

TOUCHED BY AN
ALIEN
GINI KOCH



DAW BOOKS, INC.
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, FOUNDER

375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

ELIZABETH R. WOLLHEIM
SHEILA E. GILBERT
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I WENT TO THE BOX AND LOOKED IN.

It was a man, dead, as far as I could tell. At least, I hoped so. He had long, sharp claws where his fingers and toes should have been, and his teeth were long and jagged and looked razor sharp. His expression was a contortion of fury and hatred.

“He looks like the man I killed. Right before I killed him, I mean.”

“They all look like that,” Martini said quietly.

“What are they? And don’t say mutants,” I added.

“Superbeings is what we call them,” White replied. “Roswell’s history is somewhat true. Aliens did crash-land here in the late nineteen-forties. However, when we opened the ship, the aliens were all dead. Our scientists studied them, of course. Different body structures, but they were more like humans than not. There were what we took to be books with them, and those were in a language so different from ours that it took decades to decipher.”

“What did the books say?” I asked, wanting to stop looking at the dead superbeing in front of me and not being able to.

“Turned out the aliens were on a mission of mercy,” White said. “They weren’t the only ones sent out, just the only ones sent to Earth. Their planet had been invaded by a parasitic race. They’d learned how to fight against the parasites, but they knew this would only make other planets targets. So they sent emissaries out to warn the other populated planets of the threat.”

“What do the parasites do?”

“Guess,” Martini said softly.

When White didn’t counter that, I gave what I was in some way hoping was the wrong answer. “The parasite attaches to someone and alters them into a superbeing, capable of great destruction. They’re attracted to rage and fear, or whatever pheromones are given off from those emotions. That’s how they pick their new host.”

DAW Books Presents GINI KOCH's

Alien Novels:

TOUCHED BY AN ALIEN

ALIEN TANGO

(Available December 2010)

TOUCHED BY AN
ALIEN
GINI KOCH



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*To Steve and Veronica,
for being mine and, in your own ways,
always being ready to “bring it.”*

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WHAT GETS ME IS THAT IN ALL THE COMIC BOOKS and movies and even novels, whenever someone gets superpowers, there's at least an eighty percent likelihood they'll use said powers for good.

It's always some man or woman of science looking for a cure for the world's ills who gets hit with the gamma rays, or an outcast kid who happens to have a wise oldster around to show him the right ropes as soon as the mutation hits. The few bad guys who turn superpowered always have some fatal flaw that renders them easy pickings for the good guys, who also manage to outnumber the baddies every time it matters.

In real life, of course, it never works that way. At all.

In real life, there are no superheroes.

Of course, this doesn't mean there are no superpowered beings.

But never fear—I'm on it.

Yeah, it doesn't sound all that comforting to me, either.



CHAPTER 1

MY FIRST SUPERBEING WAS AN ACCIDENT. Literally and figuratively.

I was walking from the courthouse to the parking garage. Jury duty was over, I'd been released early, right after the lunch break, so I was free to go back to work and try to catch up on my missed half a day.

The parking garage was across the street, so I had to wait for the light. As I stood there hoping I wouldn't sunburn, I witnessed a small fender bender. One slow-moving car rear-ended another right in front of the courthouse, about fifty feet away from me.

The drivers got out—man from the front car, woman from the rear—and he started yelling at her immediately. At first I figured he was raging because he'd been hit and the start of summer in Arizona always makes everyone here a little crazy, but I could hear him, and it dawned on me that this was his wife.

She was apologizing, but he wasn't having any of it, so she got mad, too. Their fight escalated in a matter of moments. This was a full-on domestic dispute, the kind the cops rightly would have nothing to do with.

The light changed, and I wondered if I should just head across the street to avoid getting involved with these two when it happened. The man's rage went supernova, and all of a sudden he sprouted wings out of his back.

I'm not talking little wings, either. They were huge, easily six and a half feet high and I guessed the span as double. They had feathers, but they were odd looking, which, I know, you'd figure would be given in the first place. But they didn't look like bird feathers—they gleamed, and not with blood. There was a viscous substance on them, and as I watched, the man turned toward his horrified screaming wife and shot blades out of the feathers that lined the wings' edges.

