

CHAPTER ONE

WAKING UP INSIDE A prison cell was hardly how I expected to start my day, but then, that was just how life went sometimes, I suppose. Before he died, Dad always used to tell me that you could never know what the next day would bring you, but he never mentioned that you might find yourself lying on the top bunk of a bunk bed in a prison cell. Then again, Dad had never been in prison himself, being a famous superhero and all, and he certainly never expected his son—me, also a superhero—to end up in there sometime, though he had put plenty of people behind bars during his long career.

Sitting up, I looked around at my cell. It was a pretty small room, with maybe enough room for two people at most. There was a toilet at the back wall—with no walls or anything to hide it from the rest of the prison—plus a sink next to it that looked like it hadn't been cleaned since World War II. The ceiling, walls, and floor were thick concrete, while thick steel bars kept me from being able to leave the cell. I could hear the voices of the other prisoners on the cell block, talking among each other or throwing curses at the guards.

But I didn't know what *I* was doing here. I was a superhero; specifically, the superhero Bolt. I had never broken a law in my life. I didn't remember being arrested for anything. The last thing I remembered was being knocked out by a jolt of electricity from a woman named Shade, who was a member of the government-sponsored superhero team known as the G-Men. That still didn't explain what I was doing here, though.

Shaking my head, I looked down at my clothes. I was no longer in my superhero costume and my suit-up watch was also missing, meaning that I couldn't put on my costume and suit up even if I wanted to. I was in an orange prison jumpsuit, which was hardly appropriate for crime-fighting; then again, I wasn't likely to do much crime-fighting in this place. It looked like a normal prison, but I didn't know which prison I was in.

"Finally awake, eh?" said a voice tinged with a Russian accent in the bunk underneath mine, causing me to start, because I hadn't known I had a cellmate. "I thought you were just going to sleep forever. Then again, I doubt the G-Men would have put you here if you'd been in a coma."

I looked over the side of my bunk and saw another prisoner lying on the bunk underneath. He was reading a magazine—*Cat Weekly*, which seemed entirely out of place in a prison—and it was obscuring his face. But I could see his hands and arms; they were thick and muscular. Clearly, this guy worked out, though I doubted he could take me in a fight, given that I had super strength and he probably didn't.

"Who are you?" I said. I glanced out our cell, but didn't see anyone out there. "And where am I? How did I get here? Last thing I remember, I was knocked out by the G-Men. And how long have I been unconscious?"

"Eh, probably about a day or so," said the man as he flipped to the next page of his magazine. "They brought you in yesterday. Was told you were my new cellmate, which I don't mind, since I hate being alone."

“What happened to your last cellmate?” I said.

“I killed him,” the man said, as nonchalantly as before, though his Russian accent made him sound very threatening anyway. “Snapped his neck like a pencil. He had it coming, since he insulted my mother, and I don’t let *anyone* insult my mother.”

I rubbed my own neck unconsciously as I said, “That’s, er, um, interesting. Why didn’t the guards stop you?”

“What *can* they do about it?” said the man. He chuckled. “I’m already in prison. And they can’t execute me, either, since that wasn’t the sentence that the judge gave me. They can take away my cat magazines, though. Bastards.”

Given that this guy had murdered his cellmate just because he had insulted his mother, I thought taking away his cat magazines was the lightest punishment they could inflict on him.

But that wasn’t my biggest concern at the moment. “Where am I? Can you tell me that, at least?”

“You don’t know where you are?” said the man in surprise, though he still didn’t lower his magazine. “Then again, you were unconscious when you got here, so I shouldn’t be so surprised. Well, I’ll tell you, since you’re my new cellmate, which means I’m going to have to teach you the ropes: You are in Ultimate Max, the one and only prison in the whole country dedicated to holding supervillains and criminals.”

