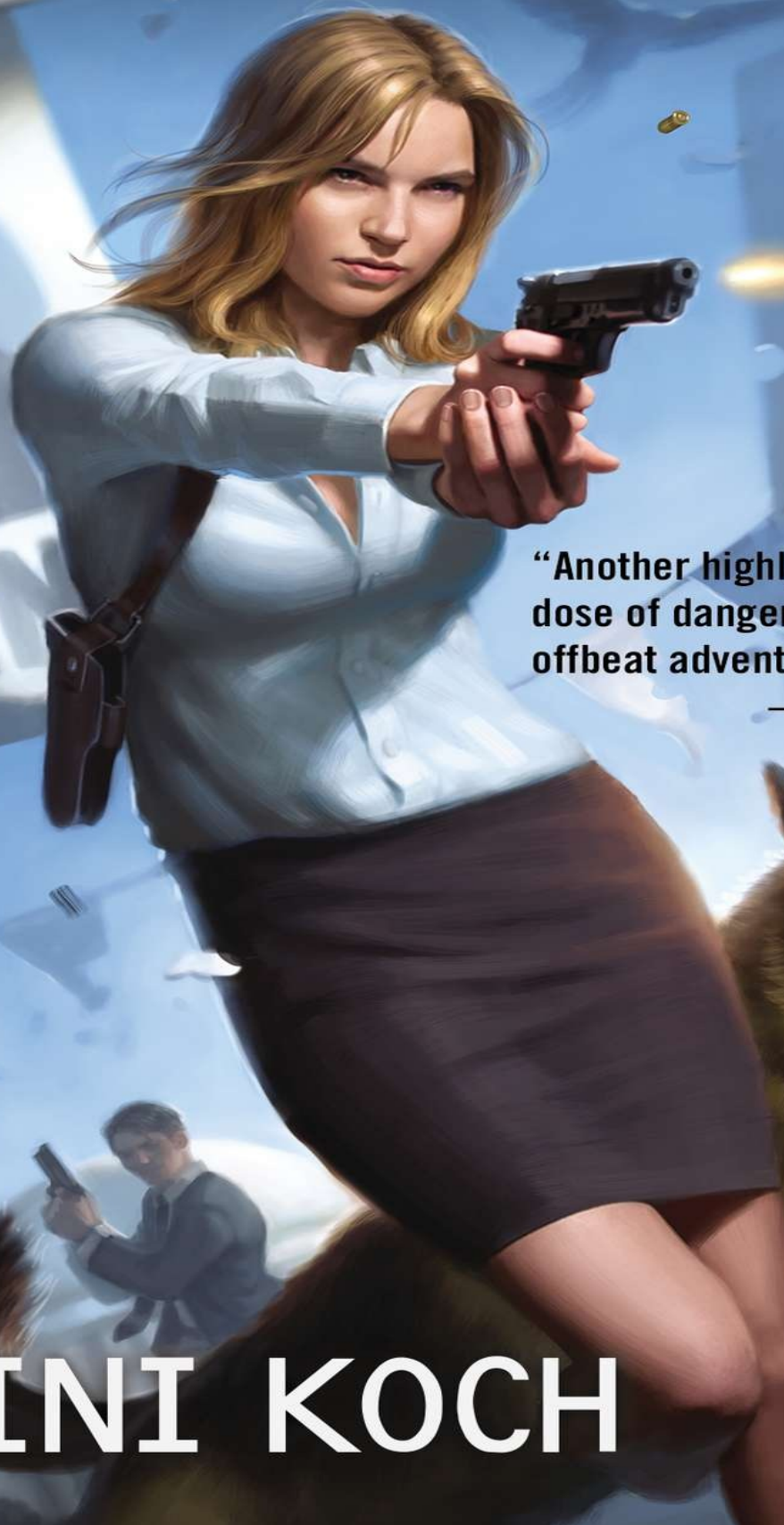


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CONTENTS

[*Raves for the Alien novels*](#)

[*Books by Gini Koch's*](#)

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Copyright*](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[CHAPTER 34](#)

[CHAPTER 35](#)

[CHAPTER 36](#)

