

# Chapter One

Flynn scanned the crowd with a wary eye, intent on making sure his desire for a drink wouldn't be disturbed by some idiot looking for a bar room brawl. All he wanted was to relax for a few minutes before meeting his old friend down at the police station.

His eyes flashed a quick circle of the room, coming to rest on a dark-haired woman sipping a drink at the table closest to the bar and reading a newspaper. By past experience, he knew those tables were usually reserved for important people, like the owner or his friends. He tried to move his gaze on past her but his eyes wouldn't cooperate, so he finally gave in and studied her. Chandelier lights reflected and shimmered in the coal black waterfall of hair that had been swept to one side, leaving a delicate ear bare. A black, spaghetti strap cocktail dress clung lovingly to her curvaceous figure and ended teasingly at mid thigh. Black stiletto heels completed her and set off shapely legs and trim ankles to perfection. Those legs were crossed and one small foot was absently kicking the air while she read.

Classy was the description that sprang to mind.

Feeling a responsive tightening in his loins, his dark brows slashed downward in disapproval. He didn't have time for bar floozies, which was probably what she was. Most likely she belonged to the owner of the club but could be had anyway, if the price was right. In spite of his misgivings raging curiosity bade him see her face. He moved with panther like grace through the thong of people, angling for the bar and a better view.

Disgusted with himself, he tried to veer away from the girl at the last minute, but she suddenly lifted her head to stare quizzically at him as if he had asked her a question.

Flynn found himself a prisoner of eyes so blue they looked hand painted, a startling bright blue like the brilliance of sapphires in the sunlight or the velvety blue of a peacock feather. Fire kissed his blood and his heated gaze raced down her pert nose and narrowed at lush lips the color of elderberry wine. Two matching puckered long berries just waiting to be devoured with a plucking kiss. The milky rich color of her complexion was flawless from her smooth forehead to the curving swells of her well rounded breasts barely peeking above the black silk. She was artistically perfect and the artist in him responded feverishly.

"Name your poison, Mac."

The bartender's mundane request forced him to tear his eyes from the beauty and he turned to belly up to the bar, staunchly telling himself to get a grip.

"Seven and Seven," he replied caustically, refusing to allow himself the dubious pleasure of turning around. He could feel her eyes locked on his back and he knew she was studying him in return. Little flicking flames danced along his back and shoulders as if everywhere her gaze touched his skin ignited.

Did she like what she was seeing? He squashed the question as quickly as it flitted through his mind. It didn't matter if she did.

Flynn had never been so powerfully aware of a woman before but he wasn't looking for a woman. He was only in Reno on business. He didn't have time in his life for women anyway, especially with his current fiasco. Katherine was fighting him tooth and nail for every dime she could get. Sometimes he wondered if there was a woman alive that wasn't filled with avarice.

Although he'd been in St. George for several years now, coming home to Reno was always a treat, even if it was business. Lately, he'd been thinking about returning and setting up his own art gallery instead of managing for someone else. Even though his parents no longer lived in Reno, he was feeling the pull of his birthplace and childhood. He'd even gone so far as to look for properties in the area and he intended to check out a few he had liked while he was here.

Still feeling the pull of her inspection grazing across his backside, he forced himself to stay focused. In the mirror above the bar, her table wasn't in the view, but he could see patrons at the gaming tables, their eyes riveted to the cards in their hands or tossing coins in a slot machine. Fortunes were won and lost, lives destroyed or renewed within the walls of casinos like these on the turn of a card or the toss of the dice. The place reeked of conflicting opposites of turbulent emotions, the agony and despair of the frantic loser or the ecstasy and joy of the jubilant winner.

Flynn knocked back his drink, subdued his rising partner, which had responded to her inspection even though she couldn't see it, and shouldered his way towards the exit. At the door, finally unable to deny the relentless pull of attraction, he succumbed and turned to face her once again. Yes, she *was* still watching him, obviously not embarrassed in the slightest to be caught doing so. One dark, delicate eyebrow slashed mockingly upward yet still her blue eyes never wavered.

