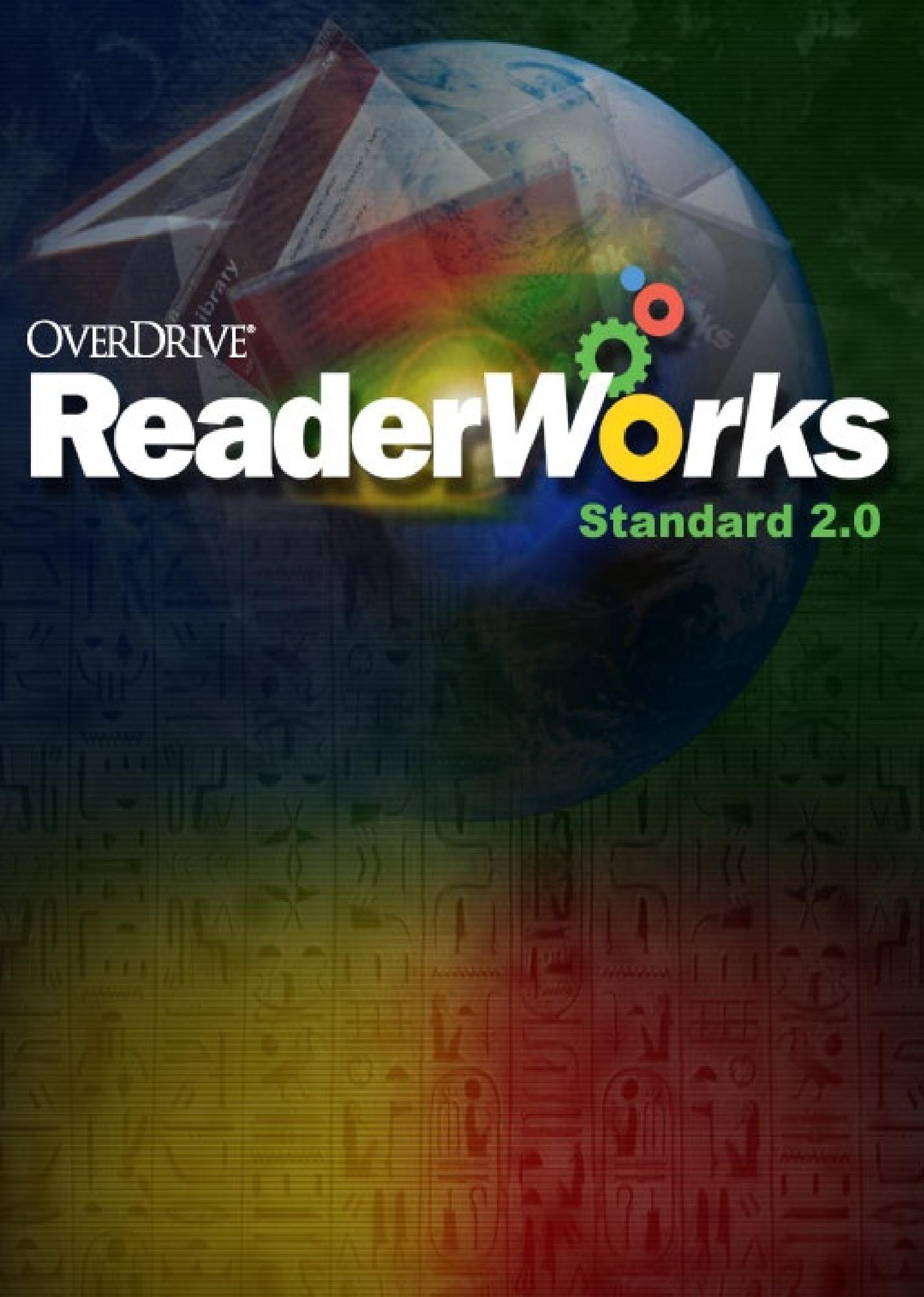
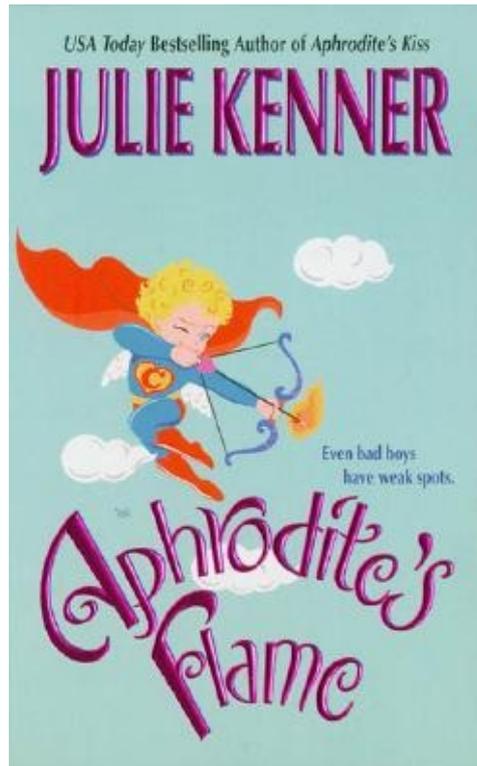


