



CHRISTA TOMLINSON
DR. Z
BONUS MATERIAL



PREVIEW

DR. Z

Mike Zielinski has joined St. Louis's superhero team under his new secret identity as Dr. Z. He's partnered with Aiden Saliette, code name: Stardust. Determined to keep their relationship professional, Mike hides his attraction to his gorgeous partner behind a no-nonsense exterior. Until one night, in an unguarded moment between them, he reveals his secret desire.

Aiden loves being a superhero. What he doesn't love is being stuck with an uptight new partner. But he grudgingly accepts Dr. Z's help in order to stop the zealous attacker terrorizing the city. Long nights on patrol lead to shared intimacy, and Aiden realizes that behind his partner's stern façade, is a scarred, vulnerable man longing for love. Aiden is tempted to explore the powerful chemistry that sparks between them but his own relationship fears and emotional wounds hold him back.

As partners united against evil villains, Dr. Z and Stardust are an unbeatable team. But the ghosts of their pasts might be too strong for them to defeat. The super-powered lovers will have to fight to save the day, and for a chance at a love that lasts forever.

DR. Z is Book Two in a steamy superhero romance series. It has heroes in tight pants, post-battle kisses, and a triumphant Happily Ever After. Fans of comics and movies who want to see their favorite heroes kiss will love this series!

Content Tags: Urban Fantasy, Superheroes, Slow Burn, Light Kink, Fiery Smol/Gentle Tol, Battle Couple, Scarred Hero, Reluctant Partners, On Page Social Drug Use, Action Movie Style Violence, Brief Mention of Off-Page Domestic Violence,

Heat Level: High/Explicit

CHAPTER 1

"I like this bad guy. He's big, dumb and hung."

"Stardust!"

The stern voice cracked like a whip into Stardust's ear piece.

"Yeah, boss?"

"Stay on task."

"You got it, boss."

"And don't call me boss."

Stardust grinned but didn't respond as he got ready to fight. He, Frost, and Sonica had been sent to take down a group of people rampaging up and down the Delmar Loop, one of St. Louis's entertainment districts. It was a busy Thursday the first week in September, when nights were the perfect temperature to sit outside, and the street was filled with people who'd come out to have a beer and listen to music. Now, they were panicked. Screaming and running to get out of the way as five men caused indiscriminate destruction in front of the shops and restaurants.

Stardust took in the scene. Tables flipped on their sides, food and drink spilled on the sidewalk, plates shattered, and cups crushed beneath fleeing feet. Several shop windows were broken, with their displays and merchandise tossed into the street. One of the rampagers was naked, with the exception of a face mask, a pair of thick white athletic socks, and mountain climbing boots. The naked man yanked back and forth on a lamp post, which despite his efforts, wasn't coming loose from the ground. Still, he continued mindlessly yanking. Stardust shook his head in disgust at the pitiful sight.

Sonica took charge. "Frost, you get the two at the other end of the street. I'll grab the two in front of Iron Age and check inside the building to make sure there aren't more of them in there causing a ruckus."

"Got it," Frost answered.

"Guess that leaves me with Mr. Nakey," Stardust said, already looking forward to the fight.

"You both be careful," Sonica said before she teleported away to the legendary tattoo shop.

Frost took off in the opposite direction in a swirl of cold air, *whooshing* down the street on an ice slide they created with their powers.

With his partners after their targets, Stardust walked up to his own. He kept his hands loose at his sides, easy and non-threatening. The multicolored lights from the Blueberry Hill sign above the naked man reflected off his pale sweaty skin. Stardust couldn't see the guy's face thanks to the mask he wore, but he could see his blue eyes, cracked open wide and rolling in their sockets. The wild eyes were a clear sign that he'd overdosed on Croton - a drug that increased a user's physical capabilities and blocked fear receptors but caused mindless rage and massive heart attacks after prolonged use. His assumption that the guy was on Croton wasn't an official diagnosis, but anyone who stripped naked in the middle of a busy entertainment district and tried to rip a lamppost out of the ground had to be on something.

"Hey, big man!"

At the sound of Stardust's voice, the naked man stopped his attempted vandalism, and turned to face Stardust, giving him a good look at his mask. It was acid yellow, with blood-red slash marks across the mouth and eyes. The mask was clearly meant to instill fear. But seeing this guy standing there bare-assed naked, with his dick literally swinging in the wind, Stardust wasn't at all intimidated.

"I don't know how far gone you are in that Croton rage but I can help you if you let me." He stepped closer. "Don't get me wrong, I like to fight. But you probably just want to put your pants back on and go home, right?"

Naked guy threw back his head and roared before stomping toward him, fists clenched, veins bulging in his forearms.

"Guess not."

The guy was huge. He had a foot and a half in height and at least thirty pounds on Stardust. But this was one occasion where he didn't care about size. Stardust pulled his sai from their thigh holsters. He twirled them around to grip them by their handles, pommels up, blunted blades held against the inside of his forearms.

As the naked behemoth charged, Stardust sprinted forward to meet him. Just before they crashed into each other, he jumped up in the air, flipping over naked guy's head to land behind him. Spinning around, he punched out with his sai, hitting the man in the kidneys. The rampager roared with pain but didn't go down. He turned to face Stardust, swinging with massive fists. Stardust wore his own mask, but he still preferred not to get punched in the

face. He dropped down to avoid the hit, sweeping his leg out in the same motion to kick at naked guy's ankles. The man stumbled and fell in the middle of the street. But to Stardust's unpleasant surprise, the big man had speed too. He rolled and leaped back to his feet.

Although he was impressed at the move, Stardust sighed in annoyance. "You should have just stayed down, man."

The naked berserker finally spoke.

"I don't stay down."

"Oooh! A challenge." Stardust spun his sai again. "I accept."

They rushed at each other once more. This time, Stardust met him head on. Before his opponent could strike, Stardust double-punched with his sai, hitting him dead center in the solar plexus each time. When the big man doubled over in pain, struggling to catch the breath that had been knocked out of him, Stardust jumped up with a flying high knee, catching him on the chin. He caught a glimpse of those wild eyes rolling back in their sockets before the berserker crashed to the street, landing flat on his back. This time, he didn't move.

"Guess you were wrong about not staying down," Stardust mocked as he straightened from the defensive pose he'd landed in. After sliding his sai back into their holsters, he put a booted foot on the big man's shoulder, rolling him over to his front so he could restrain his hands behind his back. Once the guy was secured, Stardust turned his attention to the people who were standing nearby.

"Everything is all right, everybody." He looked toward a trio who appeared relatively calm. "Can you help right some of the tables and chairs?"

An older woman in the group snapped out of her shocked daze.

"Yes. We've got it."

She started directing those around her to help the staff put the sidewalk dining to rights. Stardust left her to it, moving on to see if anyone had been seriously hurt. Thankfully, there were only a few people with minor injuries and no one with anything major. Mostly scrapped palms and knees from falling on the sidewalk or cuts from broken glass. The rampagers hadn't seemed set on personal harm, only destruction of property.

Stardust made his way back over to Naked Guy, who was still out cold in the middle of the street. Frost walked up at the same time, leading the two rampagers they'd been tasked with subduing, both with their wrists

restrained in manacles made of ice. Neither of them struggled, but they shivered violently, teeth chattering, lips nearly blue from cold. Cold wind and icy vapor swirled around Frost as they looked down at Stardust's felled opponent.

"Should we try to dress him?"

"Pffft. *I* didn't tell him to take his pants off. That's on him. Besides, he'll get a nice orange jumpsuit to wear when he's booked at the county jail." Stardust crossed his arms over his chest, fingertips tapping his bicep. "But I suppose I should get him out of the middle of the street."

"It's what a hero should do."

Stardust cut his friend a quick side-eye. Frost didn't react, either because they were sincere, or because they were trying to get Stardust's goat. It was hard to tell with them sometimes.

Stardust rolled the man back over to his front then bent down to thump him on the forehead and wake him up. His powers didn't include super strength, so he wasn't about to drag this hefty bastard up onto the sidewalk. After a second forehead thump, the man came to yelling, cursing, and straining to get free. Unfortunately for him, the cuffs around his wrists were made to hold enhanced strength individuals, so even hopped up on Croton, he wasn't getting loose.

"Hear those sirens? That's the police coming to get you. You'd better get out of the street if you don't want them to run you over." At Stardust's warning, the man sat up, scooting backward on his naked rear end across the concrete until he reached the curb. Stardust followed to make sure he didn't try to make a run for it as the sirens grew closer.

The approaching sirens were also the cue for Stardust and his crew to get out of there. Their group didn't have any type of official working relationship with police, and could be charged with vigilantism.

Sonica popped in, dusting off her hands as if she'd just finished a tough job. "Already dropped mine off at the police station. We've done all we can do here. Let's go."

"You're right," Stardust agreed. "I'll see you two back at the firehouse."

Sonica nodded and put her hand on Frost's shoulder to teleport them both away.

Stardust jogged up the street to where he'd left his motorcycle. Throwing a leg over the sleek black machine, he started it up, the bike roaring to life

with a throaty rumble. He pulled out of the space and took off, zipping through the city streets, the air rushing over him, whipping the tail of his heavy braid of hair back and forth. The mask he wore identified him as Stardust, while hiding his true identity from everyone he passed.

As he approached his destination, he turned right and sped down a side street. Up ahead was the brick wall of a dead-end alley. Stardust headed straight for it. Just when it seemed as if he would crash, the wall rippled and he passed through without incident. The "dead end" was a mirage, a visual barrier created to hide the headquarters of the Arch City Guardians - the group of heroes who'd banded together to protect the citizens of St. Louis. As an extra precaution against unwanted visitors, if you got too close to the mirage, a sonic alarm went off. Unless you were wearing the tech that muted the alarm, you'd be hit with the extremely unpleasant sensation of what felt like several giant mosquitos buzzing at the back of your skull. The sound was too high-pitched for regular humans to realize they were hearing anything, but the uncomfortable sonic vibrations made people instinctively turn around to avoid them nonetheless.

Past the barriers, Stardust pulled into the small parking lot next to their headquarters, killed the engine and hopped off his bike. The headquarters was an old firehouse, decommissioned nearly a decade ago, and recently purchased to serve as the center for the newly created superhero team. Constructed from tan brick with white stone accents, the building was longer than it was tall. Multiple satellites and electronic towers were mounted on the roof. Thanks to Bulldozer, a member of the ACG team, the grounds were in immaculate condition, with mature greenery, and not a single crack in the driveway. The two wide fire truck doors were down, so Stardust entered through the pedestrian door.

Inside, where firetrucks were once parked, two men sat at a U-shaped trio of tables that held a multitude of computers, monitors, and other tech equipment. The younger of the two men sat directly in front of the largest computer screen in the center, the overhead lights shining on his bright blue hair, while the older was off to the side, typing onto the electronic pad he held. Frost and Sonica were already there, sitting in two of the club chairs set up in front of the command center.

"That wasn't so bad," Stardust said as he took off his mask and plopped down on one of the three remaining chairs.

Caleb spoke up first, brushing the blue strands of hair back from his forehead. "More Croton freaks. But you guys stopped them before they could do too much damage or seriously hurt anyone."

Strong gave an approving nod. "Nice work."

"Thanks."

"Blaze is going to be furious when he hears what happened. He fought so hard to keep that drug from hitting the streets."

They started discussing the drug that was steadily taking over the city. Caleb brought up a map of the city on one of the big viewing monitors to highlight areas where Croton incidents seemed to be the most widespread when an alarm went off, signaling that someone was approaching their headquarters. They all turned to look at the outside camera feed on one of Caleb's giant monitors. A dark SUV was driving down the street at a steady pace, headed straight for the barrier.

Stardust frowned in confusion. "What are they doing? Shouldn't they have turned back by now?"

"They're invited and were told to signaling continue past the auditory defense line," Strong answered.

