

## Chapter One

She hated waiting.

Mara Ross forced herself to stay still, nestled amongst the shadows on the deserted London street. She hated the dark, too. The way it crept in around you and whispered terrible things.

Taking a long, deep breath, she trained her gaze on the building across the road. Somewhere in there, a woman was being held prisoner.

The eighteenth-century façade in the exclusive Bank area housed offices for various finance companies. Bank was busy during the week, but—she glanced down the empty street—on the weekend this part of the city was a ghost town.

Perfect for a clandestine rescue.

Her gaze scanned the darkened windows. *Hang in there, Cate.*

There was a flash of movement at the front door.

Two men exited the building. They were big, armed. Ex-military. A third man followed.

*Gabriel fucking Leven.*

Under the streetlight, she watched the crime boss's loose-limbed stride. He was clad in some designer suit and crisp blue shirt. He looked like any other wealthy businessman. Mara ground her teeth together. You couldn't tell from his distinguished face that he made his money from the drug trade, human trafficking and a thousand other criminal activities.

You couldn't tell he was a murdering, torturing bastard.

She wanted to run across the street, tear into his mind and leave him a drooling mess. Her gut clenched into a hard tangle and she shoved her hands into her pockets. She'd killed the bastard a thousand times in her dreams. The temptation to do it now was overwhelming.

All too easily, she imagined the atrocities he was putting Cate Hartmann through. God, it had been over three months since he'd snatched the schoolteacher off the street.

If only Mara had pushed Cate harder. Convinced her to move to Haven. Then she'd be safe on the island filled with people like them, not chained up doing Leven's dirty work. Mara shook her head. No point in wishing, the present was what mattered now.

A sleek, black sedan pulled to a stop at the curb and Leven slid into the back.

Mara watched the taillights disappear down the street, her throat tight. Her focus was Cate, not Leven. Releasing a long breath, she searched for calm. Leven had been here, so that meant there was a good chance Mara's intel was right. After months of being too late and searching the wrong locations, it seemed she was finally in the right place.

And she wasn't leaving Cate in there one more minute. Mara moved out of the shadows.

She headed for the front door, tugging up the sheepskin collar of her leather aviator jacket. Head held high, she injected some swagger into her step. Sneaking in was always better accomplished brazenly.

She withdrew a swipe card she'd snatched from a building employee earlier in the day, slid it through the reader on the door.

Then she was in.

Her boots clicked on the marble tiles of the lobby. She entered a small elevator and hit the button for the offices of Equinox Capital, Leven's financial advisors. When the doors opened, it

was to a long front desk lit by a single lamp and empty except for a vase full of wilting lilies. The air was filled with their overripe scent.

She turned left and worked systematically, searching each of office. They were all decorated in what she thought of as old English style—dark wood, leather and lots of books. And other than that they were empty. *Empty, empty, empty.*

She cursed. Maybe her information was wrong. She stalked through one last office and headed for the conference room marked by an engraved brass plate.

After pushing the doors open, she flicked on the light. Hissed in a breath.

The long conference table was made from a dark wood. Chains dangled from its side and the surface was now stained with deep red blood that dripped onto the plush carpet.

Her gaze stayed on the chains, distant horrors lurking, threatening to rise.

Swallowing hard, she looked beyond the table. The body of a middle-aged man sat slumped in one corner. His eyes stared ahead sightlessly from a swollen face, his mouth twisted into the shape of a scream.

Bile rose in Mara's throat. She was too late.

A noise from the doorway startled her.

She spun. Just in time, she blocked an arm coming at her. She punched out, aiming for the gut.

The tall guard grunted and stepped back, eyeing her warily. He drew the gun holstered at his side. "Get on your knees."

Mara cocked a hip. "I don't think so."

His gaze slid down her fitted trousers before jerking back to her face. *Got you.* She held his gaze and let her ability take over.

His mouth went lax and his arms dropped to his sides, his gun making a muffled thump on the carpet. His eyes were blank.

She clucked her tongue. “Didn’t your employer warn you to never look a mind raider in the eye?” She sauntered closer. “Was Cate Hartmann here?”

“Yes.” The word came out slowly. “She was used to kill the Equinox CEO.”

Mara glanced at the body. Wondered what the poor bastard had done to piss Leven off.

“Where is she now?”

“They moved her.”

