



Alien Separation

By Gini Koch

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The Mastermind has finally been identified, but before Jeff and Kitty Katt-Martini can take him down, they, their daughter Jamie, Charles Reynolds, Paul Gower, Christopher White, and several others are zapped out of their solar system and into another.

Landing in scattered groups on various areas of Beta Eight in the Alpha Centauri system means getting the team back together will be a major issue. But it's only one of the challenges they'll face. Kitty and Company have to forge alliances with the wide variety of sentient natives on the planet while plotting to create a civil war and overthrow the king—who just may be a clone of one of their bitterest enemies, Ronaldo Al Dejah!

Of course, to do this, they have to overcome an assortment of dangerous obstacles, protect a group of refugees, take mind reading lessons, and seek out unexpected new allies as they journey to the CenterPoint of the World.

And once they reach the All Seeing Mountain, new issues and surprises await. Because there's more than a small war going on—they're in the midst of the Alpha Centauri Civil War!

From the Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Alien series:

"Gini Koch's Alien books **remind us why we read**: it's fun!" —*Kirkus*

"A series that shows **no signs of slowing down**." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Aliens, danger, and romance make this **a fast-paced, wittily written sf romantic comedy**." —*Library Journal*

"For those craving futuristic high-jinks and gripping adventure, **Koch is an absolute master!**" —*RT Reviews*

"This **delightful romp** has many interesting twists and turns as it glances at racism, politics, and religion en route. It will have fanciers of cinematic sf parodies referencing *Men in Black*, *Ghost Busters*, and *X-Men*." —*Booklist*

"Campy, hyperactive, implausibly entertaining, there's a lot of fun here, and more fun to come in future installments." —*SF Site*

"Gini Koch has created a monster with the Katherine 'Kitty' Katt **series that continues to grow**." —*Gizmo's Reviews*

"Twelve books into the Katherine 'Kitty' Katt series and Gini Koch is still able to deliver a **fast-paced, action-packed thrill ride** that stays true to what faithful readers love about the series but still manages to throw in some unexpected twists and turns." —*Under the Covers*

About the Author

Gini Koch writes the fast, fresh and funny Alien/Katherine "Kitty" Katt series for DAW Books, the Necropolis Enforcement Files, and the Martian Alliance Chronicles. She also has a humor collection, *Random Musings from the Funny Girl*. As G.J. Koch she writes the Alexander Outland series and she's made the most of multiple personality disorder by writing under a variety of other pen names as well, including Anita Ensal, Jemma Chase, A.E. Stanton, and J.C. Koch. She has stories featured in a variety of excellent anthologies, available now and upcoming, writing as Gini Koch, Anita Ensal, Jemma Chase, and J.C. Koch. Reach her via: www.ginikoch.com

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COUNTRIES—MARCA REGISTRADA HECHO EN U.S.A.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REVENGE IS A DISH BEST SERVED COLD.

Yeah, I have no idea what that means, either. But it's what they say when you're ready to go after someone who's done their best to destroy you. I think it's supposed to mean that you should be levelheaded and calm while plotting your enemy's ultimate, untimely, and ugly demise.

Sound plan. Pity that I work better angry. But then again, I'm pretty angry. So we should be good here.

Of course, that's probably being far too optimistic.

Not sure what was more shocking—discovering that there's a zillion and one universes out there and I'm representing in most of them, or discovering the identity of the Mastermind.

Visiting another universe was kind of cool. Nice to see how the other half was living with basically no aliens on the planet. Not as well in some ways, just dandy in others. It was a “fun” vacation, if we define fun to mean spending a couple weeks unsure if I'd ever get home again or if I was going to spend the rest of my life in Oz, both literally and figuratively.

Coming home was better—always nice to have that “took a trip but boy it's great to sleep in my own bed and have great sex with my mega-sexy alien husband again” feeling.

But while I got to save the day for the other world, I'm not so sure how to manage back in mine. The term “it's complicated” has never been more apt. And, as in the other world, a frontal attack is probably not the right plan.

A battle will be coming, though, one way or the other. Because it's time to take the bull by the horns and ram those horns right into the Mastermind's personal tenders. So to speak.

But at least I won't be fighting this battle with only a small commando force. For this battle, I'm going to ensure I have an army. And, to quote one of my favorite '80s glam rockers, it's time to make the Mastermind Stand and Deliver. For I am a Woman of the Multiverse and I will not allow evil to continue unchecked.

• • •

Yeah, fine, fine. Let's go with what's been working all this time. Yo, Mastermind—just thought you should know that Megalomaniac Girl is back and she's madder and badder than ever. So watch your step, 'cause I'm coming for you.

CHAPTER 1

EARLY MORNING AND I are not best buds. I'm not a girl who sees any virtue in watching the sun rise.

However, it was the morning after I'd come back from an unintended vacation, and my husband and I had spent the night wide awake and extremely active in the best possible way.

Now we were lying next to each other, relaxing in the afterglow of a night very well spent.

"I know who the Mastermind is." As post-coitus comments went, this was probably not going to go down as the World's Most Romantic Statement.

"Yeah?" Jeff rolled onto his side to face me, leaning on his hand. His other hand stroked my body. It was great to feel his hand on my skin—I'd spent the last couple of weeks wondering if that would ever happen again.

We had music on, and as Weezer's "My Best Friend" hit our airwaves, I shifted likewise so we were face-to-face and I could also stroke Jeff's chest and such. And I could look at him. Considering I hadn't been sure I'd ever see his face again, it was nice to be here, like normal, as if nothing much had gone on.

We were in Sydney Base, so the standard nightlight glow was in the room, meaning we *could* see each other. Aliens, of which Jeff was definitely one, were different from humans in many ways, not all of them physical. As near as I could tell, no A-Cs liked to sleep in the extreme dark. I'd never asked why—and as I'd learned during my foray out of this world, I probably needed to be a bit more curious about many things.

However, since we'd moved into the American Centaurion Embassy in Washington, D.C., I'd gotten used to sleeping in the actual dark again. But this was kind of a nice retro moment. I'd spent my first night after discovering aliens were on the planet in a room very like this one, half of it with Jeff. The best half.

I was willing to stay in bed with Jeff forever but, partially because I'd had a two-week "vacation" in another universe, duty was calling in a loud and insistent manner. Also, Mr. Clock shared that it was six in the morning, and that meant that our daughter was going to be up in an hour, give or take.

"Yeah. Only . . . I don't know if I can tell you."

"Because you're worried I'll give away the fact that I know because I can't lie any better than the rest of the A-Cs, right?"

"Right. You sound like you had this conversation already."

"I did. With you, in that sense."

"Oh. Other Me figured it out?" I'd switched universes with another version of me. Yeah, my life was just that kind of exciting. Hers was, too, now, come to think of it. Oh well, she was me. She'd roll with the punches.

"Pretty much."

"How? I mean, I realize I'm great at looking at accepted truths and quickly spotting the flaws and all that, but she couldn't have had a lot to go on."

"Oh, she didn't. But she had the one key piece of information we've never had. The same new fact I figure you discovered while you were in her universe—her Chuck hates the Mastermind's guts, with good reason."

Other Me was married to my best guy friend since high school, Charles Reynolds. Well, her universe's Charles Reynolds, at any rate. It had been instructive and interesting to see how my life might have been

different. Hoped she'd enjoyed seeing how the other universe lived.

"Wow, yeah. So, you know who it is?"

Jeff nodded as "Bad Blood" by Ministry came on. "Almost the worst person it could be."

"Got that right. So, does Chuckie know?"

"No." Jeff sighed. "We've managed to keep it from him. For the whole week and a half that we've known. And only because we've been so busy and focused on fixing things with the Australian government and getting you and your Cosmic Alternate to switch back."

"Did Malcolm already know?" Malcolm Buchanan had Dr. Strange powers. At least as far as I was concerned. If he didn't want you to see him, you didn't see him. If he said it was so, it was probably so. Luckily for me, my mother had assigned him to be my bodyguard when we first got to D.C. She'd assigned the Buchanan in the other universe onto Other Me a lot sooner. Apparently things were dicey wherever I was. Go me.

"Yeah. Buchanan's known for what sounds like three years. But he has no actual proof. None of us here do."

"We had no proof, either, other than the fact that Cliff Goodman was that universe's Charles' lifelong enemy. And the fact that he tried to kill Other Me, their kids, Charles, James, and Malcolm. He'd already . . ." Murdered my mother in that world. Along with the rest of her and Buchanan's teams, which included other people I knew and loved in this world.

"I know," Jeff said gently. "We figured it all out. Well, most of it. I'm sure we're both missing parts of the whole nightmare." He grinned. "And I know I don't have the full story of how you kicked butt and saved the day."

"You just assume I did that?" I hadn't really had time to brief everyone on what had happened, in part because Chuckie was here with the group that had come to fix things with Australia and I hadn't wanted to let anything slip.

Jeff kissed me, his typical awesome kiss. "Yeah, that's my default assumption," he said after his lips and tongue had owned mine for a good, long time, emphasis on good. "That you're going to do what has to be done, better than anyone else ever could."

"I could get used to this form of hero worship."

He laughed. "There's nothing wrong with accurate hero worship, baby."

Snuggled my face in between his awesome pecs and rubbed against his chest hair as the Veronicas sang "I Could Get Used To This." "Works for me. After all, I hero worship your bedroom and leadership skills, so we're even."

Jeff chuckled. "Always nice to be appreciated."

"Back atcha. So, what do we do? I don't know how to tell Chuckie that the guy he thinks is his best friend is the reason his wife is dead. He's normally laid back and able to roll with whatever's thrown at him, but I'm not willing to bet he'll be able to deal rationally under the circumstances."

Naomi Gower-Reynolds wasn't really dead in the technical, universal sense. She'd taken so much pure

Surcenthumain—what we called the Superpowers Drug—in order to save Jamie and Chuckie from being destroyed by the Mastermind that she'd become something far more than human or alien. She'd become a superconsciousness. And she was never allowed to come back to Earth. Our Earth. However, she'd found a way around that rule by covering the protection of her beloved goddaughter and husband in every other universe they existed in. And I was the only one who knew this. Well, me, and my daughter Jamie. Daughters Jamie, I guess.

There was a multiverse out there, and I discovered that I'd seen it before. In the past, when I'd seen the Universe Wheel, I'd never remembered it when I'd woken up or come back to life or whatever. But now, after this trip, I remembered it all. And I was pretty sure I did because of Naomi's influence.

I existed in a large number of the universes out there, and in every one I was in, Jamie was there as well. Same birthdate for every Jamie throughout the multiverse, though her father was usually Chuckie, or James Reader. This was the only universe where Jeff was on Earth, so it was the only one with him as her father.