"Who's the girl at the back table?" he asked the guard at the door. *So much for resisting*, he castigated himself wryly.

Felipe, the evening bouncer, followed Flynn's gaze back to the lovely girl. "They call her Bones," he replied, a knowing smile curving his lips. "She owns the Lonely Angel."

Startled, Flynn nodded and stepped into the early evening twilight of the Reno night feeling like a vise was gripping his gut. It was unusual for a woman to own a casino, especially one so young and beautiful. He wondered what the story was behind that? Maybe her husband had left it to her. Or maybe she had a husband now; the idea of her having a husband at all was uncomfortable. He hadn't noticed a ring, but then that didn't necessarily mean anything.

Flynn adjusted the crotch of his pants without thinking, flushing slightly as a passing hooker smiled indulgently. When had hookers invaded Moana Lane? Or maybe they'd always been there; he'd just never been aware of it before he went into the air force.

"Damn," he muttered as he stalked across the parking lot. "Get it together, man. She's just another beautiful woman. You can't trust any of them and you have better things to do." It was one thing to say it, but it was another thing entirely to put those painted eyes out of his mind. They floated there, along with the creaminess of milky skin against jet black hair, pushing everything else out of their way.

The flashing lights of the casino marquee cast twirling shadows along the concrete as he moved between the parking spaces. More cars were coming in, bearing the addicted gamblers looking to spend their hard earned money in the Lonely Angel, always hoping for that one big win that would set them up for life.

"Bones," he mused aloud, his recalcitrant thoughts refusing to leave the subject of the alluring young woman. "Wonder how she got a name like that?" He snorted as the light inside his truck lit up when he opened the door and hauled his long frame inside. "Probably from cheating suckers out of their hard earned cash on the craps table."

In spite of castigating himself the entire way, Flynn was still wondering about her name fifteen minutes later when he pulled up in front of the sprawling Reno police station and parked his beat up Ford pickup truck in an empty slot. As he made his way up the neatly paved sidewalk

between red rock beds and local cactus plants, he told himself it didn't matter how she got that name, he had no intention of going to the Lonely Angel Casino again.

The double glass doors sounded the soft jingle of a bell alarm when he stepped inside the police department where he followed the young night receptionist down the echoing wooden floorboards of a long hallway. The department needed some updating but his coordinated artsy mind didn't even take a mental note. He was still concentrating on putting those painted eyes in a mental box and shutting the lid when he finally sat down in front of Ian McNamara, Chief of Police in Reno, and an old friend.

The harsh glare of the neon lights overhead competed with the soft drone of the ceiling fans moving the somewhat cool air around. Award plaques hung in profusion along the sand colored wall behind Ian and a bedraggled looking jade plant sat in the corner, its clay pot painted in a checkered black and red Indian design. The other side of the room proudly displayed a bookshelf filled with police manuals and magazines interspersed with the occasional statue of some momentous occasion.

"All right, Ian, I'm here now—what's up?" Flynn lay one ankle casually across the other, one hand gripping his calf and the other falling limply off the end of the armrest as he waited for his friend to speak.

Captain McNamara grunted and sat back in his office chair, his tall, powerful frame exuding pent up energy. The wheels beneath him rolled and squeaked slightly with the rhythm of his body as he drummed a pencil against the gleaming wooden surface of the oak desk. "It's about time, lad," he growled. "Why didn't ye just bloody fly? Ye'd have gotten here a hell of a lot sooner. It's a wonder your car didn't die somewhere in the bloody desert as hot as it is!"

Flynn grinned, his lips quirking upward in amusement. "What's got you in an uproar?"

"We just had another robbery," he snapped fiercely, his white eyebrows racing to meet his patrician nose. "Bloody thief struck again while ye were taking your sweet time enjoying the scenery. Two hours ago, around five-thirty, the home owners returned from a few days out of town and reported the theft. If ye'd flown in from St. George this morning instead of driving to Salt Lake and down through the salt flats, you could have been here for the initial crime scene investigation."