“Where?”

His brow creased. “I don’t know.”

Mara swore. “You’re going to find an empty room and take a nap.”

A slow nod. He wandered into the hall and disappeared.

Fighting the sharp sting of frustration, she turned to leave. Then she heard multiple voices moving in her direction. Quickly growing louder.

*Shit.* The damned building was supposed to be empty. Body tense, she ran through her options. No time to run. Hiding would be no good in the confines of the offices, and that really wasn’t her style anyway. Her skill was almost useless since she couldn’t raid more than one mind at a time.

She spread her feet. That only left one choice.

A woman and a man barreled through the door. From behind them, a broad-shouldered, blonde man stepped forward. “Mr. Leven thought you might pay a visit, Ms. Ross.”

*A trap.* Damn, how had Leven known?

Mara kicked out, aiming for Blondie’s gut. He cursed and stumbled back. She spun and

landed a kick on a second man.

But she underestimated the woman.

The muscular brunette moved in with a powerful kick. Mara staggered, fighting to block the lethal blows raining down. A strike to the head, a chop to the back. The woman's fists were unforgiving.

Mara tasted blood in her mouth. She fell backward, her hip hitting the table. Blondie moved in and grabbed her arms. He spun her, shoving her against the wall. Her head rapped back against the plaster.

Looking up, she focused her attention on the other man. He was younger with hazel eyes set a little too close together. *Come on, look at me.*

His gaze met hers straight on and she opened her mind, reaching out. She couldn't describe how her ability worked, it was just something she knew how to do. Like it was imprinted on her bones.

She saw the flash of panicked realization in his face but it was too late. His eyes emptied of thought and his face went slack.

"Collins, you idiot." Blondie backhanded her across the face and broke her raid on the younger man's mind.

A piece of cloth was wrapped over her eyes cutting out all light. Her pulse spiked. *So dark.*

She was dragged across the floor. Something solid hit the back of her thighs. Then she felt cool metal at her wrists.

Fear punched through her. "No."

"You know how it feels to be locked up, don't you?" An edge of dark glee underscored his tone. He pushed her flat against the tabletop.

Her gut spasmed. God, he reminded her of a man she'd once trusted. The man who'd sold her out to Leven. He'd taken pleasure in hurting her. "Fuck you." She struggled like a mad woman.

She wouldn't be chained.

Not again.

Suddenly the hands on her fell away. There was a thud and a grunt.

"What the hell?" The woman's voice.

Another thud and then silence.

Mara held her breath until her chest hurt. There was someone else was in the room. She yanked on her chained wrists.

"Easy." A hard masculine voice that rasped over her senses.

She stilled. *Callahan*.

Mind Raider. Leader of Haven. Enigma.

His big body brushed against her and strong hands steadied her. He touched one wrist, then the other and the chains fell away.

Warm lips brushed her ear. "Breathe."

She did, sweet air rushing into her lungs. When he pulled back, she sat up and tugged the blindfold away.

Clad all in black, Callahan's lean frame was dressed to blend into the shadows. But he was the kind of man no woman missed.

Wide shoulders, lean hips and the long legs of a swimmer. She'd seen him in the ocean every morning when she was on Haven. Her gaze went to a face too sharp to be handsome and midnight-blue eyes so dark they looked as black as his inky hair.

Speculating about the leader of Haven was a favorite pastime of the residents of the island. He was their protector, but he never let anyone close. He ensured their well-being but he rarely showed any emotion.

Power radiated from every inch him. Just like the others, Mara spent far too much time studying him. He reminded her of a blade honed to the sharpest edge.

One that could leave you bleeding without you realizing you'd been cut.

\*\*\*

Cal watched Mara Ross slide off the table. She was all vibrant red hair against the palest skin. With a strong, curvy body designed to leave a man begging.

But she wasn't just beautiful. The first time he'd seen her, she'd been dragging an unconscious mind raider—a man far taller and heavier than her—from one of Leven's warehouses in New York.

Everything about Mara Ross stirred something in Cal long gone cold.

A luxury he couldn't afford.

Mara looked past him to Leven's motionless guards. They kneeled on the ground staring ahead like robots.

Her mouth dropped open. "You're raiding all three of them." Her gaze swung to his face. "That's...impossible."