Jamie had learned how to communicate with her other selves. I wasn't sure if it was because my Jamie housed a superconsciousness in her mind now, since ACE had taken up residence there, or if she was just that highly talented. Probably both.

“None of us have a plan for that yet,” Jeff admitted. “It needs to be broken to him gently, if that’s at all possible.”

“There’s a slight possibility that I’m wrong about Cliff being the Mastermind in this universe. Very slight.”

Jeff shook his head. “No, you’re not. Too many pieces fit.”

“Yeah, they fit to me, too. I don’t know what to do. Other than get a three-way mirror pronto.”

The Jamie I’d spent time with in the other universe was also special—she could see every other Jamie in all the other universes. But she needed help to do so—a large three-way mirror set up as if it was in a department store’s dressing room. I was pretty sure that she didn’t need a magic mirror, but I wasn’t completely confident—in my experience it didn’t pay to assume.

“Yeah, you told me that when you, ah, came back. I ordered a set. Should be at the Embassy when we get home. But unless those mirrors are going to give us proof that Cliff’s the Mastermind, or show us how to break the news to Chuck safely, I don’t think they’re what we need the most.”

“Yeah. What we really need to know is if Cliff and LaRue have a death ray.”

“Excuse me?”

Before I could explain what I was talking about, “Trouble” by Pink came on and we were interrupted by a voice on the intercom. “I’m sorry to wake you, Vice President and Ambassador Martini,” a woman I’d never heard before said in an Australian accent. “But we have an incoming call from a restricted number.”

“Did the caller give a name, Melissa?” Jeff asked as he sat up and turned the music off.

“No, Mister Vice President, he did not.” Apparently Melissa was as big on the titles as Walter and William Ward were. Walter ran Embassy Security and, since Gladys Gower’s death, his older brother William had taken over as Head of Security out at the Dulce Science Center.

“Why are we taking this call then?” I asked as I sat up as well. This was far too reminiscent of the start of

Operation Confusion for my liking.

“Because the caller said it was a matter of life or death, Ambassador.”

CHAPTER 2

“IT SO FIGURES. Can we take that call in here . . . Melissa, is it? Or do we have to go somewhere else?”

Jeff shot me the “shut up, shut up” look.

“Yes, Ambassador, it’s Melissa. We’ve met.” Her voice was rather icy on the last sentence.

Crap. The reason for the “shut up” look dawned on me. Now that I was back, I’d forgotten that Jeff had told me that everyone had done their best not to let on that Other Me was here instead of Real Me. “Oh. Right. I’m sorry. You just sounded different on the intercom and this early in the morning. We, ah, didn’t get a lot of sleep.”

“Ah. Well, I can patch the call through to your room, if you’d like.” Melissa sounded appeased and Jeff looked relieved, so assumed I’d handled it well enough.

“Just asking . . . why wouldn’t we like? It’s not a video call or something, is it?” We were naked and I didn’t feel like sharing the wonder that was Jeff’s naked body with random strangers, restricted calls or not. Frankly, I was a selfish girl and didn’t want to share his naked body with anyone. Shoved the worry about how much of his naked body Other Me had seen and/or enjoyed away. Clearly, the game was afoot. Sometimes I hated the game.

“Mister Buchanan feels he should be with you for this call, Ambassador.”

“Gotcha.”

Jeff zipped out of bed, grabbed our pajamas, and zipped back. He was dressed in a second. Hyperspeed, the savior of decorum. “Give us a minute, no more, Melissa,” Jeff said. “Then have him come to our room.”

“He’s outside, Mister Vice President.”

Pulled the pajamas on at human speeds. Didn’t need to rip my clothes in half right now. “Now is fine,” I said as I pulled the T-shirt down.

We headed into the sitting room portion of the standard A-C transient housing section. All A-C facilities had transient sections and they all resembled a nice, austere hotel setup, just like the regular living quarters did. Aliens had their funny ways, was how I looked at it.

The door opened and Buchanan came in. He was built a lot like Jeff—tall, buff, handsome for a human. Unlike Jeff, his brown hair was straight, not wavy, and he had blue eyes instead of Jeff’s light brown. The perks of my job and life were many, and being surrounded by the best looking aliens in the galaxy somehow meant we scored the best looking humans on Earth, too. It wasn’t fair, but I wasn’t complaining.

“Secured line, Melissa,” Buchanan said, without even a howdy-do. “No one else listening in other than those in this room. Caller unaware that I’m in this room, as well.”

“Yes, Mister Buchanan.” Melissa clearly liked Buchanan more than she liked me. Oh well. I’d have to find the will to go on somehow.

The sound in the room changed to the crackle of a poor connection on a long distance line. “Missus Martini?”

Recognized the voice. “Gideon Cleary, it’s been a while. It’s Ambassador Martini to you, though, dude.”

“Yes, sorry. I wasn’t trying to be offensive.”

Considered this. His tone didn’t sound snide or condescending. Frankly, he sounded worried. “You were trying to be sure it was me.”

“Yes.” Now he sounded relieved. “It *is* you. Good. We have a problem.”

“How is that? And why wouldn’t it have been me? You called for me and my husband and it’s dawn over on this side of the world. Who were you expecting to be sleeping in our bed, so to speak?”

“No idea, honestly. There have been some . . . rumors these past couple of weeks that you haven’t been, ah, yourself.”

“A concussion will do that to people,” Jeff said dryly. And before I could blow it again. Though I had remembered that my excuse for anything and everything was supposed to be the concussion I’d gotten falling headfirst onto some concrete stairs at the start of Operation Bizarro World. Of course, I hadn’t used said excuse with Melissa. Jeff’s intervention made a lot of sense.

“Yes, I know, Mister Vice President.” Interesting. Normally when Cleary was speaking to Jeff, he sounded like he was eating the sourest lemon on the planet. Right now, however, he just sounded normal, and still worried. “However, that wasn’t my concern. And I don’t mean that in an insulting way, Ambassador.”

“You were worried that I’d been turned into an unwilling android, weren’t you?”

“Frankly, yes. You’re clearly still yourself, which is a relief.”

Hadn’t been hard to guess. Since he’d at least known about if not helped to turn Cameron Maurer into an unwilling android, and Maurer had been Cleary’s VP running mate. “Seriously? I know we reached an understanding during the campaign, but I find it hard to believe that you consider yourself a pal of mine, and vice versa.”

“Politics makes strange bedfellows.”

“Dude, that is like *the Washington* saying, isn’t it? But, fine, what do you want us to be in bed with you about, to the point that you’ve called on the restricted, we can’t trace it line?” I had no way of knowing this, though Buchanan nodding at me indicated that I’d guessed correctly.

“Stephanie Valentino is missing, and has been missing for a week.”

Let that sit on the air for a bit. Stephanie was Jeff’s eldest niece, and the daughter of one of the biggest traitors the A-Cs had ever had. She’d been turned, too, probably for far longer than we’d realized. We’d given up on trying to win her back to the side of right—in part because I’d had to kill her father or let him kill me and a whole lot of other people. But Stephanie wasn’t going to ever forgive me or the others for that. Hard to blame her, until I considered all the evil she was doing to make us pay for ending her father’s

betrayal habits in a very permanent way.

“Have you gone to the police?” Jeff asked.

“Not yet. I don’t want to create a scandal if none exists. I was hoping she’d gone home to visit her mother or other family members.”

“We can check.” My phone beeped and I got it. Buchanan had sent me a text. Showed it to Jeff. “Ah, we *have* checked. There is no sign of Stephanie anywhere, including with any of her immediate family.”

“Are you certain? I know she’s considered an outcast and a *persona non grata* in the alien community right now.”

“That was her choice,” Jeff said sadly. “But we’d let her back if we felt we could trust her. And her mother would never turn her away.” He was texting on his phone. “However, I’ve just asked every immediate member of my family—they swear they think Stephanie is with you, Cleary.”

“Did your wife get tired of the affair and kick her out or get into a fight with Stephanie about something else?”

Cleary heaved a sigh that sounded exasperated. “I realize you think that I was sleeping with her. And she’s a beautiful young woman, so I admit the temptation is there. However, I truly don’t sleep around, let alone with a girl young enough to be my daughter. My wife and I honestly have done our best to take Stephanie into our family. As a daughter. Stephanie’s father was murdered—she needs the stability we felt we could offer to her. My wife was even hoping Stephanie and our middle son would connect romantically.”

“Since when did your family become pro-alien?” Jeff asked.

“We were never anti-alien,” Cleary said. “Surely you understand how politics works by now, don’t you?”

“We do. Find a scapegoat, attack the scapegoat to divert attention away from the actual issues that matter, lather, rinse, repeat. But I have a question in regard to Stephanie. What were *you* hoping for when you took her in, Gideon?”

“That I’d have an assistant who could and would give me all the information on your people I could ever want. And I had that. Stephanie, however, has a romantic interest other than my son, despite my advice to the contrary.”

I was shocked by his honesty, but it was rather refreshing. I wasn’t used to anyone in D.C. ever being honest on the first try. My brain nudged. Who Stephanie’s bad romantic choice could be was oh so likely. Why not ask, just for grins and giggles? “She’s dating Cliff Goodman, isn’t she?”

Jeff stiffened as Buchanan nodded and shot me a look that said he was pleased that I hadn’t lost any steps going back and forth between universes. There was no need for any of us to ask why Cliff hadn’t shared who his squeeze was—that would have made Chuckie, and the rest of us, suspicious. Though Cliff probably could have spun it as his attempt to get Stephanie back on the side of good.

“She is.”

“Why don’t you approve? Aside from the fact that he has to be sneaking around with her, since none of us knew of this relationship until right now. He’s well connected politically.”

Cleary took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I don’t trust him. And not because he appears to be a friend to all of you. In part because he is indeed sneaking around with Stephanie and their relationship is a secret to all but a few of us. There’s no reason for that—he could easily say that he was trying to rebuild the bridge between her and all of you.”

Chose not to say that, again, Cleary was impressing me with his intelligence. I was about 99 percent sure that Cleary was aware that Cliff was involved with the Mastermind. Doubted that Cleary knew that Cliff *was* the Mastermind, but he definitely knew Cliff was involved with our biggest enemy. So, if Cleary was coming to us with this, he was either trying to determine if we’d figured out that Cliff was the Bad Guy Supreme, or else he was afraid of Cliff and afraid for himself and Stephanie.

The word “appears” also indicated that Cleary didn’t think Cliff actually was our friend and might be trying to tell us so in a safe way. Which was, of course, true. “Makes sense. So, what are the other parts of why don’t you trust him?” Figured it was safer to ask than guess at this juncture.