Stardust and the others settled back into their chairs at Strong's announcement that the person approaching was expected. The conversation switched to a mundane discussion of the weather while they waited for Strong's guest to arrive. They heard the faint sound of a truck door closing, then a few seconds later, the front door opened. Stardust looked back over his shoulder to get a look at their visitor.

A Caucasian man walked in, tall, broad in the chest, thick in the thighs, biceps bulging beneath the thin material of a forest-green, long-sleeved T-shirt. He had dark brown hair cut short with a neat side part. His jawline was firm and clean-shaven, a perfect fit to his strong nose and sharp, bright green eyes. But his mouth... Stardust stared a second too long at full lips with a pronounced Cupid's bow - a spot of softness in that otherwise hard face.

"Who's the beefcake?" Stardust faux whispered.

He didn't get an answer, but when the mystery man walked up to Strong to shake hands, Stardust immediately recognized the similarities in their precise bearing and movements. This guy was military too.

"Mike, it's good to meet you in person," Strong greeted him. "Welcome to the Arch City Guardians headquarters." The older Black man turned to his team. "Everyone, this is Mike Zielinski. Former Army medic and newly relocated to St. Louis. I've invited him here to take a look at our operation. Mike, this is Caleb, our tech specialist. Sonica, Frost, and Stardust are field members. Helios is across town helping Ignite with a building fire and we have a few other heroes who aren't here right now as well."

Zielinski briefly made eye contact with each of them in turn. "Good evening," he said crisply.

Stardust ran his gaze over Zielinski during Strong's introduction. He assumed the other man was enhanced and wondered what his powers were. Maybe he was a super soldier like Lieutenant Strong. Going by his height and muscular build, that was definitely a possibility. When Zielinski made eye contact with him, Stardust pursed his lips and silently blew him a kiss. The Army man didn't react, other than a slight stiffening to his already stiff posture. The restrained reaction intrigued Stardust. Was the man shy or impossibly uptight? If Mike Zielinski was going to be sticking around, Stardust wanted to find out the answer to that question sooner rather than later.

After the brief introductions, Strong and Zielinski disappeared into Strong's office behind a closed door, and Sonica popped into their quiet room to lay down. Stardust turned to Frost. "What do you think?"

"What do I think about what?"

"About the possibility of adding a new guy to the team."

Frost shrugged. "Doesn't bother me."

"Might throw off the group dynamic. We've already got one uptight superhero."

"I'm not uptight. I'm reserved."

"If you're not uptight, then how did you know I was talking about you?"

Frost narrowed arctic blue eyes. They brought a hand up, ice and snow quickly swirling into a small ball in their palm. Once it was solid, they flung it at Stardust.

Stardust quickly twisted in his chair, snapping a leg up to kick the snowball away before it could hit him. It went flying across the room, sailed over Caleb's command center, and hit the opposite wall with a wet *splat*. Both of

them looked at the slush sliding down the wall, then at each other, before they burst out laughing.

"Hey!" Caleb snapped. "If you two damage any of my equipment, I'll put the emotional suffering of every fan disappointed in the latest Star Wars movie into your heads."

The threat was enough to have both of them straightening up in their chairs and apologizing.

"Sorry, Caleb."

"Won't happen again."

After Caleb's reprimand, they sat there and quietly speculated about the possible recruit for a few minutes before Frost pushed up from their chair.

"I have to go. I have an appointment to keep."

Caleb nodded in acknowledgement without taking his eyes off whatever he was looking at on his screen. "We should be fine for the rest of the night. Don't forget that we have an official meeting coming up soon. Everyone needs to be there."

"It's on my calendar. See you guys later."

After Frost left, Stardust cast a quick glance at Strong's closed office door.

"I think I'll stick around for a little while longer."

Caleb nodded again, his fingers now flying over one of his three keyboards. Stardust settled back in his chair to wait for the meeting to end.

* * *

When Mike walked into the headquarters for the Arch City Guardians, he took the time to look around. The building was an old firehouse the heroes had taken over for their use. It was impressive, but clearly still in the early stages of use. For one, it was too neat, missing the personal clutter of a broken-in headquarters. But the bones of a good set up were there. The technology was in place and top of the line, apparently run by the young Hispanic man with the royal blue hair. There were several club chairs facing the main command center. To the right, a vending machine, open shelving, and a locked cabinet took up the wall in the front of the room. In the back area, a small gym had been set up, with three treadmills, a couple of bikes, a multi-purpose weight machine, and a thick blue floor mat for sparring. On the loft above, there was a small kitchen area, with a long table taking up

most of what he could see of the space. And on his left were several small offices, all with their lights off and doors closed except one.

After everything Mike had learned about Strong and his history, he'd expected to be greeted by the organized, high-tech set up. He hadn't expected to walk in and come face to face with the most beautiful man he'd ever seen in his life.

Slender and elegant, the man lounged in one of the club chairs, an arm tossed across the back, one leg crossed over the other at the knee. Skin tight liquid-latex black pants with a holographic gold shimmer on the fabric clung to those long legs. Black boots embellished with thin gold chains laced up to his knees, and an intricately tooled leather holster was belted around his waist, with straps to hold a pair of gold sai buckled around his thighs. A cropped jacket made from the same material as those sinful pants opened to a smooth, bare chest. Black half-palm gloves partially covered delicate hands, and a gold face mask dangled from his fingers. The man's hair was as dark as a country night sky, confined in a long braid that reached to his narrow waist with shorter strands framing his face, while his skin was pale as moonlight. His lips were a rosy pink, the top lip slightly fuller than the bottom, making them appear as if they were just shy of pursing for a kiss. And his eyes. Set beneath gently arched brows and framed by long, thick lashes, they were a shocking intense gold, like a tiger's eyes caught in sunbeams.

He was gorgeous. The name Stardust suited him, as he appeared to be touched by ethereal starlight. Mike didn't let on that he was affected by the other man's beauty, however. He ignored the beefcake comment, greeting him politely along with everyone else.

"Good evening."

"Come into my office and we'll talk," Strong said.

Mike followed the retired superhero across the room to the one office with its lights on. Strong closed the door but left the blinds on the big window facing the main area open. The older man gestured at one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

"Have a seat." He went around to sit in his own chair once Mike sat down.

"I'm glad you came in."

This was their first time meeting face to face. They'd been put in contact through a mutual acquaintance in the military. After a couple of phone conversations, Mike had agreed to come in for an in-person discussion.

Lieutenant Strong's appearance fit what Mike had expected. Other than the slight bit of salt to his dark, low-cut hair, the lieutenant barely looked old enough to have retired. He was handsome, with an unlined, medium-brown complexion, dark eyes that were clear and direct, and a solid build with upright military posture. The former superhero turned director gave off an aura of calm competence, the type of demeanor that would have instilled unfailing loyalty among his soldiers. Mike liked him on sight.

"I'll be upfront with you, Lieutenant. I didn't have any plans to become a superhero. Receiving my powers was unplanned and unexpected. I'm still getting used to the fact that I'm an enhanced human."

"That's understandable. There are many people with powers who are at first reluctant to become a superhero. And not everyone who has special powers chooses to become a superhero. But there are many others who are unable to ignore the chance to do good with the powers they have and eventually overcome their initial reluctance."

Mike acknowledged Strong with a brief nod. He did have power. Only recently acquired, and one he hadn't asked for. Honestly, he'd give it back if he could. But according to the top secret doctors he'd seen, the change was irreversible. And since he couldn't give it back, he might as well do some good with it, as the lieutenant said. "I didn't plan for it but now that the opportunity has presented itself, I'm willing to put in the work."

Strong leaned forward in his chair, hands folded together on his desk top. "Perfect. We've only been a team for about two months but we're coming together well and doing good work. I believe you'd be an amazing asset to add. Your military training will help our missions run more smoothly out in the field. Especially on ops where our more experienced members are otherwise occupied."

"And you'd have an in-house medic."

Strong smiled. "That too."

"What about privacy?"

"Identities are as secret as you choose to have them. You'll be assigned a code name of course. Some of the team are open to the public with their alter egos. While others are private with the public but open among the group. It's completely your choice which way you go. In addition, Caleb has implemented various protocols to keep the team and those closest to us safe."

"That's good to know." It *was* good that they were protecting the members and their families, but that wasn't a concern for Mike. He didn't have anyone close enough to be concerned with keeping safe. Orphaned at nine, the Army was the only family he'd had for most of his life. Strong must have recalled that piece of information from his file because he leaned back in his chair, his voice taking on a more personal tone.

"I think it would be good for you to belong to a group again."

It was true that Mike missed the camaraderie of being part of a team after being reassigned from his original Army unit. He would like it if he could find another team to bond with. But he had a few more questions before he made his decision.

"Why did you form this group?"

"In general, because I've had a sense for some time that things are changing in St. Louis. More specifically, we had an incident two months ago, where one of the local superheroes almost lost his partner in a villain attack. I'd already decided that the heroes could serve the city more efficiently if we worked together, but that situation pushed me into getting the ball rolling."

"That makes sense," Mike agreed with a nod. "A team can always accomplish more and achieve better results than individuals working on their own."

"Exactly."

"Who is your team leader?"

"We don't have one yet. I've been watching to see who is a good fit for leadership roles, but ultimately it will be up to the team to choose. I've also been feeling things out, rotating partners to see who works best with who. We have a meeting coming up where we'll solidify roles and address a few more housekeeping items."

"And does your team have any official government sponsored backing?"

"Officially? No. Especially not in St. Louis proper, where other parties have tightened their influence on local government."

"You don't take orders from any government arm?"

"No, we do not. We serve the people directly and that will always be our mission. Does that work for you?"

Mike nodded. "Yes, that works for me."

Strong smiled. "Another reason you'll be a good fit with us."

Mike thought so too. In fact, he was eager to join up but wanted to take some time to consider all the angles before giving Strong his answer. "I'll think about all of this and get back to you."

Strong rose and extended his hand and Mike followed suit. They shook hands, concluding their meeting.

Out in the main area, the room had cleared except for Caleb typing away at one of his computers, and the elegant tiger, who was still lounging in his chair. The man barely moved at Mike's appearance, other than a slight tilting of his head towards the now open office door. Still, Mike had the feeling that the other man had been waiting for him.

"It was nice to meet you both," he said in their direction.

Caleb looked up from his computer with a distracted smile. "I hope we see you back soon."

The tiger gave him a quick two fingered salute. "Bye, Beefcake."

Again, Mike ignored the beefcake comment. "You have a nice night."

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, Mike stood in the large atrium at his new place of employment. He lingered near the back of a group of his co-workers, listening with half an ear to their conversation. The area where they congregated was beautiful, with a quietly tinkling fountain, plants with thick green leaves in colorful pots, and big arched windows looking out onto a wide, deep green lawn that led to a copse of trees. Every morning, the Marin's Outdoors employees gathered here, networking while drinking a professionally acceptable morning drink.

Marin's Outdoors main business was selling hunting and sporting gear, but they also hosted camping trips and other wilderness events. The morning social hour was a time for the people in different departments to bounce ideas off each other for joint projects that would benefit the company as a whole.

Mike held a mug of coffee, taking prolonged sips as a way to avoid actively participating in the conversation, which had shifted from work to discussing going out to an exotic dance club that evening. His tactic worked, up to a point. Eventually his co-workers turned their sights on him, pulling him directly into the conversation.

Gina, a petite Afro-Latina woman with a short, wavy haircut, and a diamond stud earring in each ear was the most excited. "Come on Zielinski you've got to join us. The Flirtatious Fox is one of the best exotic dance clubs in the Playground."

"The Fox has lots of variety so you'll definitely see someone you like," chimed in a guy from finance.

"And it's For the Troops night. Former military get in free and drinks are half-off."

The last wasn't exactly a selling point. They made good money at Marin's and he didn't need the discount. But maybe he should go. He hadn't done any socializing since moving to St. Louis and he did want camaraderie. If it turned out that he couldn't find what he was looking for with Strong's superhero team, maybe he could find it here at work instead. Several of his co-workers were also former military so they had that in

common. He looked down at the brown leather glove covering the hand that held his coffee mug. And he was willing to bet that at least some of them were hiding scars under their clothes, just as he was.