"I had an errand in Salt Lake." Flynn leaned forward, his mind finally clear of painted blue eyes. "It sounds like you think the same person pulled off both robberies."

"Aye, I do."

"Why?"

"Instinct. Plain gut instinct tells me it's the same person who stole the Monet a few months ago."

Flynn's eyes narrowed. Ian's gut instinct was almost as good as fact. "So what's your theory?"

The pencil snapped between powerful fingers. "I don't have one," he confessed, disgust dripping from his lips. "All I know is that two paintings have disappeared in the last six months, both from wealthy homes around the area. Whoever stole the paintings must be a professional because they haven't left a fingerprint or anything to go on." He leaned forward. "That's where ye come in. You're the professional in art forensics and I want ye to figure it out and get Delacroix off my back."

"Delacroix?"

"Leonard Delacroix is the man who lost the first Monet," Ian barked. "And I haven't had a minute's peace since!"

The lock of thick white hair hanging slightly over his forehead swished back and forth as he remonstrated. Eyes such a deep brown they were almost black looked frazzled in the harsh tubular lights above his head.

Ian McNamara was just over fifty but he held his age well. Laugh lines around his eyes and mouth told the tale of love and good times in his lifetime, but the stress grooves in his forehead deepened when he was under pressure. High cheekbones with a sun bronzed covering gave off the impression of a Highland clansman, although Ian was born in the states. The six-foot-five frame dwarfed most men when he stood and one could well imagine him charging across the Highland grasses in tartan plaid and howling a bloodcurdling Scottish war cry.

"The painting stolen this evening is another Monet, which is why I think the two robberies may be connected. It seems our thief has a passion for Monets."

Flynn's eyebrow shot up. "I think you're going to need more than instinct to support that."

Ian leaned back in his chair, his eyes gleaming. "There were two Picassos hanging on the same wall and they're still there. What do ye make of that?"

Flynn shrugged. "Okay, I see your point, but it's still a slim possibility. Maybe the thief only had time to steal one. You need more evidence to support it. Were there any other paintings left behind in the first robbery?"

"Yes, but I don't remember what. I was just getting ready to look back over the files when ye came in."

He rummaged through a stack of folders on his desk and took some out. "Here, look through these. As I remember, there weren't any paintings on the wall where the Monet hung but I can't remember about the rest of the house. We were mostly concerned about the room it was in. No, wait—damn! There were other paintings in Delacroix's house." He slapped his hand on the paper in front of him.

Flynn studied the photo in the file he was holding and then, with an amused grin, handed it to Ian. "I think this may blow your theory about a passion for Monets."

"Why? What is it?" Ian took the photo and studied it. "What are ye talkin' about, lad?"

"The painting in the bedroom is a Monet," explained Flynn. "Why didn't the thief take that one? It's worth more than the one that was stolen."

"What? How can that be?" Ian blustered. Then he suddenly snapped his fingers. "Wait, I know—that one must be a duplicate, a print. The thief knew that and so only stole the real painting."

"We won't know until we see it up close. Is there any chance of getting into Delacroix's home to view it and the other paintings in the house?"

"I'll have to make the arrangements."

Flynn stood up, raised his arms above his head and yawned, the tired muscles in his neck and shoulders welcoming the stretch from driving for hours. "You do that. In the meantime, I think I'll go to tonight's crime scene and look around."

Ian stood up too. "I'll take ye out there; I believe some of the forensics team is still working it. Be losing the light soon, though."

"Why do you suppose the thief broke in during broad daylight?" asked Flynn musingly as they walked to the front. "That's a bold move for anyone, unless it's an inside job."

Ian nodded. "We can't actually be sure when the painting was taken," he confessed. "Tonight is when it was discovered missing. Watson has been out of town on a business trip. He took his wife with him and the staff were given the weekend off, so no one was about for two days."