“Because Cliff is a master at playing both sides against each other. Frankly, he’s a master at playing everyone against each other, regardless of side.”

“Why don’t you want Stephanie dating him?”

“Because I’m certain he doesn’t care for or about her. No one who sneaks around and dates a girl on the down-low cares about her. And, as I may have mentioned, my feelings toward her are fatherly.”

“Okay, let’s say I believe you,” Jeff said. “Why are you coming to us, and not the police? In fact, why aren’t you just asking Cliff where she is?”

“I asked him where she was the first day she didn’t come home. He claims that he has no idea and is as worried as I am.”

“You think he killed her and dumped her body in the river?”

“I have no idea, Ambassador. Stephanie was acting oddly the week prior to her disappearance.”

“That coincides with when we know she murdered eight Secret Service agents in Paris on Goodman’s order,” Buchanan whispered to me. Apparently I needed to get caught up on what had gone on here, pronto.

“Oddly how?” Jeff asked.

“She seemed furtive and evasive. Her moods went up and down—one moment, she was happy, the next wringing her hands, then laughing, then crying. My wife asked if Stephanie was on drugs or if someone might have slipped some to her. Stephanie insisted she was clean. Your people don’t drink and she still follows that rule.”

She’d better. Alcohol was deadly to A-Cs, as Jeff could attest—he’d almost died from one swig of vodka way back when. And Stephanie knew about this, so she wouldn’t drink. And if she did she’d be convulsing, not acting like the poster girl for Just Say No.

However, while she’d tried to kill all of us during Operation Defection Election, she hadn’t actually succeeded. If she’d indeed murdered eight people in cold blood while I was gone, her reactions made a lot of sense.

“What do *you* think has happened, Gideon?”

“I think Cliff has done something with or to her. Whether he had her do something illegal, she’s pregnant and he’s not willing to do the right thing, or it’s something else, I believe he’s responsible for her disappearance. She might have willingly disappeared, though, which is why I haven’t gone to the police.”

“Why would she be willing to disappear on her surrogate family and employer?”

“Or,” Jeff said, “to put it another way—what did you, someone in your household, or someone on your staff do or say to her that would make her disappear without a trace?”

CHAPTER 3

“ABSOLUTELY NOTHING,” Cleary said. “I know you don’t want to believe me, but my wife and my chief of staff and I have been over this for the past several days with each other, and we’ve asked everyone who Stephanie interacts with as well. No one has any idea why she’s disappeared, but everyone noted her drastic attitude change and mood swings.”

“Does anyone have any theories? Other than yours, I mean.”

“No. Her going home to her family for some reason was the only idea any of us could come up with.”

“Why should we believe you’re not just trying to get us to think you haven’t harmed her?” Jeff asked.

“Look, I realize we’re not friends. But stop acting self-righteous. You two have killed people in the line of duty. I’ve done things I’m not proud of along the way as well. No one’s hands are clean, especially not in this town. But I’m not calling you in a way that no one could ever verify to create an alibi. I’m calling you because a young woman I care about, whom I think you also care about, is missing, and I have no idea what to do.”

“What, exactly, did you say to Cliff and what, exactly, did he say back to you about this? You said you asked him about her the first night she didn’t come home—have you talked to him about her since?”

“I called Cliff the morning after Stephanie hadn’t returned. As far as we knew, they’d been out together. I said I was just making sure she’d spent the night with him. He said that she hadn’t, that he’d dropped her at our house around two in the morning and waited until she was inside, then gone home. He’s checked with us every day to see if we’ve heard from her or not.”

The three of us looked at each other. “She’s not hiding from the Clearys, is she? She’s hiding from Cliff.”

Jeff and Buchanan both nodded. “That makes the most sense to me,” Jeff said. “If she’s alive and this isn’t some elaborate setup to make us all think he’s innocent of her murder.”

“If I report her as missing, then Cliff will be the first person the police suspect,” Cleary said.

“Now, Gideon, here we were, getting along, telling each other the truth, and you have to toss in a great big lie.”

“What do you mean?” He was trying to sound innocent. Not his best go-to voice.

“Dude, *you* are the first person the police will suspect, for all the reasons we all just talked about, and because Cliff isn’t considered Stephanie’s boyfriend by anyone but you, your wife, and your close staffers, in

other words, people more than likely to lie to protect you. You're calling us because you're scared, and we are your Obi-Wan Kenobis."

"You're not my only hope," he muttered.

"Yes. We are. Or you wouldn't be chatting with us. But I have to say, your getting my reference just made me actually kind of like you. Choose your next words carefully—you don't want to waste my like."

"Oh, fine, yes, you're right."

Buchanan whispered to me again, and I passed along his question. "What else are you worried about or afraid of? We need all the facts before we can actually help you. And that *is* why you're calling, isn't it, Gideon? To ask us to help you?"

He was quiet for a few long seconds. We waited. I'd learned the sales maxim that—once the offer or big question is made—he who speaks first loses, and I'd taught it to Jeff. Buchanan had probably learned this in the womb. The three of us were utterly silent. I examined my nails to pass the time. I needed a manicure in a bad way. Apparently this trans-dimensional stuff was hard on the paws.

But finally Cleary spoke. "Yes, you're right. I am calling to ask for your help. I have no one else I can actually trust in this situation, and yes, I trust you because your reputations are very strong as both reformers and defenders."

"We're flattered," Jeff said in a tone that indicated we really weren't. "But we need the rest of the answer to Kitty's question. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm worried that this could be a setup, to trap me in some way. To force me to do things I don't want to do—change my vote on certain bills, use my influence with lobbyists or my constituents in a way I don't want, commit crimes I find abhorrent or reprehensible."

Managed not to ask for the list of what Cleary—Mr. I Have An Unwilling Android As My Running Mate—would find unsavory. It was too early in the morning to have my stomach that upset.

"That makes sense," Jeff said. "And it might be a trap. We aren't going to alibi you about Stephanie's romantic liaisons, you know."

"I wouldn't ask because I'm aware that your only proof is hearsay from me. I don't want your help in court—I'm praying we don't end up in court over this. I'm hoping Stephanie is alive and unharmed. I just don't believe that it's safe to assume that's the case. Something's happened. Either Cliff has her or, as you just suggested, he did or said something to her that caused her to run away. But no matter what, I know in my bones that she's in danger."

Buchanan whispered to me again and again I passed it right along. "I think we need to see where Stephanie was living. In case there are any clues about where she's gone."

"We've searched her rooms. We didn't find anything."

"Gideon, don't take this the wrong way, but there's no way you've searched like an A-C can search, and there's also no way that you've figured out A-C thought processes in the short time you've had Stephanie with you. Trust me. I've been immersed for years and they still baffle me at times." Ignored the hurt look Jeff shot at me. "So, what's going to be our reason for dropping by your residence? It needs to be believable, especially since said residence is in Florida and we are, currently, in Australia and due back in D.C. pronto."

“Can’t you, ah, just take a gate here?”

“No,” Jeff said flatly. “We aren’t going to be sneaking around to help you out. If we’re helping you, it’s going to be aboveboard and seen.”

Something clicked. “Wait a second. You’re in Florida at the Governor’s Mansion. Stephanie was in Florida. What the hell was Cliff doing taking her out in Florida? He lives in the D.C. area.”

“He keeps an apartment in Florida,” Cleary said. “He’s from here originally, I believe. He flies down at least once a month, usually more often. Sometimes I’m sure he takes a gate, but most of the time he flies.”

“Amazing how he can do that on a government salary,” I said quietly to Jeff and Buchanan. “Gideon,” I said in a louder voice, “come up with a reason for us to visit. Make it good, and make it something that won’t reflect badly on us. If it reflects badly, or you make it sound like *you* are helping *us*, well, we’re going to feel obligated to mention that the just-out-of-her-teens A-C you snatched away from us has gone missing. And we all know you don’t want that.”

He sighed. “No, I don’t. I’ll come up with something.”

“Make it fast,” Jeff said. “The President expects us to be heading for home in the next few hours.”

“Call back on a regular line, too. We’ll roll with whatever your reason is, as long as it fits the parameters we just outlined.”

“I will do. And . . . thank you. I honestly appreciate this more than you probably will believe.”

With that we hung up and the three of us looked at each other. “So, do we think Stephanie’s freaked out about murdering people or is there more going on?”

“There’s always more going on, Missus Chief,” Buchanan said. “I think it’s time to call in the one person who has experience with Stephanie as a traitor who is also your friend.”

“Really?” Jeff asked. “You want to bring Siler in on this? Now?”

Buchanan nodded. “He’s interacted with her and I think she may still believe he’s on the Mastermind’s side. But even if she knows he’s working with us now, he’s seen a side of her that none of the rest of us have, and he may be able to predict where she’s gone.”

“And you just happen to have him on speed dial.”

Jeff groaned. “A call to Siler means a call to Kitty’s ‘uncles.’ Do we really want to involve those people in whatever’s going on?”

During Operation Defection Election we’d met Benjamin Siler, the child of the Ronald Yates-Mephistopheles in-control superbeing and Madeline Cartwright. They’d done things to Siler and, among other weirdnesses, he didn’t age like normal people. His uncle had rescued him from life as his parents’ lab rat, and trained Siler in his profession—assassination.

Siler worked frequently with my “uncles,” the top assassins in the world. Peter “The Dingo” Kasperoff and his cousin, Victor. Somehow they’d adopted me as their niece and helped me out when they could.

“Frankly, I trust the Dingo Dog and Surly Vic a lot more than I trust most of the politicians in Washington,

including the one who just called us on the secret telephone. So if Nightcrawler brings them along, so much the better.”

“I’ll leave that to his discretion,” Buchanan said.

“Is he here already?” Among Siler’s abilities was the fact that he could “blend,” which made him invisible to humans or A-Cs. It was more of a chameleon effect than real invisibility, but it was effective, even though he couldn’t hold his blend for too long. So, the possibility existed that Buchanan had already called in his version of the cavalry and Siler was just hanging out in here, unseen.

Buchanan chuckled. “No, but he’s nearby.”

“Why?” Jeff asked.

“Because I wanted backup in case Missus Chief didn’t come back right away.”

Thought about this. “Oh. The Mastermind has upped his game and you were willing to do the stopgap fix and hire a hit on Cliff.”

Jeff looked shocked. “We can’t condone assassination.”

“I’d condone anything that would get Cliff, LaRue, Reid, all their clones, and all their evil dead gone and buried forever.”

Buchanan nodded. “I assume the LaRue and Reid clones backed up Goodman’s memory and have clones of him on the way. But killing him would give us a little time, and it’s time we might need. My gut tells me that he’s going to make a big move soon, and if we’re not ready, we’ll all be destroyed.”

