

MATT FORBECK'S

BRAVE

NEW

WORLD

REVOLUTION



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**MATT FORBECK'S
BRAVE NEW WORLD:
REVOLUTION**

ALSO BY MATT FORBECK

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Matt Forbeck's Brave New World created by Matt Forbeck.



Dedicated to my wife Ann and our kids Marty, Pat, Nick, Ken, and Helen,
the real heroes in my life.

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Each and every one of them rocks, and I can only hope that this book
justifies the faith they showed in me.

12 FOR '12

This is the standard edition of a book first released as a reward for the backers of my first Kickstarter drive for [my 12 for '12 project](#), my mad plan to write a novel a month for the entirety of 2012. Together, over 260 people chipped in more than \$13,000 to successfully fund an entire trilogy of novels based on my Brave New World Roleplaying Game, a dystopian superhero setting in which superpowers have been outlawed for anyone that doesn't work for the government.

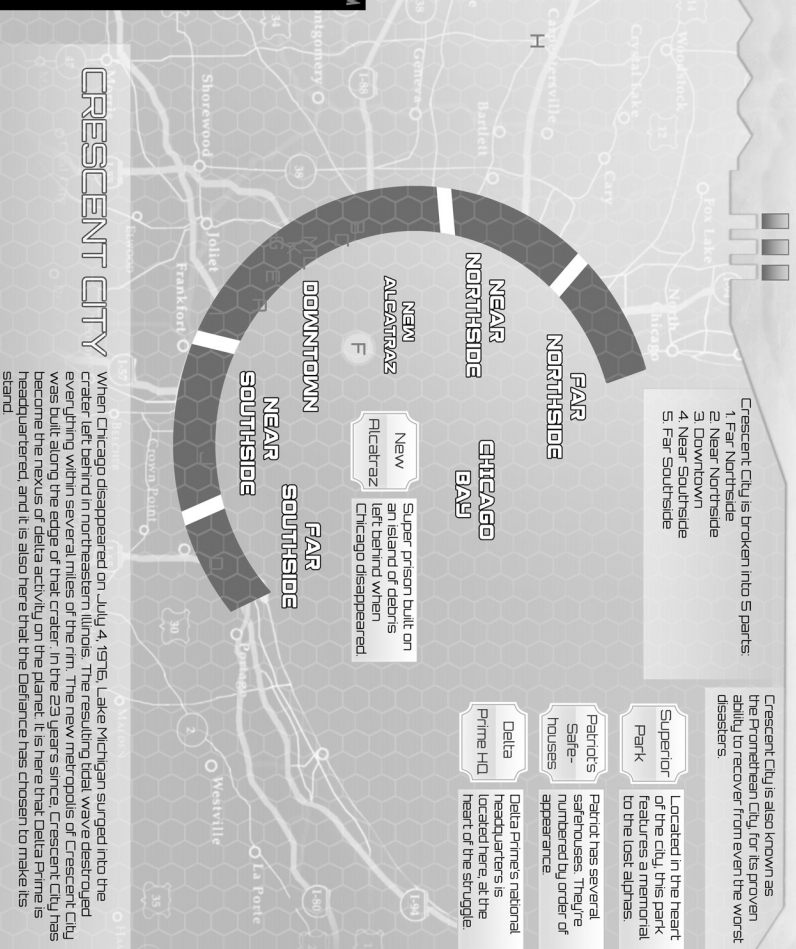
Thanks to each and every one of them for daring me to take on this incredible challenge — and for coming along with me on the wild ride it promises to be. And thank you to all my readers, whether you're backers or not. Stories have no homes without heads to house them in.



Location Key

- R Crescent City Marina
- B Delta Academy
- C Delta Prime HQ
- D Finnegan's Irish Pub
- E Just Us
- F New Alcatraz
- G New Dearborn Station
- H PRK International
- I Safehouse #1
- J Safehouse #2
- K Safehouse #3
- L Superior Park
- M Triumph Tower

BRAVE NEW WORLD



CRESCENT CITY

When Chicago disappeared on July 4, 1976, Lake Michigan surged into the crater, left behind in northeastern Illinois. The resulting tidal wave destroyed everything within several miles of the rim. The new metropolis of Crescent City was built along the edge of that crater. In the 23 years since, Crescent City has become the nexus of delta activity on the planet. It is here that Delta Prime is headquartered, and it is also here that the Defiance has chosen to make its stand.

CHAPTER ONE

JULY 4, 1976: PATRIOT

I bolted into the hollow interior of the Statue of Liberty through its feet, coming up by way of the large base beneath it, and charged up the metal frame stairs that lined its walls, my heavy boots clanging on them with every step. The composite plates of my Delta Prime armor made slipping through the narrow stairwell tricky, but that's why I'd spent so many hours training with the damn stuff on. I preferred to enter the scene of a crime in progress with a bit more subtlety, so the noise made me cringe inside, but I didn't have any good reason to try to be quiet. The terrorist waiting up there for us knew we were coming.

I felt the power building in my hands, plasma crackling between my fingers, wanting me to show it the way out. I let it grow but held it in check, readying it like a cocked pistol — if a pistol could blast apart a car. I wanted to let it loose, but there wasn't that much room inside the statue and my target hadn't shown his face yet.

Booster came pounding up the stairs behind me and nearly tripped me up. I turned and put out a hand to signal him to slow down. "I don't need your help here, Billy," I said. "You magnify my blasts in here, and I'm liable to kill all the hostages."

He held up his hands to show agreement and gave me a wild grin from under that shaggy brown mop of his. An automatic pistol wobbled in one of them. "I got your back, Cruise. No powers. Not from me."

I glanced past him to Porter, who held a gun just like his, standard issue for Delta Prime. She carried it in both hands, pointed at the floor. I never worried about her in the field, not once.

"I could pop in there and take him out, John," she said. "One shot."

I waved her off. "You'd be going in blind. Let's see what we can find out about this jackass first."

They both nodded at me, and I started climbing the stairs again, leading the way. Our footsteps echoed against the hollow insides of the copper statue. I'd been here before, as a tourist, and it had always been crammed full of patriotic gawkers like me. I'd never seen it this empty. It felt like charging through a ghost town.

"Park service did a good job of getting everyone out," Booster said, echoing my thoughts.

"Everyone but the dozen people trapped up there in the crown," Porter said.

I stopped cold, putting a hand behind me to keep Booster from running into my back. He wasn't so thoughtful for Porter, and she grumbled a quiet complaint. I sniffed at the air.

"Smell that?" I said.

Booster crinkled his nose and nodded. Porter narrowed her eyes. "Mustard gas," she said.

A gunshot rang out overhead and ricocheted around in the statue's interior. I ducked back, trying to make myself as small a target as possible. Powered up, my skin could stop a bullet, sure, but that didn't mean it wouldn't sting like hell. Besides, I didn't want to give the man up there the satisfaction of hitting me.

"Don't come any closer!" the man who'd fired the gun said. "You do, and I'll gas every damned one of these sheep to death!"

