

Chapter One

Be the wall. Be the stone. Be invisible. I chanted the mantra silently as the temple guards strolled past. Frank, a heavysset older man, was no more than three feet away, yet he wouldn't see me. I called it blending, but whatever the skill was or however I came to have it, the ability to become nearly invisible had saved my ass hundreds of times. More important, it allowed me to be a damn good thief, maybe the best in the world.

The skill and the reputation I'd earned with it had brought me here, to hiding in a small hole carved into a wall of dirt that had swallowed this long-buried temple. After more than eight hours I was stiff and tired and dreaming of a Big Mac. Despite my nonviolent nature, I'd seriously consider killing for those all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese... Even the thought of that juicy burger had me drooling, and since I couldn't reach my chin without drawing attention to my hiding spot, dreaming of burgers proved to be a bit of a problem.

On days like this, I almost regretted my personal rules. Number one on my list of codes to follow was *If I accept a job, do anything it takes to get it done*. I was well known for my tenacity. Once I sank my teeth into a job, I owned it. The trick was making good choices about which offers were worthy of my interest. Fortunately, this particular job was more than a little worthy.

Two million...

Okay, two million American bucks for a simple recovery was a very worthy reason—worthy enough to be suspicious.

Weaver, the mysterious guy who'd hired me, had the money to throw away and so here I was, trapped for another hour. The final stage of the recovery would take place after the temple emptied for the evening. Soon. Very soon, I could snag the goods and hit the road.

Only one archaeologist remained. Davis, aka Dr. Benjamin Davis, seemed to be packing up, and my recon had shown that the overly studious man sometimes had to be dragged out by his colleagues. He'd provided me with much-needed entertainment during the last few hours of stillness.

Davis was scrumptious in a super-geek sort of way, and he didn't have even a single clue why all the lady rock docs hovered at his elbows. His wavy brown hair tickled his shoulders, and his tanned complexion set off his gray eyes so nicely. Not to mention the man had an ass that just didn't quit.

Davis raised his arms over his head as if to stretch the aches from abused back muscles. His broad shoulders tightened the T-shirt and left me drooling for a whole different kind of meat. How long had it been since I'd taken time off for some carnal enjoyment? Davis's long, lean body would make for a wonderful playground. I could rub those sore muscles until they relaxed completely. And then—

He spun in my direction.

I froze. Had he caught me watching? I'd been ogling him all day. I held my breath as his gaze skittered over my hiding place. I was no more than ten feet from him. Would he see me?

No, no one ever saw me.

And why was that thought disappointing? For the first time in a long time, I wanted to be seen.

I'd been hiding since childhood—first from the abusive bastard who'd been my father and then stealing just to survive on the streets. All I'd ever wanted was to be invisible. But the look in Davis's eyes drew me like a magnet. Despite my past and all its hard lessons, I wanted Davis to see me, see the real me.

I mentally snorted in self-disgust. No one saw the real me. Was I the runaway or the master thief? Was I the elegant woman in red or the one cracking the safe? Or was I none of those? After all the lies and pretending, did I even have a real side?

I locked up my wayward thoughts and threw away the key. Shit, this was the problem with a stakeout like this. It gave me too damn much time to think.

The good doctor hadn't seen me, and he wouldn't until I wanted him to. Much as I might enjoy watching him, this job, like most, played out on a one-way street. I wasn't about to blow my cover just so he might ogle me back. Teeth buried in the job, I'd take what was targeted and get out. I'd done it hundreds of times, never been caught or seen and rarely left any sign I'd been there at all, except for the missing items on the few occasions when I couldn't leave a replica.

Davis turned back to a small container he'd been packing. The man was covered in fine dust from his long day of work, but he carefully cleaned each of his tools and placed them into his immaculate case. His large hands were fascinating, mesmerizing. Each smooth movement was ritualistic. It was a familiar ceremony, one I'd watched him perform just the night before.

I understood and respected his need to protect and care for personal, professional tools. I did the same with my weapons and liberation accessories. The similarity made us seem closer, more alike than moments before.

He settled the case inside a canvas bag, gathered up his hat and strolled out of the room, switching off the primary lights as he left.

Just a little bit longer...

I waited another twenty minutes before dropping from my protective crevice. Frank and his partner would be through in another half hour. Security was pretty lax, and this time it would cost them. Moving quickly through the excavation site, I searched for the artifacts I'd been sent for. Several priceless objects were scattered about the room, but what I'd come for was one of the lesser-known prizes. Only one of the archaeologists had paid it any attention. Davis, of course. It was just another interest we had in common.

The hours of observation paid off and I claimed the small box within minutes.

The wood of the six-inch-square box was ancient but still strong and beautifully carved with intricate symbols, glyphs of some ancient writing. But it was still a box, and the true treasure would be found within its sealed frame. I carried the treasure back to my hole and took out my lock pick set. Hopefully it would be of some use in opening the box. Only after confirming what it held could I make my escape.

First I studied the lock and the hinges. They gave away no clues as to the best technique to open it. Then I had to hide while the guards passed.

Once I was alone again, I slipped the first pick into the tiny opening in the front, feeling for whatever mechanism

kept the box closed. A soft click, which I was fairly certain I hadn't caused, reached my ears. The artifact opened, revealing several beautiful jeweled pendants, as I'd hoped. Each was designed to frame a unique, delicate dragon in different jeweled tones. I counted them and began to close the lid once more.

The amethyst dragon pendant caught my gaze and held me transfixed.

It was magnificent. An oval of black encircled a dragon inlaid with purple stone. I picked up the pendant, breaking every personal code I held dear, and caressed the smooth, cool gem. Without a single coherent thought, I dropped the fine chain over my head, letting the warm stone of the pendant settle between my breasts.