CHAPTER 4

“I CAN AGREE WITH THAT. In the other universe, he was definitely making his big move. There were enough parallels that it’s really possible he’s ready in this universe as well.”

“Murdering eight of our Secret Service detail, and they were eight men who reported to him, sounds like moving up a timetable to me,” Jeff agreed. “Especially since he was trying to frame Buchanan here.”

Who nodded. “I think the Mastermind trying to get me out of the way indicates he’s ready to roll out his plan. Whatever it is.”

“Seriously, I think he’s got a death ray. He had one in the other world, and that was with far fewer scientific resources available to him. Oh, and this is a biggie that you and all the others need to know—LaRue isn’t a human. She’s an Ancient turncoat working for the Z’porrah.”

Both men stared at me. “Why did you wait to tell us this?” Buchanan asked finally.

“Dude, I’ve been home less than twenty-four hours. It’s early morning. So this is me telling you quickly. Besides, Chuckie was there when I came back and I think we all agreed that we didn’t want to tell him what’s going on until we’re sure he can handle it and we can handle him and his reaction.”

Jeff nodded. “Let’s get dressed and get ready as if it’s a normal day. We’ll figure out how to break the news

to Chuck.”

“Figure out how to brief everyone other than Reynolds,” Buchanan said. “And figure it out fast. Because it sounds like we need your intel and you absolutely need ours, and there’s no way the many A-Cs who figured out who the Mastermind is are going to be able to keep that from Reynolds. I’m not even convinced you can keep it from him, Missus Chief. He knows you better than anyone else, and I’m pretty damn sure he knows when you’re lying to him.”

“Maybe we can focus him on the Stephanie situation?” Jeff asked.

“That would tell him that his supposed best friend is dating your niece on the sly, and I can guarantee that Chuckie will put two and two together immediately because of that.”

“We’ll think of something,” Jeff said, rather desperately. “We only need to keep it from him for a little while anyway, right?”

Buchanan stood up to leave. “Depends on when you want Reynolds on a murderous rampage. Because the minute he knows, I can guarantee that’s going to be his reaction.”

“He’s normally a very calm, controlled person. And I’m saying this based on years of experience with him.”

“Yes, and I’m saying this based on an understanding of human motivations and reactions learned over time. And from your mother. He’s not going to be the man you’re used to.”

Jeff nodded. “He’s been dealing too long and too poorly with losing Naomi. This is a betrayal of the highest order, baby. We’re all prepped to have to lock him into isolation for his own safety.”

“Wow. I go away for a couple of weeks and everyone’s got delusions of doom going. Fantastic.”

Buchanan grinned. “I’m sure you can handle it, Missus Chief.” With that he left.

Jeff and I showered and got dressed. Okay, we showered, had a lot of mind-blowing sex, and then dressed. Hey, I’d been gone for *ages*.

Would have said it was nice to be back in my own clothes, but technically I’d never *not* been in my own clothes. Still, I enjoyed my own selection of concert T-shirts. Based on all that was going on, I chose an Aerosmith T-shirt, because it was always wise to go forth with my boys on my chest. Jeans, my Converse, and a No Doubt hoodie completed my ensemble. Ready for anything. I hoped.

As Jamie woke up there was a knock at our door. I opened the door while Jeff got Jamie to find Chuckie standing there. “Hey, Kitty. How are you?”

“Um, fine? Why are you asking me that at this time of the morning?”

Jeff came out with Jamie. “Hey, Chuck.” He looked and sounded guilty. Not good. “What’s up?” I trotted over to give Jamie a kiss and hug and hopefully distract Chuckie from Jeff’s expression.

“I . . . wanted to talk to Kitty. Alone. For a few minutes.”

Jeff and I looked at each other. “Fine by me.” I figured I had the best shot of lying and besides, Jeff was about to give away that something was up.

Jeff nodded. “Don’t be too long. We need to do a big, fast debrief. And bring you up to speed on our latest early-morning phone call.”

Chuckie nodded and spun on his heel, seemingly uninterested in our phone call. I quickly followed him out of the room. “Where to?”

“My room here is fine.” He led me a few doors down and we went into a room that looked just like the one we’d just left, only a bit smaller. The A-Cs were all about conformity.

We sat on the couch. “So, what’s up?” Figured it was going to be a lot safer for him to lead the conversation.

“A couple of things.” Chuckie looked at his hands, which were clasped together, his forearms leaning on his thighs. “What was he like?”

“Who?”

“The me in the world you were in.”

Knew he wasn’t asking lightly, so I considered my reply before I gave it. “Basically you. With a slightly different life. But you.”

“Was he . . . happy?”

“Mostly, yeah. He’d been lying to Other Me for years about what he really did, and that was taking its toll. And he blamed himself for their Jamie’s presumed autism. I, ah, fixed both of those, I’m pretty sure. And you guys over here probably did, too.”

He nodded but didn’t say anything, and he still wasn’t looking at me.

“Um, why?”

Chuckie sighed. “Because everyone’s hiding something from me, and it started shortly after the other you arrived. I think . . . I’m worried that there’s something awful about the man I am in that other universe.” He looked up at me. “And if he’s got a bad streak, then I do, too.”

And here was the problem with everyone lying to the smartest guy in any room—it was too easy for him to come up with believable scenarios that were both wrong and detrimental to his mental and emotional health. And he was just as likely to freak out if he thought he was some kind of monster in another world as he was if he knew what Cliff was really up to.

“There was nothing wrong with the you in that universe, Chuckie. Nothing at all. If I’d had to stay there forever, I’d have found a way to stay happily. As your wife. Because, just like here, you’re still one of the greatest guys I’ve ever known.”

Pondered my next statements carefully. Everyone was walking around Chuckie as if they were stepping on eggshells. And I’d been worried about Chuckie’s reactions to the truth, too, in part because everyone else was worried. But, despite what Buchanan and Jeff said, I knew Chuckie better than anyone else alive. And while everyone wanted to tell me Chuckie would go all Mr. Hyde on me if he knew what was really going on, I was the one with the life experience with him, and I didn’t buy it. Charles in the other universe hadn’t flipped out and, as I’d just said, they were basically the same guy. Time to treat my best friend *like* my best friend.

I took his hands in mine. “But I do know why everyone’s acting weird around you.”

“So, tell me.”

“See, here’s the thing. Remember when Joey Tucci had asked me to the Senior Prom and you knew he planned to rape me if I didn’t say yes to having sex with him somewhere during the night?”

“Yeah,” he growled. “I was scared as hell to tell you, because I wasn’t sure if you’d believe me, or hate me for ruining your expected good time, but I had to.”

“Right. You told me because you loved me and trusted me to listen to you. You told me I couldn’t react the way I’d want to. And I did listen to you and I didn’t go kick him in the balls or run him over with my dad’s car.”

“Yeah. You told him you’d gotten asked by someone you liked more and were being kind and not leading him on. Then you asked me instead.” He smiled at me. “That’s probably my favorite high school memory.”

“I’m fond of it, too.”

“So, what’s the thing you need to tell me that you don’t want me overreacting to?”

Sent a small prayer up to ACE, Algar, Naomi, and any other superconsciousnesses or superpowered beings who might be listening. “We’ve figured out who the Mastermind is.”

Chuckie was quiet for a few long moments. “No one’s told me. And everyone started acting strangely once the other Kitty was here. So, that means there was a Mastermind in the world she was from, doesn’t it?”

“Got it in one. It was very *Age of Apocalypse* there. People who were good here were bad there and vice versa. People dead here were alive there and vice versa again. But some people were exactly the same, both good and bad.”

“Yes, we got a lot of that from the other you.” I could see the wheels turning in Chuckie’s brain. “So, the Mastermind there is someone I know here, and probably trust, because otherwise, why keep this information from me?” He looked stricken. “I’m not the Mastermind there, am I? Him, I mean.”

“Dude, seriously, why are you so down on yourself? No, of course you’re not the Mastermind there, any more than you are here. But to be sure of the overriding theory . . . did you participate in a mail-in chess competition before I met you?”

He nodded. “In grade school. I won. The people who ran the contest were thrilled. They made a huge deal about it, and I told my teacher, who told the class.” His face clouded. “And that was when I learned, definitively, that being known as the smartest person around was the fastest way to being the butt of every joke, the focus of every bully, and more, all of it bad.”

Well, that was exactly how it had gone down for the Chuckie in the other universe, so this wasn’t a surprise. It was, however, a confirmation. And the proof that my last hopeful doubts were going to be dashed. “Let’s talk about that some more. Was there anyone who might have, oh, protested your win?”

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “I haven’t thought about this in years, but now that you mention it, there was someone who was just a little older than me, in high school, I think. He protested my win, for quite a while.”

“Did you ever learn his name?”

Chuckie shook his head. “No. We were both minors, so his name was kept out of it. He came in second, but refused to accept, so they never shared his name with me.”

“But yours was shared.”

“Yes. I won and my parents and I gave them permission. What does this have to do with anything, or are you just enjoying reminiscing?”

“Oh, it’s really significant. Same as for your counterpart in the other universe. Probably in all the universes, but I don’t have enough data to guess.”

The wheels were once again spinning. “You’re saying that this person, whoever it was, became the Mastermind?”

“Yeah, I am. He turned that loss into a lifelong hatred of and competition with you, which grew into a full-blown mania by the time he was an adult.”

“So, we just need to figure out who that was in this world, and we’ll know who the Mastermind is.” He looked at me closely. “And everyone else has figured this out. Because the me in that world knew who this guy was, didn’t he?”

“He did. And Other Me did, too, therefore. They didn’t know he was the Whack-A-Mole King of Lunatic Take Over the World Plans, but they knew who your lifelong enemy was. I mean, they know he was their Mastermind now, because we had to take him out before I came back. But they didn’t know until we switched places.”

“The Great Mommy Switch, as your counterpart called it, was good for a few things, wasn’t it?” He took a deep breath. “I could start guessing, but I think it’s going to be better if you tell me straight out who the Mastermind is. And, before you ask, I promise you that I’m going to do what you want—react like you did when you found out what Tucci was planning, not how I’m sure I’m going to want to react.”

Took my own deep breath. “Okay. Dude, just remember two things. One—everyone else is going to kill me if you go into Wolverine’s Patented Berserker Rage. And two—everyone else loves and cares about you. Everyone. Even the guys who act all tetchy about your authority. They may have the Alpha Male head-butt fights with you, but they still care about you. So, you’re not alone in this, okay? We are all, and I do mean all, here for you.”

Chuckie looked pale. “This is going to be worse than I think it is, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. You’re gonna hate it.” Sent another prayer up to the various Powers That Be, and then took the plunge. “The Mastermind is, for certain, Cliff Goodman.”