I peered up through the metal struts that braced the staircase in place, and I spotted him. Six foot tall, skinny, and a shock of dark red hair cropped close on the back and sides but left free up top, brushing over ice-blue irises. Desperation danced in those eyes, or maybe it was madness. At that moment, I don't suppose it mattered.

I pulled my open-topped mask down to hang around my neck.

The original Patriot had handed the design down to me himself, along with his name. It wasn't much more than an American flag bandana tied around my forehead and draped down over my face, but it did the job. Best of all, it didn't cover my hair, which meant I could tolerate wearing it on sweltering July days like this.

I didn't yank down my mask for comfort though, nor to get a better look at the perp. The eyeholes in the mask — one of which cut through a single white star on a blue field, while the other split a set of red and white stripes — were plenty big for that. I did it to show him I was human as anyone, even him.

"There's no way out of here." I did my level best to keep my voice solid and strong. I didn't know who we were up against or how powerful he might be, and I didn't want to find out in a fatal way. I'd only been with Delta Prime for a few years, but I'd seen enough bad guys kill people with their powers to make me cautious.

"Don't you think I know that?" The man's voice cracked as he shouted down at us. "Don't you think I planned it that way?"

I shrugged, even though I knew the man couldn't see it. He'd ducked back through the doorway that led into the observation platform inside the statue's crown.

"Just keep calm!" Booster said.

I motioned for him to cut the commentary. I was in charge of this show, and he knew it.

"What's your name, pal?" I kept my voice low and easy. I didn't want the guy any more agitated than he already was.

"Call me Renegade," he said.

Booster arched a sarcastic eyebrow at me. Porter saved me the trouble of smacking him.

"All right," I said. "Renegade. What's your plan here?"

"What do you mean?"

"What are you hoping to get out of this? You don't just walk into a national monument and grab a bunch of hostages because you're bored."

"I have gas," Renegade said.

I shot Booster a look before he could snicker.

"I mean, I produce poison gas. That's my delta power."

"And?"

"And?" I could almost hear the gears grinding in his brain. "And I want a million dollars and a fully fueled plane waiting for me at LaGuardia. And a helicopter to take me there!"

"I can take him." Porter held her voice to barely a whisper, but I still worried how well it might carry in that coppery echo chamber.

I signaled for her to hold on. In the silence, I could hear a boy whimpering up in the crown. A mother tried to hush him, but he just couldn't help himself. I had to put an end to this soon, but I didn't want to lose anyone in the process — not even this so-called Renegade.

"What's your real name?"

"Just get me my plane!" Renegade's voice shook as he spoke, and he appeared in the doorway again, his gun pointed right at us. "And my money!"

"Sure," I said. "But it's going to take some time. Even Delta Prime can't pull something like that out of petty cash."

I held my hands out, my palms open and empty. I took a step up toward him and let him train the gun on my chest. It would hurt if he fired, I knew, but better he shot me than anyone else. I could take it.

I took another step up.

"Don't come any closer!" he said.

"You don't need that gun," I said. "You could just use your gas to kill me, right? To kill us all?"

"Right!" The gun shook so hard in his hand that I worried it might go off. "Damn right!"

"Who'd you kill?" I took another step up.

"I didn't —" He wiped his nose with his sleeve. "I — how did you know about that?"

I took two steps forward this time. "It's all right. I'm sure it was an accident."

I could see his face clearly now. That wasn't snot he'd wiped from his nose but mustard gas leaking from his nostrils and one corner of

his mouth. The scent of it — even from so many feet away — made my eyes sting.

I wanted to help him out. I'd seen guys like him all too often, ones who had awakened to their delta powers before they realized it and hurt the people around them. I'd seen the tragedy play out too many times, and there wasn't a damned thing fair about it — especially for guys like Renegade. I mean, when you start exhaling poison gas without any kind of notice, it's easy to see how everything can go bad in an instant.

Once Renegade saw what he'd done, he'd probably figured that being drafted into Delta Prime was off the table. Running meant that he'd be chased for violating the Delta Registration Act, but that probably seemed like nothing compared to being brought up on murder charges. And so, in his despair, he decided to kill himself or get rich trying.

"We can help you," I said. "You just need to let these people go. Then we can sit down and figure it all out."

For a moment, I thought he'd go for it. He lowered the barrel of his gun, and he nodded at me. The madness began to drain from his eyes.

Then I felt the plasma build in my hands, hot and fast. I tried to tamp it down, snuff it out. I mostly managed it, but the air between my fingers gave off a telltale crackle.

I knew without even turning around what had happened. Whether he'd meant to or not, Booster had used his power on me, magnifying my own abilities. Under most circumstances, I wouldn't have minded that at all. He'd probably thought he'd pump up the hardness of my skin, making me bulletproof enough that any slug our hostage-taker might fire would bounce right off me. He'd just done it without warning and at the worst possible moment.

Renegade's gaze darted down to my hands, and he must have seen a faint nimbus of a fiery glow leap from them. Terrified, he snapped the gun straight up at my chest again and fired.

He unloaded three shots straight into me. Whether I wanted the assist from Booster or not, his powers did the trick. The slugs didn't

do much more than tickle me, although the impact knocked me back a few steps before I managed to grab onto a railing and catch myself.

Someone up in the statue's crown screamed as I struggled to regain my footing. I stared up at Renegade and saw him draw in a huge breath. I steeled myself for what I knew would come next: a poisonous cloud of yellowish gas that would kill every single person inside the statue, except Renegade.

That would include me, of course. I might have been able to bounce a shell off my chest at that point, but that didn't keep me from having to breathe.

I brought my fists up and pointed them at Renegade as the plasma built up in them. I knew I'd never make it — I'd never get off a good blast before the man exhaled and murdered every one of us — but I had to try.

That's when the roof of the Statue of Liberty ripped off and disappeared into the sky.

CHAPTER TWO

JULY 4, 1976: PATRIOT

I don't know if you've ever seen Superior in action, but it's like standing in the presence of God. He flies so fast it's all your eyes can do to keep up with him. Sonic booms follow him wherever he goes.

He must have decided to sneak up on Renegade by moving at sub-Mach speed. I didn't know he was there until I spotted him high in the blue sky that appeared where the top of the statue had been, and he was still a streak of red, white, and blue.

Renegade only had time to look up at Superior tossing the statue's lid into the air — a hunk of metal that had to weigh tons — and gape at him. An instant later, Superior zipped into the now open-topped observation deck and fanned away the mustard gas. Then he grabbed the man and tossed him in a high arc over his shoulder, not even bothering to look back to see where he might land.

He glanced at me then. "Everyone all right?"

"Yessir." I fought the urge to snap off a salute. I'd worked with the man for years, and I still couldn't help it.

"Good work, John."

With that, he launched himself into the air again to catch the statue's lid in the same lazy way I might snag a high-hanging pop fly. A moment later, he'd replaced Lady Liberty's crown and started to spot weld it into place with blazing red lasers from his eyes. In the distance behind him, I saw Renegade's flailing form splash down into the waters of Manhattan's Upper Bay.