She was cut to ribbons in a matter of seconds, and he turned toward the courthouse and let more blades fly. The main Pueblo Caliente courthouse, a nine-story building with mostly glass walls, was built a few years ago and was really very modern and attractive, doing its best to pretend the city hadn't once been a pioneer cow town.

I flinched as the projectiles hit. Glass shattered and flew everywhere—the courthouse went from sleek to rubble in a matter of moments. I could hear screams—the people coming out of the courthouse, those near the windows in the first few floors, anyone in his path, maybe more—were all being cut down, possibly murdered by this man. I couldn't guess how far the projectiles went; for all I knew, they were going deep into the building.

I don't know why I didn't try to run or hide. In hindsight, I could say maybe I just knew it would be futile. But at the time, that wasn't what I was thinking. I was scared, but more, I was angry, and I just wanted to stop him. He wasn't slowing the attack at all, and I realized he was enjoying it, enjoying the power, the fear, the death.

His back was still to me, and I could see a spot, right between where his shoulder blades had been

and wings now were. Something was there, pulsing, almost like a human heart, but it didn't look like heart. It resembled a small jellyfish, really.

I tried to think of what I could use to stop this monster—it wasn't as though they equipped marketing managers with Uzis. I didn't take my eyes off the pulsing thing on the man's back as I dug through my purse and my fingers found my weapon—my heavy, expensive Mont Blanc pen. It had been a gift from my father when I'd gotten a promotion at work. I doubted this was what he'd hoped I'd use it for, but I wasn't holding any other options.

I dropped my purse, kicked off my heels, and ran, straight for his back. He was moving closer to the courthouse but was still less than a hundred feet away from me, and back in school I'd been on the track team. I was a sprinter and a hurdler, and some things don't leave you, even if you haven't done them for a while.

Because he was a little taller than me, I knew I needed to be airborne when I hit him. I judged it and leaped at the last possible moment. My pen slammed into that jellyfish-like thing on his back just as he started to turn. I could see his eyes—they were wide, glowed red, and no longer looked human.

As I drove the pen into his back, his mouth opened, but he didn't make a sound. His eyes, however, went back to human, and they glazed as I watched them die. Then his body fell forward and mine with it. I scrambled to my feet, covered with ooze from his wings and the exploded jellyfish thing.

The police arrived. After all, many of them had been inside the courthouse. The scene was chaotic—people screaming, glass and blood everywhere, sirens in the distance—but as I stared down at the dead body, all I could think about was whether I should retrieve my pen or not.

A man appeared out of nowhere. He was over six feet, big and broad. I didn't register much else other than his suit, which I was pretty sure was Armani and looked excellent on him, meaning he probably wasn't with the police. My eyes were drawn back to my pen, still sticking out of the dead man's back.

“How did you know what to do?” he asked, without any opening formalities.

“It just seemed . . . right,” I answered, winning the *Lame Reply Award* of the hour. “Can I take my pen out?”

He squatted down and examined the body. He pulled the pen out slowly. I got the impression he was ready to ram it back in if the body gave the slightest indication of coming back to life.

“I saw his eyes. They weren't normal, and then, as I killed him, they went back to human again. And I saw him die,” I added. I wondered if I was going to have hysterics and realized I wasn't. I was somewhat relieved.

The man looked up at me. I registered his face now—rather broad features, strong chin, light-brown eyes, dark, wavy hair. Handsome, definitely. I hated myself for it, but I looked immediately to his left hand. No ring. I looked right back at his face, but he'd noticed and grinned. “Jeff Martini. Single. No current girlfriend. And you are?”

“Wondering if I'm going to be arrested.” I noted several of Pueblo Caliente's finest bearing down on us with a determined attitude.

Martini stood up. “I don't think so.” He turned around. “Our agency will handle it, gentlemen. Please perform crowd control.”

The cops all stopped and did what he said, no arguments, no issues. I felt nervous now, much more than I had before.

He turned back to me. “Let's go.” As he said this, a large gray limo with tinted windows pulled up across the street. Martini took my arm and led me over.

“I need to get my car,” I protested. “And my shoes.” I hopped from foot to foot. I contemplated

standing on top of Martini's shoes, then figured the brevity of our relationship probably meant I shouldn't.

"Give me the keys," he said.

"I don't think so." I pulled my arm out of his grasp and managed to find a tiny patch of shade to stand in. "What the hell is going on?"