"All right. I'll meet you guys there."

Gina clapped him on the back. "Yeah! I knew you were good people."

Thanks to practice, Mike didn't flinch at the uninvited touch. He did however, subtly shift out of range to make sure he wasn't touched again. "It sounds like it'll be a good time," he said politely.

Soon after he agreed to join them, the morning coffee break ended. Mike returned to the marketing floor, greeting the administrative assistant he shared with two other employees as he passed the man's covered but organized desk on the way to his office. The office he'd been assigned was small but nice. Thick, gray carpet covered the entire floor. An L-shaped bamboo wood desk was the focal point of the room while bamboo shelves and wood fronted filing cabinets took up most of one wall. The office had three large windows with a decent view of downtown St. Louis. He hadn't brought many personal items in yet, but the framed poster-sized nature shots that had come with the office gave it somewhat of a lived-in feel.

In his current position, he handled the influencers and other signed talent contracted to represent Marin's on social media. It was decent work, but a far cry from the Army life he was used to. Adjusting to wearing slacks, a dress shirt, and a tie every day was a big change. Mike knew he was lucky to have found such a good position so soon after leaving the Army. He hadn't wanted to return to his home state of Oklahoma, so when a friend mentioned they had a contact in St. Louis who hired veterans, he'd immediately applied. Then, deciding St. Louis would be a good place to live whether or not he was offered the job, he'd made the move to the city on the river as soon as his discharge was complete.

A little over a month had passed since his move, but he still didn't feel settled in. He'd joined the Army as soon as he'd aged out of the foster care system at eighteen, and remained enlisted for ten years, so it stood to reason that he was lost without that familiar structure.

Determined not to waste office hours dwelling on his personal life, Mike turned on his computer to get started with work. His first task of the day was to review his stable of influencers' social media feeds, check to be sure there wasn't anything controversial attached to their names, and that Marin's products were featured as scheduled. He was diligent, carefully going over

a full day's worth of Instagram posts, TikTok videos, and Twitter profiles for a half-dozen influencers, looking for red flags. Thankfully, nothing negative caught his attention. There were only pictures and videos of attractive people in front of idyllic campsites, artfully splashed with mud while straddling four-wheelers, or paddling canoes across serene lakes. Even his one problem case had been on his best behavior lately. It had been nearly two weeks since he'd had to ask the popular outdoorsman to remove a post that didn't align with Marin's brand.

Once that task was finished, Mike moved on to reviewing submissions for people who wanted to collaborate with Marin's. There were a lot, the coming fall and cooler temperatures inspiring many social media personalities to think of outdoor activities and working with a company who could sponsor them. Mike worked quickly using a *Yes, No, Maybe* system. The *Yes* and *No* submissions received one of the two form emails he'd created to speed up the response process. The *Maybes* he flagged to review their platforms in more detail before making a decision.

For the rest of the morning, he tackled the remainder of his task list with the same smooth efficiency. He was so focused that he almost worked through lunch. He might have done so if his phone hadn't rung with an inter-office call, taking his attention away from his computer.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Zielinski. It's Gina. Wanted to give you the details for tonight."

Mike grabbed a pen and memo pad. "Okay, shoot."

"We're meeting at seven in the Fox's parking lot. It's toward the front of the Playground on Mars Street."

Mike jotted down the information Gina gave him before asking a question. "What's the Playground?"

"Oh, goodness. You're so new," Gina said with a friendly laugh. "The Playground is the red-light district in East St. Louis. It's on its own little island, where adults can go to get up to all sorts of fun and shenanigans. Pretty much everything is legal and it's all play all the time. That's how it got the nickname the Playground."

"I see."

Another laugh. "You'll definitely see when you get there," she teased.

She finished giving him directions, telling him which highway exit to take. Once they hung up, Mike went to the break room to get his lunch. He returned to his office, eating the contents of his protein box while he stood

at one of the large windows. It was a clear day, and the early afternoon sun glinting off a massive, amber-glass sky scraper drew his eye to the tall building and the giant gold *P* perched atop it. The building housed Pruitt, Inc., a large corporation based in the Gateway City. Spread out on the grounds surrounding the golden tower on the hill were smaller buildings for the company's manufacturing plants, distribution, and other facilities.

It was a huge campus. Taking up that much real estate in the middle of a major city must have been expensive and had more than likely displaced lots of businesses and homes. Pruitt products were everywhere in the country and the resulting jobs and corporate taxes had bumped the aging city on the river to a level of prosperity that hadn't been seen in decades. Still, even as a new resident, Mike was aware that many St. Louisans weren't completely happy with Pruitt's invasive presence in their city. He'd seen the anti-Pruitt graffiti and heard people complaining about the company while he was out and about.

Finished with his lunch, Mike turned away from the window and thoughts of giant corporations. He had a lot of work to complete before he could go off to play tonight.

* * *

Around six-thirty that evening, Mike finally walked out of Marin's. He crossed the nearly empty parking lot to his dark gray Chevy Blazer. Inside, he took off his tie, tossing it on the passenger seat before he put the vehicle in drive and headed for East St. Louis. As he drove over the Eads Bridge into Illinois, the Gateway Arch shone silver and orange in the light of the setting sun. His tires whirring on the pavement, he looked over the guardrails at the wide expanse of water below him. It was a muddy brown, gently waving in the wake of the traffic on the river.

After exiting the bridge, he drove a few miles down a dark street with squat brick buildings on either side. They were plain, missing the charm of many of the older buildings in downtown St. Louis. Then he turned a corner. He came to another bridge, this one stretching over a lake and leading to a small, man-made island. At the end of the bridge was a sphere of colorful lights, beckoning him closer. The closer he got, the brighter the lights became. A digital billboard stretched over the bridge at the mid-way point. On top of the sign in bright red neon letters read *Welcome to the*

Playground! And on the display, a woman with a white fur coat opened to reveal the red lingerie beneath swung back and forth on a wide swing. She leaped off, arms stretched forward as if she was reaching for someone to catch her. The image faded to black before she was caught. Mike drove beneath the sign just as the display began to repeat.

And then he was in the Playground. Up close, the kaleidoscope of colors separated into distinct signs, every one of them bright and determined to catch his eye. Mike drove slowly, exactly at the speed limit so that he could take in everything the red-light district had to offer - which was a lot more than strip clubs. A sign with old-fashioned flashing bulbs as a backdrop to pinup art of a woman kneeling in black stockings, coyly looking over her shoulder, offered live peep shows. Above a building with a glass front a giant green pot leaf glowed, advertising the smoke house below. A deck of cards lit to give off the effect that they were shuffling from one end of the sign to the other identified one of the many casinos he passed. There was a white stone building with tall narrow windows, all lit by a red light, with a bright purple sign proclaiming it as Madame Blyth's Bordello.

He passed a cybersex chat cafe, a tantric massage parlor, and an outdoor boxing ring sheltered by a pavilion. There was a corkscrew water slide inside a giant glass tower, and they even had go-kart racing on a neon-lit track that swirled above the island like a life-sized Hot Wheels race set.

By the time he reached his destination, Mike was nearly on visual sensory overload. But he still admired The Flirtatious Fox. The building's exterior was constructed from pristine white brick. A black and gold marquee with a digital display of exotic dancers flashed over the entrance. Above the marquee, a red and white neon fox perched, its tail flicking back and forth, the right eye blinking closed in a saucy wink.

Mike parked and got out of his SUV, making his way across black asphalt to where his co-workers had already gathered in a group on the sidewalk. He was the only one still dressed in his work clothes. If he'd gone home to change, there was a big chance he wouldn't have come back out. Removing his tie was the best he could do for a casual look.

"You made it!"

"What do you think of the Playground so far?" Gina asked.

He looked around at the dizzying display of lights and entertainment and crowds of people walking the streets. "It's a lot more than I expected."

"Come on inside," she said happily. "There's even more good stuff to see."

They herded him across the street to the Flirtatious Fox, through the gold framed doors, and into an explosion of color and sound and beautiful people. The club floor was a glossy dark red, the ceiling painted gold with flecks of glitter to make it sparkle. In the center hung a huge stained-glass globe, the light within it casting colorful reflections all around the room.

At the moment, the Fox's dancers were in the middle of a group burlesque routine. They swept through the crowd, shimmying so that tassels on breasts and chests swung in delighted patrons' faces. High kicks flashed secret places barely covered by the tiniest of thongs. Go-go dancers in boots and lace briefs dipped and twirled in gilded bird cages scattered throughout the club.

"Let's sit over there!"

Gina spoke loudly so that the group could hear her over the music and cheering crowd, pointing out a section three rows back from the stage with several empty tables and chairs grouped together. They agreed but stayed where they were until the music ended. A shower of gold confetti rained down, the audience clapping and whistling as the performers took their bows before disappearing backstage in a swirl of color and glitter. Then their group headed for the spot Gina had chosen.

As soon as they settled in, a cocktail server came over to take their drink orders. The young man was dressed according to the theme for the night in green camouflage booty shorts, combat boots, and Army green tape over his nipples in an *X*. He efficiently took their orders, clearly at ease in his bare skin. Mike remembered a time when he'd been comfortable going without a shirt in public. Those days were over for him.

Their group talked and Mike easily joined in, appreciating that they were making the effort to get to know him and include him in their social group. It wasn't long before the server returned and set Mike's glass of rum and Coke in front of him. Mike had just taken a sip when the DJ's voice boomed throughout the club.

"And now, patrons of The Flirtatious Fox. The act you've all been thirsting for. Please welcome to the stage the titillating, tantalizing, and always tempting...Glimmer!"

"Yes, we're right on time," Gina said as she excitedly straightened in her seat. "I love his performances."

Eli put his drink down on the table. "Hell, I'm straight and I love seeing this guy dance." He leaned over to look at Mike. "What about you Zielinski?"

"I'm bi."

"Then you should like this performance."

"If he's Mike's type," someone put in.

"Glimmer is everybody's type," Gina said with a laugh.

The music changed to the slow, sultry bass beat of a popular hip-hop song. The red velvet curtain parted and a slim Caucasian man stepped through it, gliding onto the stage with a long-legged stride. He was dressed in a sexy version of Air Force dress blues. A pale blue shirt tied in a knot above his navel revealed a narrow waist and hard abs, the short sleeves rolled up over lean muscled arms. Tight, dark-blue shorts rode low on his hips and cut high on his thighs. Shiny, black over-the-knee boots, and a brimmed service hat pulled down low to shield the upper half of the dancer's face completed the look.

The man started dancing, and Mike overheard a low conversation between Gina and the woman next to her.

"God, I would love to peg him."

"Does he like women?"

"In my fantasies he does."

The dancer gripped the pole and jumped up to swing around it, removing the hat and tossing it to the side. He flung his head back and a sheet of ink-black hair spilled down over his shoulders, flaring out like a silken flag as he spun. When he raised his head back up and looked out over the crowd, Mike's mouth dropped open. His heartbeat paused before it picked up speed double time.

Even from three rows back he recognized those eyes. Tiger's eyes. It was Stardust, the man he'd met yesterday at the firehouse.

CHAPTER 3

Mike was so surprised to see Stardust there in front of him, that he sat unmoving with his mouth open for several moments. It took an ear-splitting whistle of appreciation from the table next to him to jar him out of his shocked freeze. He managed to close his mouth, but he couldn't take his eyes away from the stage - away from the man on stage. Mike had thought the other man was beautiful during their first meeting but seeing him now with his creamy skin dusted with gold glitter and sultry dark makeup enhancing his golden eyes, he was in awe.

Stardust's, or Glimmer's, lithe body moved in sensuous waves, hips rolling, spine arching as if in the throes of a climax. His long-legged stride carried him to the front edge of the stage, where he ripped open his shirt. Glimmer spun around in a slow circle as he shrugged out of the mock Air Force uniform top and tossed it to the side, leaving him in nothing but his boots and those little shorts. But a heartbeat later they came off too, Glimmer's hands sliding over his hips and ass before he unzipped and shimmied out of the shorts, revealing a pair of skimpy dark-blue square cut briefs. The underwear decorated with sparkling rhinestones over his groin somehow managed to be even smaller than the miniscule shorts he'd discarded, the sheer material giving the club patrons a tantalizing peek at the bare skin beneath.

