “Why?”

She shrugged. “My ex got the tickets, and, well…” She waved a hand, falling easily into her character. “There was a messy breakup. I’m sure you don’t want to hear all the gory details.” She smiled. “I got the tickets for this exhibition, though.”

Another sexy smile. “Your ex must be an idiot.”

“Now, there is something we can both agree on.” She lifted her glass and took a sip. Her gaze fell back on the emerald. “Tell me more about this fabulous gem.”

“It was commissioned by the Mughal Court, possibly sometime during the reign of Emperor Shah Jahan. That puts it somewhere in the mid-1600s. Sometime after that, it made its way into the hands of an official of the British East India Company.”

Morgan tilted her head. “British East India Company. I’ve heard of that.”

The man nodded. “The English company, along with its fleet of East Indiaman ships and large, private armies, eventually controlled large areas of India and much of the trade of cotton, silk, salt, tea, and opium. The company officials established sprawling estates and helped themselves to much of India’s treasures. They laid the groundwork for the British Crown to later step in and assume rule in India.”

He lit up as he told her the history. “Fascinating. So how did this emerald end up here?”

“It was transported as part of cargo headed back to England on a ship called the *Verelst*. The ship sank off the coast of Mauritius.” That smile again. “My team and I dived the wreck last year, and one of the artifacts we recovered was this incredible gem.”

“You dive shipwrecks?”

He nodded. “Underwater archeology is one of my areas of interest.” Suddenly, his gaze moved over her shoulder, and he stiffened. “Hold that thought, and please excuse me for just a moment.”

“Sure.”

Morgan pretended to fiddle with her hair, and glanced in the direction her private tour guide was looking. He was deep in quiet conversation with a security guard, but his gaze was on a man leaning against the wall.

He’d spotted Declan.

*Hmm.* So whoever this guy was, he knew that THS had been hired to test the security.

After the guard had moved off in Dec’s direction, the man looked back at her and smiled.

“Sorry about that.”

God, the megawatt smile was panty-melting. The man had it down to a fine art. “No problem. I realize you’re working, as well.” She turned back to the emerald. “So, is it safe? I can’t believe you have an amazing emerald just sitting out here like this.”

His face turned a little serious. “We have state-of-the-art security.”

“Oh?” Morgan made a big show of looking at the sides of the pedestal.

He laughed and of course, he had a sexy laugh, too. “You can’t see anything. There’s a special sensor system that picks up body heat that’s in close range to the emerald for too long, and triggers an alarm. And a backup.”

She arched her head to look at him. “A backup?”

“If someone gets past the first system, then it is also calibrated to the emerald’s exact weight. If it’s moved off the pedestal, then an alarm is triggered.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Thank you. Do you need a refill?” He gestured at her empty glass.

She shot him a smile and watched his gaze drop to her lips. “I’d love one.” She handed her empty glass to him, and their fingers brushed. His gaze flicked back up to hers, locked there. Morgan felt a faint trickle of electricity through her hand, and she blinked.

“What’s your name?” he suddenly demanded.

“We’re having so much fun, I don’t want to tell you and break the spell,” she said, only half kidding.

The smile was back. “Okay, Ms. Mysterious. Stay right here, and I’ll convince you to tell me when I get back.”

Then he was gone, walking through the crowd with a loose-hipped stride that made more than one woman look his way.

*Focus, Morgan.* She pulled off one of her earrings and peeled off the tiny sensor attached to it. She stepped closer to the pedestal and gently pressed the tiny, transparent dot to the stand.

“Dec?”

“Got it. I’m patching you through to Darcy.”

“I’m here,” came Darcy’s melodious voice. Dec’s younger sister was sitting several miles away, in the converted warehouse that housed the Treasure Hunter Security offices. Morgan could picture her sitting in front of her wall of screens.

“I’m tapping into the security system now,” Darcy said.

“I need to know how much this emerald weighs,” Morgan murmured.

“Searching now,” Darcy said.

Morgan scanned around the crowd for that tawny head of hair. She spotted him over by the bar. He was a head taller than most of the other people in the room. The bartender was handing him two full glasses. “Hurry it up.”

“Fifty-five grams. And the heat sensor will be disabled in three, two, one...”

Coop walked past Morgan, handing her a napkin topped with a few hors d’oeuvres. “Fifty-five grams,” he murmured quietly.

Okay, now for the switch. Morgan moved closer to the emerald, looking like she was studying the tiny carvings on the gem. Her heart was beating hard and fast, but she breathed steadily.

She held her left hand up over the emerald and lifted the hors d’oeuvres close with her other.

It was all a matter of timing. And Morgan had excellent timing.

With a quick slide, she skimmed the emerald off as she set the napkin in its place.

Adrenaline flooded her system, but she’d had years of practice controlling it. She took a step back, her fingers closing over the emerald. It felt cool in her hand.

No alarm sounded, and no one converged on her with shouts or screams. She quickly turned, wrapping the emerald in a small cloth she’d brought, and slipping the priceless gem down her neckline, nestling it in her cleavage.

She wandered over to the window, looking at the reflection of the party in the glass.

“Slick.” Dec’s amused voice.

Morgan hid a smile.

“There you are.” Mr. Handsome had returned. He handed her another champagne flute. “Now, I just have to know your name.”

Job done, Morgan decided she deserved a drink. She took a large gulp, the champagne fizzing on her tongue. Ugh, she’d much prefer a beer. “You first.”

“Dr. Zachariah James.”

Morgan choked on the champagne.

Dr. James moved closer, patting a hand to her back. His warm palm hit the bare skin between her shoulder blades. “Hey, take it easy. Did it go down the wrong way?”

She was instantly distracted by the feel of his hand. Skin to skin. Again, she felt that disconcerting tingle where they touched. “I’m fine, Dr. James.”

“Please, call me Zach.” Up close, she saw golden streaks through the green of his eyes. “Dr. James is so stuffy, and Zachariah is a mouthful.”

He straightened, his gaze moving over her shoulder. Then his flirtatious manner disappeared in a blink, his body stiffening. It happened so fast she couldn’t quite believe it, and his hard face became nearly unrecognizable.

She turned, following his gaze. He was staring at the pedestal...and the napkin of hors d’oeuvres resting on top of it.

Dr. James’ hands turned to fists at the sides of his rigid body. “Goddammit!”