A chill went down my spine. I knew that name. I had always heard about Ultimate Max—and, in fact, had sent more than a few supervillains here myself during my own superhero career—but I had never actually visited the prison before. I had never had any need to; after all, I was a superhero, and superheroes didn’t go to jail unless they went rogue.

“You’re joking, right?” I said.

“Joking? Nah,” said the man as he turned his magazine to the next page, still without looking at me. “I’m no good at humor. One of the guys I killed one time, though, was. He was a comedian. Cracked some jokes about me and my friends, so I cracked his skull wide open. Was a lot funnier than his stupid jokes and just as messy.”

I found it very disturbing how casually my cellmate could speak about killing people, but again I had other things to worry about. “But why am I here? I’ve never committed a crime in my life.”

“That’s what everyone here says,” said the man in a disgruntled voice. “Heck, even I’ve said it myself at one point. The judge who put me behind bars apparently didn’t consider that enough evidence to prove my innocence. Probably for the best.”

“No, I’m serious,” I said. “I was a superhero before I came here. I’m as innocent as they come.”

“A superhero, huh?” said the man. “We’ve got a few ex-superheroes here. They’re always crazier than the guys who just went straight to villainy or criminality. I always avoid them. You can see the craziness in their eyes.”

I thought it was rich that a guy who had probably been put behind bars for murder (multiple murders, if he was telling the truth) was calling *other* people crazy, but I didn’t mention it. “Did the guards say why I was put here?”

“They mentioned something about you being a member of a cult that tried to kill the President or something,” said the man. “Think it was called Vision. I don’t know. I don’t pay attention to the outside

world much anymore. Since I'm never going to see the world beyond these walls again, I've focused on more important things, like reading magazines about cats."

At this point, I couldn't tell if this guy was just pulling my leg or if he genuinely believed that reading magazines like *Cat Weekly* was important. In any case, I had to know what was going on, but I did remember what this man was talking about.

Not long ago, I had been brainwashed into joining a superhuman cult called Vision. Its purpose was to spread the 'vision' of a world where normal humans and superhumans are 'equal,' by which it meant denying biological reality by claiming that superpowers were just a social construct that anyone could get just by believing and that anyone who disagreed was an evil bigot. Yeah, I didn't get it, either.

Their leader was a former Senator named Barnabas Sagan, also known as the Visionary, who had nearly won the presidential election last year, but due to the untimely gun shot from his assistant, had ended up in a coma. His followers—many of whom had been respected members of the superhero community before their true nature was revealed—had been forced to go into hiding, but had still tried to give me trouble, such as briefly allying with the bully from my old school (who, incidentally, had been the son of my first supervillain who had escaped from Ultimate Max, but that was a whole 'nother story I didn't want to think about right now).

About a week ago, I had been brainwashed by this cult into helping them rescue their leader from the government. I managed to break the brainwashing, however, and killed Sagan and defeated his remaining followers, thus ending the threat of Vision once and for all.

By any measure of goodness and justice, I was a hero. Sure, I had done some bad things during my brainwashed period, but I had done them while being manipulated by Vision, so they weren't technically my fault. Why had I been thrown into prison, then? It made no sense whatsoever, especially since Cadmus Smith, the leader of the G-Men, had promised me that he would let me see my friends and family again after we took down Vision.

Therefore, I could only conclude that Cadmus must have been lying to me about that. But why would he throw me into prison? Did he think I was lying about my brainwashed status? What were my friends and family doing? Did they think I had willingly joined Vision? Was the Neohero Alliance trying to get me out of here? Surely they knew that I didn't belong in the same place as some of the country's worst criminals, didn't they?

I had too many questions and too few answers. I swung my legs over the side of the bunk and jumped down to the floor. I walked up to the door, which was locked tightly, but I knew that I could break it with a few well-placed punches backed up by my super strength.

"What are you doing, boy?" said the man, still without looking at me. "Going to call mommy?"

"No," I said. I balled my right hand into a fist. "I am going to break out of this place, because I *know* I'm not supposed to be here and I am going to get the answers I seek no matter what."