With that sheet of black hair swinging against his back, Stardust returned to the pole. He made it appear effortless to climb and spin and hold himself suspended, but the lean muscles revealed the strength required to clasp the pole and hold his entire body up with nothing but his thighs and core strength. Mike watched the raven-haired man's every move, completely enthralled with his glowing, seductive presence.

As Aiden reached the middle of his performance, he gracefully dismounted from the pole for more floor work. Now was the time to really get the club patrons riled up, teasing and flirting until the cash in their pockets ended up at his feet. Looking out over the cheering and whistling crowd, he noticed a

pair of broad shoulders a few rows back. Something about the build was familiar, but that section of the club was in shadow, preventing him from seeing the person's face. He was about to mentally shrug and move on, when the strobe lights flashed over that area, giving Aiden a quick glimpse of a hard, clean-shaven jaw, skin tanned by the sun, and a sharp haircut. It was enough for recognition to hit.

Aiden let his lips curl in a grin. The set of shoulders belonged to the beefcake from the firehouse. The poor guy looked uncomfortable, sitting with his neck stiff and back ramrod straight. But despite his apparent discomfort, his eyes were locked on the stage, following Aiden's every step. Aiden kept dancing but instead of casting suggestive glances over the patrons as he usually did during a performance, he watched Zielinski. Aiden knew the exact moment the other man realized Aiden was staring at him, because he immediately averted his gaze. Aiden chuckled to himself and looked away too, whipping around to strut back over to the pole.

He rolled his hips and dollar bills flew onto the stage before he even laid hands on the pole. He grasped the cool metal with one hand and walked around it, lifting up into a fireman's spin before transitioning into attitude. Still spinning, he brought his knees together, legs bent and toes pointed, sitting back into chair before landing lightly, feet spread wide so he could bend over and twerk. The audience roared with approval. Aiden grinned, flipping his hair back as he straightened. Gliding away from the pole to the right side of the stage, he paused for patrons to slip money in the waistband and leg holes of his sheer briefs. Each patron who slipped him singles was rewarded by Aiden standing right in front of them so they could watch him make it clap up close and personal.

When there was about a minute left of the song, Aiden gracefully ran back to the pole for one last combination of spins and flips. He grabbed onto the pole, pulling himself up near the top before flipping upside down into an inverted split. The crowd was still cheering when he rolled it to a Superman, one arm stretched forward, both legs extended in a straight line behind him. He slowly spun with the pose until he was just above the floor and then flipped over, landing in a split. Aiden eased to his back and rolled around, sweeping his hands through the money scattered across the stage and gathering it up to rub it over his near naked body. Building to the end, he threw a handful of money up in the air, letting it flutter down around

him, which of course inspired the people near the stage to throw their own cash, adding to the rainfall of dollar bills.

Aiden rose up onto his knees, and crawled to the center of the stage. Lips parted in a sultry smile, he popped up into a squat, bounced it twice with his knees coyly pressed together, then flashed his legs open wide. He stayed in that pose, snapping his right hand up for a sharp salute when the final beat of the music hit. The Flirtatious Fox exploded with applause. Aiden winked at the crowd, unabashedly reveling in the cheers and loving the admiring whistles. But like the song said, what he truly loved was the money that continued to rain down around him. It was still falling when he got up, bowed, and sauntered backstage.

"Nice job," the director said.

Aiden grabbed the bottle of water he'd left there and sucked back a huge gulp. It was hot under the stage lights. "Thanks." He waited in the wings as his money and the parts of his costume he'd discarded were collected by a member of the staff. When they brought it back and handed everything over, Aiden thanked them and gave them a tip.

In the dressing room, he tucked his cash into his boots. He made a quick stop in the bathroom to freshen up, then returned to the mirrored vanity in the dressing room to reapply his deodorant, gulp down more water, and change into another outfit. This one was a sleeveless black leotard, with red military piping, gold decorative buttons and a deep V to show off his chest. Black gloves and an officer's hat finished the look, giving it a Dom vibe, which suited him just fine.

"Gonna hit the floor and see what the crowd is like tonight," he said to the house mom.

She handed him a snack bag of mini-pretzels, which he gratefully accepted.

"It's wild out there. Have fun."

Aiden nodded. He took a few minutes to eat before he left the dressing room. The second he strolled out into the club, several regulars called out to him. Aiden waved and blew flirtatious kisses to everyone. But he didn't want to get sidetracked before he reached his goal, so he didn't stop to chat with any of his fans as he headed to the section three rows back from center stage. When he reached the group Zielinski sat with, they all perked up, looking excited and eager that he was among them. A guy in the first seat spoke up, his eyes bright and face flushed from alcohol.

"Hello, darlin'. I love your work."

"Thank you," Aiden said. He smiled at them all. "And thank you everyone for coming out tonight. How many of you were members of our armed forces?" Nearly the entire group raised their hands. Aiden cocked his hip and gave them a saucy salute. "Thank you for your service."

He strolled down the line of patrons, giving each of them a moment of his attention, asking if they were having a good time, signaling the server to come over and freshen their drinks. A woman with short, dark hair and warm brown skin stared up at him with heart eyes, so he paused and flirted with her for a moment before moving on. Finally, he made it to where Zielinski sat, looking as if he were in a game of *Duck, Duck, Goose* and desperately hoping he wouldn't be picked to be the goose. Aiden stopped and smiled down at him.

"And who is this? I don't think I've seen you in here before."

The happy drunk from the first table spoke up again.

"That's Mike. He's new in town. We had to drag him out tonight but I bet he's glad he came now," he said loudly, ending with a boisterous laugh.

Aiden put a hand on his bare chest, smiling as if he was delighted. "Ah, a newbie! Welcome to St. Louis. I should welcome you properly." He cast an expectant glance at the patrons closest to him and they reacted predictably.

"Get him a lap dance!"

Cash immediately appeared, waving from several hands, all passed down to contribute to Mike's lap dance. Aiden took the bills and slipped them into his boot. When he looked back up, a ruddy flush had appeared on Zielinski's cheeks.

"You up for a dance, soldier?"

Bright green eyes focused on his for a long moment before Zielinski gave a tight nod.

"Good," Aiden put both palms on his thighs, slowly caressing his own skin.

"Just one rule. No touching."

Zielinski gave him another one of those tight nods to show he understood.

The next song started and Aiden began to dance, rubbing his palms over his body in sensuous sweeps as he swayed his hips from side to side. He moved in close, teasingly trailing his fingers up Zielinski's thighs, feeling the firm muscle beneath the slacks. Aiden straddled the big man's lap, lowering himself until he felt the heat of those muscular thighs against his bare skin. He had a reason for instigating this lap dance and he got to it as soon as he

and Zielinski were face to face, close enough that they could speak low without the others hearing them.

"I didn't think I'd see you again so soon," he said as he lightly touched a hand to the perfectly broad chest in front of him.

"They're my co-workers," Zielinski said with a slight head tilt toward the people seated next to him. "They wanted me to come out."

Aiden kept dancing, moving on autopilot while he spoke. "But you didn't want to come." He said it as a statement not a question. Zielinski answered anyway.

"Not really."

"Strip club isn't your scene?"

"I don't have a scene. I usually stay in."

Aiden continued with his questions, and their eyes stayed locked through what had become part lap dance - part interrogation. Zielinski's voice remained even with each response, but the flush still on his face gave him away. And when Aiden braced his hands on those broad shoulders, using them as leverage so that he could tease with body rolls, he brushed against more proof that Zielinski was affected - a thick, hard length hidden by those crisp business slacks. Aiden raised a brow, and let the tiniest hint of a grin curl his lips. "Impressive." He shaped the word with his lips but didn't speak it aloud. Still, that flush deepened on Zielinski's cheeks and Aiden felt his shoulders tense beneath his palms. Aiden backed off and returned to his questions, learning what he could about this man that he might be working with soon.

"And you're looking to change that with our mutual friend?"

"Maybe. I haven't decided yet."

"What made you want to become a superhero?"

For the first time Zielinski didn't respond.

"Too much to explain during a three-minute lap dance?"

"Something like that."

"Strong wants you. He doesn't reach out to anyone unless he really wants to partner with them."

"That's good to know."

"Hmmm... But what do *you* want?"

Zielinski swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. But the song ended before he could answer.

Aiden leaned in close to whisper in the other man's ear. "Hope I see you again, soldier. Here or at the firehouse." He pulled back, speaking louder for the benefit of his friends. "Welcome to St. Louis. I'm sure you'll love it here." He swung his leg over Zielinski's lap to stand up straight, then strolled off, leaving longing glances and piercing wolf whistles in his wake.

* * *

After leaving Zielinski and his friends behind, Aiden roamed the club floor for another hour, giving two more lap dances, sitting with groups to add to their party vibe - which led to a bigger bar tab, and chatting with people who just wanted someone to talk to. At the end of his shift, he made his way back to the dressing room.

Here the music was muted, thanks to the soundproof blankets hanging on the walls. The carpet was old but free of tears or holes, and a ceiling fan whirred overhead to keep the scent of dozens of body sprays and perfumes from becoming too cloying. A stand of metal lockers, its tan factory paint covered with doodles and rude messages written in Sharpie, stickers, and pictures of patrons who were shitty tippers stood in the far corner. Mike went over and unlocked his locker to grab his backpack.

He peeled off the black body suit and boots, then stood there in his briefs to let his skin breathe for a few moments before he changed into a pair of black joggers and a crop top t-shirt. He sighed with relief when he slid his feet into the cushioned comfort of his tennis shoes. After nearly twenty years of dancing, his feet were a mess of almost constant soreness, and the boots and pleasers he wore on a near nightly basis didn't help.

Once he was dressed, he sat down at his assigned spot on the long vanity table to remove his makeup and tie his hair back. He'd just wiped the last of the glitter from his eyelids when the dressing room door opened. A moment later someone called his name.

"Hey, Glimmer, you've got company at the front door."

Aiden turned to look over his shoulder at the club staff member. "Who is it?"

"It's Steve. And he's got The Look."

At that answer, a chorus of sympathetic groans from the other dancers rolled through the room. The Look was one they all knew. It was the tell-

tale expression of a man who was ready to push for the dancer they were dating to quit the stage. Aiden shook his head, disappointed but not surprised. "Right on schedule," he muttered to himself. "Thanks. I'll be right out."

He quickly braided his hair, snapping an elastic band around the end of the braid. Then, he shrugged into a light jacket and grabbed his bag. He said goodnight to his fellow dancers, kissing a few cheeks and smacking several sequined covered butts as he left the dressing room and walked down the narrow hallway that led to the front of the club. Near the entrance, a tall, broad shouldered red-head waited for him.

"Steve. How are you, sweetheart?"

"I'm good. Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure. Let's go outside." Aiden led the way through the small lobby, giving the bouncer a nod on his way out. Management didn't like it when their dancers were involved in disputes inside the club. Romantic conflict was bad for the club's vibe, and it reminded the patrons that the dancers weren't actually as available to them as they pretended to be.

Once the club door closed behind them, Aiden walked a few steps away from the building, but still within shouting distance of the bouncer if things got out of hand. He turned to his probably soon to be ex-lover with his best smile. "What's up?"

Steve stepped closer and took hold of his hand, looking down into his eyes with a loving gaze. Aiden wanted to groan but managed to remain silent. They were really about to have what Steve clearly wanted to be a romantic conversation, outside of his place of work while a group of people across the street engaged in dueling chants of *Show us your tits! Show us your dicks!* with the tarts hanging out on the balcony above them.

"Aiden, baby. I'm ready for us to take the next step in our relationship."

"Oh yeah? And what step is that?"

"You and me together."

"Aren't we already together?"