Booster, Porter, and I secured the hostages and swept the observation deck for any surprises Renegade might have left behind for us, but we found nothing. We led the tourists back down to the base of the statue and out onto the grounds of Liberty Island. As we emerged into the blazing summer heat, they spontaneously sprang into applause.

Booster stuck out his chest and grinned. "Nice to be appreciated."

Porter elbowed him in the ribs and jerked her chin skyward. "That's not for us."

I looked up to see Superior lowering himself out of the sky. A sopping wet Renegade dangled from one of his fists like a puppy held by the scruff of its neck. The man was out cold.

The grateful hoots and hollers from the former hostages grew louder. Everyone else on the grounds joined in too, from the National Park rangers to the janitorial staff. Only Porter, Booster, and I kept our cool. We were part of Delta Prime, after all, just like him.

Hovering a few feet in the air, Superior acknowledged the applause with a nod, then pitched Renegade over to land in a heap at my feet. "He'll live," he said. "You have it under control here."

It wasn't a question. I glanced down at Renegade. "Yessir."

Superior touched down next to me and spoke in a voice meant only for Booster, Porter, and me. "The Devastator's launched an attack on Chicago. They need me there."

I put a hand on the sleeve of Superior's navy blue jacket. Most days, I wouldn't have dared, no matter how well I might have known him, but I couldn't help it. "Take me with you."

He shook his head. "I can handle the Devastator, and the Chicago force of Delta Prime can knock down as many Dreadnauts as he can throw at us."

I didn't let go of his arm. "Delaney's there."

Superior frowned. "All the more reason I can't let you slow me down, John."

I released him as he slipped into the air and hovered over our heads. "I'll take care of her," he said.

"I know," I said, "but—"

The only answer I got was a sonic boom as the first and greatest of our alpha-level deltas disappeared into the bright blue sky. He blazed through the air like a comet heading west. I tracked his progress until he disappeared over the horizon.

"Who's Delaney?" Booster asked.

I didn't look back at him. "My wife."

The Delta Prime support team moved in from the edges of the park grounds then. One squad took care of the hostages, checking them for damage. Another scooped up Renegade onto a stretcher, then threw a bag of black cloth over his head and cuffed him with a portable set of power dampeners that fit over his forearms like a pair of casts.

"What's she doing in Chicago?" With Renegade put away, Porter holstered her sidearm.

"I don't know." I stared at the point where Superior had disappeared. "She was in New York with me this morning."

"Must be something big." Booster shook his head at the sky. "And we're stuck here, missing it."

"It's huge," one of the Delta Prime technicians said as he finished checking Renegade's dampeners. "Chicago branch put out an all-alpha call."

Booster blew a low whistle. "That's a lot of firepower."

He wasn't kidding. Not all the alphas were as amazing as Superior. Actually, none of them were. He was in a class by himself. But even with my powers I wouldn't have wanted to try standing against any one of them, much less every one of them who'd registered with the US government.

"Can't blame 'em." The tech chuckled as he watched his teammates haul Renegade away. "Ain't every day the Devastator threatens to blow up an entire city, is it?"

CHAPTER THREE

JULY 4, 1976: SUPERIOR

As I zoomed through the sky, sonic booms I couldn't hear at that speed trailing behind me, I cursed myself for having taken the time to put an end to that hostage crisis in the Statue of Liberty. I should have just let Patriot and his team take care of it. They wouldn't have managed it as fast as me, but they would have gotten the job done.

As amazing as my alpha powers are, though, they don't allow me to be in more than one place at once. President Kennedy had called me personally to let me know about the Devastator and his demands, and that should have been enough to get me there as fast I could make it. I heard about the silliness inside Lady Liberty as I was getting ready to go, though, and I just couldn't fly off without lending a hand. Someone could have been hurt or killed, and I didn't want that on my conscience.

Because of that, I was running about fifteen minutes behind when I finally reached Chicago, and the battle against the Devastator had already started.

As I zipped into the area, deep inside the Chicago loop, I spotted Benjamin McLean and Delaney Cadre — John's wife had kept her last name — on the ropes. A pair of the Devastator's soldiers in their Dreadnaut powered armor had pinned them down and were peppering them with high-caliber rounds from their shoulder-mounted miniguns. One of the best bargainers I'd ever known, Delaney had managed to cast a shield spell to protect her and

Benjamin while he fired away at them with his assault rifle, but it wouldn't last long under an onslaught like that.

Using the momentum from my supersonic flight, I reached out with my arms and slammed into the two Dreadnauts. The impact smashed them into the ground and cracked open their armor like tin cans hit by a truck. The men inside were dead before they knew it.

Benjamin sprang to his feet as I landed next to him, and I reached down and helped Delaney up. I'd told Patriot I'd take care of her, and I was happy to make good on my promise. "Who jumped the gun?" I asked.

Ever the soldier, Benjamin kept scanning the area for incoming attacks rather than answering me. Delaney been cut across her forehead, and she wiped the blood out of her eyes before she answered. "Guess the Devastator got tired of waiting around for you. He just bellowed 'The time has come' and sent his Dreadnauts out to soften us up."

I glanced around. I'd never seen so many Dreadnauts in one place, not even when they'd assassinated Jackie Kennedy in Dallas. They clashed with Primers on every front, all around the area, letting loose with everything they had: rifles, missiles, even flamethrowers.

My Primers were giving it back to them even better though. The Dreadnauts might have been a crack team of powered-armor pilots, the best-trained mercenaries the Devastator's fortune could buy, but they weren't anything special without their suits. None of them were deltas.

On our side, bolts of plasma and arcs of electricity from our ranged-powers squad crackled into the Dreadnauts, while our bargainers worked their magic to trip up the tin-plated terrorists in every way they could. Speeders blazed circles around the enemy, hemming them in and making them easier targets for our big muscles, who reached up and plucked the jet-powered soldiers from the sky.

"He's been planning this for a while," I said. "We need to take him out fast. Where is he?"

Benjamin used his rifle to point straight up toward the top of the

Sears Tower, the tallest building in the world. "Where else would a megalomaniac make his last stand?"

I shook my head. "This just doesn't make any sense. The Devastator likes to keep a low profile. Stepping out like this to challenge us isn't like him."

Delaney nodded as she rubbed her sore neck. "You can inquire after his motivation after you kick his ass."

"Amen." I clapped Benjamin on the shoulder, kissed Delaney on the top of her head, then kicked off from the ground and zoomed to the Sears Tower's roof, straight past all one hundred and eight stories.

I slowed down as I got closer to the roof. Even with reflexes as quick as mine, I can move fast enough to get ahead of myself sometimes. As I cleared the roof's edge, I saw him there, standing between the two massive tower antennas that stabbed out of the building's top like a pair of horns rising from the building's black-clad skull.

I've seen a lot of horrible things in my time, from Nazi death camps to people turned inside out by mad science, and the sight of the Devastator still made me gasp. He looked like nothing less than a demon straight from the pits of hell. He stood taller and broader than me, every ounce of him pure muscle. Raging flames coated him from his toes all the way up to the vicious horns that curled up out of his forehead, and his eyes and mouth glowed with an unholy light that made him look like the fire that raged inside of him burned far worse than the one that enveloped his skin.