"Good luck with that," said the man. "It's your funeral."

I rolled my eyes. Not only was this guy crazy, but he was also sarcastic. Then again, Ultimate Max was supposed to be inescapable, with only one supervillain—Master Chaos, who I knew far too well—ever succeeding in breaking out. But I was strong and fast, a combination I figured would be enough for me to escape.

So I threw my fist door, aiming for the lock specifically. One blow to the door and the entire thing should fall apart.

But as soon as my fist struck the door, the door didn't break off. Instead, the door bent with my fist, almost like rubber, yet it felt just like metal.

Then, all of a sudden, the door rebounded. The rebound sent me flying backwards into the back wall of the cell. I crashed into the back wall and fell to the floor, dazed by the impact. I shook my head quickly and looked at the door, unsure what just happened.

"What ... what was that?" I said, rubbing the back of my head where I'd cracked it against the surface of the wall.

"Indestructonium," said my cellmate as he flipped to the next page of *Cat Weekly*. "Artificial alloy created by the government's top scientists in order to build a metal that superhumans can't break. Like the name suggests, it can't be destroyed; instead, it absorbs the impact of the blow and rebounds it back at the attacker. You were lucky it just knocked you back; I've seen more than a few prisoners get outright killed by the rebounds from their own attacks during failed escape attempts."

I gulped and looked at the cell door. "Meaning I can't break it?"

"Yep," said the man. "Well, maybe if you had a nuke, you could blow it sky high, but since you clearly aren't Nuke Boy, you're stuck here with the rest of us."

I scowled, but before I could say anything, I heard footsteps coming from the outside of the cell. Then a prison guard—wearing thick black armor and carrying a large gun I'd never seen before—appeared in front of our cell, an annoyed look on his face.

"What's going on here?" said the guard. "I heard someone hit the wall. Already fighting your cellmate, Ivan?"

"No," said my cellmate, who was apparently named Ivan, which explained the Russian accent. "The boy attempted to punch the door down and failed."

"Ah," said the guard. He chuckled. "Yeah, I love seeing new prisoners try to use their powers on Indestructonium. Always good for a laugh."

I rose to my feet and walked up to the door, wrapping my hands around the bars. "Mr., uh, Prison Guard, I'm glad to see you. You have to let me out of here."

The guard chuckled again. "Everyone says that on their first day here, kiddo. You think I'm stupid enough to fall for such a dumb trick?"

"Trick?" I said. "You clearly don't know who I am."

"Sure I do," said the guard. "You're Prisoner Number Four Four Three Five. Says so right there on your tag."

I looked down at my chest. There was indeed a tag on it with my prisoner number on it: 4435, just as the guard said. I hadn't noticed it until now, but there it was.

I looked up at the guard again. "I am not a number. I am the superhero Bolt, son of Genius, and leader of the Young Neos. I've done nothing in my life to deserve to be in the same place as all of these supervillains."

"Yeah, right," said the guard. "And I'm the Queen of England. You deserve to be here, just like every other damn criminal in this place, even if I don't know exactly why you're here. That you're a su-

perhero doesn't change that; although if you really are Bolt, you should probably keep quiet about that around here."

"What? Why?" I said.

The guard just laughed. "You'll find out later today when we let the prisoners out to work out, which will be after lunch. Until then, shut the hell up and don't ask me to let you go again."

The guard laughed again after he said that and walked down the hall the way he came, still laughing all the while. I decided that not only were the prisoners here insane, but so were the guards.

"You're Bolt?" said Ivan behind me, causing me to look over my shoulder. "The son of Genius?"

Ivan had finally put down his copy of *Cat Weekly* now, allowing me to see his face for the first time. He had a very strange face; it was kind of lopsided and crooked, like his face had been smashed in and he had had to readjust it without a mirror. His eyes were black and old. He looked like he might be in his late fifties or early sixties, though he was in great shape for a man his age.