An older man got out of the back of the limo. He was built like Martini but was at least two decades older. They didn't look related, but I was pretty sure they were in the same line of work—whatever that was.

He gave me a long look. "Give Jeffrey your car keys, please. You're wasting time, ours and yours."

"Then I get to sleep with the fishes?" I asked with as much sarcasm as I could muster.

He laughed. "We're not the Mob, we're an authorized world-government agency. You can stay here and be questioned by the police about the death of that unfortunate, or you can come with us."

"You'll tell me what happened? I mean, what really happened?"

"Yes." He moved aside and indicated the car's interior. "We'll also help you get cleaned up and keep you out of the papers."

"Why?" I didn't move toward the limo or to get my purse.

He sighed. "We need agents. Ours is a dangerous job. And it's a rare thing when a civilian not only has the courage to do what's needed but also the natural instinct to know where and how to kill a superbeing."

I felt a nudge, and as I looked around, Martini handed me my purse. He had my shoes as well. "Pickpocketing part of the trade?" I asked as he tossed my car keys to another man who'd appeared out of pretty much nowhere. Same Armani-clad look, maybe a bit smaller in build, but still obviously one of the crew. "I don't think I fit the agency's look," I added as I grabbed my shoes and put them back on.

Martini grinned again. He had great teeth and a great smile. I was already disgusted with myself for looking for a wedding ring and more now that I was paying attention to his looks while I was possibly teetering on the edge of life or death.

"We can use some female intuition," Martini said. "That's what it was, right? You didn't know what was going on, but you knew what to do."

I shrugged. "I have no idea. Can I have my pen back?"

Martini laughed. "Only if you get into the car with us." He leaned down. "And only if you tell me your name," he whispered in my ear.

My knees went weak then. Somehow, this made it all real, not something I'd wake up from in a moment. I felt myself blacking out, felt Martini catch me and lift me into his arms, and then . . . nothing.



CHAPTER 2

I WOKE UP INSIDE THE CAR. I was sitting up, leaning against someone who had his arm around me. Even the confusion of waking up from fainting didn't cause me to wonder whose arm it was. The I didn't mind made me want to turn myself over to Gloria Steinem as a real failure as a modern woman.

“. . . think she'll be willing to be an agent?" It was a man's voice, but not Martini's and not the older man's, either. I kept my eyes closed and tried not to change my breathing too much.

"Hope so." This was Martini. "Be nice to have someone easy on the eyes around."

"Jeffrey, this isn't a dating service." This was the older man. "You'd better hope she doesn't slam that pen of hers into your groin when she comes to."

"I didn't give it back to her yet," Martini said with a laugh. I could feel him move a bit. "Can't wait to find out why she used this."

"It was all I had." I opened my eyes to see him holding my pen out to the others in the car. I snatched it out of his hand. It was still covered with slime.

"I'm more interested in how you knew where to stick it." The third man's voice. I looked around and realized Martini and I were facing the back of the car, Martini across from the older man, and I across from this one. He was built along the same lines as Martini and the older man—big, handsome, and Armani-clad. He was also bald, and his skin was the kind of black that looks almost ebony.

"All the men handsome in this agency?" I asked the older man. "Because, if so, trust me when I say I can help you recruit all the women you want."

He laughed. "I'm Mr. White."

"Right. And he's Mr. Black?" I said, indicating the man across from me.

"Great sense of humor," the black man said dryly. "No, I'm Paul Gower. But thanks for the compliment. His name really is White. Richard White. Don't call him Dick."

"Unless he acts like one?"

"Not even then," Gower said with a small smile. "Now, you going to impress us with your manner and tell us your name?"

"No. I'm sure you all went through my purse while I was out." I looked up at Martini who contrived to look innocent. "Right. So, you know who I am."

"Actually, you woke up before I could find your wallet," Martini admitted. "I don't know how you found that pen; your purse is like a black hole."

"I prefer to think of it as Mary Poppins' carpetbag. Okay, okay," I added to the looks I was getting from both White and Gower. "I'm Katherine Katt, k-a-t-t, and yes, before you ask the obvious, my parents call me Kitty."

"I like it," Martini said with a sly grin.

"What do your friends call you?" Gower asked.

I gave him a long look. "You're not my friends yet."

White chuckled. "Fair enough, Miss Katt."

"Oh, let's call her Miss Kitty," Martini pleaded.