CHAPTER 5

CHUCKIE WAS QUIET, which was a good sign. I hoped. Hard as it was not to run my yap nervously, I allowed him to process what I’d said by keeping said yap firmly shut.

After a good long minute, he swallowed. “So, you’re saying that the man I think is my best friend, the man I was going to have be my best man at my wedding, the one guy I think ‘gets me,’ that man is actually the person responsible for my wife’s death?”

“And every other action against us and you, specifically. Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

“Ah.”

Cleared my throat. “Ah, do I have to tackle you before you make a mad dash for The Retribution Railroad?”

He shook his head slowly. “No. I understand why no one wanted to tell me. And . . . I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that you were the one to break this news to me. Alone.”

“You need to go to a workout room and hit something and maybe scream a lot?”

“No. I want to save the rage. I know that’s what you do these days—you use the rage to control your power, to ensure you’re mad enough to kill if you have to.”

“Yeah, I do—”

The door slammed open, rudely interrupting me, and Jeff, Buchanan, and Gower were there. Gower was built like Jeff and Buchanan—big and buff. He was also black, bald, beautiful, and Reader’s husband. More pertinently in this situation, he was the Supreme Pontifex of the A-C’s religion. Why he was with Jeff and Buchanan wasn’t hard to guess—bring the head religious man when you have someone about to totally lose it.

All of them looked worried and ready to tackle someone. And all three of them came to a screeching halt, looking confused.

Chuckie managed a small smile. “Sorry, Jeff. Yes, I’m sure my emotions are off the charts. But as I just told Kitty, I’ve spent a lifetime banking anger and turning it into something that works in my favor.”

Gower came and sat on Chuckie’s other side. “Chuck, seriously, I’m here for you, we all are.”

“I know, Paul. And I appreciate that, truly. But Kitty needs to debrief us and we need to do the same for her.”

The three other men looked like they didn’t believe it could be this easy. “Ah, are you sure?” Jeff asked. “Because, trust me, you don’t feel like you’re banking anger or turning it into something useful. You’re ready to kill.”

“I am.” Chuckie stood up. “You just have no idea how many times throughout my life I’ve wanted to kill someone who’s wronged me, or Kitty. I know the expectation was that I’d go on a rampage, and, honestly, if Kitty hadn’t told me what was going on privately that could have happened. But . . . we have a history of this, of watching each other’s backs, of giving each other the bad news the other one doesn’t want to hear but has to. I’ll be okay.”

“Really?” Buchanan sounded no more convinced than Jeff had.

“Really.” Chuckie’s eyes glittered. “What you all forget is that I’m both an extremely patient person and I’ve been in covert and clandestine ops for my entire adult life. You don’t rise up in the C.I.A. by losing it anytime something goes wrong or someone tries to kill you or kills someone on your team or someone who you care about. You rise up in the Agency by being smart enough to solve problems off-book, without any dirt flying back onto you or anyone else you need to protect.”

Gower nodded. “You’re much less . . . impulsive than, say, Jeff is.”

“Anyone is less impulsive than Jeff,” Chuckie said with a laugh. The others laughed, too, and I felt the room relax. “Understand—I’m *going* to kill him. But I’ll do it when it’s not going to cause us all more problems than it solves. It’s going to be slow, horrific, and as painful as I can possibly make it. And I’m going to make sure he knows it’s me who’s killing him, and that I know why he deserves to die. *But*, that won’t happen until, as I said, it’s in a place or a way that doesn’t ruin all of us.”

“What do you think?” Buchanan asked Jeff.

Who cocked his head. I could tell he was concentrating on Chuckie. Jeff nodded slowly. “When you’re with Kitty, you really can’t hide your emotions from me. Naomi could, and did, hide them from me when you two were falling in love, and you’re pretty good at it when you’re not with Kitty. But when you are you’re almost as clear a read as she is.”

“That’s good, I guess,” Chuckie said.

Jeff nodded. “It is. Chuck’s under control,” he said to Buchanan. “For now.” He turned back to Chuckie. “But you and we need to be on guard—because that control feels tenuous. And it’s going to be tested the moment you see Goodman again.”

Chuckie shrugged. “I never did anything to you when you essentially took Kitty from me. I won’t do anything to him until it’s the right time.”

“Hey, I thought we were past that.” Jeff sounded hurt.

Chuckie walked over and clapped Jeff on the shoulder. “We are. Well past that. And I was glad of it before but I’m incredibly grateful now that you, not Cliff, were my best man. Thank you for that, Jeff. So much.”

Jeff pulled Chuckie in and hugged him tightly. Gower joined them. Group hugs were really an A-C thing, and I didn’t mind them. But I knew better than to add into the Bro Hug right now. Chuckie didn’t need me there, because I knew without asking that him crying would be a bad thing all the way around, and I was pretty sure he was close to breaking down right now.

Buchanan knew better, too. He stepped closer to me. “This solves the biggest issue. But we still have an entire set of people who cannot lie who know that Goodman is the Mastermind. We have to debrief each other and then move swiftly, before Goodman catches on and escalates whatever it is he’s planning now.”

“Death ray. I’m telling you, that’s what he’s working on.”

“So you said. However, where the death ray is remains our first mystery.”

The others broke apart. “What’s this about a death ray?” Chuckie asked.

“Debriefing,” Buchanan said in a tone that brooked no argument. “Now. And not here, either. I want everyone back in the Embassy. We can go there first, before any help is offered to Gideon Cleary.”

Both Chuckie and Gower looked lost. “What?” Gower asked.

“It’s the usual long story. But I agree with Malcolm. Let’s tell our stories at home.” Looked around. “By the way, where is Jamie?”

“I left her with your parents,” Jeff said. “Who also need this debriefing. Just like everyone else.”

“What about those who didn’t know that Kitty switched universes?” Chuckie asked.

“I’m back. We can share the wonder that was my adventure in another world with them, since it’s hugely relevant. They work with us—they’ll all roll with the punches.”

Jeff hit the intercom button in the room. “We need a voice activated system put into all Bases,” he said, more to himself than anyone else.

“Yes, Mister Vice President?” Melissa asked.

“Melissa, please advise Commander Reader that we need all Washington, D.C., NASA Base, Euro Base, and Dulce Base personnel to vacate Sydney Base immediately. Dulce Base personnel should go to the American Centaurion Embassy. All others should go to their home Bases.”

“Is everything alright, sir?” Melissa sounded worried.

“Yes, we just need to get back to work on a variety of pressing issues. And the President wants me home, pronto.”

“I’ll take care of it, Mister Vice President. I’ll advise Launch to expect you all.”

“Thanks, Melissa.” Jeff hit the intercom button again to close the line. “Let’s get packed up and back home so we can stay ahead of the latest situation that is laughingly called our normal lives. Ah, baby, why don’t you stay here and help Chuck pack up?”

Chuckie laughed. “She doesn’t have to ride herd on me, Jeff, but if it’ll make you feel better, I’m fine with it.”

Jeff gave me a quick kiss, then he and the other men headed out. I shook my head. “I’d ask if I’d jumped into another universe if this wasn’t the only one where I know Jeff is on Earth.”

“You’re sure of that?” Chuckie asked me, as he went to the closet and pulled out a small rolling suitcase.

“As sure as I can be. I’ve seen what I call the Universe Wheel before—every time I’ve almost died. But I never remembered it until Operation Bizarro World happened.”

“Huh. Well, hopefully that knowledge will give us an edge, even if it’s a small one.”

“A girl can dream.”

“Yeah.” He checked the suitcase. As I’d expected, it was already packed. The Operations Team, aka Algar, King of the Elves, was good that way. “Kitty . . . do you think that maybe my role in the greater existence is to be the guy who’s never happy?”

Went to him and hugged him tightly. “No. You’re happy in all the other universes I saw, even the ones where we aren’t married to each other. And, I promise you—you’ll be happy again in this universe, too. Even if I have to move heaven and earth for that to happen.”

He hugged me back. “Well, as long as you’re still my friend, I’m good.”

“I’ll always be your friend, Chuckie. In this world and all the others.”

He kissed my forehead. “And thank God for that.”

CHAPTER 6

I’D HAVE LIKED TO have taken a look around Sydney Base, but since Other Me had done the full tour, me wanting one would sort of scream suspicious, concussion excuse or no concussion excuse.

On the other hand, it was nice to be heading home. It would be the afternoon of the day before today. Decided not to worry about it. Also decided that I would be within my jet-lagged rights to ask for one of Jeff’s mother’s brownies when we arrived. We hadn’t had breakfast, after all.

Sydney Base’s launch area was just like all the other Bases’—lots and lots of gates, those unlovely contraptions that looked like airport metal detectors but felt like hell on earth to step through, at least for me.

Happily, Jeff carried me though the gate, just like always. And I had to admit, after not knowing if I’d ever use a gate again in my life, even the nausea wasn’t as bad as it could have been. Of course, I was also very glad we hadn’t eaten yet, because the transfer from Sydney to D.C. was a long one, relatively speaking.

Since anyone at the Embassy who wasn’t “in the know” didn’t know I’d been gone, our homecoming was somewhat anticlimactic. However, for me, it was great to come back. After all this bouncing around, I was truly able to look at the Embassy as home. Figured that probably meant we’d be moving again soon, because that was always the way things worked for me since I’d joined up with the gang from Alpha Four.

The Embassy was a full city block wide and long, and we had a raised walkway that attached to the building “next door,” which we’d nicknamed the Zoo, meaning we lived in two gigantic multi-story buildings. Normally I found our apartment—which took up half of the top floor of the Embassy—to be overly gigantic. But today it felt normal, possibly because I’d just spent time seeing how large Other Me’s house was.

Jamie grabbed my hand and dragged me to the room next to our bedroom. “Mommy, look at my new room!” She flung the door open and pulled me in.

Managed not to gape, but only just. The room was Jamie’s typical Shrine to Pink, and had all four dog beds, all the cat and Poof condos, and a lot of sleeping hammocks I realized were for the Peregrines, mostly because some of them were snoozing in said hammocks when we arrived. Those were new, but apparently very much appreciated by the avians.

Before I could give any comment on the room, however, the animals were on me, howling, purring, squawking, and generally letting me know that they’d missed me and I needed to pet each and every one of them right now if not sooner. As I was mobbed, noted that what seemed like every Peregrine or Poof—of which we had an almost uncountable number by now—had joined us in the room.

“The pets missed you, Mommy,” Jamie said, presumably in cased I’d missed this somehow.

“I can tell. Give me a second, sweetheart, before I admire your pretty room.” Looked over at Jeff as I gave Dudley the Great Dane, and Duke the Labrador vigorous pets. “Other Me approved the new digs?”

