

Chapter One

Nick

When I was nine years old my dad bought me a remote control helicopter. He took me to the park near our house where he taught me how to fly it. My dad said I had a natural feel for flying. He said I had nerves of steel and an intuition that couldn't be taught. He told me I should be a pilot. It's one of my favorite memories of being a kid. Just him and I out in the open, the electric whine of the chopper buzzing overhead. I took his words to heart and I seriously considered being a pilot. It sounded fun.

But he died and I never flew anything again.

Not until now.

Watching the giant bird soar against the wind, hesitate high and heavy in the sky, then drop with a force unnatural and ungodly in this world is a feeling I can never describe. I can sense the wind rushing around it the way I can sense the tides in a dream. That's how I know I'm getting better. I'm getting stronger.

I would be afraid if I had any sense. If I had the option to feel it.

“Nick.”

Alex's voice brings me around, pulling me out of myself. It's full of pain and fatigue. It's no mystery as to why. She's covered in blood from a shoulder wound combined with the cuts all over her hands. She begins to waver precariously on her knees, threatening to keel over at any moment. I turn and take a step toward her, ready to help. To plan our next move. But before I can make it a single step, her face contorts with fear.

“Nick!” she cries.

I don't turn around. I already know. I can feel it in the dizzying rush of the fall, the feeling that tips me over and drops me to the ground like a drunk on a Tilt-A-Whirl. I don't even try to fight it. I can't pull either of us out of this nose dive.

“Get down!” I shout to her as my face rushes toward asphalt.

When the explosion hits it shakes the ground just as I connect with it. I feel the heat of fire blazing from the mouth of the cave. I cover my head with my arms, hoping Alex does the same. Debris rains down outside but we're safe here in the dark cover of the mountain. Nothing touches me, but I listen to it pelt the ground, pinging and cracking hard off metal and stone. Then it's done. Only the crackle of fire and the whooshing of the island air feeding it. I risk a glance behind me.

The bird has crashed into one of the armored trucks, crushing it and throwing the front end into flames.

I swear at myself under my breath. Rookie ass mistake. I should have kept my focus. I should have brought her in easy, not dropped it out of the sky like a meteor. Maybe I'm not getting as good at this as I thought.

"I'll give you high marks for the flying," Alex calls, "but your landing was total crap."

I push myself up to look at her. She's lying on her back staring at the ceiling.

"Are you okay?"

She throws up her hand, giving me a thumbs up. "Fan-freakin'-tastic. How are you, Nick?"

I rise slowly, ready for injuries or the exhaustion that's plaguing her. I don't feel anything. How novel for me.

"I'm pretty good, actually."

"That didn't wear you out?" she asks in amazement

"No," I reply thoughtfully. I'm way ahead of her. It's weird. Pulling the Jaberwocky from the dream drained Alex to the point of collapse. But for me, bringing the bird to life was easy. Exciting. It was like a high, one I'm still buzzing from. "No, I'm wired. I could run a marathon right now."

"Not fair," she groans, pulling herself into a sitting position. She stares down the tunnel for a long time and I wonder if she's fallen asleep sitting up. Finally, she says, "We have to go back in there."

"No."

She looks over her shoulder, scowling at me.

I sigh internally. “No, we do not need to go back in there,” I amend. “What could we possibly need in there?”

“The files. The serums.”

I shake my head as I get to my feet and head toward her. “I’m not injecting you with more of their freak juice and we don’t need the files. You don’t even know if they exist.”

“They do,” she groans. She turns to sit on her knees, facing me. “I know they do. He’s a dinosaur. Trust me, he has hard copies.”

“So what? Say we find these mythical files. What then? What are we doing with them? Are we hunting these people down?”

“No, not hunting them. We’ll find them and tell them we understand what’s been done to them. Maybe we can help them.”

I kneel down in front of her, trying to reason with her eye to eye. Maybe it makes me a manipulative SOB or maybe it makes me resourceful, but I know for a fact Alex is more... let’s say ‘pliable’ on issues when I’m nearby. Proximity is her Kryptonite, a resource I’m not above using in the name of extricating her from a hostile situation. And this island is pretty damn hostile.

