
Chapter 1

The first thing that hit her was the smell, and she knew immediately that things were not going to be good. It was that back of the throat, acrid, moldy aroma that arose from severe neglect, mixed with the unmistakable aroma of death.

Still, the door to her sealed chamber had popped open automatically for some reason, and she could no longer indulge in the lovely oblivion of the stasis into which she'd been put so long ago.

Before she pushed it open even further, she indulged herself in a full body stretch that was so pleasurable as to be nearly orgasmic. Nothing like, who knew how many, years of being in the same position to kink your muscles all to hell.

That, and finding something to wear, would be her first priority – determining exactly *when* she was. She couldn't imagine that the entire facility had been moved, so she was pretty sure *where* she was, but all of the supposedly built-in, fail-safe features that were supposed to have given her all of the pertinent information she would need to survive in another time had, of course, failed.

Your tax dollars at work.

Well, not hers, exactly, but everyone else's.

When she pushed the door open all the way, it protested arthritically, adding a second layer to what were rapidly becoming grave concerns about what this might mean for her possible survival.

And the condition of the room she stepped out into did nothing to assuage her worries – she had to look hard to find a place to put each foot that wasn't covered in shattered something – glass, maybe – mixed, as it was, with dirt and grime that was an inch or two thick on the floor.

But that was the least of it.

Standing, naked, outside the chamber, in her carefully choreographed three-sixty, she took in the wreckage of what had once been a state of the art stasis facility. The equipment obviously scavenged over time; what were supposed to have been sealed windows broken or missing entirely, and, worst of all, the two other chambers – and their contents – horribly defiled, one over on its back on the floor, the other in place as it should be, but with the door lying across the room.

Neither occupant was in any kind of shape to be joining her in this adventure, their bodies in the process of decomposition, but not enough so to spare her the sight of their ravaging.

She drew a long breath.

She was alone, more alone than she had ever been in her life. More alone even than she had been when she'd lost the man who had inspired this jaunt of hers, and she knew there was no guarantee that she'd make it even just one more day. There was no way for her to know whether the entities – *please let them be people of some sort* – who had destroyed this facility might be back, although there was little evidence that anyone had been here in a while, so she took some comfort in that thought.

No foot – or paw – prints beyond her own had disturbed the

dust in quite some time, at least not in what had been this reasonably well-hidden chamber.

With a twinge of conscience about not having the intestinal fortitude to bury her...co-workers, in favor of preserving her own hide, although she tried to assuage her feelings of guilt by remembering the fact that they had not been her friends. They were merely acquaintances who were going to attempt the same journey into the future as she, she ventured out into the hallway just outside the door.

Still, they deserved to be buried, and she made a mental note to try to get back here – once she'd gotten the lay of the land – to do just that, eventually.

Further inspection of the rest of the facility revealed a tattered old lab coat in a locker she'd had to use a fire extinguisher to break open, but not much else. Whatever useful materials this place might once have held, vandals probably long since removed. It might act as a shelter to her in the very short term, but she doubted that it would provide much beyond that.

She would probably have to venture out in order to find food and water, if only to bring it back here, if this was even the best place to base herself.

And what she'd seen when she left the seclusion of what had been the well-guarded, windowless room that housed the stasis chambers had chilled her to the bone, causing her to stand stark still and stare, blindly out the first window she encountered, wondering if there would be any safe place for her in this world at all.

Everett Labs was secluded in the rolling hills of Tennessee. Growing up in a little town nestled into the Green Mountains of Vermont, she'd liked the idea of slumbering away in her adopted home state, which she'd always considered to be Vermont with better weather.

Unrelenting verdancy should have been what greeted her

eyes – even the overgrown kind would not have been unexpected, considering the condition of the lab.

She was completely unprepared to encounter nothing of the sort.

Nothing of *any* sort, really.

If she hadn't known better, she would have sworn she was in a desert, despite the presence of the same hills with which she was familiar. The vista before her eyes reminded her much less of Vermont than of New Mexico or Arizona, both states in which she'd spent more than a few happy years with him.