"Yeah, but I don't want either of us seeing anyone else."

"So, you want to be exclusive." It wasn't a question. Aiden knew from experience what Steve wanted. He was just waiting for him to come out and say it.

"Yeah. And I want you to quit this job."

And there it was. "Oh, I see. What you actually mean is you don't want anybody seeing me. Or more precisely, seeing my body on stage."

Steve flashed a cajoling smile, one that Aiden was used to seeing. He usually gave in to the harmless requests that accompanied that smile. That wouldn't be happening tonight.

"I just want you to be mine, baby," Steve said with a light squeeze to Aiden's hand.

"And I want to keep dancing. You know that."

"But-."

"No buts." Aiden kept his voice soft as he cut in. "I made it clear when we started seeing each other that I love my job and I'm not going to give it up for anyone or anything."

"Not even this?"

Steve dropped his hand to pull a square, black velvet box from his pocket. He opened the lid, revealing a ring with a wide platinum band and an impressive inset canary yellow diamond flanked by white diamond chips. The ring was gorgeous, sparkling brightly against its black velvet backdrop. But as far as Aiden was concerned, it might as well have been a pair of jeweled shackles.

"Steve," he started gently. "You're sweet. And I appreciate the gesture. But this isn't what I want."

"But-." Steve's forehead crinkled with a frown as he began to realize this wasn't going the way he'd obviously hoped for. "I love you."

"I don't feel the same way," Aiden said, turning him down with kind firmness.

Several increasingly uncomfortable moments of silence followed his statement. Steve's expression morphed from hopeful, to disappointed, and finally to anger. Aiden braced himself in case that anger exploded verbally or worse, physically.

"You might be gorgeous, and hot in bed, but the truth is you've got a heart as cold as ice."

The insult set off a spark of anger in his gut, burning away his determination to be gentle during this break up. "I'm not cold," he snapped. "I just know what I want. And quitting my job because a man wants to take ownership of me isn't it."

"Fine," Steve bit out from between lips tight with anger. He snapped the ring box closed and shoved it back into his pocket. "I won't bother you again."

It was on the tip of Aiden's tongue to say something placating and soothe Steve's feelings. But he knew if he did, it would only give the man hope to try again, and they'd be right back in this uncomfortable situation in a few weeks' time. He kept his mouth closed. Steve stared at him for a long moment before he whipped around and stormed off to the parking lot.

Aiden watched him go with only a little regret. They'd had fun together, but he wasn't surprised their relationship had ended this way. They always ended this way. The guys he dated always wanted him to quit dancing and they were never able to fully give him what he wanted. He needed to take a break. Or better yet, swear off dating the type of guy that for some reason he was always attracted to even though they could never match up with him on what he wanted in a relationship.

Aggravated with Steve and all the guys who'd come before him, Aiden made a snap decision. "I'm done with dating guys like Steve." Satisfied with his declaration, Aiden sighed and moved to lean back against the wall behind him. He was prepared to wait a few minutes to make sure Steve had actually left the premises before he went over to his bike. But at the soft scrape of shoes on asphalt he realized he wasn't alone. He whipped his head to the side to see who was out there with him. Zielinski stood a few feet away, half-hidden in the shadows.

"Eavesdrop much?" Aiden snapped as he straightened again.

"I wasn't," Zielinski said. "Or, I didn't mean to. I'm waiting for one of my co-workers since he had too much to drink and I agreed to give him a ride home."

"And you got a free breakup show for your trouble."

"I'm sorry your relationship ended."

Aiden shrugged. "No need to apologize. Breakups happen."

"You don't seem torn up about it."

"Because I'm not. I like to have a good time. When the times are no longer good, I end it."

"Hmm."

Aiden felt the censure in that green gaze, the color somehow still clearly visible in the shadows where they stood. "Whatever. My life. My rules." He

looked out to the parking lot. Steve's car was gone which meant he was free to go. "See you around, Beefcake."

He started walking down the street to the crosswalk, headed to where he'd parked his bike when a furious yell came from the alley he'd just passed.

"Stop! What are you-? No! *Stop!*"

Aiden didn't have his mask or his sai, but he didn't need either to fight if someone was being attacked. He turned back and ran around the corner just in time to see a tall, heavy-set man dressed in a plain brown sweatshirt and cargo pants, with his hair covered by a gray skullie, backhanding one of their club's cocktail servers across the face. The young man cried out in pain and fell to the ground.

"You're gonna regret that," Aiden snarled before he dropped his bag and charged forward. The guy spun around to face him, but Aiden was on him before he could get his guard up. He didn't go for the obvious punch, instead he swooped in close and jumped up to hit him with a headbutt. The guy yelled out with his own cry of pain, a sound that was immensely satisfying to Aiden. But the mugger didn't back down after the nose-crunching blow. He squared up, so Aiden got ready to fight.

* * *

Mike stood outside in the warm late summer night, his ears buzzing as they adjusted to the absence of bass-heavy music thumping against his eardrums. His co-worker had been pretty green around the gills when he'd rushed to the bathroom, so he expected to be there waiting for a while. Running into Stardust again when he'd exited the club was unexpected. He looked different from the first two occasions he'd seen him. Gone were the tight pants and weapons of his superhero outfit and the makeup and exotic costumes from his time as Glimmer. Instead, he appeared relaxed and casual in sweats and sneakers. But his mood had taken on a hard edge, no doubt attributed to the breakup he'd witnessed. His unintentional role in the scene as an eavesdropper probably hadn't helped. Realizing the situation must be awkward for the other man, Mike didn't try to prolong their conversation. Besides, lap dance aside, they hardly knew one another.

Stardust walked off but barely thirty seconds after his departure, there was a cry of pain, followed almost immediately by sounds of a scuffle. Mike

instinctively jumped into action and ran toward the fight. He might not be a superhero yet, but he wasn't going to sit there and do nothing while someone was hurt.

He made his way around the side of the Flirtatious Fox to where the noises were coming from. A slim young man huddled on the dirty, uneven pavement; torn dollar bills scattered around his feet. He'd obviously been assaulted and mugged, but Stardust was there fighting off the assailant in the narrow space between two buildings. The dancer had the upper hand with swift punches and elbow strikes, until the attacker got in a punishing blow dead center on his chest and sent him stumbling back.

Without even thinking about it, Mike activated his power. Twin beams of bright green energy blasted from his eyes, knocking the assailant off his feet and throwing him back several paces before he could land another hit on Stardust. The beams also clipped the side of the building opposite, tearing loose a few bricks before Mike blinked and stopped the blast.

He rushed over to check on Stardust and the victim. "Are you guys okay?"

"I'm fine," Stardust said. He kneeled down to help the other guy sit up.

"How about you?"

Mike stayed alert while Stardust checked on the victim, who he recognized as the camouflage wearing cocktail server, in case the guy came in for another attack. But he was nowhere to be seen. Apparently, he'd done the smart thing and taken off when he realized the odds had turned against him.

The young man gingerly touched his bright red cheek. "Going to have to go heavy on the makeup to cover the bruise I'll probably have, but I'm okay."

He started trying to gather the money at his feet but it was torn into so many tiny pieces, there was no way to salvage it. "Damn! That guy yelled that I shouldn't make money peddling sin and ripped up all my cash." He flopped back to the ground in frustration. "An entire night's tips. Gone."

Stardust opened his backpack and pulled out a thick stack of bills folded and held together with a rubber band. Without a moment's hesitation, he held the money out to the young man. "Here."

"What?" The server slowly sat back up; his eyes wide. "I can't take that. That's your money and it's way more than I made tonight."

"Yes, you can. I know you're new and you're working your way up the ladder in the club. I remember those days and how tough they can be. Take it. And don't worry about paying me back." He took hold of the server's hand and pressed the money to his palm.

After several seconds of prolonged silent shock, he finally let his fingers close over the money. "Thanks, Glimmer. This means a lot."

"You're welcome."

They exchanged a hug, the blond's face tucked into Stardust's chest. When they parted, the guy smiled up at Mike.

"Thank you for helping too. A round of drinks on me next time you're in the club."

"No thanks necessary," Mike said politely.

"We'll watch you walk to your car," Stardust said as he helped him to his feet.

The server grabbed his bag and brushed himself off, giving Stardust one more quick hug before he left.

Together, Mike and Stardust walked to the end of the alley, both of them watching the young man make his way across the street to a small, beat-up pick-up truck. The old Ford pulled out of the lot, the kid honking twice when he drove by. Before Mike could say anything, Stardust turned and looked up at him.

"I could have handled that by myself."

Mike sucked in a sharp breath, ready to tell Stardust off for his ungrateful attitude. Before he could say anything however, Stardust continued.

"But I appreciate you stepping in. Thanks."

It was obvious that the thanks was grudgingly given but Mike accepted it without complaint. "You're welcome."

Something caught Stardust's attention, as his gaze flicked to the side.

"I think that lost little duck is looking for you," he said with a nod at the club door.

Mike looked over at the front of the Fox. His co-worker stood there, one hand braced on the wall, peering across the street to the parking lot, clearly looking for his ride. Mike turned back to Stardust to say goodbye, but the other man had already taken off, strolling down the sidewalk without looking back. At the crosswalk, he jogged across the street to a motorcycle parked in the first row of the parking lot. As he watched, Stardust climbed on the back of a black and gold bike, bouncing once as he kickstarted it to life. He slowly drove off the lot, then went roaring past the Flirtatious Fox on his way out of the Playground. Mike stood there, watching the single red tail light until it disappeared around the corner.

What a strange night this had turned out to be. Seeing the superhero he'd met yesterday on stage tonight as an exotic dancer, getting a lap dance from him, then helping him fight off a mugger. Maybe the universe was telling him that he was indeed meant to work with the members of the ACG. Mike shook his head and went to collect his co-worker.

CHAPTER 4

A few evenings later, Aiden sat at the vanity in the dancer's dressing room. He was already in costume for his upcoming performance, but he wasn't scheduled to go on stage for another hour. Too lazy to move from his seat, he decided to give himself a fresh manicure to pass the time. He grabbed a bottle of black polish, slapping it against his palm a few times before he opened it up. The scent of the lacquer was nearly buried beneath the smell of perfumes and body sprays floating in the air as he painted his nails in broad, even strokes.

He'd just finished his left pinkie when Suzie, a dancer known for her pastel kawaii themed burlesque performances, burst into the room, her eyes wide and upset.

"You guys, there's been another attack! A dancer from that rave club down the street was robbed not even an hour ago."

Aiden immediately twisted around in his chair to face her. "Were they hurt?"

The petite woman nodded. "Roughed up a little. Although she's mostly mad she lost a night's wages. But get this. The mugger ripped up the money just like he did to our little newbie cocktail server and the courtesan from Madam Blythe's yesterday. It's got to be the same guy."

"Why would he do that?" a dancer on the other side of the room asked.

Suzie sat down at her spot at the vanity. "I don't know about the Blythe girl but the rave dancer said he ranted about sinful earnings. I guess he doesn't want our ho money." She looked at Aiden. "Didn't he say something similar to Brandon?"

"Yeah, and I wouldn't be surprised if he said the same thing to the courtesan, we just haven't heard about it. Tearing up cash is too specific. It's got to be tied to his rants."

The dancer in the seat next to Aiden spoke up. "Oooh! That makes me so mad. If you're gonna rob my ass you better do something good with that money, don't just tear it up and toss it on the ground."

Aiden nodded in agreement with the others. It was horrible to steal someone's hard earned cash. Destroying the money right in their face was

adding insult to injury. But to himself he worried that this could be escalating into a serious problem. Dancers were sometimes mugged - they were known to carry large sums of cash on them, making them a popular target for thieves. But this guy had now robbed three people so far and for whatever reason, he wasn't keeping the cash. That and his ranting meant he was no run of the mill mugger. Aiden had no idea why this was happening, but it might be a situation for his alter ego to look into.

Maybe he'd ask Blaze for assistance. The electric-powered hero didn't usually patrol this side of the river. However, he was adept at working nights and dealing with low-life scum. But that conversation would have to take place later. Right now, Aiden needed to make sure his fellow club workers were safe.