As dreams went, this one was a doozie. I was flying over the land but not in some common airplane. No, I was flying like a bird. The wind carried me, gentle as an infant's cradle and as wild as the storm-tossed sea. My arms were stretched wide and they kept me aloft with great sweeps. No, not arms...wings. I had wings. I looked to my right and saw a long glittering wing in a familiar amethyst shade.

I should remember that color from somewhere other than my shiny scales. I should, but I couldn't grasp the slippery memory.

So I flew on, letting the ground rush beneath my glistening body like water in a riverbed. And like that river, I seemed to be following an invisible trail to some unknown source. I looked down and saw my shadow cutting over the land. My long, serpentine outline promised desolation to all those below. Then there were other shadows. More of the giants flew beside me, all

seeking the source.

The source...

And there he stood. Not a place, but a man, and even as I watched, he transformed into a great silver beast and swept up into the sky, breathing fire down upon the land. He set the pace, and we others followed.

We flew and left nothing but devastation in our wake.

I awoke tucked inside my hidden crevice, swallowing a gasp. *Shit!* Night had fallen away and the workers were back in the temple. I was safely hidden in my little hole, but how long would I stay that way once they discovered the missing artifacts?

How had I fallen asleep? I was never so reckless. *Never.* I felt the weight of the pendant and slowly clasped the offending jewel. I needed to get it and the box into the small bag I had strapped at my waist. And then I needed to get my ass out of Dodge, or Tiahuanaco, where this oldest temple had been discovered.

The pendant was warm to the touch, as if it had soaked up my body heat, and after hours of being tucked securely between my breasts it wasn't much of a surprise. But what was a surprise was how it seemed to be glued to my skin. No matter how I pried at it, the pendant remained stuck to me.

Damn. Now what? I slid my fingers around the edges in the hope I could pull it free, and all I found was a perfect oval seal, holding it tight.

But there had been no glue. Surely I would have felt it before, and I hadn't. All I'd felt was the cool amethyst and the texture of the dragon. That must have been what inspired the strange dream.

What else besides glue could bind the thing to my

skin?

My mind whispered one word. *Magic.*

There was no such thing. The only supernatural occurrence I'd ever seen was my own ability to get in and out of tight places without being caught. And as far as I knew, blending wasn't magic. I didn't know what it was or how it worked, but not by magic.

Still, the pendant clung to me in a way I didn't understand. Maybe it was some ancient booby trap set by the people who'd made the pendants? One archaeologist had said this temple might be more than ten thousand years old, but he'd been hushed quickly by the others. Not that I cared where the damn thing came from or even how it became stuck. All that mattered to me was getting the pendant unstuck. I had to get it free before I could finish the recovery job. I wasn't about to take back one of the artifacts attached to my body. If this employer was like most, he would have no qualms about cutting it from my flesh, and I wasn't about to let that happen.

Prying at the pendant did nothing.

I needed help.

My gaze darted to where Davis entered the temple. Now, that was a temptation. He would surely know more about the artifact than any of the other eggheads, but how could I get him to help me without getting caught by the guards?

Take him.

It was the only option. From what I'd seen, he wasn't going to let me walk out with the pendant no matter where it was stuck. No, he was too goody-goody to help a thief. Dr. Davis would have to be captured and given no choice. I wasn't big into violence or personal crime but was capable when the job called for it. An ancient pendant

attached to my body? Yep, this job was screaming for full-on response.

I started to formulate a plan, but my success relied on Davis being last out again. From what I'd seen and overheard, he was always last to leave, and I prayed he stayed in character for at least one more night.

As the hours passed, I studied the doctor and calculated what would best motivate the man to help me. I let my fingers stroke the intricate carvings on the box. They had to provide the information needed to get the pendant off. At least I hoped they did.

And the doctor would help me decipher the glyphs.

Finally the other workers left and only Dr. Davis remained. He bent low over his notebook, appearing oblivious to the time and his surroundings. Completely unaware as I crept down from the shadows and moved silently behind him.

Then he burst from his still pose and sprinted across the temple to the storage area where I'd found the box. His hands moved frantically over the shelves of the artifacts yet to be cleaned until he found the bare place that my theft had left behind. His fingers settled there as if waiting for the missing artifact to reappear. He was in for a big surprise.

I shadowed him, sliding my slim, sexy knife up against his throat while holding the artifact before him to get his attention.

This should have kept him passive and listening, but instead Davis jerked to the side and dove for the box. It took all my skill to not slash his throat open when he spun toward the weapon. I leaped back but held my suddenly meager knife up before me.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Excellent question. The name Antonia tickled my lips. But I swallowed the bizarre urge of honesty. I'd long ago decided to never again be scared little Antonia Giovanni. I steadied my stance and asked, "Does my name matter?"

"No, it doesn't. What are you doing here? Why did you take the *Tawasuyus*? It's far too precious to be handled by an amateur." He reached for the box once more, surging forward until my knife pressed against his chest.

I kept the box just out of his reach and waited for him to back off. "I came for this box and I will leave here with it."

"That's what you think." He didn't back off even a hair. The knife caught on a shirt button, cutting it free with a quiet ping.

I took a deep breath. This was not going the way I expected. How had he turned the situation around on me? I couldn't hold back my frustrated sigh. "Just tell me what the glyphs on the box say, and maybe I won't have to take it."

His gray eyes narrowed. "Why do you care?"

I slid my knife into its sheath. Taking a deep breath, I stared into his smoky eyes and calculated my options. None of them looked good. Rule number one was back in play. It was time to do whatever was needed to get the job done.