[CHAPTER 37](#)

[CHAPTER 38](#)

[CHAPTER 39](#)

[CHAPTER 40](#)

[CHAPTER 41](#)

[CHAPTER 42](#)

[CHAPTER 43](#)

[CHAPTER 44](#)

[CHAPTER 45](#)

[CHAPTER 46](#)

[CHAPTER 47](#)

[CHAPTER 48](#)

[CHAPTER 49](#)

[CHAPTER 50](#)

[CHAPTER 51](#)

[CHAPTER 52](#)

[CHAPTER 53](#)

[CHAPTER 54](#)

[CHAPTER 55](#)

[CHAPTER 56](#)

[CHAPTER 57](#)

[CHAPTER 58](#)

[CHAPTER 59](#)

[CHAPTER 60](#)

[CHAPTER 61](#)

[CHAPTER 62](#)

[CHAPTER 63](#)

[CHAPTER 64](#)

[CHAPTER 65](#)

[CHAPTER 66](#)

[CHAPTER 67](#)

[CHAPTER 68](#)

[CHAPTER 69](#)

[CHAPTER 70](#)

[CHAPTER 71](#)

[CHAPTER 72](#)

[CHAPTER 73](#)

[CHAPTER 74](#)

[CHAPTER 75](#)

[CHAPTER 76](#)

[CHAPTER 77](#)

[CHAPTER 78](#)

[CHAPTER 79](#)

[CHAPTER 80](#)

[CHAPTER 81](#)

[CHAPTER 82](#)

[CHAPTER 83](#)

[CHAPTER 84](#)

[CHAPTER 85](#)

[CHAPTER 86](#)

[CHAPTER 87](#)

[CHAPTER 88](#)

[CHAPTER 89](#)

[CHAPTER 90](#)

[CHAPTER 91](#)

[CHAPTER 92](#)

[THE FIRST TUESDAY IN NOVEMBER](#)

[Excerpt from Universal Alien](#)

For Colette Chmiel and Joseph Gaxiola, whose help and support has been and remains invaluable to my career and my sanity.

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THERE WAS A TIME, about four and a half years ago, when I thought the world was basically simple.

I was a single, carefree girl with a sorta-promising career in marketing, great parents, good friends, and a place of my own.

Then a superbeing formed in front of me and genetics I didn't know I had took over. I killed the fugly monster, saved the day, and won the heart of the handsome prince. Literally.

Of course, my prince didn't know he was a prince, though he did know he was an alien, even though he was born on Earth. His family was exiled from Alpha Four in the Alpha Centauri system. His very large, extended, and connected-back-through-the-ages family. All of whom are pretty much the most gorgeous people on Earth. Since they also have two hearts, hyperspeed, the ability to regenerate and heal quickly, and special talents, the fact that they're also great looking sort of seems unfair.

It *is* unfair, really. But I manage to find the will to go on.

I also discovered a much more promising career in the realm of Superbeing Extermination, and moved quickly up the ranks to become the Head of Airborne for Centaurion Division. And, just as quickly, got moved over to become first the co- and then the only Ambassador for American Centaurion. Though I've protested a lot about the Peter Principle, everyone insists I'm at least as good at this job as I was at any other. They're being complimentary. I think.

Jeff's in the same spaceship, of course, because he got shoved into being the Representative for New Mexico's 2nd District in Congress. Meaning he has to work with politicians every day. And to set the rumors straight, not all politicians are evil monsters, but most of them make us nostalgic for the superbeings we used to fight regularly.

There are plenty of nights where we argue about which one of us has the worse job. But at least we have each other.

And we have our daughter, Jamie, who's very special with a heaping side of extra. In addition to her being a human-alien hybrid, some extenuating circumstances have led to her sharing head space with a collective superconsciousness. At two and a half, that's probably a lot to handle, but she's our daughter and she's doing great with it. Overachieving is apparently our "thing."

So, you know, fantastic husband, amazing daughter, important jobs we feel challenged in, great friends, wonderful family. What could go wrong with all of that?

• • •

Wow. You really haven't been paying attention all this time, have you?



CHAPTER 1

“YOU HAVE THE RIGHT to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in court of law.”