"Everybody be cautious out on the streets," he said to the room at large. "Don't flash any cash around and keep your personal protection in hand."

"I've always got protection, baby," Suzie said, pulling a condom from her makeup bag and waving it above her head.

Whistles and catcalls followed Suzie's deliberate misunderstanding.

Aiden grinned but the matter was too serious to let drop with a joke. "I don't mean condoms, Suzie. If anyone needs pepper spray or a stun gun, let me know and I'll hook you up."

The group of dancers agreed to be careful and watch out for each other. Aiden was glad they were all aware of the extra need to be safe, but that wasn't enough for him. Something about this mugger set off serious alarm bells in his head. He blasted his nails with Express Dry to make sure they wouldn't smudge, then grabbed his phone to send a text to Strong.

Hey, Boss. We're having a situation with a mugger over here in the Playground. The guy has a weird M.O. which makes me think he's got some kind of nefarious goal beyond robbing and that he doesn't plan to stop anytime soon. Zielinski backed me up on the first mugging the other night. And there was another one this evening. I think we should look into it.

Strong's response came through quickly.

Zielinski was with you?

Purely coincidence that he showed up at my job. But he can verify everything I've reported.

No need for that. If you think we need to look into this situation then we will.

Thanks. Aiden typed. Maybe Blaze can help. This sort of deal seems right up his alley.

I'll take that into consideration. Be prepared to patrol soon.

Aiden sent a thumbs up emoji before he set the phone back down on the table. He cared about this little glittery and exotic world. When he'd been at his lowest, hurt and pissed off because he was unable to continue dancing ballet, he'd come here. At first, he'd taken to the pole out of spite and anger. But it wasn't long before the Playground Players showed him that they welcomed him as one of their own, and had his back when he needed them. Now, he was loyal as hell to the people who danced in heels while adorned with glitter, and he would do everything in his power to protect them.

* * *

Mike sat at his desk, a print out of a contract for a new influencer in front of him. He stared down at the document but he wasn't seeing it. Instead, he saw a delectable round ass barely covered by a skimpy black leotard. He saw lean thighs split open wide to straddle his lap. He saw black hair sliding over the curve of a spine, daring him to touch, even though he knew that to do so was forbidden.

The images were burned into his mind's eye, thanks to the number of times he'd called them up over the weekend. They'd been on his mind enough that he'd actually considered returning to the Flirtatious Fox on his own for another chance to see Stardust dance. But he'd held himself back from following that impulse. Showing up once to Stardust's place of employment without knowing he worked there was one thing. Going back after he had that knowledge was another. He would have to be satisfied with the highlight reel playing in his head over and over while he tried to ignore the erection that accompanied each viewing. Like the one that was starting now, his cock thickening in his pants as he remembered Stardust rolling his hips forward until their bodies touched in the most intimate of places...

"Mr. Zielinski."

Mike guiltily jumped in his chair, snapping to attention at the sound of his admin's pleasant voice coming through the desk phone speaker. He took a moment to get himself under control, making sure there wouldn't be any

hint of arousal in his voice before he hit the flashing button to respond.
"Yes, Leo?"

"You might want to take a look at Johnny's Twitter feed before you go home for the evening."

Mike clenched his jaw to hold back a curse. "I will. Thank you for the head's up."

It seemed that his problem influencer's streak of good behavior had ended. Mike logged on to the social media network and went to Johnny's profile to check it out. He'd posted a thread of polarizing political tweets, leading to a firestorm of fury in the replies. Mike looked at the clock. It was almost time for him to leave. Unfortunately, the tweets were incendiary enough that he needed to stay and address the situation. They were too inflammatory to leave up overnight. Mike would have to contact Johnny, get him to delete the thread and tweet an apology, then have yet another discussion on what was expected for a representative of Marin's Outdoors.

Mike sighed in resignation. Talking to Johnny was always a pain in the ass. If he wasn't so popular, bringing in millions of views to Marin's products each month, Mike would have cut him loose as soon as he'd taken over this position. He was reaching for his office phone to make the call when his personal cell rang. Grateful for the reprieve, he changed course and answered his cell instead.

"This is Mike Zielinski."

"Mike, it's Strong."

"Strong. How are you?"

"I'm doing well. Do you mind swinging by the headquarters after work? I'd like to talk to you about the other night."

"Not at all." He wasn't surprised to receive this call from the director of the ACG. Stardust would have filled his commanding officer in on the incident with the mugger and included Mike's involvement in the report.

"Great, I'll see you here in a few hours."

His reprieve over, Mike ended the call and pulled up his office phone to call Johnny.

After work, Mike drove to the firehouse. He had to grit his teeth and push to keep driving forward when he got close to the barrier. The ACG auditory

defense device made him itch beneath his skin. Thankfully, once he drove through the mirage the buzzing stopped, and Mike shook off the unsettling feeling. A minute later, he walked into the Guardian headquarters. Strong was there, along with Caleb. A young East Asian man was in the back workout area, doing chin-ups on the exercise machine.

"Thanks for coming in," Strong said as they shook hands. "You remember Caleb?"

Mike nodded at the young man with his bright blue hair and a pair of icy blue headphones on his head but tilted behind his ears.

"Hello."

"And that's Ignite over there working out."

Ignite paused in counting out his reps to call out a greeting.

"Sup!"

"Hey," Mike called back.

"Let's talk," Strong said after the quick introductions.

Mike followed Strong into his office. The lieutenant closed the door behind them, waved Mike to one of the chairs in front of his desk, and took the other for himself. Then he got right to the point.

"I understand from Stardust's report that you helped him out the other night."

"Yes," Mike answered. "Someone robbed and assaulted one of the employees at the club where he works."

"And you stepped in with the assist. Stardust appreciates that. And so do I."

Mike wasn't so sure that Stardust appreciated his help after the grudging thanks he'd given, but he let that go unmentioned. "I was happy to help. I couldn't stand by while someone was in trouble."

A satisfied smile spread across the lieutenant's face.

"You know what you sound like."

Mike laughed. "I don't think helping out one person one time makes me a hero. It was all spur of the moment. A random bystander probably would have done the same. With that being said, I do want to join your team."

"Excellent!" Strong said, clapping his hands together once.

"I do want to join up, but there's something I need to tell you first. I don't want to come on board without being honest about my powers. They're not as precise as I'd like. And I'd hate for there to be collateral damage in the middle of a fight because they got away from me."

Some of Strong's excitement faded. "What do you mean?" he asked with his forehead creased in a frown.

"I can't always pinpoint exactly where I aim. I can take out a cow. But I'd probably take out the barn behind the cow too. If we can solve that problem then I'll join up with no hesitation."

"Hmmm..." Strong leaned back in his chair for a moment before he pushed himself to his feet. "Let's see if Caleb can assist with that. Come with me."

They went back out into the main area, where Mike explained to Caleb that he could hit the general vicinity of what he was aiming at but that he couldn't strike with precision.

"Can you come up with something to help him control his aim?" Strong asked.

Caleb grinned. "Oh yeah. I can definitely help with that. Do you mind giving me a demonstration of your powers? I need to see you in action to know what I'm up against."

"Here?" Mike raised a brow. "Might punch a few holes in the walls of your new headquarters."

"That's only funny because I know you're joking," Caleb said with a laugh. "There's an open field not too far from here. We can go there."

"Sounds good," Strong said. "I'll come along too. Nick, you stay here and keep an eye on things."

Caleb grabbed his laptop. "I'll be watching remotely," he said to Nick as he slid the computer into a gray nylon messenger bag. "Try not to burn the place down while I'm gone."

Mike cast a glance at Ignite, who'd switched from chin ups to hanging upside down to do crunches, wondering what Caleb meant by that comment. Maybe the man had fire powers he couldn't control?

Ignite flipped and dropped down from the chin up bar. "He's kidding," he said to Mike as he walked over to join them. "I'm a fireman."

"Who doesn't know how to watch his popcorn in the microwave."

"I don't get why they'd put a popcorn button on the microwave if it's not timed to exactly pop your popcorn."

Caleb dropped his head back with a groan. "I *told* you that you're not supposed to use it for those small personal bags of popcorn."

"Then why'd they put a button on there that you can't use?"

The two were clearly gearing up for what sounded like a repeat argument, when Strong stepped in and put a stop to their squabbling. "That's enough. Ignite, eat chips if you get hungry. Let's go," he said to Mike and Caleb.

Outside, they walked over to a big black SUV with dark tinted windows. Strong took the wheel and Mike waved Caleb to the front passenger seat.

"It must be hard getting used to driving after flying everywhere for so long," Caleb said once they were underway.

"I haven't been active as a superhero for nearly ten years," Strong answered.

"Come on, you really expect me - us," Caleb said with a look to the back at Mike - "to believe that you haven't used those wings not once? Not even for runs to the grocery store?"

It was quiet for a moment.

"Maybe if I just need to get milk and bread."

Caleb laughed. "I knew it!"

Mike grinned. "I would use them too, sir. You've earned the right."

"It saves time. And I'm all about efficiency," Strong said as he turned into the parking lot of a corner market.

Caleb twisted in his seat to look at Mike again when Strong put the SUV in Park.

"So how is it the Army didn't perfect your powers when they gave them to you? I know the Air Force did multiple tests and trials on Strong and the others in the A-Wing initiative before they turned them loose."

"My powers weren't part of an initiative. And I wasn't born with them either. They're from an accident. A completely unplanned side-effect from an experiment gone wrong."

"Oh, wow," Caleb said with his dark eyes wide. "That's unexpected."

Mike held back a snort. Unexpected hardly covered it.

He and Caleb stayed in the truck while Strong went in to the store. While they waited, Mike explained in brief detail about the night he'd received his powers, how they worked, and what they did, Caleb typing notes on his laptop while he listened. After a few minutes, Strong returned with two twelve-packs of bottled water and set them in the back with Mike. They left the corner mart, heading to the open field Caleb directed Strong to, which turned out to be an abandoned construction site.

Caleb looked over the area as they exited the SUV. "This should be perfect."

Mike agreed. It was an open space with nothing around for miles in three directions. His beams dissipated before they reached that distance, so he could demonstrate his power to Caleb without worrying about hitting an innocent bystander or causing property damage.

They set up the bottles of water on tree stumps, sawhorses, and mounds of dirt left behind by the unknown construction company. The arrangement gave him targets at various heights and distance.

"Ready when you are."

Mike faced the first bottle. Activating his beams was like walking. His legs moved because he needed to move. It wasn't necessary to think left, right, left, right to get him going. It was the same with his blasts. The green beams shot across the expanse of grass. He didn't hit the bottle, but the radius of the force's energy knocked it over anyway, sending it hurtling across the field. He achieved the same result with the second. The third he actually hit. The bottle exploded from the impact, sending water spraying into the air.

By the time he made it through all of the first pack and most of the second, his eyes were dry and hot, as if he'd just woken up after sleeping in front of a space heater pointed directly at his face. And a headache was already building steam in his temples. He blinked a few times to work up some moisture in his eyes and turned to the two men behind him.

"See what I mean? Very little precision."

Caleb sat cross-legged on the ground; his computer open on his lap. "You're right. Your rate of precision is only about sixty-five percent. I can design you a pair of glasses," he continued as he started to type. "Using prisms, the lenses will narrow the radius of the blast, allowing you to focus and hit only what you're directly looking at."

"That would be very helpful. I'd feel much better about using my powers in public spaces if I had tighter control over them."

Caleb nodded. "I'll get you fixed up right. You two pick up the trash for recycling so we can get back to HQ and I can start working on these."

By the time they returned to the firehouse, Caleb had already come up with a preliminary design. He put a 3-D image of them on one of the monitors for everyone to see.

Ignite walked over to get a closer look at the screen. "Make him look cool, Caleb. Don't give him a pair of superhero Blue Blockers."

"The important thing is that they're functional," Lieutenant Strong said. "Doesn't matter what they look like."

