

## Chapter One

It was dark. He was shackled. And he hurt like hell.

John ignored his throbbing head and lifted his arms. Steel links clanked in the darkness.

Where the hell was he?

He blinked, slowly, but even that hurt. Every muscle ached like he'd been thrown out of a plane or tossed down a cliff. Or both. The last thing he remembered he'd been working in the gardens on Haven, the ocean breeze cool on his face. He blinked again and a few shapes came into focus in the murky, dank darkness. A bare lightbulb on a wire overhead. White, grimy tiled walls. The sound of dripping water. He lay on some sort of metal table.

Wait a second, he hadn't been on Haven. He's been accompanying Callahan to the mainland. They'd gone to Cairns to pick up some security equipment Cal was having delivered. The man was obsessed with protecting the island and the people with special abilities who called it home.

They were hunted by many. Governments, agencies, military, criminals.

John grimaced. He should know. He'd been one of the hunters.

He wasn't that man anymore. He pressed a hand to his chest. Realized his shirt was torn

open, the buttons gone and his chest was shaved bare. What the hell?

A memory burst out of his clouded brain. He'd gone to bring the truck back to Cal and someone had hit him from behind. After that, it had been lights out.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty. You awake?"

John stilled and turned his head. The voice was husky but definitely feminine. He realized the wall to the left wasn't solid but composed of bars. A cage.

There was a flash of bare arms in the shadows and long fingers wrapped around the steel.

"Where am I?" His voice was a croaky rasp.

"Dr. Frankenstein's house of horrors." The woman knocked on the bars and a clang rang out. "Underground lab of a really nice fellow called Keene."

John frowned. The name sounded familiar. "Who are you?"

"Name's Eve."

"How long have you been here?" He tried to move but the chains around his wrists and ankles held him tight. "Are there others?"

"Not sure how long I've been here." Silence. "Maybe three months. Could be longer." Her fingers slipped away from the bars and her arms disappeared into the dark. "There were others. The last one died from the experiments three days ago."

*Jesus.* John tried to think. Cal would be looking for him. Wouldn't he? John's heart thumped against his chest. Doubt was a stealthy mistress who knew what buttons to push. Maybe Cal might just think good riddance. Maybe he'd be happy to be rid of the man who'd hurt so many anomalies.

"They brought you in about a day ago," Eve said. "They've been poking and prodding at you ever since. They love their tests."

There was something in her tone. “Are you hurt? Have they been testing on you?”

A gusty sigh. “Nothing I can’t handle. It’s not the first time I’ve been a lab rat for these bastards, or ones like them.”

“You’re an anomaly.”

Silence.

“It’s okay.” Something made him want to help her. Maybe guilt, maybe an unending need for penance. No one deserved this. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Yes. I am.”

“What kind? Time Thief? Mind Raider?”

“I can control people’s thoughts.”

Mind Raider. “Look, Eve, we need to get out of here.”

She snorted. “Hah. The thought never occurred to me, genius.” She moved and he heard the clank of metal. “I might have power but there isn’t anything I can do about the chains. What kind of anomaly are you?”

“I’m human.”

“Really? That’s odd, because they spent a hell of a lot of time testing you and injecting you with gunk.”

John frowned into the darkness. But there wasn’t time now to work it out. Voices echoed outside the lab.

“Fuck,” Eve bit out.

Bright lights flicked on.

John cursed and winced. He caught a flash of white skin and the color red as Eve drew back into the shadows.

“I’ve been looking for you for a long time, Gabe.”

John turned his head toward the voice. A blond-haired man with a square jaw to rival a superhero stared down at him, flanked by two tough-looking guards in fatigues. Hovering behind them were two slimmer figures in lab coats—one man and one woman.

“Do I know you?” John asked.

The blond slapped a hand to his chest. “I’m heartbroken. How the hell can you not remember one of your best friends?”

John didn’t remember much of his past life. Having his soul almost removed had obliterated his memories, leaving only a few terrifying flashes and horrible nightmares that regularly drenched his sheets in sweat. But he was pretty sure he’d never had any best friends. “My name’s John Brown. Why the hell have you brought me here?”

The man stepped closer. John caught a glimpse of something metallic on his belt. *Keys.*

“Oh, I have plans for you, whatever the hell you call yourself now.” The man’s face contorted into something dark. “My name is Silas Keene. Ring any bells? No? Once upon a time, you destroyed everything I had.”

John drew in a shuddering breath. Someone else he’d wronged.

Keene gripped the edge of the table. “You decided I’d encroached on your little part of the drug business in Colombia. You burned my factories to the ground and killed my fiancée.”

John stayed silent. There wasn’t anything he could say.

“Since your little empire has been dismantled, fought over and appropriated by others, I only have your body left to destroy.” Keene leaned forward. “But death would be too good for you. I want you to suffer. Hard.” He nodded to one of the technicians.