"Yeah, I am," I said as I turned around. "You've heard of me?"

"Yes," said Ivan, nodding. "Well, I've heard of the 'you' described by the guys you've put behind bars."

"What do they say about me?" I said.

"They don't really say much about you, in particular, but more about what they'd like to do to you the next time they see you," said Ivan. "Truthfully, I am amazed by the varied and vivid descriptions they gave me of what gruesome acts of cruelty they would prefer to inflict upon you if they could get their hands on you. When I was still active, most supervillains weren't nearly so eloquent."

I grimaced. "Yeah, it's kind of annoying. But is that all they do? Just complain about me?"

"Of course not," said Ivan. "They also work out heavily, so that when they next see you, they will be in good shape to rip out your spleen and stuff it down your throat while you are still alive."

"Um ..." I didn't know what to say to that. "I think I could live without knowing what my spleen tastes like."

Ivan shrugged. "I'm just repeating what they said. But in all seriousness, I think you will have some trouble later today. News spreads fast in this place; I've no doubt that every prisoner in the jail knows you are here now, probably already knew it when you were brought here yesterday."

"How are superheroes put in here generally treated?" I said.

"Depends," said Ivan, folding his arms across his chest. "Usually they get brutally beaten to a pulp by the enemies they put here, but sometimes they survive, usually by being crazier and more violent than the rest of us. Like I said, superheroes turned villains are usually the craziest."

I bit my lower lip. "Great. Just great. I'm stuck in the world's most secure prison for reasons I don't know and I'm probably going to get beaten to a pulp by all of my worst enemies later today. How could my life get any worse?"

"You might miss this month's issue of *Cat Weekly*," Ivan suggested.

I looked at him in disbelief. "You do realize that was a rhetorical question, right?"

Ivan nodded. "I did, but it is also a serious suggestion. Without *Cat Weekly*, I would have gone insane by now."

I wasn't sure that Ivan wasn't already insane, but instead I said, "Well, I still need to find out how I got here. Who is the warden? I need to speak with him."

“Warden Glass doesn’t speak with prisoners,” said Ivan. “Ever. That you’re a superhero won’t change that policy of his.”

“But how else am I supposed to know how I got in here?” I said.

“I don’t know,” said Ivan with a shrug. “Maybe the government wants to keep an eye on you. Or maybe they’ve been looking for an excuse to jail you for a while and just decided to make one up to do it.”

“Cadmus Smith would never do that,” I said.

Ivan chuckled. “Cadmus Smith? I know him. Or knew him, anyway. There isn’t much I wouldn’t put past that man, at least if he thought it would help protect the United States.”

I wanted to argue against that, but Ivan did have a point. While Cadmus Smith had always been an ally to me, I always knew I couldn’t trust him entirely. He was always extremely secretive and had a bad habit of speaking vaguely about top secret information. Not only that, but Cadmus Smith and my Dad hadn’t exactly been the best of friends when Dad was alive and I was sure that there was a reason for that, even if I didn’t know exactly what.

“Then what am I supposed to do?” I said, throwing my hands up into the air. “Just rot away here in this cell forever?”

“That’s what I’m doing,” said Ivan. “Of course, given the crimes I committed when I was free, I probably deserve it.”

Ivan’s self-deprecating tone made me curious. “Why? What crimes did you commit? Who are you, anyway, and what kind of powers do you have?”

Ivan suddenly yawned. “I’m too pooped to answer all your questions, boy. I’m just going to take a nap before the guards escort us to the prison yard for the day’s exercise.”

Ivan rested on his bunk and turned so that his back was facing me. A second later, Ivan was snoring loudly, having apparently already fallen asleep.

Ivan may have been able to fall asleep without trouble, but there was no way I could rest for even five minutes with all of these questions in my head. Yet I had no way to get out or escape, which meant that there wasn’t much I could do until the exercise period in the prison yard later.

And frankly, I wasn’t looking forward to that at all.