He nodded as I moved from the boy dogs to the girl dogs and gave Dottie, our Dalmatian, and Duchess, our Pit Bull, the same enthusiastic petting. “Everyone else says it was past time.”

“I’m not complaining.” I wasn’t. Putting Jamie elsewhere literally hadn’t occurred to me as a necessary thing

to do. Was glad Other Me had taken care of some Normal Mommy things while we were switched.

Dogs handled, it was time to give the cats some love. Sugarfoot jumped into my arms to demand his snuggles. Once he was somewhat satisfied I handed him off to Jeff and picked up Candy and Kane and gave them lots of snuggling.

Pets from my parents and youth somewhat mollified first, chose to go for the smaller numbers next. “I see my Peregrines are all in attendance for the Reunion Revival!” Peregrines were Alpha Four birds that looked like peacocks and peahens on steroids. They were bred for protection and could go chameleon along with having the typical A-C hyperspeed.

We had twelve mated pairs hanging out in the Embassy, otherwise known as Earth’s Alpha Four Principality, and all twenty-four of them hooted.

“Can I get a bird amen?” I raised my arms up.

More hoots and all wings up and flapping.

“Can I get *another* bird amen?” I waved my hands around, arms still up in the air.

Much louder hoots and all twenty-four flew up a little ways off the ground.

“Awesome! Gimme feather, everyone! Up high, down low, and double dutch!”

The Peregrines landed and trotted to me, one by one, to do hand and wing high fives up, down, and with both hands and wings. Each one got a scritchy-scratch between their wings, too.

This took some time, but the Peregrines, like the dogs and cats, seemed much happier.

This left only the Poofs. Poofs were presumed to be Alpha Four animals, but during Operation Infiltration I’d discovered that they were actually Black Hole Universe animals. This meant they had powers no one but one being fully understood. So far, said powers had saved our butts more than once. Of course said being was a Free Will Fanatic of the highest order, so the Poofs tended to act on their own initiative, and their own initiative was sometimes very different from what we’d all like.

The Poofs were normally small bundles of fluffy fur with no visible ears or tails, tiny paws, and black button eyes. They could also go Jeff-sized in a moment, complete with mouths of razor-sharp teeth. Small, they were the cutest things you’d ever seen in your life. Large, they were among the scariest cute things you’d ever seen in your life.

The Poofs were androgynous and considered to be pets of the Alpha Four Royal Family—of which Jeff’s family, Christopher White, and the Gowers were all a part—and supposedly only mated when a Royal Wedding was imminent.

Wouldn’t know it from Earth Poofs, though. We had and continued to have a Poof population explosion. Poofs bonded to whoever named them, and they weren’t totally discerning about what name they decided was “theirs,” meaning we had a lot of people who had their own Poof these days. Most of those weren’t here, but some had dropped by to say “Welcome Home.” All the unattached Poofs lived in the Embassy, because I said so, meaning there were a *lot* of Poofs in the room. Decided there was only one good way to deal with greeting them all.

Fell back onto Jamie’s bed. “Poofies, come to Kitty!”

I was immediately enveloped by a blanket of fluffy adorableness. That was me, always taking one for the team.

While the Poofs and I had a massive Group Snufflefest, I checked out Jamie's room. Looked a lot like her old room, which had been the nursery attached to the master bedroom, but there were some differences. However, none of those differences were anything to worry about from a parental standpoint.

"I think your room is great, Jamie-Kat."

She beamed and joined me and the Poofs on the bed. "I'm so glad you like it, Mommy!" She picked something up and showed it to me—a stuffed, pink, striped cat that said "Paris, je t'aime" in a little heart on its chest. "And look! You and Daddy brought this home to me from Paris! I named him Stripes!"

My throat got tight, for a couple of reasons. The first being the realization that we almost never thought to bring Jamie back anything from anywhere we went while on missions, meaning Other Me was still winning the Good Mother Competition she and I weren't really having with each other. I hadn't realized Jamie wanted a new room, hadn't thought to bring her a present, and pretty much was going to see her for five minutes here then send her to daycare. Well, not today. She was involved in what had happened—probably more than anyone other than me truly realized—and she was going to be with us today, briefing or no briefing. Presuming Jeff didn't freak out about it.

The second realization, however, was that I'd never see Stripes, the awesome, kick-butt cat I'd rescued and made part of the family in the other universe, or anyone else from said other universe ever again.

Felt tears coming and blinked as rapidly as possible to keep them in my eyes and not let Jamie think I was unhappy to be home or with anything she'd done.

Jeff, of course, picked up what was going on immediately. He gently moved the Poofs off of me and picked me up. "It's okay, baby," he said quietly. "It's normal to feel like this."

"But I'm so glad to be home."

"I know. But they were all yours in that other world, too. Your Cosmic Alternate got attached to us, and while I know she's overjoyed to be home, I'm sure she's missing us a little bit, too. It's normal, and it doesn't mean you love any of us less. You attach to people quickly, and they do so with you just as fast. It's a loss, and you're allowed to grieve."

Buried my face in Jeff's chest for a minute and let his heartbeats soothe me like they always did. Finally felt back in some kind of control. "We don't have time for me to miss them right now. Their major problem is handled. Ours is still out there."

He kissed the top of my head. "That's my girl." Jeff sighed. "I know you . . . don't want to send Jamie to Daycare. I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"Maybe not. But she's more aware of what happened than I think you realize."

"No, we realize. It's just . . ."

"It's okay, Daddy," Jamie said, as she came to us. Jeff picked her up so we could do a family hug. "It won't scare me."

"I'm sure it won't, Jamie-Kat," Jeff lied, as poorly as ever. "But we're going to be discussing grownup

things that little girls shouldn't have to worry about.”

“You mean like how Mommy was gone and is back?”

I made the coughing sound. “I think, as I said, she’s more aware of what went on than you are, Jeff.”

He looked worried. “But she’s just a little girl.” He sounded even more worried. “She shouldn’t have these worries shoved onto her.”

I leaned up and kissed his cheek. “And you and Christopher shouldn’t have had to become men at age ten, either. Sometimes, we can’t stop those things, we can only do what we can to protect those who are being forced to grow up too fast.”

“I’m taking Stripes with me,” Jamie announced. “He’s the cat for the job.”

This earned her some extremely hurt looks from all the animals, cats especially. “It’s okay,” I told them. “None of you were with me in the other universe. I found a cool cat, named Stripes, to help cover the kick-butt animal side of things. She saw him, I’m sure. Loving a stuffed animal in no way lessens the love for the real animals. I promise.”

Once again, the animals seemed somewhat appeased. Took a good look at them. “Did we lose a Poof somehow?” Had no idea why I thought we were down by one Poof—frankly, we had so many that we could have been down by a hundred Poofs and I shouldn’t have been able to tell. But I was sure we were missing one.

Harlie and Poofikins mewled and jumped up and down.

“Oh. Really? Well, that’s great then. And kind of awesome, too.”

“What’s great?” Jeff asked, in the tone of a man who’s long since stopped asking himself how his life got this crazy, but still wonders anyway.

“Other Me named and bonded with a Poof, and it went with her into the other universe. Which is great, because now Harlie won’t be alone there.”

“What? Excuse me?” Jeff was speaking for himself and Harlie both.

Heaved another sigh. “Onward to the briefing. Everyone. Animals, too, I guess.”

CHAPTER 7

THE EMBASSY’S CONFERENCE room was a relatively recent addition, created because Pierre—our Concierge Majordomo and the most competent man on the planet—had gotten really tired of us having all of our meetings in the ballroom.

However, since we were doing an all-hands meeting, the ballroom was once again called into service. Nostalgia was good sometimes, right?

By the time we got there the ballroom was packed with people. Thankfully, there was food and drink in evidence, probably because Pierre was clear on how I rolled. Alpha Team, Airborne, all Embassy staff, and

my parents were here, along with a few others who were closely attached to Centaurion Division in some way. Hacker International, including the Queen of All Hackers, Chernobog, had even broken down and left their happy home in the Zoo and joined us in person, instead of video conferencing. And, completing our Team Ensemble, Olga and Adriana from the Romanian Embassy and Mr. Joel Oliver were in attendance. Pretty much everyone looked tired and stressed.

Jamie squirmed out of Jeff's arms and ran to Mom and Dad, who were next to Reader and Gower, meaning Jamie was going to bask in the glow of four of her favorite people in the world. Couldn't complain about her choice.

"Where's Bruce Jenkins?" I asked as I completed my headcount and Rajnish Singh, our Embassy Public Relations Minister, handed me a briefing sheet and an envelope.

"We're waiting to brief him," Raj said. "Please read what I just gave you. I know you never like to read briefing materials, but this time, it'll help."

"Read the letter, too," Buchanan said. "As for Jenkins, Mister Joel Oliver's been proven far longer. Anyone not here isn't here for a reason."

"Um, Christopher and Amy aren't here. And neither is Kevin. Are they not here for a reason?" What had gone on in the time I was away? Kevin Lewis was our Defense Attaché and my mother's right-hand man in the Presidential Terrorism Control Unit. It had been unsurprising to find out that Other Me hadn't known Mom was in covert and clandestine ops. I hadn't known until I'd met the Gang from A-C, after all.

Frankly, I wanted to hug Mom for a long time. And then do the same with half the room, starting with Kevin and his wife, Denise, who was in here. Realized all the Embassy Daycare kids were in here, too, with their parents. Interesting. Buchanan must have come to the same conclusion I had—the kids were targets, involved, more in the know than the adults realized, and needed to be aware of what was coming. This probably put me and Buchanan both on the list of Worst Adults to Care for Children Ever, but we were at war, even if it was a very sneaky, small, focused war.

"They're securing a prisoner," Evalyne, the head of my personal Secret Service detail, shared. "One of our team was determined to be—" She looked at Chuckie and stopped herself. "Anti-alien."

"Malcolm, can I speak safely and freely?"

"Go ahead, Missus Chief."

"Okay. Hey gang, it's great to see you all again." The room quieted. Go me. "For those who might not know, I spent the last couple of weeks in Bizarro World and so did the person who you thought was me. She *was* me, in that sense, but me from another universe. We're both home in our proper universes now, go team. Anyone who didn't know this, raise your hands."

A lot more hands went up than I'd been prepared for, including all of the Secret Service. "Ah. Okay. Those waving your hands in the air like you just don't care, turn to whoever is next to you with no hands up and have them explain what I'm talking about. We'll wait. Oh, and while we wait, Chuckie already knows the Horrible Truth, so no euphemisms or talking around the issue needed."