He stood in front of a spherical device the size of a small car. It glowed with an inner light that mimicked the one inside his skull. I'd never seen its like before, but that didn't mean anything to me. Some deltas had gifts that allowed them to build things too advanced for modern science. Lucky for me, they broke into pieces just as easily as anything else.

I'd been chasing after the Devastator for longer than I cared to remember, and I'd yet to catch him. He preferred to work through proxies like his Dreadnaut teams, rarely taking the field himself, and

he'd proven slipperier than a Teflon-coated bullet. He'd always managed to slip away from me before I could lay a solid blow on him.

Not this time.

"You are late!" the Devastator said in his gravelly voice that always made him sound like he was bellowing. "I told the President I'd destroy the city if you weren't here within the hour."

I wasn't in the mood for conversation. I let him have it with my laser vision, full blast. The beams splashed off the invisible sphere of a force field that surrounded both him and the glowing device next to him, which he caressed with a burning hand.

He threw back his head and laughed. "You think I spent all this time planning to destroy you and forgot about your powers?"

I dove down at him at full speed, my fists held out like hammers before me. I bounced off of the force field hard. It didn't hurt, of course — pain's a rare thing for me — but it set me back on my heels.

Or it would have if I hadn't been a quarter mile up in the air.

I tumbled about halfway back down the building before I righted myself. The Devastator's laughter rang in my ears the whole way down.

As I flew back up, I took the opportunity to save a few Primers by tearing apart the suits of the Dreadnauts giving them a hard time. I heard their evicted pilots screaming all the way down. Someone else might save them, but it wouldn't be me.

By the time I made it back up to the roof, I was furious. I glared down at the Devastator as he stood next to his machine, still laughing at me through that flaming, horned skull of his, and saw that while my charge hadn't harmed him or his force field a bit, the roof under his feet had cracked. Just because the force field protected him didn't mean that it rooted him to the spot or protected whatever was beneath him. I wondered how well it would shield him from the impact if I could knock him off the top of the tower.

I flew down to the roof of the building, just outside of the force field's range. The Devastator stopped cackling at me long enough to

say. "Now, here is a list of my demands!"

He cut himself short as I reached down and stabbed my hands through the skyscraper's roof. "What are you —?"

I felt the roof's steel frame flex between my fingers, and I grabbed it and pulled upward. The chunk of the roof the Devastators was standing on tore free of its moorings and slid toward me. That knocked him from his feet and kicked the laugh right out of him.

"Stop it!" He clung to the machine as he shouted at me. "Stop it, or I swear to you that I'll destroy the entire city!"

I glared right into his glowing eyes. "We both know you're too fond of yourself to do it."

Still struggling back to his feet, he reached out and grabbed a large steel lever that jutted from his glowing devices. "Don't you think I thought of that? You idiot! Stop it now, or I swear —!"

I didn't care to listen to the end of his rant. I could see the punchline from here. I leveraged the patch of roof in my hands up and prepared to toss it into the sky. Whatever his device might do, it wouldn't be able to hurt anyone up there.

"Damn you!" the Devastator said. "Damn you straight to hell!"

Then he pulled the lever, and everything went white.

And then it disappeared.

CHAPTER FOUR

JULY 4, 1976: PATRIOT

“What the hell just happened?” Booster said.

We were back in Delta Prime’s New York City headquarters, huddled around a massive console television and watching a live broadcast of the standoff in Chicago with the rest of the deltas sitting on the sidelines. A news helicopter had gotten up high enough to get a great shot of Superior taking on the Devastator. We’d all gasped in horror when he’d bounced off the force field, and we’d all cheered when he’d come back and started tearing apart the roof beneath the Devastator’s feet.

Then it all vanished. Everything went white for a split-second, and then the feed from the chopper went dead.

My gut sank.

“We need to get out there,” I grabbed Booster and Porter. “Let’s go.”

“Belay that,” Ragnarok, our commanding officer said from the back of the room. I’d known him since our days serving together in Delta Squadron, the US military’s delta-powered unit. We’d been friends at one point. Maybe we still were. “Our orders are to wait it out here and let the big boys battle it out for Chicago.”

“They just lost.” I pointed at the TV.

Walter Cronkite came back on the screen and reshuffled the papers on the desk. “We appear to be experiencing technical difficulties with our live feed from our Chicago news helicopter

team. Let's see if we can check in with our station WBBM out there instead."

Cronkite looked confused for a moment. "I'm being told that WBBM's broadcast antenna is on top of the Sears Tower, which may have been damaged in the battle between the Devastator and the officers of Delta Prime, including, notably, the legendary Superior. This may, in fact, be the reason that we aren't able to connect with Chicago at the moment, so there may be no further reason for alarm. We'll just have to wait and see."

I walked to the TV and turned to NBC, where John Chancellor announced the same thing. "We're trying to reestablish contact with our Chicago team and will get you live coverage of what some are already calling the Bicentennial Battle as soon as we humanly can."

A few people grumbled at me for messing with the channels, but I pointedly ignored them. Ragnarok was just as curious as I was, despite his need to maintain some illusion of control, and none of the complainers would dare to get in my way.

I had no better luck on ABC. Harry Reasoner had already turned to chatting with Barbara Walters about what might have happened. "We can only hope for the best while we fear for the worst," she said.

I shut the TV off and waved off the protests from the other deltas in the room. "What's the fastest way to get to Chicago?" I asked. No one answered.

I started for the door. Porter followed right after me. Booster went to the front of the room instead and turned the TV back on.

"Forget it, Cruise." Ragnarok stepped between me and the door. "If Superior and the rest of the alphas couldn't handle it, what do you think you can do?"

"I don't suppose we're going to find out by sitting around here on our asses all day. We're supposed to be the good guys. We should be on our way there already!"

Ragnarok put a hand on my chest to try to calm me down. I resisted the urge to snap it off at the wrist. He had fire powers, and his fingers smoked just a little where they touched my shirt.

“Cooper.” I looked into his eyes, trying to will him to understand. “Delaney’s out there, in the fight. You can’t expect me to just sit here and wait for the reporters to figure out what’s going on.”

“I can’t?” He cocked his head at me and pushed me backward. “Our orders are clear, Cruise. I know you don’t care much about it, but you have to follow the chain of command.”

“Bullshit.” I felt my fists warming up, plasma running through my veins. “The varsity team’s been knocked out. It’s time to send in the JV.”

Ragnarok scoffed at me. “You think you got what it takes to bring down the Devastator?”

“And you’re ready to give up?”

“Look.” Porter stepped between us. “Even with our fastest jet, it would take us hours to get there. Let’s just wait a few minutes to see if there’s any news before we race off.”

“You’re a teleporter,” I said.

She frowned at me. “I can only port to spots I can see — and consider me nearsighted.”

“What about with Booster’s help?” I pointed to the man still fiddling with the TV, and he did his best to try to seem invisible as every head in the room turned toward him.