I wiped the slime on my pen off on his pants. "I'm not gracing that with a response."

"My God, I think I'm in love," Martini said with a laugh. But he didn't take his arm from around my shoulders.

"I'll bet you say that to every girl who stabs some weirdo with a pen." I tried not to think about the fact I liked his arm around me. There was more going on, and I had to stop acting as though we were at a singles bar.

"Only the sexy ones," Martini replied, pretty much wrecking my not-a-singles-bar mind-set.

"I'd have gone with beautiful," Gower said. "Women tend to prefer that compliment."

"But we want her because she's smart and resourceful," White said, and I could hear something in his tone that sounded like my father's when he'd finally had enough and wanted us focused on business.

Martini and Gower heard it too, because they stopped bantering and both looked more serious. Me, I didn't care about White's wants. Yet.

My phone beeped and I pulled it out. I'd missed a lot of calls. "Thanks for not letting me know people were trying to reach me."

"We could hear the phone," Martini said. "Just couldn't find it in that thing."

I took a look at my missed calls list. "Mr. Brill, Caroline, Chuckie, Janet. Normally I'm not so popular at this time of day."

"Maybe they're lonely," Martini said. "Who's Chuckie?"

"A friend, why?" One of my oldest friends, actually, but I didn't see any reason to share this with Martini.

"He the one who has the 'My Best Friend' ringtone?"

"Yes, what of it?"

"Just like to identify the competition early," Martini said with a grin.

"There is no competition, because we are not an item." There, I was back on firm, feminist footing. Besides, Chuckie and I weren't dating, and one fling a few years ago didn't count. "However, I really need to call these people back, particularly my boss, who I'm sure would like to know why I'm not back at the office yet."

White shook his head. "No, we can't allow that, I'm sorry."

My phone rang again. It was Sheila. Martini snatched the phone from me before I could answer. "Look, that's one of my other oldest friends. I need to answer." The phone stopped ringing, but started right up again.

Martini looked at it. "Amy. Don't tell me, let me guess . . . another old friend?"

"Yeah. Sheila and Amy are my best girlfriends, Chuckie's my best guy friend. I've known them since ninth grade. I really think I need to answer my damn phone." It stopped ringing again and I snatched it out of Martini's hand.

"So, why does only this Chuckie guy get the special ringtone?" Martini asked.

"I'm not gracing that question with a response." I looked at my phone. Text messages were pouring in.

"I have to insist that you not contact anyone yet," White said, before I could type a response of any kind. "I assure you, we'll let you return calls in a short while."

I had the feeling White would suggest that Martini crush my phone in his hand if I argued, and Martini looked strong enough to do it. I gave up and shoved my phone back into my purse. "So, what

this actually all about? I mean, I don't think that was a movie set, so how did that man sprout wings?

White sighed. "I'll tell you about it when we get to headquarters."

"Just where is headquarters? As I mentioned and my missed-call log shows, I'm supposed to be back at work."

"If you join us, you won't be going back there anyway," White said.

"Great health and dental," Martini offered. "Mental health benefits are the best going."

"What about vacation?" I asked as sarcastically as possible.

"I was thinking Cabo, maybe Hawaii. You must look great in a bathing suit, even if you do have a sunburn," Martini replied without missing a beat. "I'll make sure to put sunscreen all over you, though, I promise."

White gave another sigh, of defeat this time. "We'll explain it to you as soon as we can pry you away from Jeffrey here."

"Not gonna happen," Martini said cheerfully. "She's looking, I'm looking, no rules about intercompany relationships, so get used to us as a couple."

"Geez, you sure are confident I'm going to throw myself at you." I wondered if this really was his usual way with women, or if he was going to turn out to be some insanely desperate, smothering, clingy man who proposed on the first date and then stalked his exes after they ran screaming into the street to escape him.

"Nope. You just think we're all hot, and I know how to stake a claim early." Martini nodded to Gower. "Make sure you spread it around—she's mine."

Gower shook his head. "He'll propose on the first date, but don't let it panic you. He's not mentally unstable as he seems, as unflattering as that last comment might be taken by you. Jeff here just knows what he wants quicker than most of us."

"Great." I looked back over to White, who seemed both amused and frustrated. "Where, exactly, are these headquarters? I'm asking because I live around here, and I know the fastest routes to the airport at any given time, and we are clearly heading to the airport."