"Didn't he have an alarm system?" questioned Flynn.

"Aye, but the alarm system wasn't disturbed. Watson said it was working perfectly when he came home. Gloria and the rest of the team have been canvassing the house and dusting for fingerprints for the last few hours."

"You still have Gloria Glandular working on your team?" Flynn teased from another tangent as they strode out of the station and into the parking lot.

Ian's eyebrows waggled. "That's *Glandula*, as you well know, and yes, she's still here. I'm sure she'll be happy to see *you* in town."

Flynn shook his head. "Not my style, Chief."

"With breasts like that, she's anybody's style," retorted Ian appreciatively.

"Tell her that," mocked Flynn. "She's never had eyes for anyone but you, and you know it. It's a wonder Marlini hasn't wiped the floor with her."

"End of conversation," Ian snapped.

Flynn just chortled. Ian juggled a fine line with the luscious redhead, Gloria, on his forensics team and the hot temper of his devoted bride, Marlini. Even though Gloria was half Ian's age, the men couldn't help but tease him about her fan-like adoration.

"Where's your car?" Ian asked as they climbed into the unmarked sedan that belonged to the Chief of Police. It was white, unassuming—and boring. He looked at the black beat-up pickup Flynn pointed out, memories flitting through his mind before he closed them off. "Don't tell me Katherine got your hot rod Ferrari and you're still driving that." He chuckled at the scowl that appeared on the younger man's face. Paybacks were hell—it was Flynn's turn to squirm.

"She tried," replied Flynn flatly, definitely not amused.

"Damn, lad, I think she's setting a precedent. I've never heard of a woman suing for lack of expectations being fulfilled. Ye had a real winner there. Another few years and you'd have been legally married to the lass."

"Not unless we were living together—which we weren't," Flynn pointed out dryly. "Trust me, she tried that one too."

"I don't understand why it took you so long to get rid of her."

"We just became a habit to each other, I guess." Flynn shrugged, mulling over Ian's words. He'd tried to figure out why it had taken him so long to realize that Katherine Benton wasn't the woman for him. They had dated off and on, used each other, and generally kept each other company when one or the other needed a companion, but Flynn's heart had been focused on his work and getting his career going. Even though they had both dated other people, they always seemed to get back together when a relationship broke up on either side. This last stretch together covered two years and he'd finally realized, when Katherine's belongings began accumulating at his apartment, that she was looking for much more out of their relationship than he was.

It was time to end it.

Katherine had *not* been happy, in fact, she'd been furious and vindictive, even suing him in civil court. The judge had thrown it out since Katherine had a successful career of her own and didn't even need alimony, which she wouldn't have gotten anyway unless they had been married, but it hadn't stopped her from trying. She said she wanted compensation for time lost when she could have been in a productive relationship that would have led to marriage by now.

Flynn figured somewhere beneath all that blonde hair, there were a few cards missing. He'd just never realized it until he'd crossed her. Although he felt bad that he hadn't had the foggiest notion of what was going through her mind, he still felt he had dodged a bullet.

Ian shook his head. "Ye need a good woman, lad, not one like Katherine. That woman had a fishing line attached to her forehead from the get go. She tried to reel ye in like a trout until you finally flipped off the fly."

"Well, since you've got the only good woman in existence, I'll just have to make do with what's left," drawled Flynn.

The comment was made with amused sarcasm but Ian half suspected that his young friend meant a lot of it. A smile quirked the corner of his lips as Marlini danced through his mind. Now, *there* was woman. Feisty, beautiful, and so damned loving that he often wondered how a dour old Scotsman like himself had won such a prize. He loved her more than anything in the world and he wanted the same thing for those close to him, especially Flynn.

Flynn Chambers was like another son to Ian. He and Ian's son, Danny, had been best friends all through school and into the military. They had even served in the same air force squadron. Flynn had been there when Danny was killed by a cowardly bomb while trying to evacuate some fellow airmen. Although Ian had two other sons and a daughter, he'd been especially close to Danny, and the loss was a deep grief that never healed.