One lab coat stepped closer holding a massive syringe. John jerked, but the chains held him

tight. The technician slid the massive needle into John's arm. The tube attached to it was filled with a bright, neon green fluid. It burned along his veins.

A female scream cut through the lab. John turned his head and saw one of the bodyguards had entered Eve's cage. John couldn't see anything but a blurry struggle. "What's he doing to her?"

"Oh, this remarkable lady is a fighter. Leon here just enjoys trying to break her." The thudding sound of flesh on flesh. "He also likes to play with his knives and pretty smooth skin is such a perfect canvas."

*Shit.* John yanked at his chains. It made the burn of the chemical worse.

Eve let out a bloodcurdling scream. There was defiance in it, but pain as well. John recognized the agony from the same kind of screams he'd heard from the Health Center on Haven, where the island doctor, Gage Walker, helped new arrivals who'd been tortured, addicted or worse.

But in Eve's scream, John also heard the pulse of anger.

He wanted to help her. Wanted to stop her terror and pain. For once, he wanted to do the right thing.

He kept his gaze focused on the cage, his thoughts racing as he tried to find a way to help her.

Suddenly the world went still. Silent.

John glanced up. Keene was frozen in place beside him, his mouth open. The technicians and remaining body guard were like statues.

Someone was stealing time.

For a second, John thought that maybe Cal had found him, and he'd brought a time thief

along. But John wasn't affected. He frowned. The thief would have to touch John to keep him out of the steal.

Well, whatever the hell was going on, he wasn't going to waste the opportunity.

He reached out and snagged the keys off Keene's belt. After some straining, he managed to get one cuff released. The others quickly followed. He wrenched the needle from his arm.

He stood and nearly pitched headfirst to the floor. He gripped the metal table and waited for a few seconds for the dizziness to pass. Then he clipped a cuff around Keene's wrist and did the same to the other three.

Then he hurried into Eve's cage.

She was crouched, her hands fisted, like she was waiting for the perfect moment to strike at her attacker. The bodyguard held a sharp MPK military blade. He'd sliced her bicep and blood had run down one slim arm.

But then John realized that not all the color on her arm was blood.

She had toned arms that went with the rest of her long, greyhound-lean body. She was a little too thin but he figured being stuck in this place would do that. Her jeans were dark and she wore a black vest-type top that buttoned up the front and left her arms bare.

Arms covered in brilliant red rose tattoos.

The green vines circled her skin and the roses were in varying stages from bud to full, vibrant bloom. They curled around her neck and for a second, John had the insane urge to know what other parts of her they covered.

The cut didn't look too bad but it was bleeding. Time to get out of here in case whoever was stealing time decided to stop.

But first...John reared back a fist and slammed it into the man's face. The guard toppled

over, the knife clattering to the ground. John snatched up the blade and sank it into the man's thigh. He didn't hit the artery, but the guy wouldn't be cutting anyone up any time soon.

John reached for Eve. He touched a hand to her face and the bruise forming on her sharp cheekbone. A pointed chin screamed trouble and her lips were outrageously full. Her hair was black and cut in a short, spiky style that made her look like a pixie gone punk. Her eyes were a brilliant green.

He guessed he was going to have to carry her.

Suddenly she moved—snapping out of the steal. She surged back, hauling in a deep breath. She raised a fist, but when she saw him, she stopped moving. Her gaze flicked to the man on the ground, the others chained to the table—all still frozen—and back to him.

“I thought you weren't an anomaly.”

“I'm not. Someone else has stolen time. And I don't care who's doing it, we have to get out of here.”

She nodded. “Damn straight.”

“Come on then.” He headed out of the cage.

She shouldered in front of him. “No. Follow me. I got out once.”

She sprinted ahead of him, out of the lab and into a long tiled corridor. Her long legs were made for running. He followed behind.

“We need to find a way up,” she said. “Not the main entrance through, because Keene has a small army of guards there. But there have to be other ways out. Right?”

“That'd be my guess. If a fire broke out down here, you'd need some emergency exits.”

They followed the maze of corridors. Once they heard voices and both paused, barely breathing until the sounds faded.

Then corridor turned into a dead end. “No.” Eve kicked at the wall.

But John’s attention was drawn to a large grate in the wall. Cool air blew from it. “Here.” He gripped the grate and after a few rough tugs, it came off. Behind it was a large circular tunnel.

“Brilliant.” Eve ducked her head and stepped into it. It was large but not high enough for them to stand up straight.

They started down it, their steps echoing around them.

A golden light appeared at the end of the tunnel. They slowed down, moved cautiously. Ahead, the tunnel opened into a large central area with other tunnels also opening into it.

Eve bounced on her heels and pointed. “Look.”

A ladder speared upward.

She moved forward, ready to step out of their tunnel. John yanked her back.

“What the fu—”

He clapped a hand over her mouth. A second later, a guard carrying an assault rifle walked past the entrance.