Mike was inclined to agree with the lieutenant. But that didn't mean he was completely on board with wearing an ugly piece of equipment on his face.

"Guys, have some faith in your local tech genius. I can make them stylish *and* functional. But don't ask me to make them affordable. The materials needed for these are going to cost a pretty penny. No worries about that either. We've got plenty of funding to cover it."

"Good," Strong said with a determined nod. "Get them worked up as soon as possible so we can get him in the field." He turned to Mike. "Once you have the glasses you can test them out on a mission and use that time to see if joining the ACG is truly right for you. You can work with Stardust again once the tech is ready."

At the mention of Stardust, a vivid memory flashed in Mike's mind - silky black hair flowing over pale skin, golden eyes lit with a teasing smile, and warm thighs straddling his own.

Caleb suddenly started coughing loudly, as if he'd choked on something.

Mike shook off the memory and looked down at the techie in concern. "Are you alright?"

"Sorry. Just errr... swallowed wrong," he said after his coughing fit was under control.

Caleb appeared to be okay so Mike answered Strong's question. "Working with Stardust would be fine," he said politely. "But I think it would be a valuable exercise for me to work with various members of your team, sir." Between his attraction to Stardust and Stardust's apparent annoyance in dealing with him at the scene of the mugging, he thought it best that they didn't work together.

"Hmmm. Of course. Well, we'll worry about partners later. For now, let me fill you in on how we operate. Have a seat."

Mike pulled one of the club chairs closer and gave his attention to Caleb and the lieutenant. As he listened, he breathed a silent sigh of relief that he'd dodged the bullet of being paired up with that golden tiger.

CHAPTER 5

Mike had music playing, keeping him revved up while he did a short evening cardio workout. His living room space wasn't that big, but as long as he pushed the coffee table out of the way he had room to move. Tonight's workout alternated between repetitions of speed jump rope, push-ups, and squat thrusts. He was nearing the end of his final set of reps when his phone rang. Mike stopped jumping, switching the rope to one hand so he could grab his phone and answer the call coming in. The cell screen showed a mix of symbols and numbers but no name, a sign that the call was from an encrypted line.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mike. It's Caleb. Your new tech is here."

"Already?" Mike was impressed. A short two days had passed since he'd discussed the limitations of his powers with Caleb. "That was fast."

"I was excited to see how they would turn out so I bumped the project to the top of my to do list. If you don't have anything scheduled for this evening, Strong wants you to come by for your trial run. You can pick them up and then go try them out."

Mike snorted under his breath. His schedule was embarrassingly open every night this week. "Nothing on tap for tonight," he answered Caleb. "I'll be there."

"Great. See you soon."

Mike tossed his phone on the couch then completed the rest of his reps. When he finished, he took a few minutes to catch his breath, then stretched to cool down. He made his way to the kitchen to grab a protein shake from the fridge. Leaning against the counter, he drank the shake while he considered what he was about to get into.

Superheroes were common throughout the world and major cities like St. Louis often had several. Many worked on their own while others had corporate sponsorship. Some were connected to the military as super soldiers. Lieutenant Strong was an example. Born with super strength and rapid healing, he'd entered the A-Wing initiative and been fitted with exoskeleton retractable wings that allowed him to fly as naturally as an eagle.

As part of the Arch City Guardians, Mike wouldn't have the military structure and training that he was used to. But he'd be joining a group of heroes with various levels of experience, led by a director who'd served both in the military and as a superhero. The operation should be a perfect fit for him. He knew nothing about being a superhero, had only become an enhanced human a few months ago. He could learn to be one with the Guardians. And he couldn't discount the fact that he was looking to find his spot in St. Louis - the place where he belonged. There was no guarantee he would bond with the members of the ACG but he hoped that he would be able to form some positive connections on the team.

The shake finished, Mike went to take a shower to wash away the sweat from his workout before dressing in fresh clothes and tactical gear. As he sat on the bed to lace up his combat boots, excitement bloomed in his chest. He'd missed the thrill of being in the field. His time in the Arctic had mostly involved standing guard. The position had allowed him to return to active duty soon after recovering from the attack that had resulted in his reassignment from his unit. But the work was boring and uneventful, since there weren't too many villains or evil regimes who wanted to freeze their asses off in the Arctic while carrying out their schemes. And although he was grateful he now had a civilian job after his discharge, he couldn't deny that he was - for lack of a better word - *restless* working at Marin's. Now, he was filled with anticipation, ready to do something more than stand in front of a lab door to keep watch over scientists or sitting behind a desk reviewing social media accounts.

Eager to hit the road and get started, Mike grabbed his keys and left the apartment, locking the door behind him.

After making the drive from his apartment complex to the neighborhood that housed the ACG headquarters, he approached the now familiar brick wall hologram. The top of his spine itched, as if a dog-sized mosquito buzzed just behind the back of his neck. Even though he expected it, he still recoiled from the unpleasant sensation, rolling his shoulders in a futile attempt to shake it off. The corners of his mouth turned down in distaste as he drew abreast of the brick wall mirage, instinct urging him to turn around and drive away to escape the unsettling feeling. Once he passed through the barrier, the buzzing sensation began to fade. It was gone completely by the time he parked in the small lot next to the firehouse. Mike sighed with relief as he turned off the engine and stepped out onto the pavement.

Surrounded by darkness, the brick firehouse was a welcoming beacon with warm light shining from its windows. Inside, Caleb sat at his command center. He had what looked like a Sugar Daddy candy stick dangling from his mouth, while he stared at the computer in front of him with his eyebrows drawn together in concentration. Ignite was up in the loft, relaxed back in a chair with his feet up on the table. Mike gave him a quick wave, then looked again at Caleb, who'd jumped up from his seat.

"Good, you're here."

He went over to the locked cabinet against the wall, typed in a code on the electronic key pad, then pressed his thumb to a small glowing screen. There was a beep and a click before the cabinet slid open. Caleb grabbed two boxes, relocked the cabinet, and brought them back to where Mike waited in front of his work station. A grin on his handsome brown face, Caleb slowly lifted the hinged lid of the bigger box, as if he were presenting Mike with a piece of fine jewelry.

"Ta-da!"

Inside the box lay a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses with sturdy gray metal frames and emerald green lenses. They didn't look like anything special, but Mike knew they had to be if they were going to help him with his blasts.

"Go ahead and put them on," Caleb said eagerly.

Mike took the sunglasses from the box and settled them on his nose. Looking through the lenses, his vision became tinted with a green hue. He faced one of the offices to get a look at his reflection in the window. "I look like I'm auditioning for a background role in Top Gun."

Caleb gasped with mock offense. "A classic film filled with the finest male specimens."

Mike grinned at that assessment of one of his favorite old movies. "They look good. Thank you."

"You're welcome. As we discussed, the glasses will focus your beams, giving you the accuracy you need in the field. If they aren't as accurate as you'd like, let me know and I'll make adjustments."

Mike removed the glasses in order to study them. Looking closer, he could see the lenses weren't one smooth surface as they appeared from the front. There were minute cuts in the glass, creating prisms that directed the focus to the center of each lens. And although they were easy to see through, the

lenses had an odd sheen to them that hinted they were made from something more than average eyewear glass.

"And next, your ACG field tech."

This time Caleb gave him the box to open himself. Mike removed the lid to find an ear piece and a watch. The earpiece was small, clear, and fit snugly over the shell of his ear. The watch was black with a big face, several buttons, and a thick strap. Once Mike had it fastened around his wrist, Caleb sat down and spun around to his main computer. After he tapped a few keys, the earpiece clicked once, and lights on the watch rapidly blinked before going dark again.

"Okay, both are activated. You are ready to go."

Ignite slid down the fireman's pole and came over. "Check you out. Very tactical-chic."

Since the other man was geared up in a red hero suit and black mask, Mike assumed they'd be partnered up. "I'm looking forward to working with you. What's our mission?"

"Oh, no," Ignite said, shaking his head. "You won't be working with me tonight."

Caleb spoke up. "Your partner isn't here yet."

At that moment, the roar of a motorcycle could be heard approaching outside.

"But he should be here in just a minute," Caleb continued.

Mike tensed, hoping that there was more than one person on their team who rode a motorcycle. The sound of the bike grew closer, until it was right outside. Then it cut off. A few moments later, Mike realized his desperate hoping was in vain. Stardust strolled in, the light gleaming off his tight black pants, his gold mask pushed up to rest on top of his head. Mike clenched his jaw to hold back a frustrated curse. He wanted to work with someone uncomplicated during his trial but it seemed it wasn't to be.

Strong came out of his office at the hero's appearance. "Perfect timing," he said to Stardust. "Zielinski is geared up and ready to help you patrol the Playground tonight."

Stardust froze, his golden eyes wide and locked on Mike just long enough for Mike to see that he was unhappy with Strong's announcement before he spun around to the team director.

"Strong, I asked to work with Blaze on this."

At that clear rejection by the hero, Mike's shoulders stiffened. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have questioned an order from a superior, but this wasn't the military. And if Stardust didn't want to work with him, he had no problem requesting to be partnered with someone else. "Yes, Lieutenant. It might be best to pair me with someone I haven't already worked with to help me get to know the other members of the team."

"Blaze is otherwise occupied," Strong said to Stardust before turning to Mike. "And since at this juncture you'll mostly be doing recon while we learn the scope of this situation, this is the perfect mission for you to get acclimated to our squad." He paused to clasp his hands behind his back, one eyebrow raised in question. "Is that going to be a problem for either of you?"

Mike immediately fell in line at the ring of authority to Strong's tone. "No, sir."

Stardust cast Mike an annoyed glance before he answered with obvious reluctance in his voice. "It's not a problem."

"Good. Hit the streets. Contact headquarters with anything we need to be aware of or if you run into trouble and need back up."

Mike looked at the face of his new watch, which was basically a mini-computer. Several lines of data flashed on the glowing blue screen. The address for their start point was on the top row and he scrolled down with his thumb to read the mission parameters on the next three. He nodded to himself after reading it through, clear on their goal for the night. "Got it. I'm ready."

"Fine," Stardust snapped. "Let's go."

Ignite looked back and forth between them, questions in his dark eyes. If he was wondering why he and Stardust were like two alley cats with their backs up, he wasn't the only one. Mike had no clue why he and Stardust sparked off each other like this.

"Have fun," Ignite said.

The two of them went outside, Mike slightly behind Stardust's quick and clearly annoyed stride. He couldn't make it any more obvious that he didn't want to work with Mike. And Mike didn't want to go where he wasn't wanted. But orders were orders so they'd both have to suck it up and deal. "We can take my truck so we can ride together," he said when they reached their vehicles.

Stardust cast his SUV a derisive look then rolled his eyes.

"I don't think so. You've got the address, right?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll meet you there," he said as he swung his leg over his bike. "Try not to fall too far behind."

Mike bit back a retort. It wasn't as if he drove an old beat-up van that Stardust would be embarrassed to be seen in. And even if he did, so what? Mike yanked open the door to his truck to get in. By the time he had the SUV in gear, Stardust had already zipped out of the parking lot. Mike pulled out after him, barely restraining from stomping on the gas and speeding to catch up. As he drove past the barrier, he didn't have that awful auditory itch buzzing at the back of his brain. Either the earpiece or watch must have the tech to cancel it out. He was grateful that he wouldn't have to deal with that anymore.

Giving his attention to the road, he followed Stardust through dark streets lit by softly glowing streetlamps, heading for East St. Louis. As he drove, he hoped he wasn't making a mistake. Lieutenant Strong had been highly recommended to Mike by someone he trusted. Through that contact, he'd learned that Strong had years of both military and superhero experience. He wouldn't have put Mike with Stardust if he didn't believe that the two of them could work well together. More importantly, he wouldn't have allowed Stardust on his team if he didn't believe the other man was capable of living up to the role as a superhero. Therefore, they should be able to get along for the mission. He hoped.