“Alex,” I tell her gently, “we need to help ourselves first. Besides, how do you know all of the people in those files want help? If you had shown up at my door out of the blue saying you were a science experiment too and we should form a support group, I’d have either shot you or called the cops ‘cause you’re crazy.”

She chews on the inside of her lip, debating. I sit silently, letting her mull it over. When her eyes eventually find mine, I know she’s going to argue. But the moment I know I’ll cave, that doesn’t come until she speaks with her voice soft and full of emotion. Full of things I don’t understand but it’s there haunting her eyes and I’m done for. This is my Kryptonite.

I need to watch that.

“Odds are there’s at least one person in those files that’s like me,” she tells me. “Someone that’s scared and confused and struggling to get by with this power they can’t explain and can’t control. Someone cast out onto the streets by people who couldn’t cope and what if they didn’t have someone like Cara?” Her voice catches when she says her

sister's name. Her eyes shine with unshed tears. "We might not have answers or solutions for them, but at least they'd know they aren't alone."

I let my head drop forward. If I were in the field, I would have slung her over my shoulder and run her to the waiting helicopter. No questions, no debates. No tears. I'd be back at base by now waiting for the next call to come in. We're in a war zone here and yet I can't play by the rules I know. I'm working with a whole crazy set that I've seen on TV or heard from Walters but what the hell do I know? Just because I've seen someone play piano before doesn't make me proficient.

As I lift my head reluctantly nodding in agreement, going against all of my training, instincts and flat out common good sense, I wonder how I'm going to do this with her. Any of this.

I wonder if I can even play Chopsticks.

"You're right," I say gruffly, choking on the words.

It's true, she is right. The PJ in me knows it. I know I need to try and save others if I can, but not if it means risking her. In my mind, she's an Alpha. A critically injured patient that needs to be brought in to safety ASAP. That's my head. It's my heart that's saying nothing else matters. Nothing beyond her survival. And this is what I need to watch. I have to keep an eye on my emotional reactions to her. I've gone without them for basically ever and if I'm going to feel these things for her, I need to be careful it doesn't have me making bad decisions. The kind that can get us both killed or locked in another prison.

"I'll go back and get the files," I tell her, standing. "Let's get you in the Jeep. You can lock the doors and stay inside until I come back, alright?"

"I'm going with you," she says, her voice stubbornly strong all of the sudden. As though her stubbornness gives her some sort of super-strength. Like crack.

"Nope, not even up for debate. You're wounded and exhausted. You'll be more trouble than help."

"Gee, thanks."

"I had to wheel you out in a chair," I remind her. "How is that not going to be a problem?"

Alex lets me help her stand up, though she promptly sways on her feet when I let her go. I wrap my arm under hers, pulling her in close to me to keep her standing. We're chest to chest, my eyes looking down into hers with an expression that is painfully easy to read.

See what I mean?

She looks annoyed, but she nods. "Alright, I get it."

Once we're both loaded in the car again I turn it around. The headlights sweep weakly over the oily sheen of our bird burning outside the cave. It's engulfed in fire, the vehicles around and smashed under it feeding the flames. But our bird is untouched. It sits in the middle of the mayhem unaffected, toically refusing to burn.

As we put it in our rearview, I'm bizarrely proud of it.

"How are we going to get out of here?" Alex asks suddenly.

I glance over to find her resting her head against the window. Her hair is falling all around her pale face, her hazel eyes hovering half-closed. She looks so frail it makes me anxious bringing her back into the lion's den. I couldn't leave her up there in the open alone, I know that, but this isn't that much better. Maybe I won't leave her in the car alone after all.

She brings up a great question. I briefly entertain the thought of resurrecting the bird and flying us out here but there are two problems with that. One, it's frigidly cold here. We'd probably die from exposure alone, especially when you account for wind chill and the colder, thinner air up high. Which brings me to number two, the thinner air. I could lose consciousness. Even if I daydream for a second, we're dead. We'll drop out of the sky into the sea like... well, like stones.