Porter gave me a wry smirk. “Even then I’d be limited to hitting the horizon at best. It would take hundreds of jumps to get to Chicago.”

“So it’s not impossible.”

“No, but —”

“Yes, it is,” said Ragnarok. “It’s too dangerous, and she could only take one or two people with her anyhow. How’s that supposed to help?”

“Then let’s scramble the jet now,” I said. “If I’m wrong, we send it back to the hangar.”

“Or you take an expensive ride to Chicago to see your wife,” Ragnarok said. “At the taxpayers’ expense.”

I flushed red. “You know that’s not what this is about.”

“You and Delaney swore to me that this wouldn’t be a problem,

Cruise. You promised me you wouldn't let your marriage affect how you perform your job."

"And you let me believe you weren't a jackass."

Ragnarok's hand burst into white-hot flames. "You'd better remember just who's in charge of this division — and why they picked me over you."

"Right." I let the plasma seep out of my skin and coat my hands in writhing orange energy. "I forget. Was it your superhuman ability to drive a desk or to kiss ass?"

Brave as ever, Porter risked her life by putting a hand on each of our chests and pushing us apart. Sure, she might have been able to teleport out of harm's way as soon as the sparks between Ragnarok and me really started flying, but if she'd been too slow by even just a fraction of a second, she could have wound up scorched or dead.

"Dear God," Booster said from the front of the room. The rest of the room gasped, and I dared to turn my head to make sure they weren't just staring at their CO and his second-in-command standing on the brink of killing each other.

I'd never been so heartbroken to be wrong in my life.

The heat drained out of my hands, just like the blood from my face. On the TV, I could see a Chicago reporter standing on an overpass that ran over I-90. He looked like he was in shock, but he held up his microphone and kept right on talking into it anyhow.

"That's right, Walter," the man said. He had tears running down his face, but he didn't seem to realize it. "We were driving in from Rockford to cover the Bicentennial Battle. We'd just gotten past Elgin when we saw that blinding flash of light that everyone's talking about. It seemed to form a gigantic dome in the sky."

"Was it a nuclear device do you think?" Cronkite asked.

The reporter shook his head. "I've only seen films of such blasts, of course, but this didn't look like a mushroom cloud — unless the stem of the mushroom started far underground, I suppose."

The man finally stepped out of the way of the camera, and I felt my knees grow weak. I fumbled my way to a chair and sat down.

Behind the reporter, off in the distance, the highway ended. It just

stopped like it had run off the edge of a cliff. Nothing showed beyond it but a huge hole that stretched out as far as the eye could see. It was like the reporter was standing on the edge of a deep dark sea filled with nothing but air and lined with rock and dirt.

"I repeat," the reporter said. "Chicago has disappeared. It's just gone. Vanished."

I lost what he said after that because of a deafening roar that drowned out his words. At first, I thought it might be my own blood rushing through my ears, but it came from the TV.

"What the hell's going on out there?" Ragnarok said in an awestruck tone. He'd sat down next to me, and I hadn't even noticed.

We watched as a wall of water grew in that massive crater, pouring in from the rest of Lake Michigan. It must have been building momentum as it went, because by the time we saw it through the camera, the front of it had formed into a gigantic tidal wave that towered over the land in front of it.

"What's that?" The reporter pressed a finger against his earpiece, trying to hear the warning someone was yelling at him. He glared at the cameraman, confused, then turned to face the wave. He stood there for a moment and dropped his microphone as he gazed up at it. Despite that, we could still hear someone screaming. "Oh, God! Oh, God!"

Then the cameraman dropped the camera, and all we could see was the overpass's railing and the reporter's feet as he stood there transfixed. The network kept the feed going until the wave finally came crashing down on it and the reporter. The last thing we saw was him being swept away in the apocalyptic wash.

CHAPTER FIVE

JULY 1, 1999: PATRIOT

Lisa Stanski was just another kid on the run from Delta Prime. She'd just gotten her delta powers, and she didn't know what to do. Like the song says, "Nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide."

Until she ran into me.

I'd been looking for her for days. I'd finally tracked her to a tiny apartment in downtown Crescent City, the kind of place you lived in when you were out on your own and didn't own a damned thing to put in it. Compared to the places I'd been shacking up in the years since I'd left Delta Prime, though, it would have been a huge step up.

Delaney and I had dreamed of a house in the suburbs once. White picket fence. Kids playing in the yard with the dog. That had all died with her, though, almost 23 years ago.

If I'd been able to find Lisa, though, it was a good bet that Delta Prime would be able to discover and locate her too. Sure, I had Truth and her shadow information network of Defiant deltas and their sympathizers on my side, but that often didn't stack up well against the full force of Delta Prime backed up by the entire US government's intelligence machine.

That meant I couldn't risk trying to reach her at her apartment or at her job. I had to find her someplace in between.

Unfortunately, that took time, which was something I didn't have much of. I found that out the hard way when I saw a pair of Delta

Prime officers in uniform single Lisa out of the crowd and pull her aside as she got off the El at New Dearborn Station. She'd just been coming home from class, not paying much attention to the people around her, and they surprised her good.

Smart girl that she was, she panicked and ran.

Running from the Primers wouldn't normally have done her much good, but I was ready to help by then. I figured out which way she'd probably head — toward her home, of course — and arranged to cut her off.

She ducked into an alley to hide for a moment, then thought she heard someone coming after her. She sprinted down the graffiti-coated alley while glancing back over her shoulder, and she wasn't looking when she ran straight into me.

I tried to catch her, but she bounced straight back off my chest and landed on her rump. I reached down to help her up, and she screamed.

I can't say I blame her. After all, I've been on the run for years now, and Delta Prime regularly lists me as public enemy number one. And I was wearing the mask, like I usually do when I'm on the job — out of habit more than anything else.

Okay, that's not entirely true. The fact is my mask is better than any photo ID. People see me in the mask, and they know who I am. No one else would be crazy enough to wear it outside of a costume party, if only for fear that the Primers might mistakenly bring them in.

So Lisa screamed at the mask. I put a hand over her mouth to muffle the noise and said, "It's okay, kid. Trust me. I'm with the Defiance."

A week ago, that might not have been enough to calm her down, but she must have suspected that she might be a delta by then. The fact that I was with the only organized delta resistance in the nation must have crossed her mind and shut her up.

"But you're —"

"No buts. If you want to get away from those Primers chasing you, I'm your only hope." I stuck out my hand again. This time she

took it and let me help her to her feet.

“Here. You’ll need this.” I handed her a business card with the address for Truth’s website on it. The Primers try to shut it down all the time, but Truth’s a wizard with that Internet stuff. They destroy it in one place, and she has it back up someplace else within the hour.

I pulled my mask down around my neck. Hanging there, covered by the collar of my overcoat, it didn’t look like much more than a regular bandana. Or so I hoped.

I led her to the other end of the alley. “Now, keep your mouth shut and follow me. Keep your head down. If you’re lucky, you might still make it home in one piece.”