White smiled. "You are just what I've been hoping for."



CHAPTER 3

IT TURNED OUT HEADQUARTERS was in New Mexico, of all places. Several miles outside Roswell, New Mexico, to be exact.

It was a short plane flight from Saguaro International. Of course, they had a private jet, gray and mostly unmarked. The limo driver was also the pilot, and he fit the mold, though like whoever had my car, he was smaller than Martini.

During the flight I made several *Men in Black* jokes that weren't met with a great deal of real even forced laughter, and Martini continued to use his considerable charm to make me unsure whether I should start picking out china patterns or consider plastic surgery in addition to going into my own version of the witness protection program in order to make sure he'd never be able to track me.

On the plane I got a chance to take a look at myself, and I figured Martini was just playing around because I was a disaster. Barring this group having the best dry cleaners in the world on staff, my suit was ruined. My hair was a mess, and my face was dirty. My shoes and purse were about all that had survived relatively unscathed. I decided not to care and felt I could maybe read the Feminist Manifesto again without total shame.

Against all commercial air flight rules, I was allowed to send text messages to those who had called or sent texts to me, mostly because the list kept on growing and Martini wouldn't let me actually speak to anyone. He also insisted on reading my texts over my shoulder, which he said was for security reasons but seemed more so he could lean over me and breathe in my ear.

Everyone other than Chuckie seemed to take "I'm okay but with the police and don't know when I'll be free" in stride. It didn't surprise me that his response was to let him know immediately if I was actually in trouble. He'd been given the nickname Conspiracy Chuck in high school, and, much as I hated to admit it, it was apt. Of course, all things considered, this seemed conspiratorial in some way, so maybe Chuckie wasn't that far off.

The trip from the lonely airstrip where we landed to our destination was fast, made in a large, gray SUV. I made a *Men in Gray* joke that also fell flat. Apparently these guys were not fans of humorous science fiction.

We reached what I assumed was headquarters, possibly the most unexciting building I'd seen in a long time. Corrugated steel, which I figured made the place like an oven inside, painted in good old Navaho White, the most boring of paint choices. It was trimmed in taupe. Nothing could have said "industrial boredom" better.

"Wow. If a building's importance is directly proportional to how dull, dingy, and unassuming it looks, you guys must work for the most important agency in the world."

"We do," White said quietly as he opened the thick metal door marked "Employees."

He ushered me inside, and I was treated to a spectacle of—not very much. Boxes and crates of all different sizes, mostly. It was a warehouse, and I had guessed the interior temperatures correctly.

"Color me totally unimpressed. What is this, prank week at the mental institution? Or is this the

Armani outlet, and you're just letting me in on some super deals early?"

"She can tell the designer," Martini said under his breath. "Amazing."

"Focus, man, focus," Gower said in the same tone. "Pull it damn together, Jeff. You're freaking her out. And me, too."

"I think she likes it," Martini replied with a grin.

"So, the real thing's underground, right?" I asked White, doing my best to ignore the other two for right now. "Or are you going to push a button and then everything will flip around and become a lot more impressive?"

"Neither," White answered. He went over to one of the crates, nodded to Gower and Martini, and the two of them pried the lid off. "Take a look," White said. It was an order, not a suggestion.

I decided I was dead if they wanted to kill me anyway, so it wasn't as though giving them the opportunity to push me into a big box was being more foolhardy than anything else I'd done all day. I went to the box and looked in.

"Oh." I wasn't screaming, and I was really proud of myself. Martini moved next to me, and I knew without asking that he was ready to catch me if I fainted again. I found this comforting because what I was looking at wasn't comforting at all.

It was a man, dead, as far as I could tell. At least, I hoped so. He had long, sharp claws where his fingers and toes should have been, and his teeth were long and jagged and looked razor sharp. His expression was a contortion of fury and hatred.

"He looks like the man I killed. Right before I killed him, I mean."

"They all look like that," Martini said quietly. "The faces are different, some men, some women, but they all end up looking at humans like this."

"What are they? And don't say mutants," I added.

"Superbeings is what we call them," White replied. "It's not a perfect description but it's good enough."

"How?"