“I’d like to say two words—Diplomatic Immunity. Then I’d like to say other words like, I want to call my lawyer, the President, my mom, and a few other people like Officer Melville.” The cop helped me up into the paddy wagon.

“That’s nice.” Of course, he was now actually helping my lawyer into the big metal van. Amy Gaultier-White patted my hand. “You and all the rest get to go to headquarters first, ma’am. Then you can make all those calls you want to make.”

“Diplomatic Immunity. We do remember what that means?”

The cop smiled as he helped several other women into the paddy wagon with me. “Yes, ma’am, Ambassador Katt-Martini. We do know.”

“I’m the Ambassador for the American Centaurion Diplomatic Mission. My husband is a congressman. And you’re risking pissing off a lot of important people.”

“Comes with the job, ma’am.”

“Why are we being arrested? Since when is arresting diplomats your job? Every woman with me is part of my diplomatic mission.” In some way, at any rate. Wasn’t sure if I could count the female members of Alpha Team as being part of the Embassy staff. Then again, I was the Ambassador, so I could decide I’d officially instated them as Disturbance Attachés before we left. Minor moral dilemma solved. Major dilemma still not solved.

“You’re at the scene of a disturbance, ma’am. Ambassador or not.”

“I’ll say it again, officer—Diplomatic Immunity.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The cop gave me the Concerned Officer of the Law look. “You’re being moved off the streets for your own protection, ladies.”

“Peaceful protest is part of our democracy,” Abigail said.

“My husband’s going to hear about this,” Serene added. “He’s an astronaut.”

“I’ll watch out for falling moon rocks, ma’am,” the cop said to her. Wasn’t positive, but I was pretty sure he was trying really hard not to laugh. “However, your own protection currently superseded your immunity.”

“Since when?” Amy asked.

“Since now.” The cop closed the back doors. Nicely. But still.

“Well,” Lorraine said, “at least we’re not chained up or handcuffed.”

“Speak for yourself,” Claudia muttered.

“You tried to hit one of the officers in the face,” Lorraine pointed out.

“He was being rude.” Claudia looked around. “Can I get out of these now?”

“Sure. You want to break them or have me or Amy pick the lock?”

Lorraine Billings, Claudia Muir, Serene Dwyer, and Abigail Gower were all female A-Cs, or, as I called them to myself, Dazzlers. Dazzlers were, to a one, gorgeous, which was par for the A-C’s course. They were also all brilliant by human standards, usually focused on medicine, math, and/or

science. My girls were also focused on butt kicking.

They all looked awed and impressed. “You and Amy have finally learned to pick locks?” Serene asked.

Amy and I both sighed. “Yes, Malcolm’s been working on it with us,” I shared.

“A lot,” Amy added, going for the Full Disclosure option.

Malcolm Buchanan was assigned to be my personal shadow. He was also pretty much the most comprehensively competent dude in covert and clandestine ops imaginable. During Operation Infiltration he’d taught the four Dazzlers with us in the paddy wagon how to pick locks. Amy and I hadn’t done so well with that. So Buchanan had made it a point to ensure that we knew how. Sadly, it hadn’t come that easily to either one of us, which was something of an embarrassment, but both Amy and I were proficient lock pickers now.

Amy pulled a metal nail file out of her purse. “Too slow, Kitty.” She went to work.

“At least some of us made it,” Claudia said as Amy got the cuffs off her and she rubbed her wrists.

The doors opened again and two more women were put in—Doreen Weisman, our last Dazzler on Embassy Duty, and Denise Lewis, who was human but frankly gorgeous enough to pass for alien.

“Diplomatic Immunity!” Doreen shouted. “Do you all understand what that term means?”

The cops smiled, nodded, and shut the doors again. “So much for Claudia’s optimism,” I said. “I thought you two had gotten away.”

“We did, too,” Doreen said.

“Someone in the crowd pointed us out,” Denise added with more than a trace of bitterness.

The doors opened again and Nurse Magdalena Carter and my sorority roommate and bestie, Carolyn Chase, were both helped inside. “This is supposed to be the land of freedom and opportunity,” Nurse Carter said darkly. “Not the land of oppression.” She was originally from Paraguay and had joined us during Operation Assassination.