She chased after me up the street, heading away from the train station, docile and trusting in the way that only someone who’s terrified could. She knew she didn’t have a choice. As bad as siding with me might have been, it had to be better than being captured and brought in for violating the Delta Registration Act, right?

She probably thought that right up until I turned around and spotted the one-man helicopter whipping up the street behind us. I’d heard it coming, but I’d hoped it had been a traffic reporter. No such luck.

I grabbed Lisa and faced the chopper, putting my body between it and her. I recognized it immediately. It was assigned to Eddie Hamilton, a Primer whose codename was Charge. I knew him well.

Hell, I’d been the one who found him, back when I was still a Primer. And I knew there was only one way to deal with him. He’d already started spinning up the chopper’s mini-guns. If I didn’t move fast, both Lisa and I were dead.

I let the plasma build up in my hands, feeling the orange energy burn there until it felt like it might fuse my fingers together. I pushed it as hard as I could, bringing it to a head as fast as I could. Then I pointed both fists straight ahead of me and right up at Eddie.

I let loose with that double-barreled blast and caught the machine right in its belly, tearing open its fuel tank. The impact from the blast sent it into an uncontrolled spin, and it spiraled backward until it

caught its tail on the front of the tower overlooking the train station. Every bit of ordnance on the thing blew up at once, knocking over the tower and sending the chopper's carapace tumbling to the ground inside a deadly hail of bricks.

"Oh, my God!" Lisa said. "You killed him!"

I watched the wreckage burn for a long moment before I spotted something — *someone* — moving inside it. Eddie pushed the crushed door off the side of the chopper's carapace then and staggered out of the wreck, his Delta Prime uniform smoking from the heat.

I figured Lisa might have been smart enough to hightail it before that, but maybe she felt like it had to be safer near me. Maybe I should have told her wrong she was about that first thing, but I corrected that error now. "Get out of here, kid," I said to her. "Run!"

She finally got the idea and sprinted up the street, away from New Dearborn Station, away from Eddie, and away from me. I turned back to Eddie, ready to finish the fight, but he was faster than I remembered. He caught me in twin arcs of electricity arcing out of his hands.

The charge hit me like a super-taser. Every muscle in my body tensed up at once, and it knocked me to my knees. It hurt so much I thought my eyes might start to bleed.

"Forget it, old man!" Eddie cackled over me, his fists still crackling with arcing bolts of electricity. "You're out of your league!"

He'd made a terrible mistake, though, by giving me a chance to catch my breath. "I thought I taught you better than that, Eddie." I felt the plasma build in my fists again. "Never count a man down until he's out!"

I didn't wait for the plasma's pressure to build into a blast. I just hit him with my energy-boosted fist as hard as I could. I hadn't had a chance to cut loose with a punch like that in a long time. It felt good.

Scratch that. It felt *great*.

Eddie went flying backward and smashed into an SUV on the other side of the street. The impact totaled the vehicle and buried

him inside of it. For a moment, I thought I'd killed him. I didn't want him to catch us, but that didn't mean I wanted him dead instead.

"Dear God! Eddie!" I sprinted over to the car and hauled him out of the wreckage by the front of his uniform's shirt. He was battered and bleeding but still breathing. He grinned up at me through a broken-toothed smile.

I couldn't see what he could be happy about. He was still so stunned he could barely move, but he seemed to think he had the upper hand. He gazed up at me with glassy eyes and said, "You've gone soft, old man. I'll write that on your tombstone. Time's up, Patriot!"

I glared down at him, unsure of what he meant. He seemed pretty damn cocky for someone I'd just beaten senseless. "What are you talking —?"

I heard the tank coming up behind me then. I let Eddie down and spun around to see it bearing down on me fast. Alone, I might have been able to take it, or at least avoid it, but it had arrived complete with a full squad of angry Delta Primers ready for action.

I hadn't been a part of Delta Prime for years, ever since I went AWOL and walked right out that dirty little club. I only recognized a few of them coming at me, but I knew right away I was in a fatal amount of trouble.

I'd often thought that I'd be able to come up with some fantastic and memorable last words when the time for them came around, but none sprang to mind. Okay, there was one.

"Damn."

CHAPTER SIX

JULY 1, 1999: LISA

I'd already had the worst week of my admittedly young life, and I have to say it sucked hard but was only getting worse. First I crashed my car — totaled it — and then these Delta Prime guys tried to arrest me just because I'm stuck taking the damned train. And to top it all off, the most notorious delta criminal in the nation not only tries to help me out of that jam but shoots down a helicopter right before my eyes!

And God help me, I was happy to see him do it. I've heard stories of what happens to people who get taken away by Delta Prime. I know they're supposed to be there to protect us, and I appreciate that, but I don't want to just disappear like Jessica Hernandez did in high school.

Honestly, I don't know what happened to her for sure, but the story was that her family's house burned down, and she was the only survivor. The Primers showed up at the hospital and took her away, and no one from my high school ever heard from her again.

Well, I did hear later that maybe she'd been drafted into Delta Squadron, but I think that was just a guess. It's hard to know who to trust these days. Any days, really.

I can't believe it was Patriot that came to save me from them — and that I was happy to see him! After I stopped screaming, I mean. That was just the shock talking — um, screeching.

When he told me to run, I sprinted away. I didn't need any more

excuse than seeing that Primer crawl out of that burning helicopter. Are these people even human? Who can survive something like that?

I started to head for home, but the thought that there might be a pack of Primers waiting there for me stopped me cold. I ducked into a Seven Eleven and wandered through the aisles for a minute instead. I just needed to catch my breath. I heard sirens getting closer outside, and I made sure to stay away from the windows, just in case.

I pretended to have a hard time choosing an energy drink for a while — until the sirens went past — then took a deep breath and headed for the door. I didn't get halfway there before this curly-haired guy in a dark leather jacket stepped in my way. He was handsome in a dangerous way, with these dark, intense eyes, but I didn't want to stop to chat, and I tried to push past him.

He put a hand on my arm to stop me. "Don't," he said, his voice soft and low. "Give it another minute."

I pulled back from him and gaped at him. He didn't look me in the eye. I turned and headed for the door.

Before I got halfway down the aisle, another guy stepped in my path. He was shorter than the first guy, but cute in his own way. He had broad shoulders, sandy hair, and hazel eyes that glinted at me, and he wore a plaid shirt over dirty blue jeans. He gave me what I'm sure he thought was a winning smile, but given the situation it just creeped me out.

"I don't know you." I glanced back and saw the first guy still behind me. "Either of you."

"We don't like this any more than you do," the grungy guy said. "Less even. But Patriot thinks you're something special."

That stopped my heart. "Are you here to help me too?"

The guy in the leather jacket came up behind me and shook his head, still pretending he wasn't paying attention to me. "You're too hot right now. Radioactive."

I grabbed his arm this time and forced him to look at me. The man behind the counter glanced over at us and then went back to

watching the news on his little TV. It showed a reporter — Heather Yamata, I think — talking into a microphone as that Primer's helicopter burned in the background.

"You can't just leave me here," I said to guy in the leather jacket.