"Roswell's history is somewhat true," White said. "In that aliens did crash-land here in the late nineteen-forties. However, when we opened the ship, the aliens were all dead. Our scientists studied them, of course, but they didn't find anything of much interest. Different body structures, but they were more like humans than not. There were what we took to be books with them, and those were in a language so different from ours that it took decades to decipher."

"It took a supercomputer," Gower interjected. "No one made any decent strides until the eighties."

"What did the books say?" I asked, wanting to stop looking at the dead superbeing in front of me but not being able to. This creature would never protect the weak and helpless, you could see it in every part of him.

"Turned out the aliens were on a mission of mercy," White said. "They weren't the only ones sent out, just the only ones sent to Earth." He let that one sink in for a bit before he continued. "The planet had been invaded by a parasitic race. They'd learned how to fight against the parasites, but they knew this would only make other planets targets. So they sent emissaries out to warn the other populated planets of the threat."

"What do the parasites do?"

"Guess," Martini said softly.

When White didn't counter that, I gave what I was in some way hoping was the wrong answer. "The parasite attaches to someone and alters him or her into a superbeing, capable of great destruction. They're attracted to rage and fear, or whatever pheromones are given off from those emotions, and

that's how they pick their new hosts."

"I say it again, she's mine," Martini said.

"And," Gower added, "because the parasite amps up everything, the emotions are enhanced to the point where the host isn't able to think rationally."

"Under most circumstances," White corrected. "There have been some who were able to control it."

"Good guys?" I managed to pull my gaze away from the clawed beast in the box.

White shook his head. "There are no good ones, not that we've ever run across. There have just been some who have been able to control their reactions to the parasite and successfully survive. Until we find and stop them."

"How does anyone survive being like . . . that?" I pointed to the thing in the box.

"Those few who can control the parasite in some way are able to revert to human form. We aren't sure if they're aware of the parasite or not." White looked sad for a moment.

This struck me as odd. "Why not?" No one answered but they all looked uncomfortable and a little embarrassed. "So, you aren't sure because you've never caught any of them, right?"

"No," Gower said. "We've caught them. But only in their superbeing form."

"No," Martini corrected. "We've killed them in their superbeing forms."

"You've got this monster in a box. Why not box up these other ones?"

"They're a lot harder to kill, the in-control ones," Martini added. "Hard to follow them back to the lair or whatever when you're dead or injured. And so far we've only been able to stop them by destroying them. Not a lot of pieces left kind of destruction."

"The longer a superbeing can remain in control, the stronger it grows," Gower added. "We have a few we know of that have survived for years. They stay dormant, in whatever their human form is until something triggers them. We haven't been able to determine who they are in human form." He looked just a little uncomfortable—I had a feeling he wasn't telling me everything. However, I wasn't in a position to push it.

"Nice. How long have they been around?"

"The first ones showed up right about the time we'd made a little headway in the translations," White said. "So, call it the late sixties, early seventies. We'd gotten enough to know the aliens were warning us about something, so when the first superbeings appeared, it wasn't a complete shock."

I thought about it. "They showed up in Vietnam, didn't they? The rage from both sides would have drawn them, right?"

"Oh, yes," White said quietly. "The unrest that war caused undoubtedly drew the parasites here. But both sides were able to destroy them. The superbeings become somewhat invulnerable, but when you're using machine guns and tanks, you can destroy them nine times out of ten."

"What if you kill the human part but not the parasite part?"

"You can't kill the host unless the parasite wants it dead. The parasites can move, but it's iffy. It's not just the strong emotions—there has to be some connection between parasite and host for the pairing to take."

"If you hadn't killed it first try, it might have moved to you," Martini offered.

"Thanks a lot. So, I'm being recruited because I'm homicidal maniac material?"

"No," he said with a touch of impatience. "They like strong people, but not just physically strong. They like bravery, intelligence, compassion."

"They're looking for a love connection?" I was back to hoping I'd wake up soon.

"In a way," Martini said with a shrug. "They want to live, they have to live with the host, why not have it be someone they like?"

“If they like all that, why do they turn their hosts into these . . . horrible things?”

“They aren’t horrible things to *them*,” Gower answered.

I thought about it again. “They don’t belong here, so what they adapt their hosts to don’t belong here, either. On the right world, they’d be a benefit. But on the wrong ones, they’re a plague.”

“Yes,” White said. “But from what the aliens’ books told us, the right world for these parasites died when its sun went supernova. Instead of destroying the parasites, it sent them into the far reaches of space, searching for hosts so they could fully live again.”