“Senator McMillan is going to hear about this!” Carolyn was the Senator’s Girl Friday.

“I’m sure he will, miss,” the officer said. “From more than just you.”

Counted noses. We were missing one person. Sure enough, the doors opened again. Though who was being helped in wasn’t on my list of Girls Gone Washington Wild.

“Lucinda? What are you and my daughter doing here?”

Yes indeed, my mother-in-law was there, carrying my daughter, Jamie. Two officers helped them in, with a third standing behind to catch them if Lucinda lost her balance.

“Thank you so much,” she said to the officers. “You’re all too kind, and I just want you to know how much we appreciate all the good work you do and long hours you put in.”

She got very friendly smiles from the cops. “You’re very welcome, ma’am. You and the little lady be sure to sit down so you don’t lose your balance.” The doors shut again.

“Mommy, this is so much fun! Gran’ma Luci said we could come watch you work!” Jamie bounced over to me for hugs and kisses.

Happily gave out the necessary snuggles, then handed Jamie to Amy for more of the same.

“Lucinda, what part of ‘you and Jamie stay at the Embassy’ didn’t come through clearly?”

“No part of it, Kitty,” she said as she settled herself in between Doreen and Serene, opposite Amy.

“I just thought it would be fun for Jamie to see what you girls were up to.”

Lorraine and Amy both nudged me. “I think Kitty just wanted to be sure you and Jamie didn’t get hurt,” Amy said as she finished loving on Jamie and handed her to Abigail. “And I have to agree. Are you alright?”

“Oh, yes, Amy dear, we’re both fine. It was quite exciting, all the chanting and jumping up and

down.”

~~Managed to keep my mouth shut but only by grinding my teeth. Abigail hugged Jamie then passed her on to Carolyn.~~

“You do realize it’s a political protest?” Serene asked, radiating innocence. While my first impression of Serene, during Operation Drug Addict, was that she was a crazy loon, my second, third, fourth, and fifth impressions of her were Innocence on the Hoof.

However, I’d learned there was a lot more to Serene than most of us ever saw. Right now, for example, I had a feeling she was asking because she knew I couldn’t do so without snarling, and she was doing it in such a way as to not upset Lucinda.

And it worked, of course. Lucinda patted Serene’s knee. “Oh, yes, dear, I know. It’s part of how our great host country works, and it’s important for Jamie to see that, to see how her father is a part of something so much bigger than himself.”

“Jeff’s always been a part of something bigger than himself,” I pointed out.

“Yes, Kitty, but Jamie couldn’t go into active situations with her father, now could she?”

Regardless of Amy and Lorraine’s nudging, Doreen and Serene’s wide-eyed “shut up, shut up” stares, and what I could feel radiating from the rest of the girls—that I needed to keep my mouth shut—I couldn’t stop myself. “Um, have you been paying attention to anything that’s gone on since Jamie was born?”

Fortunately, before Lucinda could reply and I could earn more Bad Daughter-In-Law Points, the doors opened again. And, once again, our new arrival wasn’t anyone I was expecting.



CHAPTER 2

LILLIAN CULVER was helped inside. “Thank you, officers, that will be all.”

“Yes, ma’am. Do you need anything else?” the officer who’d been doing most of the talking asked. Unlike with Lucinda, where he’d clearly been happy to help, or with me and the others, where he’d been trying not to laugh, right now he seemed very controlled and official. Presumed he knew exactly who Culver was.

“No, no, we’re all good here now.” Lillian turned to me and smiled widely. She was a top lobbyist *the top* for most of the big defense contractors, meaning she was incredibly powerful and influential in this town—the epitome of a Washington insider. And, as seemed to be the “thing” here, she had “her color,” which happened to be red.

Culver was an attractive enough woman, until you looked at her just long enough. Then you realized she was all bones and angles, with a very wide mouth her bright red lipstick really emphasized. I called her Joker Jaws to myself for a reason.

Right now, I was getting the Joker’s smug “I’ve trapped Batman and all his cronies” look from Culver. Couldn’t wait to hear what she wanted.