"Can't we?" He yanked his arm away and glared at me. "We're not risking our asses for you just so we can get thrown into the same cell with Patriot."

I shivered at that. "They caught him."

The grungy guy snorted at me. "What do you think all those sirens are for?"

I gave him a helpless shrug. "That helicopter pilot?"

He shook his head. "He's going to be fine. Patriot, though?" He glanced back at the TV and then pointed straight at it.

The reporter moved to the side for a moment so the cameraman could zoom in through the spot where she'd been. There, near the still-burning wreckage of the helicopter Patriot had shot down, I saw a squad of Delta Primers hauling Patriot away. He wore a huge pair of manacles that covered him from his elbows to his fists. He had blood and bruises on his face, and he looked tired — weary even.

"He looks old," I said. I could barely stomach the idea that he'd gotten hurt like that while trying to help me.

"No." The guy in the leather jacket didn't bother to keep the bitterness from his voice. "He looks beaten."

Patriot turned toward the camera then and glared at me straight through it. It felt like he could see right through the camera's lens to where I stood in the store, impossible as that might seem. I knew then that this man would never be beaten. Of course, that didn't mean he couldn't be killed.

The grungy guy stuffed a flyer in my hand. It was for a nightclub called Just Us, downtown on the corner of South Ninth Street and Tenth Crescent. "If you make it through the day, meet us there tonight. About ten o'clock."

I stared at them both. "And what am I supposed to do until then?"

The guy in the leather jacket smirked at me in a way that made me

want to hit him. "If I were you? Hide."

He walked past me then so that he and the grungy guy could leave, but I grabbed him by the sleeve. He looked down at my fingers, but I refused to let go.

"I'm not good at that kind of thing," I said. "I don't know how."

He shrugged off my hand with an ease that told me how strong he must be under that jacket. The grungy guy stepped forward then, looked me square in the face, and spoke in a low voice.

"Don't use your credit cards, your El pass, or anything else with a magnetic strip on it. If you have a cell phone, toss it away. If you need to pay for anything, use cash. And stay off the streets as much as you can. If you have to go out, keep your head down, and don't look up at any traffic cameras if you can help it."

I nodded all the way through his list and tried to make mental notes as I went. "And if I can't help it? If someone finds me and comes after me?"

"Run. And try not to lead them to us."

"Who are you?" I tried not to sound like I was desperate, like I was just trying to come up with things to chat about to keep them there as long as possible. I don't think I fooled either one of them for a second.

The guy in the leather jacket shook his head and frowned. "You don't get that. Not yet."

With that, they turned and left. I watched them walk down the street and disappear into an alley. I thought about following them, but I knew they could outrun me, and I didn't want the attention.

I looked down at the flyer in my hand. I'd never felt so alone in my life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JULY 1, 1999: LISA

I don't know how I made it to ten o'clock, but I did. I kept my head down and walked from the Seven Eleven to the only place I knew where I'd always been able to get lost: the Crescent City Library.

The building doesn't have the gravitas or history of a place like the New York City Library, but it does all right. There's nothing all that old in Crescent City, after all. It hasn't been that long since it was built on the rim of the crater left behind when Chicago was destroyed.

Okay, it's been twenty-three years. To me, that's literally a lifetime, but in architectural terms, it's the blink of an eye. I grew up with the library. My parents took me there the day it opened, and I can't tell you how many times I've been back there since.

I used to play hide-and-seek with my little brother Larry in the stacks there while my mom did research for one paper or another. We had such a great time, and he almost never could find me. I never guessed then that those skills might come in handy later in life.

I didn't have much cash on me, and I was afraid to use the ATM. I found a payphone in the library and used my spare change to call my friend Molly Anderson from back home. Molly was going to school at the University of Michigan, and I figured the chances of the government tapping her phone were pretty much nil.

"Oh, my God, Lisa," she said. "Have you seen the news? Delta Prime captured Patriot!"

"Yes," I said. "I know."

"It supposedly happened right in Crescent City, near Dearborn Station. Isn't your apartment near there?"

"Close enough."

"Well, thank God they finally caught him. It seems like they've been after him forever. I'll bet you feel a lot safer now that he's off the street."

"Not as much as you might think."

As good as it was to hear a friendly voice, the way Molly talked about Patriot just disturbed me even more. That morning, if you'd asked me about him, I probably would have said the same kinds of things. Now, though — I still hadn't wrapped my head around just how wrong I'd been.

I spent the rest of the evening holed up deep in the stacks. I'd skipped lunch earlier in the day, though, and when dinnertime came around, my stomach started growling. I put up with it until nine o'clock, when the library closed, at which point I headed out and started walking toward the nightclub.

I didn't want to spend so much time on the streets, but I didn't trust the alleys. I knew they had plenty of cameras in the El stations too, so I ditched the idea of grabbing a train. I couldn't stand the idea of someone coming after me while I was trapped on one of those rolling tin cans with no way out.

I didn't have money for a cab, and I didn't want to ride with anyone who would pick me up hitchhiking. So I walked.

It was a beautiful night for it. On another day, under different circumstances, I might have enjoyed it. I stopped and grabbed a red hot with the works from a sidewalk cart, and I ate while I walked.

I started out on North 20th and Second Crescent which put me thirty-seven blocks from my goal. I cut away from the bay as first, walking out to Tenth Crescent. Otherwise, once I reached the heart of downtown, I'd have run the risk of getting too close to police headquarters for my comfort.

I glanced behind me often as I strolled along, although it was hard to do that and keep my head down at the same time. I ducked into a few stores too, just to see if anyone followed me in or out. I didn't see anyone coming after me, but I wasn't all that sure I'd be able to spot them if they knew what they were doing.

I got to the nightclub a few minutes early — I heard it before I saw it — and realized I wasn't dressed right for such a place. Dance music thumped out of its facade, the bass shaking the sidewalk. It was a warm night, so they'd rolled up the garage doors that normally fronted it, and I could see people in their club wear grinding and sweating to some kind of house music tunes I didn't recognize.

A large man in a blazer stood by the door under a neon sign that read "Just Us," keeping a close eye over the line of people who stood in the roped-off section of the sidewalk, waiting to get in. It was early for a club's night, but the line already stretched halfway down the street. I stood there for a moment, staring in through the window, and wondered how I was going to get past the rope — and whether I had enough cash to afford the cover charge.

The guy from the Seven Eleven — the one still in his leather jacket — emerged from inside the club and tapped the bouncer on the shoulder. He pointed at me, and the bouncer nodded at me and waved me over. As I approached, he unhooked the velvet rope across the entrance and waved me in.

It was almost darker inside Just Us than it had been outside. From what I could see, that was probably a blessing. As we jostled our way through the place, I wondered what would happen if someone turned on the lights. Would everyone in the place scatter like cockroaches and leave behind an unholy mess?

"Anyone follow you?" The guy had to lean in close to shout into my ear so I could hear him over the music.

"I don't think so, but does that matter?"

He smiled. "Probably not."

"Call me Street," he said, sticking out his hand.