“It would be sad if they weren’t turning humans into horrifying, murderous creatures.” I shook myself. “But they are. So, what’s in the rest of the boxes? More of them?”

“Yep,” Martini said. “Your little friend’ll be here soon. Just have to preserve, box, and ship him over.”

“In my car?”

“Hardly. But don’t worry, I’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

“I feel so lucky. Why save them all, especially if they’re not leading you to the scarier ones?” I directed this question to White.

“We need the proof. We also have scientists who do tests on the bodies, to see if we can spot similarities so we can predict the people more likely to be potential hosts.”

“You do all this here?” I looked around. “I don’t buy that for a minute.”

“No,” White said with a chuckle. “This is just the first stop.”

Something wasn’t adding up right, many things, really, but I decided not to argue or point out my concerns yet. “Show me more of them.”

As we went around the room on my personal horror tour, more agents arrived, two of whom were carting in a new box. Extra large. One of the agents was the guy who’d taken my car keys. The other with him was great looking, just like the rest of them.

It was hot and I was sweating, yet none of the bodies in the containers were decomposed or even smelly. I put my hand inside some of the boxes, with White’s permission. Just as hot in there.

A few more agents came in and out, some carting boxes with dead superbeings, some just milling about. All of them were male, and while there were standard variations in body types, facial structures, coloration and the like, all of them would be classified as handsome by the majority of the population. Lots of hunky agents were here—and none of them other than the set with me had come through the only door. I wasn’t sure how they’d gotten in, but however it was, it wasn’t via normal means.

There was nothing else in this warehouse, but I was outnumbered by a lot. Not that I thought I had a chance against White without help, let alone any of the others.

I leaned up against the large box that held my personal superbeing, crossed my arms, and gave it my best shot at not sounding scared and freaked out. “What’s really going on?”



CHAPTER 4

“**WHAT DO YOU MEAN?**” White asked in a very calm tone. But I wasn’t looking at him. I was looking at Martini and Gower, and both of them looked guilty.

“I mean that some things don’t add up.” Martini wasn’t looking at me, and I was pretty sure it was because he was trying not to give anything away.

“Like what?” White asked pleasantly.

“Like all of you, for starters.” I looked around. “You’re all too good-looking. I’ll bet when I meet some scientists, they’ll all be hunks, too. While it’s a great fantasy, there’s no way this many great-looking men would all be working in one agency, unless it’s a modeling agency.”

“That’s all? You’re worried about our looks?” White seemed amused.

“No, it’s just the start. This isn’t a headquarters, so you brought me here to show me the bodies. I guess it makes sense as an initiation ritual. But it’s too damn hot in here. On Earth we keep dead things we want to preserve very cold, not very hot. Everything in here is roasting, me included, but I’m pretty much the only one breaking a sweat. Everyone else and everything in these boxes is just fine. That’s not normal, for this world at least.”

“What else?” White still seemed calm and unconcerned. Of course, he had backup and I didn’t.

“You all seem to move too fast. You appear out of nowhere, no one tries to stop you, the cops do what you tell them without argument. That’s not normal, either. And you claimed there was nothing of interest in an alien spaceship other than some manuals. Sorry, but that doesn’t ring true no matter what. The metal, the components, everything that made the thing fly, all of that would be of huge scientific importance. NASA would have an interest, even if no other government agency did. Alien things that are more like humans than not would be hugely interesting, just as interesting as if they were nothing like us. Every single thing in that spaceship, starting with its mere existence, would be fascinating to anyone with at least a normal IQ.”

“What do you think this all means?” White asked me. He seemed interested in my answer but not worried.

“You come from Planet Hunk, sent to Earth to protect and serve. And make the ladies happy.”

Martini started to laugh, which was sort of a relief. He finally looked at me again, and I was interested to see that his expression hadn’t changed much from what I was getting used to. He looked confident and interested and intelligent, but like White, he didn’t look worried.

Gower shook his head. “You gotta give it to her, boss. She’s a smart one.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” White said.

“Well, gee, I have the time.”

White shook his head. “Not here.”

“No, *right* here. I’m tired of the game, whatever it is. You tell me what’s going on or you take me home and leave me the hell alone for the rest of my life. And that would include you,” I directed

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