But before Culver spoke, the doors opened yet again. “Good grief, it’s like a Marx Brothers film in here. We’re about to be at standing room only.”

Culver laughed and reached her hand down. “Nathalie, you’re here, too?”

Representative Nathalie Gagnon-Brewer was helped in by the officers and Culver. “Thanks, Lillian. Kitty, I’m glad I caught up with all of you.” She was a French expatriate, a former international fashion model, and a widow. Her husband, Edmund, had been a Representative from California, and he’d been murdered during Operation Sherlock. As with Jeff, the President had asked Nathalie to take over her husband’s seat in Congress. And as with Jeff, considering the state of the union and the world after Operation Destruction—when everyone on Earth had learned, in a really big way, that we weren’t alone in the cosmos—Nathalie had said yes.

“Wait for me, wait for me,” a man called before the cops could close our now very full paddy wagon up again. Vance Beaumont climbed inside. “Thanks, guys, appreciate you holding the car for me,” he said to the officers.

They nodded and closed the doors behind him. “Vance, what are you doing here?” I asked.

Vance was married to Guy Gadoire, who was to the tobacco industry what Culver was to defense. Vance spent his days thumbing through *GQ* and dressing accordingly, throwing lavish parties, and hanging around.

Despite all of this, I’d come to realize he had a functioning brain he liked to keep hidden, and he was actually a better friend to me now than I’d have ever thought possible when we first met. Same with Nathalie, of course. And while Culver and I couldn’t be called friends, thanks to my “uncles” the top assassins, she and I had a good working relationship where she didn’t try to push me into making bad decisions for American Centaurion too often and I returned the favor by not threatening to “call home” too often.

“I thought this was a woman’s rally against the anti-alien presidential candidate,” Lucinda added a

Vance jumped the line and took Jamie from Nathalie—who'd just barely gotten her from Carolyn—to give her a quick "airplane flight" she loved, if her squealing with joy was any indication.

Vance gave Jamie a kiss, handed her off to Culver, and shrugged. "I have the wife role in my relationship, in case you missed that key point, and, also in case you didn't notice, the Cleary-Maure ticket is also anti-gay."

"And anti-woman," Nathalie added. "They aren't pro-minorities, either. Or immigrants, legal or otherwise."

Shocking me to my core, Culver both cuddled Jamie—who didn't scream in horror but instead cuddled back—and nodded. "They need to be stopped."

"Wait, what? Lillian, are you saying you were here as part of the protest?"

Culver shrugged, gave Jamie a kiss, and handed her over to Doreen. "Yes. I'm a woman, in case you didn't notice, and I'm not excited about what Cleary and Maurer both stand for."

"They stand for hate," Lucinda said calmly as Jamie clambered from Doreen and over Lucinda to get to Serene, giving Lucinda a kiss along the way. "And, as such, they need to be opposed." She looked right at me. "And our young women need to see that their role models are so opposing."

"Fine, fine, yes, I noticed everything and yes, I'll stop complaining about Jamie being here." Stood up and hugged my mother-in-law. "I just don't want either one of you getting hurt, that's all."

She hugged me back. "I know. I may have been a housewife more than a career woman, but trust me—no one will touch a hair on one of my grandchildren's heads and live to talk about it."

"So," Claudia said as she took Jamie from Serene, "do we think Adriana made it without getting nabbed, or do you think she's in a different arrest vehicle?"

"And, since we have two who were out of the Embassy against orders," I gave Lucinda the hairy eyeball, "where's Mahin?"

Before anyone could reply, the back doors opened once again. Two more men joined us—Len and Kyle, my official driver and bodyguard. They'd both played football for USC, but they weren't causing the cops any problems. "Thanks," Kyle said as the cops once again closed our doors. He stayed by the doors, blocking both entrance and exit.

Len nodded to everyone as he worked his way forward. As he reached the front of the holding area, car doors slammed—they were clearly the doors to our particular car. "Everyone, please keep your seats," Len said. He took Jamie from Lorraine and handed her to me.

"Hey, I just got her," Lorraine said.