That depressingly familiar, unbearably painful twinge in her chest was still there, even after Lord knew how long. She'd hoped that the distance time would create might have lessened her sense of loss, but she couldn't be that lucky, it appeared.

She'd just brought it with her.

He was gone then, and he was still gone now. Why she'd thought this might help her deal with the loss of the love of her life – of the only man she'd ever loved, since she'd laid on him in high school at the ripe old age of fifteen – and with whom she'd had five years of a truly blissful marriage from the moment they could legally be hitched.

Now, she stared despondently out the window, at what had been a largely virgin paradise of old growth forest. At what had, somehow, become a very desert like – deserted – landscape, she felt the same sense of desolation that she had sought to avoid, wrapping itself around her with frightening familiarity, fitting her again with the emotional equivalent of a hair shirt.

A little more than a week later, she had more thoroughly scouted the area around the facility and was now dwelling in a cave that wasn't too far from the lab, although the facility's use was now very limited for her. Since she'd scavenged pretty much every-

thing she could from it – everything she thought might come in handy, everything she thought might be of value, pickin's were mighty slim.

In the surprising – and suspicious – absence of any form of transportation – there weren't even any abandoned cars as far as she could see – a few hand trucks and carts had come in handy in getting her booty to her cozy – if somewhat damp – new home. Creature comforts were reasonably readily available. She'd made a makeshift bed from the plump cushions of the couch someone'd had in their office, and further – more careful – exploration had yielded a small cache of clothing of various styles and sizes.

Food and water, however, were in scarce supply.

Very scarce supply.

The vending machines had long since been raided, as had the break room as well as peoples' desks. Her sharp eye caught the bright red of a wrapper that shone against the dingy white ceiling, leading her to do what the previous owner of said energy bars had obviously done, which was to stand on the desk in order to move the tile away. This revealed a stash of about ten bars. Some of which had obvious signs of having been nibbled on by tiny rodent teeth.

As distasteful as she might have found the idea of eating that which a mouse or rat had decided not to for some reason, she was in no position to be a chooser.

She'd also stumbled on one of those big water cooler bottles – its seal still intact. Despite what must've been its age, she trusted its contents more so than any faucet or ground water she might have encountered.

Considering how heavy it was, and the fact that whenever her boss asked her to change one when she'd worked in an office that had one of those water coolers, she only ever managed to spill most of it on the floor *around* the cooler. That was one of the times she blessed the various carts she'd found, or she never

would have been able to get it – or much of what she'd collected – back to the cave.

She'd quickly rejected the idea of staying put in the lab. It stuck out like a sore thumb in the landscape, which meant it could be a magnet to scavengers of all sorts. There was no telling when someone might come knocking at the front door.

Although she had an inkling they weren't likely to display such manners.

Along with provisions to address her immediate needs, she scoured the place for anything she could apply to the next concern on her mental list – security.

But if there ever had been guns within these walls, they were long gone. The closest thing she found to a weapon was a lowly butter knife, although she brought with her the tools necessary to begin sharpening what pieces of metal she could find into something that might actually manage to cause someone some harm – she hoped.

She'd also scarfed every bit of reading material – which was about as hard to find as food and water – she could find in order to try to bring herself up to date, but print journalism had gone out of style long before her time, much less whenever now was. So she wasn't able to lay hands to much beyond a copy of the Bible, someone's recipe collection, an old stash of porn magazines that dated back to the twentieth century, and a copy of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* that was copy written in her great-great-grandmother's era.

And even now, nearly ten days later, she'd yet to see another human being – or any evidence that there was anyone left on Earth besides her. Wondering what had happened was a full time occupation, when she wasn't worrying about her own survival – or what was likely to be the distinct lack thereof if she didn't find more food and water shortly.

She'd never envisioned waking up as she had – totally alone –

but apparently, things had gone terribly, terribly wrong with the world while she'd been playing Sleeping Beauty.

She didn't think her environment had the look of a nuclear winter – no toxic clouds obscured the sun – and not that she was an expert on such things by any means. There hadn't been any rain – and she kind of thought there might not have been for quite some time, considering the landscape. If there had been a shower or two, they might have been a source of water, but then again, not. If what had happened to deforest the area was chemical in origin, those chemicals would have been in the rain, too, and she was in no hurry to expose herself to any more of them than she probably already had done.