"What horrible truth?" Doreen Coleman-Weisman asked. Her hand was up, and she didn't look happy about it. Couldn't blame her. Doreen's parents had been the former heads of the Diplomatic Corps. They were traitors, and had been eaten by our core set of Poofs during Operation Confusion. Doreen wasn't a traitor,

however, and she was also the only truly trained diplomat on staff. And yet the rest of the A-Cs, Doreen included, still insisted I remain the Chief of Mission here. Aliens were both weird and sometimes very unaware of the best choices for certain jobs.

“We now know, without a doubt, who the Mastermind is. Oh, and I know other things pretty much no one else does, because other universe and all that. But I’d really like to tell the story of My Amazing Journey once to the team, so I’m waiting for Christopher, Amy, and Kevin. Unless they aren’t able to leave our resident bad guy alone.”

The Peregrines flapped their wings at me, and then all the males other than Bruno disappeared.

“We’re here,” Christopher said a few seconds later, as our three missing people zipped into the room. Hyperspeed was the best—and Amy and Kevin, despite being humans, weren’t barfing thanks to the Hyperspeed Dramamine that our Embassy doctor, Tito Hernandez, had created. “The Peregrines are handling prisoner guard duty.”

“Which prisoner?”

“Sam Travis. He was part of your Secret Service detail, remember?”

“Ah . . .” I’d paid a lot more attention to the gals on my detail than the guys. Go me for not paying attention to things that mattered. Again.

Christopher cocked his head at me. “Oh. Welcome home.”

Amy looked at me closely and heaved a sigh. “Really glad you’re here.”

Looked up at Jeff. “Really? You didn’t let them know I was back?”

He rolled his eyes. “Pardon me for being so caught up and relieved that the love of my life was returned to me that I selfishly kept the news to myself for all of twelve hours.”

“Well, when you put it like that, all is forgiven.”

“I’m so relieved.” Jeff’s sarcasm knob was heading for eleven on the one-to-ten scale. Chose to not try to up the sarcasm ante, mostly because we really had a lot of briefing to do.

We sat and I threw Raj a bone and read his briefing sheet while others explained the cosmic shift that had taken place.

Along with the usual blah, blah, blah that exemplified why I never read the briefing papers, apparently Other Me had been busy in my absence. We were now besties with the Australian Prime Minister and his wife, Jamie had a dress from them that was a family heirloom of sorts, and Other Me and Jeff had hit Paris to find presents and also apparently discover a new recording artist. I wasn’t overly surprised that said artist turned out to be Amadhia—Other Me had owned far too many of that gal’s T-shirts for me to believe she wouldn’t want to find said recording artist in this world. I mean, if there had been no Aerosmith in her universe I’d have done my best to find them and insist they make up for lost time. And it had apparently worked out, since she, like me, had been at an Amadhia concert when the switch back to our own worlds had happened.

Despite Buchanan’s insistence, the letter I chose to save for later. The handwriting was my own, and it was addressed to *My Cosmic Alternate*. I was pretty sure who’d written it. I’d written a letter to Other Me, too. Nice to know we’d both gone out of our way for each other. But then again, we were us, so that was to be

expected.

Chose to get back to the briefing before my mind exploded from the contemplation of alternate universes. Also, everyone else was done sharing the wonder that had been the last couple of weeks and they were all looking at me.

“Ah, okay, everyone ready for what went on where I was?”

“Only if it’s relevant to the current situation, girlfriend,” Reader said, shooting me his cover boy grin. “With Chuck in the know and handling things, we need to formulate plans to take down the Mastermind sooner as opposed to later.”

“Most of it’s relevant.” I’d tell the flyboys later that they were dead in that other world but that their buddy, William Cox, was alive and on the side of right. Same with telling Tim Crawford, who’d replaced me as Head of Airborne, that instead of kicking butt daily he was a top teacher of little kids in Los Angeles. And, frankly, most of those who were dead in that other world probably didn’t need to know about it, and those living other, more sedate lives didn’t need to know about those, either.

“I know I’m dead in that world, kitten,” Mom said, right on cue. “And we’re clear that many who are evil in this world are good in that one, and vice versa.”

“We also know there are no aliens there,” Jeff said.

Wondered how to say this, but it was actually relevant to the issues at hand. “Ah. As to that, Jeff, you’re not quite accurate.”

CHAPTER 8

ALWAYS NICE TO GET the full room’s attention. “Mind sharing what you mean?” Christopher asked, clearly speaking for everyone.

“Yes. Things on Alpha Four are very different in that universe. Ronald Yates never went to the bad. However, Adolphus’ first assassination attempt against him was successful.” Decided it would be easiest to keep eye contact with Mom for this next part. “The attack was on a high holy day for the Exonerates. Richard and Lucinda died in that attack, and Terry felt it all and died in Alfred’s arms. Therefore, Yates never remarried, so Gladys Gower never existed.”

“How do you know that?” Jeff asked quietly.

“I’m impressed she knows the name of our religion,” Christopher muttered.

I chose to ignore Christopher, in part because I’d literally learned said name when I was in the other universe and didn’t feel he needed that information. “I found the person Adolphus exiled to Earth. After Kitler had had Stanley Gower assassinated for treason, that is.”

Cleared my throat and kept looking at my mother, in part because I could feel every A-C in the room tense up. “Alfred is alive and now much more well than he was. He was hiding in the underground tunnel system, but now he’s living with Other Me and her family. He’s the brains behind literally every advancement for the betterment of mankind that that world, and this one, has had. And that means, Mom, that we need to get the entire Martini clan under lock and key. Because the Mastermind will want what’s in Alfred’s brain, and I’m

pretty sure he's aware that Alfred is the driving force behind most if not all A-C scientific advancements."

Mom nodded and looked to Kevin, who got up and stepped just outside of the room. He was on his phone before he reached the doorway.

"You can look at us," Jeff said quietly again. "Yes, everyone's upset, but that's another world from this one, baby."

"A world our people don't exist in," Christopher added. He sounded both angry and sad. Couldn't blame him.

"True enough. And you're not the only ones who aren't there anymore."

"Yeah. Share that later, baby." Was pretty sure that Jeff had read my mind and emotions and knew who else wasn't alive in Other Me's world.

"On the plus side, Harlie was with Alfred when I found him and, based on the news that a Poof went with Other Me back into her universe, I think they're set up pretty well. Oh, and they're set up because we took out the Mastermind there, also known as Cliff Goodman, as well as his Queen Accomplice, LaRue Pick A Last Name."

"The . . . other you said she'd never heard of LaRue," Amy said carefully.

"She hadn't. Over there, we figured that because Yates hadn't hit Earth there wasn't any other alien for her to hook up with and formulate evil plans alongside."

Noted everyone in the room running my last sentence back in their minds. "You mind explaining that?" Chuckie asked, presumably because he'd run the words back the fastest.

"Not at all. LaRue isn't a human. She's an Ancient who is also a Z'porrah spy." Mouths opened. I put my hand up. "I spoke with her. In person and, for the circumstances, at length. Believe me when I tell you that there's at least one Ancient, or Ancient Clone, now left on Earth. And LaRue was the real brains behind what the Mastermind in that world was doing, and that means the likelihood is high that she's also behind most everything that's gone on here."

"That makes sense," Lorraine said. She was still blonde and buxom, sitting next to her human husband, Joe Billings, with their hybrid son Ross on her lap. "She's got the scientific knowhow to have helped the Masterminds and their various associates move forward much more quickly than they could have alone."

Claudia nodded. "Ronald Yates or no Ronald Yates, he was our religious leader, not a scientist." She was a willowy brunette, and like Lorraine, was sitting next to her husband, Randy Muir, who had their son Sean on his lap. "I'm sure he was more advanced than some Earth scientists, but not like an Ancient would be. They're advanced far beyond any of us in either this solar system or our original one."

"But she's a shapeshifter, then," Serene Dwyer pointed out. Like the other two gals, she was next to her husband, Brian, but their son Patrick was crawling all over Matt Hughes, Chip Walker, and Jerry Tucker.

Nice to have all my main Dazzlers on Duty and my five flyboys back within arm's reach. And it was nice to have the sane version of Brian here, too. Decided I'd keep his bizarre fascination with me and flipped-out hatred for Chuckie in the other universe to myself. It was probably better for all concerned.

"So does that mean she could be anyone in this room?" Brian asked nervously. He was an astronaut in this

world, and frankly pretty unflappable. But the news I was sharing was bizarre even by our standards, so I could understand where his concern was coming from.

“No. For whatever reason she seems really attached to the shape we’re familiar with. Possibly because she’s in deep cover and there are empaths around who might pick up her emotions about shifting.”

“Makes sense, but you mentioned a death ray,” Buchanan said, showing an impressive ability to focus on the key issues. Not that this came as a surprise.

“Yes. They had one. It was scary impressive. Created little piles of dust of whatever thing it zapped. And a gigantic crater when it exploded due to some, ah, malfunctions my team and I caused.”

“Is that world safe?” Jeff asked. Wasn’t surprised—he was a protector, after all, and even if he wasn’t there, his father was, and our daughter was, at least in a sense. And Other Me was, too, and I was willing to bet he’d gotten at least somewhat attached to her.

“Yes, we destroyed Cliff, LaRue, the death ray, and all the other bad guys. At least the ones we knew about. They’re set up better than ever now, because Alfred’s with them. They’ll all be okay. We, however, cannot say the same.”

“We have no proof,” Richard White pointed out. He was Christopher’s father, the former Supreme Pontifex of the A-Cs, and my partner on the rare occasions when I got to kick butt these days. He was also a younger, hotter version of Timothy Dalton. Realized I’d obviously missed all the gorgeousness I’d become accustomed to these past few weeks. “And we’re going to need it, just in case.”

Jeff nodded. “The President needs to be warned, if no one else.”

“Vander, too,” Serene pointed out. “And a host of other politicians near to us like Senator McMillan.”

Tim, who was sitting between Jerry and Reader, shook his head. “Reynolds is right—if we don’t have proof we’re just accusing a high ranking public official who everyone in the world thinks is our friend of treason. That’s going to backfire on us.”

“Not everyone thinks he’s our friend.” This earned me everyone’s attention again. “Oh, right. Most of you don’t know. Gideon Cleary contacted us this morning, or whatever time it was over here when he called. Stephanie’s taken off and he thinks she’s hiding from her Secret Boyfriend. Who also just happens to be Cliff Goodman.”

Most of the room groaned. “Does it get any better than this?” Reader asked.

The intercom came to life. “Excuse me, Ambassador,” Walter said politely. “But Governor Cleary is calling for you. He suggested I patch him through via speakerphone.”

“Well, James, we’re about to find out how much better. Put him through, Walter.”

CHAPTER 9

“AMBASSADOR, thank you for taking my call.” Cleary sounded a little nervous, but nothing like he’d sounded when we’d spoken before.