"Sorry." He didn't sound sorry. Len pounded twice on the metal separating the cab from the rest of us, and the paddy wagon lurched off. We drove for about thirty seconds and came to a screeching halt.

The doors opened yet again, and two more people joined us. Tito Hernandez, our Embassy doctor, and Mahin Sherazi, who'd joined up with us a year ago during Operation Infiltration. Tito was literally dragging Mahin aboard.

"A little help?" he asked Kyle, who reached down, grabbed the back of Mahin's shirt, and lifted her into the back.

She was shouting in Farsi. I didn't speak her native tongue, but it was pretty clear that she wasn't saying nice things.

Kyle and Tito got the doors closed, Len did his hand-slam-on-metal thing, and we took off, this time at a much faster rate of speed. Sirens were going off around us—clearly we had at least one police car as an escort, maybe two. Maybe more.

"So, what's going on?" I asked Len. "And I'd really like an answer. Starting with what you, Kyle, and Tito are doing here in the first place. And why you all happily leaped into the paddy wagon with

us instead of, oh, I'm just spitballing here, getting us *out*."

He sighed. "You weren't supposed to go to this thing without me and Kyle."

"It was, despite us having four men in here, supposed to be a women only thing. Hence why we left the men at home. Or thought we did. Mahin, you were supposed to stay home, too."

She tossed her hair out of her face. "I went with Lucinda and Jamie."

"Shocker."

"Mahin is part of our family, too," Lucinda said calmly. "And I brought Doctor Hernandez, Len, and Kyle along with us to protect Jamie."

"Wow, check and mate. Good one. Look, I appreciate the arrest solidarity, but didn't it occur to anyone that some of you staying out of jail might be helpful?"

Culver cleared her throat. "Ah, Kitty? I don't think we're actually being arrested."

"No? Then why are we in a police riot van?"

"For our safety," Lucinda said. "That's what the nice officers said."

Got a bad feeling. "Look, you all realize that we've been herded into a metal van and are being taken God knows where by God knows who, right? And that the local police have been infiltrated and impersonated before, usually by people wanting to perpetrate a great deal of malice aforethought on us? Remember? Anyone?"

The car came to a stop, the doors to the cab opened and closed, then the doors to our section opened yet again.

Had to admit—I really wasn't expecting to be where we were or see who was standing there, though it shouldn't have surprised me all that much.



CHAPTER 3

“**MISSUS CHIEF**, nice to see you and the rest of the gang.”

“Malcolm, what the hell?”

Buchanan was tall, good looking, built, and buff, with brown hair and blue eyes. Not as handsome as my husband, but he wasn't hard on the eyes at all. Of course, A-Cs were the most gorgeous people on Earth, but most of the human guys working with us were pretty nice to look at, too—it was one of the many perks of being part of Centaurion Division and American Centaurion.

Buchanan didn't answer me. Instead he looked to Len and Kyle. “Let's get them all out and in, as fast as possible.”

The boys nodded, and Len worked his way to the back, with Kyle keeping everyone in until Len was out. Then the boys started helping everyone down.

Adriana Dalca appeared as everyone other than Amy and me were out. “Convoy is all inside, gates are locked.” She was the granddaughter of the Romanian Ambassador. Romania's embassy was across the street from ours, and we'd become good friends with them, particularly Adriana and her grandmother, Olga.

Olga was former KGB and could pass as the Oracle on any given day of the week. She was training Adriana in the old spy ways, as well as the new spy ways, which was good, because Adriana had saved my life almost as many times as Buchanan had.

“Nice to know we didn't lose you in the crowd,” I said as I handed Jamie to Adriana and Buchanan lifted me out of the truck.

“Mister Buchanan found me as things started to get out of control and suggested we get all of you to safety.”

“Nice. I guess.” Something registered. “Things were out of control?”

“Oh yes. Grandmother was very concerned.” Before I could ask what things had concerned Olga, Adriana turned, still holding Jamie in a protective manner, and trotted off.

“Malcolm? I'd like to know what was out of control.”

“I'd like to know why we're at the Bahraini Embassy,” Amy said, as Kyle helped her down. He and Len nodded to Buchanan, then trotted off, but in a different direction from Adriana.