Not something he intended to discuss. An ugly bruise was forming on her cheek. "Who hit you?" He lifted a hand and skimmed his fingers down her cheekbone.

Her eyelids fluttered. "It's nothing."

"Who?" Heated fury punched through his veins although he let none of it bleed into his face. He'd had years of practice at keeping his feelings hidden.

She angled her head. “Blondie over there enjoys hurting people.”

The man in question clutched his head and let out an agonized scream. He slumped to the floor and was silent.

“My God.” She took a shaky step forward.

“He’s not dead.” Cal stared dispassionately at the man. “But he’ll be unconscious a long time.”

She looked up. “What are you?”

A nightmare. He looked away. He didn’t want to see fear in her emerald-green eyes. “Did you find the soul stealer?”

She released an impatient breath. “Her name’s Cate. And no.” Mara turned, eyeing the bloodstained table. “She was here but they moved her.”

Cal’s gaze ran over the corpse in the corner. The man showed the classic hallmarks of having had his soul ripped from his body. They said it was the most excruciating way to die.

“How’d you know I was going to be here?” Mara asked.

He kept tabs on her. Had ever since she’d made Haven her home. Not that he’d ever tell her. “An informant mentioned Leven was here. Figured you wouldn’t be far behind.”

She kicked a chair at the table, sending it skidding across the floor. “I can’t breathe knowing that bastard has an innocent. Is forcing her to kill.” Mara’s gaze fell to the blood pooling on the floor.

Cal knew she’d once been at Leven’s tender mercy. He didn’t know what the crime boss had done to her, but he saw the terrible shadows in her eyes. They matched the ones staining his own soul.

“I’d almost convinced Cate to come to Haven. I was this close.” Mara held her fingers a

whisper apart. “If only...” her voice drifted off.

“You aren’t to blame.”

She tossed her head back. “I know. I’m more than happy to heap the blame at Leven’s feet.”

“We need to go.” Cal headed for the door.

She matched his stride. “If we’re quick enough, we can find them before they leave London.”

He stopped and held out his arm. She ran into it. “We have no idea where they’re headed. We need to plan, tap our informants—”

Her jaw clenched. “You’re too cautious.”

Callahan was used to people—especially women—being afraid of him. But Mara was too stubborn to let anything or anyone scare her. She was one of the few people who dared to question—or outright ignore—him.

“And you’re always leaping.”

Her chin lifted. “If we sit around planning, Cate will die.”

Cal backed Mara into the wall, watched surprise skitter over her face. Their bodies brushed and damn it, his responded to the feminine feel of her. It made his tone harsh. “You need to learn to follow orders.”

Fire sprinted through her eyes. “You certainly love issuing them.”

Her lips were so close. “Haven provides sanctuary and protection for anomalies. It only functions because we have rules.”

“Your rules,” she spat.

He leaned closer and their chests pressed together. He loved that she was tall and almost looked him in the eyes. “Yes.”

“Let me go.” There was a barely detectable tremor in her voice.

“Not before you listen to me.” Jesus, she made him want things he couldn’t have. “Most of the people at Haven can’t survive outside of the island. They’re hunted by governments, criminals and anyone else who knows about their abilities. They’re shunned by their families and friends. Freaks of nature who can stop time, control minds and kill with a touch.”

She swallowed. “I know.”

“If we don’t follow the rules, men like Leven will overrun us and turn us into unwilling slaves. Is that what you want?”

She struggled against his grip. “I refuse to leave a woman in that man’s grasp—”

“We won’t leave her. But we won’t take unnecessary risks either.”

“I want—”

Cal leaned in and pressed his mouth to her ear. Her scent hit him. No delicate flowers for Mara, instead something darker, more sensual. “I don’t care what you want. If you race in without planning, you’ll end up in Leven’s chains just like Cate Hartmann. Do you want to be tortured again?”

She trembled and remorse tore at him. Sometimes he had to be tough, had to make hard choices, but he hated making her relive what haunted her.

He released one shoulder and cupped her jaw. “Mara—”

She jerked away from him. “You’re a bastard.”

He sighed. “I know.”

A low groan from behind them had them both tensing. Cal spun, pushing Mara behind him. When she stepped back up beside him, he cursed.

The dead body in the corner moved.

They both froze, gazes glued to the corpse.

The man's eyes were still clouded with death, but his head turned, his mouth opening.

*“Celebes.”*