“What can I do for you, Governor?” I knew he was calling in this way because Jeff had told him to. Assumed he had a bunch of people in the room with him just as I did, because this was the Public Show Call. Hoped Cleary had come up with a good excuse to get us down to Florida, because otherwise he was going to crash and burn in front of a whole lot of people. Mine wouldn’t care, but his might.

“I have a problem I’m hoping you and the Vice President will be able and willing to help me solve.”

So far so very good. Of course, his answer to my next question was going to determine if we continued to play nicely. “What problem is that, Governor?”

“I’d like to pass a bill that requires our colleges and universities to have better programs in place to ensure the safety of all students, our female ones in particular. My first efforts haven’t been met with, shall we say, enthusiasm. I’d like to ensure that my next attempt goes through, and I believe we need to bring in outside help. I understand that you have someone on staff who initiated a similar program in Southern California with considerable success.”

“We do indeed.” Kyle Constantine, who, along with Len Parker, was one of my permanently assigned C.I.A. bodyguards, had started a variety of programs at USC after we’d met. He and Len had both been on USC’s football team—Len as quarterback and Kyle on the line—and they’d both given up promising NFL careers to work with us.

Kyle looked shocked, but Len grinned and punched him gently in the arm, and Adriana, who was a close friend with both of them, patted his hand.

“I was wondering if you and, perhaps, the Vice President would come down with your resident expert and whoever else you think could provide meaningful input, to help me draft a nonpartisan bill. I feel that it will have a better chance of passing if it has the Vice President’s and your approval. And since you, as the wife of the Vice President, need to pick a cause to support, I’m hoping to inspire you to take this one up as yours, not just for my state but for the entire country.”

I managed not to ask why I had to have a cause. Even I knew that both the First Lady and the Second Lady, or whatever my ridiculous title really was, had to find something to focus good deeds and such on. Had to hand it to Cleary—he’d chosen something that I actually cared about. And it was a non-alien cause, meaning that it would show that we cared about everyone in the country, not just those with two hearts and amazing good looks. I hated it when my enemies seemed less enemy-like and more like reasonable, potentially decent, people. It made hating them close to impossible.

“Governor, that sounds like a very strong possibility, both the cause and our coming down to assist you. I’m sure that the Vice President will need to ensure that the President can spare him. Let me get back to you, but, in the spirit of partisanship and showing that our administration and yours are able to work for the public good despite the election’s outcome, I’ll do my best to get us down to you as soon as we possibly can.”

“Thank you. I truly appreciate this. Please stay in touch, and we’ll be ready for you whenever you can spare the time.”

We exchanged the usual call-ending pleasantries, then he hung up. “Caller is offline, Ambassador,” Walter shared. “Just the com to Security opened.”

“Well,” Mom said, “I have to hand it to him—there’s almost no way you can say no, and yet it’s clear he’s asking you for help. It’s a win-win for everyone. So, what’s the full story behind this?”

Buchanan did the honors and brought everyone else up to speed on our early-in-Australia's-morning call. While he did so, I made a list of who I figured we wanted down in Florida so that we could come up with the reasons why we were bringing them along. Why Chuckie had to come was going to take some explanations, let alone a few others, like the princesses, Rahmi and Rhee.

I wanted them with us for a simple reason: they were the best warriors out of the Alpha Centauri solar system and we might be fighting Cliff, Stephanie, the Death Ray, or God alone knew who or what else.

The princesses had been sent here from their home planet of Beta Twelve right before Jamie turned one, and due to whatever was going on in that solar system they had been left here ever since. I was fairly sure they'd been sent to both help us and protect themselves, but I wasn't a hundred percent sure. I was sure their mother expected me to train them in how to deal with men without killing them on sight, as well as how to deal diplomatically when possible. On Beta Twelve, I was considered incredibly diplomatic, apparently.

The women of Beta Twelve were Amazonian shapeshifters, meaning they had Ancient DNA in them. Also meaning that, realistically, Rahmi and Rhee would be people LaRue would want to get her hands on. Tried to remember if Cliff knew they were from another planet and couldn't. Had to figure he knew by now. One way or another, keeping tabs on the princesses was, if not Job One, certainly in the Job Top Five.

Because they were Queen Renata's daughters, they resembled her—Rahmi was the eldest, tall and brunette to Rhee's shorter blonde. When they'd first come they'd looked like every other woman from Beta Twelve I'd ever seen—very muscular in an attractive way, short, spiky hair, with slightly elongated limbs that looked out of proportion compared to a human or anyone from Alpha Four and larger and more elongated dark purple eyes.

However, I'd had them ensure they looked human while they were here. Over time, they'd altered themselves so that while they still resembled Renata they also—per everyone else, and my own eyes, now that I hadn't seen them for a few weeks—resembled me. It was flattering, really. In a kind of weird way, but that was pretty much par for our particular course.

Realized that while I could maybe say the princesses were attachés of some kind, or even babysitters for Jamie, they weren't going to be able to pass as part of our team of female protection specialists. They were probably the best *at* female protection, so to speak, but while they'd learned a lot since coming here, they weren't really able to pull off the diplomacy required not to ask why the women of Earth didn't just get rid of all the men attacking them, permanently.

Looked at the rest of my list. Sure Cleary wanted us down there and he'd be just fine with me bringing all of Alpha Team, supported by Airborne, along with at least half of the rest of those in the room, but we weren't sneaking down to Florida. We were going in a very obvious and photographable way. Meaning that anyone with half a brain would know something more was going on. And Cliff definitely had a whole, highly functioning brain.

Frankly, to make this work and not alert Cliff that something was going on, anyone past me, Jeff, Kyle, Len, and, possibly Tito was going to be suspect. We could sneak Tito in because he was both our Embassy doctor and a former UFC cage fighter, meaning he'd have professional input. Cliff would expect Buchanan to be with us, and of course Raj would be going to keep me from making my usual faux pas. Beyond that, though, what possible reasons would we have for bringing along everyone else?

Kevin came back in the room, interrupting my fretting. He was a human who gave the A-Cs a run for their money in the looks department. Tall, handsome, dark skinned, and with the best smile going, Kevin also had bags of charisma. He'd been a football player before my mom had recruited him, and still had the athletic

build going strong.

He nodded to his wife and seated himself back by her. Denise matched him well—also tall, blonde, and gorgeous, with a matching killer smile and her own bags of charisma. I was only half joking any time I mentioned that if I had to go to Beta Twelve to live forever, Denise would be the mate I'd choose.

Yep, I'd missed all the hotness. And here I'd found all the beauty almost boring as much as a whole month ago. Wondered how Other Me was handling her return to the land of normal-looking people. Then again, she had Reader there, and Alfred, too, along with Buchanan. And Chuckie wasn't a slouch in the looks department, either. Presumed she'd find the will to go on with her concentrated number of close, personal hunks and decided to turn my ever-wandering mind back to the current relative conundrums.

I tried to, but the Lewis kids, Raymond and Rachel, were playing with Jamie, my dad, and Gower now. They were gorgeous, too, a beautiful blend of their parents, and also two of the sweetest kids in the world.

And in the world Other Me was in they were all dead. I couldn't get rid of Cliff Goodman and all his cronies in this world fast enough. Perhaps a frontal "kill 'em all" attack was the way to go.

"Calm down, baby," Jeff said softly. "They're fine here, and we're not going to let anyone take any of our friends from us."

"We've said that before. And been wrong. Dead wrong." We'd hit the Mastermind hard during Operation Infiltration but it had cost us. A lot.

"Wars are filled with casualties," Chuckie said quietly. "And we may be fighting in the shadows, but it's a war, Kitty. You know that."

"True enough." I'd been thinking the same only a few minutes earlier, after all.

"I think the first order of business," White said, "is to share our concerns with the President. Proof or no proof, he's an ally and needs to be on his guard, because if the Mastermind is after us, he's also after the President. Jeffrey, I'm sure Vincent would like you to advise him that you're back in the country, as well."

Jeff sighed. "True enough, Uncle Richard." He kissed my cheek. "Don't start the next offensive without me, baby. I'll be right back." He got up and, like Kevin before him, headed out of the room to make his call.

"Kitty, I know you want to take a big team down there," Serene said, "but I don't see how we can do that without giving away that we know something's up." She sounded like the sweetest airhead in the world saying this. I'd come to realize that Serene was the poster girl for the whole "still waters run deep" maxim. She was an accomplished imageer—so much so that she'd taken over as Head of Imageering when Christopher had come into the Embassy with us. But she was also a troubadour, a fact she kept secret from all but a few people.

Troubadours weren't considered impressive to the average A-C, because they were actors. But, of course, what actors did was lie believably and with conviction. Raj was a troubadour too, and Serene's right-hand man in the clandestine team she'd formed—the A-C version of the C.I.A.

So I recognized now when she was throwing me a leading question. "You're right, Serene. I've been thinking that, too. I guess a few of us should go down openly while the rest of the team goes in covertly. Wouldn't you agree, James?"

Reader been promoted to Head of Field for Centaurion Division at the same time as Serene, replacing Jeff.

Jeff had been the Head of Field when I'd first met the gang, but supposedly wiser heads had shoved us into political and public-facing jobs. I still wondered what the hell was wrong with those people, but I'd long since given up complaining that I wanted to go back to my old job.

"I think that's going to be best, yeah," Reader replied. "Frankly, I'd like more information about what was really going on in Florida before we commit a lot of manpower to searching for a traitor who may or may not be having a crisis of conscience or a change of heart. Especially because she could be doing this as part of an elaborate trap."

"She very well might be," a familiar voice said. The entire room jumped, because we hadn't seen him and no one thought he was in the room. Well, everyone other than Buchanan jumped. And every guy who wasn't Buchanan and packed heat had a gun out and pointed at the man who'd spoken.

Benjamin Siler pushed off the wall he'd apparently been leaning against. "But there's a real possibility she's having reactions to having been ordered to murder eight people. And you can't afford to bet a hundred percent either way."

"Nightcrawler, good to see you. Why did you go all chameleon on us?"

He grinned. "Sometimes I like to make an entrance."

CHAPTER 10

EVERYONE PUT THEIR guns away, though not without a lot of glaring. Siler seemed completely unfazed, not that this shocked me.

"Martini let me in," Siler said with a laugh as Jeff returned to the ballroom.

"Yeah, I went to my office to talk to Vince and saw him at the side entrance. Why is everyone so damn tense?"

"Siler slipped in without our knowing," Christopher snapped.

"I knew he was here," Buchanan said calmly, as Christopher shot Patented Glare #3 at him and I enjoyed the comfort of truly being home. No one in Other Me's world was close to matching Christopher in the glaring department.

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