Sure enough, I could recognize the architecture, if you could really call it that. In our part of town, aka Embassy Row, all the buildings were lovely, some really showing off, some making do with quiet dignity. But all attractive.

However, there was another embassy section of D.C. that I'd nicknamed The Bunker. In this part of town, every embassy was gated and secured, the buildings were set well back from the street, and no doorway was close to the gates. The buildings also weren't nearly as pretty as the ones in our area—they'd been built for stolid usefulness and defensibility, not architectural beauty.

We could have been at any embassy in The Bunker, but we had good friends in the Bahraini and Israeli embassies, and it was pretty much a fifty-fifty guess that we were within one of their heavily guarded gates. The Bahraini flag flying overhead was undoubtedly the clue that had tipped Amy off to where we were.

Buchanan grinned. “Because you have friends all over.”

Looked around and finally managed to spot the six police cars that were with us. All of the cars’ flashing lights were on, and they all had dogs inside. “Oh, the K-9 squad is here? Well, that saves me a call to Officer Melville.” Chose not to mention that I hadn’t noticed that they were here until now. Hey, they’d turned off their sirens. Somewhere along the way.

The policemen were opening their doors and helping people out, among them Mona Nejem, who was the Bahraini Ambassadors, and her Royal Bahraini Army bodyguard, Khalid.

Unsurprisingly, Jakob, Oren, and Leah from the Israeli Diplomatic Mission were getting out of another squad car. They were all Mossad, but, as Mona had explained to me during Operation Destruction, if I thought politics made strange bedfellows, it was nothing compared to the beds diplomats tended to lie in. Only she’d said it with far more class.

By now, I wasn’t the least bit surprised to see my favorite reporter, Mr. Joel Oliver, also getting out of a car. He pulled a snazzy sports wheelchair out and then, sure enough, helped Olga into it, with Leah assisting.

“It’s a party. Malcolm, you want to tell me what the hell’s going on?” One of the K-9 dogs ran over to me, whuffing happily. “Hey Prince, how’s my favorite officer of the law?” I knelt down and gave Prince tons of pets and he licked my face in return.

“You’ll be briefed inside, Missus Chief.” He helped me up and moved us so we were standing near the embassy with the police van blocking us from the street. Prince came with us.

Looked around. Richard White was getting out of another squad car. He was Amy’s father-in-law, Lucinda’s older brother, and the former Supreme Pontifex of all the A-Cs of Earth. He was also my partner whenever we got to kick butt.

White was accompanied by Jeremy and Jennifer Barone, the brother-sister Field team assigned to our Embassy during Operation Destruction. Jeremy was an empath, and Jennifer was an imageer. She was also engaged to Ravi Gaekwad, a member of the team I called Hacker International, who’d also joined up with us during the gigantic alien invasion.

Rajnish Singh, our Embassy Public Relations Minister, and Pierre Duchamps, our Embassy Concierge Majordomo got out of squad cars number five and six respectively. They were ushering the kids from Embassy Daycare. Did a fast headcount—yes, all the kids. This was boding. Or else we were having a giant kegger no one had told me about. I went with precedent and figured on the former. They, like the rest of those in the cars, were hurried inside the embassy by Len, Kyle, and the police officers.

Amazingly, I didn’t see any evidence of Hacker International or anyone else I wouldn’t have expected to be here anyway. I was shocked that not every, single solitary person I knew was here. Maybe they were coming in their own police vans and were delayed by traffic.

“Malcolm, seriously, it’s like we’re at a surprise party or something.”

He sighed. “In a way, you’re right.”

“Wow. Cryptic. Not a help, mind you, but cryptic nonetheless.”

“Let’s get inside, Missus Chief. All will be explained shortly.”

“I guess I should be glad we’re at Mona’s embassy instead of at police headquarters.”

“No,” Buchanan said darkly. “You should be glad you’re in a safe location as opposed to being dead.”

Let that sit on the air for a bit. “You mind explaining that?”

“No, but not here.” And with that Buchanan took my arm and, accompanied by Prince, we headed into the Bahraini embassy.

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