So how do we get out?

"How did you get here?" I ask her. "A plane, right?"

She nods, but she looks doubtful. "I really don't think that plane is still here. Dr. Evans took off in it at the first sign of trouble, I just know it."

"Yeah, you're right," I mutter.

I do an inventory of what I've seen so far. Most of the vehicles outside are toast. This jeep is still good but where will it get us? To an empty air strip? If there's a radio we could call for help, but then what? Where does that land us? I'm AWOL and neither of us

has a plausible story for how we got here or what's happened. And odds are we're going to get Russia on the radio, not the US. Hard pass on that.

"Nick," Alex says softly.

I don't want to look at her because I know what she's going to say. It's exactly what I'm thinking and I don't like it.

"I know," I eventually tell her, glancing her way. She tries to manage a small smile, probably to reassure me. "I don't want to do it—"

"But it's our only option. You have to inject me. I have to Slip us out of here."

"We'll do it this one last time. Then never again."

"Nick, I can't do it on my own and seriously, how valuable a tool is that for us? I can't bring out anything like the Jabberwocky again at a moment's notice unless we put me under."

"That nearly killed you. You're not doing that again anyway."

"Like hell I'm not," she says hotly. "The Jabberwock, the bird – we needed those things."

I shake my head firmly, my eyes hard on the dark road ahead. "I can handle it, Alex. All I need are the stones. Those are easy for you. No more monsters, alright?"

She doesn't answer me. I wait longer than usual but still nothing. It's when the demolished face of the clinic comes into sight that I start to feel anxious. Or annoyed? It could be hunger, I don't know. Chopsticks!

"We're on the run now," she suddenly says, her voice low. She sounds frustrated. That I can identify. "There are people who will come after us. People who have abilities like ours."

I smirk. "No one has abilities like ours."

"Liam does. He can do what I can, only he can control it."

"He can Slip anywhere at any time?" I ask, dubiously.

"Not anywhere, but any time, yeah."

"Where can't he go?"

"Anywhere he's never been. He has to go to a place before he can Slip to it."

I frown. "That's pretty limiting. Why can't he move like you can?"

“I don’t know. They said they started the experiments on him later in life. He was way older than I was when they started on me. I guess his brain didn’t open up as much or something. He wasn’t as spongy as me.”

“Alright, so we can’t go to England.”

“Or back to Nebraska.”

I snort, throwing the Jeep into park just outside what used to be the front of the building.

“Why would we?”

“I have money there. Cash,” Alex says seriously. “We’ll need it.”

I turn to look at her hard. “Hold on. Not only do you want to go back inside this crumbling building full of killers for hire, mad scientists and X-men, you want to go to your home as well? A home they know the address for? One they’ll probably have staked out by the time I step out of this Jeep?”

“We’ll need money,” she insists.

“I have money.”

“On you? I pulled you out while you were sleeping. Do you have your wallet with you?”

I clench my jaw. “No.”

She shakes her head. “We won’t be any better off having me Slip us to where you were stationed in the desert than we will be going back to Nebraska. I can Slip us in and with a little luck, I can Slip us right back out. Easy.”

I can’t help but laugh. None of this is going to be easy. I haven’t thought about the long term of how this is going to play out. I haven’t had time. Right now I’m just worried about getting her out of here, sewing up that slice in her shoulder and cleaning the glass out of her hands. But I don’t know where we’re going from here and there’s a clinic right in front of me.

“Hell,” I mutter, staring at the building.

“What?” Alex asks anxiously. “What’s wrong?”

I go to open my door. I’m going to come around and pull her out with me. She’ll have to walk behind me, holding onto me for support, but she’s coming with me. I don’t have a good feeling about leaving her behind, especially with her as tired as she is. She

could Slip on accident and who knows where she'll land. Plus, everything I need to patch her up is right here. If only I had a g—

“Hands in the air!”

My eyes snap forward. Two guards have appeared from inside the clinic. Their guns are trained on us.

One on me. One on Alex.

The gun trained on Alex, that strikes a chord with me. I know this note.

I'm angry.