By the time they were on the bridge leading to the colorful lights of the Playground, Mike had eased back from his annoyance, determined instead to trust Strong's decision. Arriving in the red-light district was just as visually extravagant as the first time he'd come. The multicolored neon lights washed over his windshield as he drove through the busy streets, but tonight he didn't take the time to cruise and look around.

Near the center of the district, he pulled into the parking lot of a strip club. This one was decorated in blinding hot pink neon accents and advertised *Furries Gone Wild!* Stardust was already there, straddling his bike with his mask again pushed up to rest on the top of his head. Mike got a good look at the motorcycle for the first time. It was a glossy black with gold accents, built heavy for power and stability. Focusing on his decision to trust

Strong's methods, Mike offered his temporary partner an olive branch. "That's a nice bike."

"Thanks."

Stardust swung off the bike and Mike found himself watching the sensuous way that lithe body moved as he approached. He was dressed as he had been the first time he'd seen him: skin tight black pants with gold shimmer to the fabric, black boots and gloves, and a cropped jacket. His long black hair was confined in a single braid. He must only wear it loose when he was in his Glimmer persona, like the night he'd seen him on stage at the Flirtatious Fox. Mike assumed this was the other man's official look as Stardust.

Mike didn't have any official hero gear yet. For tonight, he'd dug through his collection of military supplies for a black flak vest to throw on over a long-sleeved black T-shirt, worn with black tactical pants. His right hand was covered by a glove. Boots and the glasses provided by Caleb completed his uniform. Mike didn't think he looked much like a hero, but it would do for now.

Stardust pulled his mask back down to cover his face. Up close, Mike saw that the mask was all gold, except for three columns of glittering black stars under his left eye. It had holes for Stardust to see through, but no openings for mouth or nose. Mike assumed that the mask was designed in a way that allowed the man to breathe through the material.

"We're patrolling the red-light district tonight," he said from behind the mask. "Is that going to be all right with you? Protecting strippers and whores?"

The implication underlying Stardust's questions raised Mike's hackles. He forgot his own olive branch from seconds before to snap back. "I was there when Strong said where we'd be patrolling, and I read the mission brief. Did I give any indication that I had a problem coming here?"

"No. But there are plenty of folks who keep their disdain for sex workers hidden. That's not the kind of guy I want watching my back."

"Like I said. I don't have a problem with the area, or the people working here. A job is a job. And I'm not a hypocrite to enjoy watching exotic dancers while judging them for their job choice."

"So, you did enjoy watching me dance."

Mike's shoulders stiffened at the question and the slight change in Stardust's tone and posture: a hip slightly cocked to the side, chin canted low. How could anyone go from surly to flirty that quickly? "I meant dancers in general."

Stardust stared at him, those golden eyes watching him closely. Mike stared back, refusing to give in and admit that he'd enjoyed Stardust's performance. Or that he'd replayed it in his head multiple times while imagining that Stardust was dancing for him alone. Stardust tilted his head to the side, continuing to stare for several seconds. Mike stood still, outwardly calm, while on the inside his heart pounded so hard, he could hear the rush of his pulse in his ears. Finally, Stardust shook his head, making the end of his braid swish past his hip once as he broke their tense face off.

"Okay. I'll work with you."

Mike relaxed slightly. "I didn't realize I had to pass a test first. And you did tell the lieutenant that you would work with me."

"I know what I said. And I meant it. I just wanted to be sure that I could trust you out in the field."

"And do you trust me?"

"I trust you to do the right thing. That's enough for now."

Mike sucked in a breath through his nose but didn't say anything in response. He was going to end up with indigestion if he kept swallowing things down with this man. For now, he let it go.

* * *

They walked through the entertainment district, down both dark alleys and well-lit streets. Music thumped from the clubs and businesses they passed, revelry spilling out into the parking lots every time a door opened on an exiting group. There didn't seem to be any issues, or more precisely, nothing that wasn't already being handled by the bouncers and club security.

Stardust looked at the man beside him out of the corner of his eye. He'd been a bit of an asshole when asking him how he felt patrolling the Playground. But he needed to be sure he wasn't teamed up with someone who might end up doing more harm than good. Especially since he was giving off Call of Duty: Black Ops vibes in the outfit he'd chosen. It wasn't

exactly a style that would engender trust in the bright and shiny Players of the Playground.

Although, Stardust had to admit that Zielinski looked pretty damn sexy in the all-black gear. His broad shoulders easily carried the tactical vest he wore over his torso, and the defined muscles of his biceps were perfectly outlined by the thin material of his shirt. With arms like that, Stardust had to wonder why Zielinski always seemed to wear shirts that kept them covered. Unfortunately, he couldn't make out the beefcake's chest or abs behind the vest. But the cargo pants he had on were just tight enough to show off his thick thighs, and allowed Stardust to check out the muscled curves of his ass whenever Zielinski managed to get a few steps ahead of him. Stardust grinned behind his mask. It'd be a waste if an ass like that had a stick of the not-fun variety shoved up it.

After several minutes of walking in tense silence, his partner for the night asked him a question.

"Have there been any more muggings since the one I witnessed?"

"Yeah. There was one the next day actually. Another that I heard about right after it happened and then one on my night off that I didn't learn about until two days later."

A short, low whistle came from the big man as he shook his head. "That's a lot of muggings in a short period of time. Is that normal for this area?"

"Nope. Several years ago, we took measures to take back and clean up the red-light district. Crime happens, but not this often or with this type of regularity."

"We? The ACG?"

"No. We reclaimed this area long before the ACG came on the scene. By we I meant the sex workers. This is sort of a for us-by-us part of town."

"How did you-."

"Help!"

The frantic scream pierced the night, immediately grabbing Stardust's attention.

"Hold that thought."

They sprinted toward the panicked cry, Stardust's speed easily keeping pace with the taller man's longer strides. In the back parking lot of one of the smaller clubs, they came upon an ugly scene. The man he recognized from the previous alley attack was trying to rip a bag away from a woman, while

she valiantly struggled to hold on to it. The man switched tactics, grabbing her by both arms to slam her up against the wall of the building behind them. Her head went flying back from the force of the blow. There was a sickening *crack* of bone against brick as her head hit the wall, and she went limp in the mugger's grip.

"Assess the scene, see if there's anyone else-".

"Screw that!" Stardust yelled before he rushed in. He sprinted toward the attacker. When he was right next to him, he jumped up, tucked his knees into his chest, then kicked out *hard* with both feet, striking the mugger on the side and knocking him away from the woman. Stardust landed on his back but instantly flipped upright in time to catch the woman as she slid down the wall.

A warning shout came from behind him.

"Look out!"

There was a loud buzz and a flash of light. Acting on instinct, Stardust held on to the woman as he dove to the side, protectively cradling her head when they fell to the ground. A red ray shot across the space, hitting the spot where he'd just been standing. He looked in the direction the ray had come from. There was a second assailant. A woman dressed in all white, holding what resembled a big Super Soaker water gun, except it was gray metal instead of colorful plastic. He hadn't noticed her in his rush to rescue the mugging victim.

Another ray shot down the alley, this one a deep emerald green. It knocked the woman to the ground and the gun went flying from her hands. Stardust snarled, ready to go after her and retrieve the weapon. But the first attacker leaped forward to grab the strange looking gun and brought it up to aim it at Zielinski. Thinking fast, Stardust pulled one of his sai from its thigh holster and threw it with practiced aim. It twirled end over end, striking the man's hand in the split second before he fired. He yelled, recoiling in pain, causing the shot to go high and wide, and thankfully not striking Zielinski or anyone else.

"Let's get out of here!" the man's partner shouted.

The two took off running. Stardust growled in frustration as he watched them escape. He hated to let them get away, but they had an injured victim who needed their help.

"We need to get her medical attention," he said when Zielinski rushed over to them.

Zielinski pulled a phone from one of the pockets in his tactical pants and kneeled down next to the victim. "Calling 9-1-1 right now."

Stardust nodded while watching the woman. He listened with half an ear as Zielinski talked to the operator, in case he needed to supply any information. At the sound of sirens wailing in the distance, the woman opened her eyes. She moved to sit up, but Zielinski stopped her with a light hand on her shoulder.

"Stay still," he said in a firm but soothing voice. "You took a hit on the head and it knocked you out. EMTs are on their way to look you over."

"My bag!" she said in a panicked whisper.

Stardust grabbed the dropped bag and held it up so she could see it. "Everything is right here. Just relax."

"Okay."

She went still, her eyes sliding closed again.

"Keep her awake," Zielinski directed in that same calm voice.

"Hey." Stardust lightly squeezed her hand. "Keep your eyes open, just in case, okay?"

"Okay."

The woman agreed but her eyelids were still drooping. Stardust knew he'd have to get her talking to keep her awake. "Tell me about your night. Are you a dancer?"

"Yeah. At the Barbed Wire."

"What'd you dance to?"

"I went old school. Teased the hell out of my hair and stripped to Warrant's *Cherry Pie*."

"Classic." Stardust grinned down at her even as Zielinski shone his phone's flashlight in her eyes.

"Both pupils are responsive," he said to the 9-1-1 operator.

He kept talking and a minute later, the blue lights of an ambulance washed over the alley. Zielinski told the EMTs what happened, then stepped back to let them take over.

They quickly got the victim on a backboard, then up onto a gurney, and into the back of the ambulance.

"Thank you, guys!" she called out before the EMTs closed the doors.

Just before they drove off, Stardust thought to check in with his partner for the night. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I didn't take any damage."

"Yeah, not with the way you blasted that woman from the other end of the alley." He went to retrieve the sai he'd thrown. "How did you do that?" he asked as he slid the weapon back into its holster. "All I saw was the green light just like the other night. You got your own laser gun hidden under that vest?"

"No. The light came from me. From my eyes."

"Laser eyes then. Wow."

"They're not lasers. It's a voluntary magnetic pulse powered by the Aurora Borealis moving at jet turbine speed."

Stardust hadn't paid much attention to his classes outside of dance, so he had no idea what the beefcake was talking about. He tilted his head to the side in question. "What?"

"It's basically a really strong and tightly focused wind."

"And you can control it."

"I can activate it at will. And the sunglasses Caleb gave me tonight allow me to aim it with precision. That was my first test of their accuracy and they did great."

"I'm glad to know you aren't wearing sunglasses at night trying to look cool."

A smile twitched the corners of that serious mouth. "I assure you that was not my goal."

"Damn. Your superpower is a knockout blast from your eyeballs. That's pretty boss. You might be on a level with Helios."

Mike shook his head. "Probably not. We received our powers in similar incidents, but he has far more abilities than I do."

"You're saying you can't fly?"

"No, I can't."

"Well, thanks for stepping up and taking care of the second assailant. I didn't even see them."

The small smile began to fade. "That's why I wanted us to wait and scope out the situation first."

"That woman needed help. And neither of us were hurt so it worked out all right in the end," Stardust said with an unconcerned shrug.

Zielinski pressed his lips together, the smile completely gone. He clearly didn't agree with Stardust's assessment.

"Running an operation like that is a surefire way to get someone hurt. You can't just charge forward and hope it works out all right in the end. You need a plan."

"There isn't always time to plan. Especially not in the heat of the moment."

"Then you need to learn how to make time."

Stardust scoffed. "I don't need to learn how to do anything. I've been patrolling the Playground for two years now and managed to help plenty of people. I don't need some military man with a plan coming in here telling me how to handle my business."

A muscle bunched in Zielinski's jaw. Stardust couldn't see the eyes behind those glasses, but he had a feeling if he could, he'd see the beefcake glaring at him. That was too bad. As far as he was concerned, what was done was done. If Zielinski didn't like it, tough. "I'm going to report in to Strong then do a sweep for the rest of this area to make sure those assholes don't attack anyone else. Are you coming or are you going to stand here and bitch about drawing up battle plans some more?"

Again, a muscle clenched in that hard jawline before Mike responded.

"Let's go."

DR. Z is available on Amazon and in Kindle Unlimited October 15, 2021.

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CHRISTA TOMLINSON

DR. Z

ARCH CITY GUARDIANS 2