Flynn had left the military when his stint was up and gone into investigations and continued his art degree. He'd never seen anyone work harder than this boy to succeed—and succeed he had. He'd see twenty-six on his next birthday and was already managing an art gallery in St. George, Utah. He also did forensics investigations on an art specialist basis, which was why Ian had called him into Reno. He needed his expertise on this puzzling case.

"Don't worry, lad, she's out there somewhere. Ye'll find her if ye'll quit hitching up with the likes of Katherine—and stay away from the bar floozies."

"Maybe," murmured Flynn as painted blue eyes pushed their way to the front of his thoughts at the mention of bar floozies. Funny that phrase should come up again. He thought his bar floozy must be a cut above the rest if she actually owned the place.

Wait a minute—*his* bar floozy? Since when had she become his? Flynn had no intention of going anywhere near the Lonely Angel again—even if it did have the most beautiful blue eyed owner he had ever seen.

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"Color coming in!" The familiar phrase of a craps player cashing in his chips at the table just behind her drew Bones out of her reverie. She glanced at her watch and grimaced. Two hours, she'd been sitting here thinking about the man she hadn't even met. Across a crowded room was such an outdated phrase—it was pathetic—and yet that was the way she'd felt when their eyes met earlier tonight. She hadn't been able to look away and she'd stared expectantly at him, caught like a mongoose in a cobra's hypnotic gaze.

Bones had waited for the handsome stranger to say something, waited for him to approach her, just plain *waited* for him as long as he was in the room. Was he the stranger her horoscope had predicted would enter her life? He'd never approached her, though, and she'd heaved a shaky sigh of relief, or maybe disappointment, when he'd finally turned and went out the door.

Intuitively Bones knew he was dangerous to her, dangerous to her peace of mind with that smoky blue gaze like campfire smoke curling into the horizon of a Reno high desert sunrise. Her mind's eye traveled up and down his stature once again, remembering everything about him from his broad shoulders in the white, *rolled up sleeves* shirt, to his lean hips and powerful thighs encased snugly in well worn denim. He'd worn a black cowboy hat over thick chestnut hair. His arms, face, and the chest that played peek-a-boo with his open neckline had been brown, like he'd spent a lot of time in the sun. Black leather boots had completed the hard to ignore man and his

hand had worn no wedding ring. She shivered, remembering his heated gaze, her bones feeling like they were melting before he'd turned away and released her so she could breathe again.

"You okay, Bones?"

She looked up to see Lou, her godfather, mentor, and partner in the casino, sliding into the chair across from her, his kindly weather beaten face looking concerned. "I'm fine, Lou—just tired."

"You've been sitting here for the last couple of hours," he pointed out unnecessarily. "Usually, you circle the room several times or get in on a game or two. Are you feeling sick?"

"I'm fine, really." She smiled wearily. "I think I'll go up early tonight, though. You want to close up for me?"

"You got it, boss," he replied with a wry chuckle. She picked up her glass to finish off her drink and he noticed the scraped skin on the side of her wrist. "Did you hurt yourself?" He reached over to move the charm bracelet aside so he could see better but she waved him off with a laugh.

"It's just a scratch, nothing to worry about." She yawned widely and stood up.

Lou eyed the girl protectively, having seen what happened earlier. He'd been at the bar when the stranger had come in and ordered the drink. He'd never seen his goddaughter react that way towards a man. Oh, plenty of men sought her, but she wanted nothing to do with them.

This one had been different.

There had been no mistaking the instant magnetism between them; the air had fairly vibrated with its force. The stranger had paid cash so he hadn't been able to glean a name from a credit card or a check. Lou wondered who he was for the hundredth time tonight—and whether or not he would come back. It was something he'd stake his paycheck on—the stranger coming back. There had been too much tension between them for him not to. It was just a matter of time.