I shook it. "Lisa."

“We have a booth in the back.”

I followed him as he threaded his way across the dance floor and toward a curtained-off area along the left-hand wall. On a deep couch — almost a bed — to one side of it, a man even bigger than the bouncer out front reclined under a pile of women who leaned on different parts of him, languidly sipping neon-colored drinks from martini glasses. They had their eyes fixed on a guy who was pulling off the most amazing breakdancing I’d ever seen.

Peering at him closer, the dancer turned out to be the grungy guy from the Seven Eleven. I never would have guessed he’d have had such great moves in him. I supposed he was good at hiding who he was in lots of ways.

I didn’t have much time to appreciate his skills though. This wasn’t a date night for me. In fact, it was Thursday, and I had class at Crescent City University the next morning. I laughed at the idea that I was going to be able to make it — or that I might ever be able to go back. That was the first moment I’d allowed myself to relax enough to permit myself even such a rueful smile in hours.

As Street reached the curtain, he pulled the sheet of blue velvet back, gave me a little bow, and gestured for me to enter the alcove beyond first. I stepped in and saw there was someone waiting for us there.

The alcove was lined with cushioned benches with a couple low tables in the far corners. The man stood with his back to me until Street followed me in. Then he turned around and greeted us with a wide and easy grin.

I’d only met the man once, and just for a few minutes, but I recognized him right away. Tall and handsome with dark hair going gray at the temples, he gazed at me with his bright blue eyes and gave me something I’d never seen on him before, not in real life or on TV: an easy smile.

It was Patriot.

“Street. Miss Stanski. It’s good that you’re here.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

JULY 1, 1999: LISA

"You escaped!" I was so happy to see Patriot that I almost squealed. Then Street shouldered me aside and stepped between me and Patriot, just as I was about to throw my arms around him and thank him for saving me from going to jail.

"What the hell?" I said. I elbowed him in the ribs — which felt like steel — and stepped around to stand beside him.

"Who are you?" Street glared at Patriot as he if could knock him down with his eyes. I wondered if maybe he could. I didn't know much about him or whatever delta powers he had, after all.

Patriot gave us a wide grin. "Come on, Street. Don't tell me you don't recognize me."

Street stood firm, not giving an inch. "Patriot — the real Patriot — doesn't like this place. He'd never come here."

Patriot spread his arms wide. "True, but on a day like today, don't you think I might make an exception?"

Street shook his head. "I've never met a bigger hard-ass. And I'm pretty damn sure I've never met you."

Something twinkled in Patriot's eyes. "Oh, you might have met me lots of times and never even known it."

Street moved faster than I could see. Next thing I knew, he had Patriot's throat clasped in his hand.

"Who the hell are you?" Street said through gritted teeth.

"He's with me," a voice said as its owner stepped through the

curtain behind us.

I spun about to see a man with a tight, military haircut and dark, serious eyes standing on the threshold. He wore Delta Prime armor, and although I'd not seen many Primers outside of television, I felt like I knew him. He let the parted curtain fall into place behind him as he moved inside.

Street half turned to see who had joined us, and he said one word under his breath. "Shit."

The newcomer allowed a smile to spread across his face at that, and I recognized him with a start. "You're Edward Cooper, the leader of Delta Prime."

He nodded at me. "You can call me Ragnarok, Miss Stanski." The harshness in his tone put the lie to his polite words.

Street put a hand on my shoulder and pulled me out of a direct line between Ragnarok and Patriot. Even I'd heard about how Ragnarok had sworn to bring in Patriot, dead or alive. I didn't want to be between them either.

It turns out I wasn't.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Cooper," Patriot said. He winked at the man who'd hunted him for years and finally tracked him down here tonight. I couldn't understand at all why he would act so friendly toward the leader of Delta Prime.

And then his face melted. I supposed it morphed actually. It changed from the face of Patriot into that of someone else.

His clothes changed along with his looks. In an instant he went from looking like a battered but defiant delta to none other than George Clooney in the sharpest tuxedo I'd ever seen.

"You can't be Clooney!" The words sounded stupid to me as soon as they left my mouth. Whoever this was standing in front of me couldn't be a world-famous movie star. Right?

"Of course not, darling," he said in Clooney's suave voice. "I'm a much better actor than that."

"He's one of my top operatives." Despite that, Ragnarok couldn't tamp down his annoyance at the man's arrogance. "Call him Shift."

"That's 'Shift,' with an F." He winked at me. "That one letter

makes all the difference.”

Ragnarok ignored Shift and turned to Street. “If you come quietly, we’ll make sure that no one gets hurt.”

“Just like you did with Patriot?” I asked.

“He resisted arrest. Don’t make the same mistake.”

Street flexed his hands, cracking his knuckles. “And what makes you think we can’t just walk out of here after I take care of you two?”

Ragnarok’s hand burst into flames, and I felt like I must have jumped about a foot. He held up his burning hand, extended his index finger, and said, “One, you’re welcome to try. I don’t think you’ll like the results.

“Two, do you really think I’d come in here and corner a pair of known deltas without backup? We don’t want to hurt you. We just want to talk to Patriot’s known associates, and you both qualify.”

“Three? There is no three. One and two ought to be enough.” He extended his flaming hand in front of him, both an invitation and a threat.

“So, Mr. Reikert,” he said to Street. “Can we do this the easy way or not?”

The curtain behind Ragnarok parted again. The grungy guy who’d been breakdancing out there on the floor staggered into the room. Ragnarok held up a burning hand in front of him, but the grungy guy just stared at it as if he’d never seen anything so cool. I wanted to wave the guy off to tell him that he’d stumbled into something bad, but I was so relieved to have Ragnarok paying attention to someone else that I couldn’t manage it.

“Hey, dudes,” the grungy guy said, “I was wondering if you had anything good to drink back here. All that dancing really takes it out of me. I’m a bit parched.”

Ragnarok held up his flaming fist. “Get out.”

The grungy guy’s smile grew wider as he focused on the flickering light coming from the hand in front of him. “Dude, that’s so cool. Doesn’t that hurt?”

Ragnarok took a step toward the guy. “Not me.”

The grungy guy tripped then, and I saw his life flash before my eyes — or at least what I figured would be the blazing end of it. The fire on Ragnarok's hand went out as he braced himself to catch the guy, and then the strangest thing happened.

Street grabbed my arm and yanked me toward the door. As he did, the grungy guy leaped into the air over Ragnarok. He hung there for a moment — upside down, his feet tiptoeing across the ceiling — still holding onto Ragnarok by the shoulder pads that made up part of his Delta Prime armor.

Then the guy pushed off against the ceiling and came slamming down toward the floor behind Ragnarok. As he went, he spun into a ball and hurled Ragnarok over his shoulders, flinging him straight into Clooney.

"Holy shit." It seemed like something out of a movie, one of those wire-fu flicks my brother Larry's always trying to get me to watch with him. It couldn't be real, I thought, but then a lot of my life had turned unreal that day.

"Let's go!" Street hauled me through the curtain and back toward the dance floor. "Now!"