She relaxed against John and he dropped his hands. But she stayed there, pressed enticingly against him. He tried not to notice her subtle curves—now really wasn’t the time. In the two years he’d been at Haven, he’d had no interest in females. At first, he’d been focused on making some sense of his new life. And after that, well, maybe he thought he hadn’t deserved the connection.

But the taut bottom pressed against his groin awakened something in him.

“Just one,” she murmured.

Before he knew what she was doing, she stepped out of the tunnel.

“Eve!” he said in a furious whisper.



But she was advancing on the guard, her slim hips swaying in a saunter designed to curdle a man's blood.

The guard spun, yanking his weapon from his shoulder. "Stop. Now."

But Eve had already caught him, her gaze boring into his. "Drop the gun."

The man's arms flopped to his sides. The gun hit the concrete.

*Amazing.* John stepped out of the tunnel. He'd seen the anomalies on Haven use their powers, but not often. Usually it was the kids just learning to control the gifts that kicked in with the rush of puberty hormones.

But here was an anomaly in her prime with full control of her power.

"Why didn't you use your power on the guy back in the lab?"

She arched a brow. "Keene's guards are careful not to look me in the eye. And the few times I managed to...they make you regret it."

Suddenly an alarm sounded, echoing around them. Then another guard came out of a doorway. "Ron, there's been an escape—" when he saw them, he raised his gun fast.

John dove toward Eve, bullets ripping into the wall behind them.

Mind raiders could only raid one mind at a time. John kept his body on Eve's and reached for the first guard's gun. His fingers brushed metal, but he couldn't quite reach. Damn it, he wasn't going to make it before the second man mowed them down.

Eve pushed at him and he rolled off. She got to her knees and faced the guard under her control. "Go to sleep." Then she was sprinting at the second guard.

*Was she crazy?* He'd shoot her at point-blank range. John's fingers curled around the gun.

"Drop it and go lie down with your friend. Sleep."

The newcomer laid his gun on the ground and went and flopped on the floor beside the other

guard.

She'd done it. Somehow, she'd had enough time to deal with the first man *and* raid the second. It should have been impossible in just a few seconds. So much power.

A flash hit John. The sensation of greed coiled his belly. To have such power at his disposal. He'd never be vulnerable again. *Take her, use her.*

Then the sensation was gone, leaving him nauseous. Sometimes you could never escape the past. He turned to her. "You were brilliant."

She let out a laugh and dipped a curtsy. "That felt damn good. I've been wanting to give a little payback for a long time now."

He glanced at the men. "You didn't kill them."

"I'm not a killer."

She sauntered toward him now. Was there even more swing in her hips than before, or was he just imagining it?

"I won't become like them." She stopped in front of John. "I just want my freedom. To make my own decisions. I don't kill."

The skin on her face was so smooth. He wondered how old she was. But her eyes hinted at years of hard experience.

"I want to make my own choices. Like this." Her hand fisted in his ripped shirt. She yanked his head down and planted her lips on his.

John froze. Heat washed over his body. He couldn't remember his love life from before. He only had the vaguest sense of what kissing and sex felt like. It was like being a virgin all over again.

*Almost.* It seemed his body remembered.

His lips moved, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. She purred and pressed into him, her tongue dueling with his. She tasted so good.

Then she stepped back, smiled. “Long time since I’ve kissed a guy, John Brown. That was damned nice. Now, shall we get out of here?”

He managed a nod.

She gripped the ladder, put her foot on the first rung, then tossed a glance over her shoulder. “Enjoy the view.” She started up.

*View?* John took hold of the ladder and looked up. At a perfectly-shaped, denim-encased butt. He breathed deep and climbed.

The ladder was long but they moved methodically, pausing once to rest their arms. At the top was a round hatch. Eve tried the metal catches but they were tight. “You take a turn. Let’s swap positions.”

He shifted to the side and she shimmied down the ladder beside him. Suddenly he found himself staring at lean thighs, then the spot where they formed a juncture. John swallowed. A glimpse of a strip of bare belly. Then two small breasts and just a hint of cleavage from the *vee* of her vest.

She slipped a little and his face pressed into those high, firm globes. Every muscle in his body went tight and blood rushed to his swelling cock.

“Sorry.” She scooted the rest of the way until they were face-to-face.

Damn, her features intrigued him. His gaze moved down her arms to her tattoos. Those intrigued him too. He wanted to lick them, trace them with his tongue and see where they went.

She kept moving. Her shoulder bumped into his groin and he closed his eyes at the sensation.

“Can you reach the hatch now?” she asked.

Swallowing, John reached up. “Yeah.” He pushed and pulled on the catches until they loosened with a metallic groan. The hatch swung open.

Above he saw a patch of brilliant blue sky. He smiled. *Hot damn.*

He climbed up farther and straightened. He was blasted by hot air and what he saw made his gut clench. *Shit.*

“I am so happy to be out of this shit hole.” Eve climbed up beside him. “Oh, fuck.”

Desert sand stretched out all around them, as far as they both could see.