Boredom was a definite problem. None of the electronic equipment that surrounded her in the building seemed to work, although she supposed that whatever advances had been made after she'd been put into stasis, and before whatever catastrophe befell the planet, could have resulted in her standing next to something that might have allowed her to communicate, but that she wouldn't have recognized as such.

She did her best to keep herself occupied and on a schedule, spending time foraging through the facility, even when there wasn't anything left that she wanted. She made scouting forays into the surrounding area and sat in the entrance to the cave, scanning, with a pair of reasonably good binoculars, some enterprising amateur ornithologist had left behind in his desk, for signs of life.

Any kind of life.

She would have been happy to see a field mouse scampering across the sand – a cat or dog would have been wonderful for companionship. No matter how hungry she got, she didn't think she'd be able to consider either one of them as a food source, and something goat sized or bigger might have become dinner, if she could have managed to catch it.

Nothing but nothing out there moved but the occasional clump of scrub brush in the wind.

Her supplies dwindled rapidly, despite her strict rationing; forcing her to abandon attempts to do much that was physical in favor of saving the calories. This reduced her to being a sentry at the mouth of the cave, which she'd done her best to conceal with brush, for hours on end.

She was just beginning to enjoy her one meager meal a day – while still scanning the horizon for signs of life – when she saw him.

One second, nothing, and then, on the return sweep, there he was, not bothering to conceal himself in the least, sitting, bold as brass, on a big horse.

And staring right back, directly into her eyes, without the benefit of binoculars.

His appearance so startled her – and what she could see was his bold assessment of her – that she dropped her binoculars and scrambled a few feet away, into the cave.

Not because she was scared of him, necessarily, although she knew she ought not to assume that he would be friendly.

No, it wasn't fear that had driven her back into the false safety of her cave.

It was the way her body had reacted to that stare. The man was a good half mile away, at least, and yet her body trembled, her breathing was shallow and sharp, as if she'd just been jogging, nipples hardening against her will beneath the baggy shirt she was wearing as she felt a longing rise within her that was unlike anything else she'd ever experienced.

Her sex life with her love had been amazing, and she had wanted him all day, every day, since the moment she'd met him.

But this was not that.

This was quite...uncivilized.

Primitive in the extreme.

Animalistic.

And much less controllable – completely overwhelming and undeniable.

She had to ball her hands into fists to keep them from plunging beneath her shirt and cupping her own breasts, pinching her nipples the way she knew she wanted him to. Then slipping further down to delve into what she knew would be the wet heat of her desire, horrified at the same time to realize that she could already feel her own juices dripping down the insides of her thighs.

She shook her head so rapidly that it made her stumble dizzily, hoping to clear it enough to make preparations in case he decided to storm the cave. She should have been scrambling around making things as secure as she could – however pitiful though her attempt might be.

Instead, she found herself rooted to the spot, head down, gasping for breath, the struggle to tamp down the urge to writhe where she stood taking every bit of her concentration.

When she'd finally beaten it back some, she lifted her head and looked up again at where he'd been.

Only he was no longer there.

She briefly wondered if lack of food and water had caused her to hallucinate, and he was the result, but then she dismissed the thought, knowing that decision, too, could have been because she was losing her mind.

As she searched for him frantically, while remaining – hopefully – as secluded from his eyes as she could, full blown panic set in at the idea that he was, indeed, a reality. That thought succeeded in doing what she'd been wholly unable to—overwhelming—if just barely, those primitive sexual urges goosing her into nervous action.

She'd already hidden anything she thought was of value well

inside the cave, and what she ended up doing was much less preparing for an attack by him than doing things that would have been more in keeping with the idea that she was cleaning her apartment in anticipation of having a date see it. She straightened her almost bed, folded her clothes and put them neatly in the small bookcase she'd procured, wishing randomly that she had a hairbrush.

Then she stopped short when she realized where her thoughts were going. This was not a date. It was much more likely to be a very short, ignominious fight to her death, if he was as big up close as he already looked from a considerable distance.

But her supplies were so meager that there was truly little she could do to prepare herself for him, besides make mental peace with the fact that this was probably going to be how and where she died – at this man's hands.

She was already wearing the one weapon she owned, such as it was. Her attempts at making more had been pitiful at best, and she had soon abandoned that idea.

So, she stood in the entrance to the cave and waited for the inevitable. He was on horseback, so she should be able to hear him approaching, she thought.

But he proved her wrong about that, seconds later, when he swooped down from above and landed dead in front of her, a long, wicked blade in one hand as he assumed a defensive posture.

For the second time in less than ten minutes, she found herself reeling backwards, away from him, only this time she managed to overbalance herself – partly by looking up – and up – and up some more at him – and was in danger of ending up flat on her backside.

Quick as a snake, his eyes never leaving hers, he caught her wrist in his free hand and pulled her upright. She would have sworn he was smiling down at her as if she was a brainless dolt, although, staring into those obsidian eyes of his, she realized that

she could also have no problems at all believing that he had never smiled – not once – in his life.

Under normal circumstances, she might have smiled up at him and thanked him for keeping her from falling, but things were far from normal. Instead, she began to struggle to reclaim her hand immediately, her fierce and frantic actions the result of those unwanted feelings she'd only just begun to be able to get under control roaring back to life within her as a direct result of his proximity, to say nothing of his touch.

He remained rock still as she tugged and pulled and tried to twist her arm from a grip that wasn't painful in the least, but also seemed to be completely unbreakable, even against all of the self-defense tricks her husband had taught her. No matter what she did, he simply stood there like a mountain, staring down at her, never having moved so much as a muscle, despite her efforts.

And not only was she having to fight him, but also, she was still deep in the midst of that struggle with her baser self.

She could already tell she wasn't likely to win either altercation.

Her feeble attempts at breaking his hold quickly dwindled down to what was nothing more than her trembling and occasionally jerking violently as she fought to maintain command of her own body and continue to fight against his hold.

She'd never felt anything like this, a neediness – a desire – so insidious that it was agony to deny it in any way, that had already worked its way into her brain, shutting down her centers of reason, subduing her intelligence in favor of convincing her to offer herself to the man who stood – unmoving and immovable – in front of her. Until the only thing she could think about was the fact she wanted to strip off her clothes and present herself to him as if she was a bitch in heat, bottom high, head down, legs spread so that she was completely open to him, body weeping copiously for want of him.

She knew she was moments away from begging him to mount her.

Nothing else – not finding out what kind of catastrophe had befallen the area, not discovering who he was, not even maintaining the illusion of her own safety and security – mattered to her in the least. She rapidly reduced herself to her lowest common denominator, to her carnal, animal essence.

As he watched her, his face darkened, then – lightening quick – he gave a small tug on her wrist, which sent her crashing into him. The impact jarred her small body as he strode forward at the same time, plowing her back until she could go no further. Trapped, as she was, between the rock wall of the cave and the rock wall that was him towering over her, reaching out to tear her shirt to shreds with one sharp jerk to lift her into the air by her armpits and hold her there.

Her bare, seeping crotch dangled inches from his face.

She could feel the warmth of his breath on the parts of her that were overflowing with their welcome to him. She knew she should have been ashamed and embarrassed about the pool of her own moisture that had already begun collecting at her feet, but she couldn't think enough to do so.

Suddenly, she felt herself being hitched even higher, watching in disbelief as he draped her thighs over his shoulders, opening her to him whether she wanted to be or not. Pausing for a long second, closing his eyes and deeply – ritualistically – he inhaled a huge lungful of nothing but her scent on a deep growl that rumbled almost tangibly between them before raising his head. And only then, opening his eyes, those full, sensual lips quirking just slightly upwards – top lip moving just enough to give her a glimpse of frighteningly impressive canines – in a smile that had nothing whatever to do with amusement, and everything to do with raw, primitive male pride and possessiveness, that she heartily wished she hadn't seen.