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EVEN BAD BOYS

Since his father was the world's most super villain, Mordi was used to being bad. He'd helped his sire in countless plots, and only recently freed himself from the man's evil influence. But now his father was turning over a new leaf, joining the good guys, just as Mordi met the woman of his dreams. How lucky was that?

FALL IN LOVE

Bad boys!?! Isole wasn't used to them. At least not in *this* way. Usually, she'd freeze 'em cold, but this time it was hard enough just keeping her cool. For years she'd been a Protector, a super-heroine, but a dark presence was trying to sway her allegiance. Worse, the best thing in her life since her first propulsion cloak was Mordi: a dark-haired hunk whose sweet green eyes belied a past and a pedigree of evil. He was gorgeous, and someone she could love. He made her burn with desire, and nothing she did could put out the flames.

FIRE & ICE

Mordi focused on Izzy. She was frowning at the Henchman she'd frozen solid with her superpower, concern etched on her face.

But was it really concern? Or was it all an act? He didn't like it: the woman was the most intriguing he'd ever met, but he still couldn't discount the possibility that there had been no other attacker, and that Izzy was simply trying to cover her own tracks.

Inside the auditorium, applause crescendoed. They were running out of time. "Call in a retrieval team," he said. "And be ready."

While she watched, binder cuffs at the ready, he gathered his power, took aim, and—quite literally—fired. The Henchman defrosted, first blinking, then writhing about, bellowing at the top of his massive lungs. By that time Izzy had snapped the cuffs on him and jumped back. She looked at Mordi, her gorgeous eyes wide, and mouthed one word:

"Fire."

He nodded. "Ice," he said, referring to *her* power. And he didn't have to say that the two didn't mix.

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APHRODITE'S FLAME

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Greetings and Salutations:

The Venerate Council of Protectors is in receipt of your Form 849-7A (filed in triplicate) seeking re-assimilation into the Council and eradication of your status as an Outcast pursuant to the Outcast Re-Assimilation and Immunity Act (codified at Part III, Title 9 of the Protector Code of Conduct). As you are most likely aware, all Outcasts seeking re-assimilation shall be assigned a Re-Assimilation Counselor; you will receive notice of the date, time and location of your initial Meeting and Assessment (along with your counselor's name) within ten business days. Please complete the following forms and bring them with you to the initial meeting with your counselor.

- Form 26Q(3)(a)—Affidavit of Intent re Non-Recidivism;
- Form 297-T (please complete the top portion only; the bottom portion may be retained for your records)—Statement of Purpose and Rationale Behind Decision to Seek Re-Assimilation;
- Form 26Q(3)(b)—Chronology of Events and Activities Undertaken As An Outcast. Remember only truthful Outcasts will be re-assimilated! and
- Form T-26—Request for Pardon.

It is highly recommended that you read Circular 147B, *So You Want To Be Re-Assimilated!* Further information may be found on the Council website, www.superherocentral.com, on the Re-Assimilation Procedure page. Prior to sending questions or comments to the Council, we suggest you check the FAQ section to see if your situation has been covered.

Again, thank you for your interest in returning to a productive and helpful life as a Protector.

Sincerely,
Phelonium Prigg
Phelonium Prigg,
Assistant to Zephron, High Elder

jbk:PP
enclosure

Chapter One

“Nothing but bills today,” Burt Foster said, smiling as he handed Isole Frost a stack of mail. The mailman’s skin was baked to a golden brown, a testament to the recent beautiful weather that had soundly defeated whatever rain, sleet, snow, or hail might otherwise have tried to keep him from his appointed rounds.

Izzy took a good look at him as she fingered the bundle. Burt was about forty, with a round face and a receding hairline. His wife had passed away three years ago after a lingering illness, and when Izzy had met the man at the beginning of the summer, he’d seemed haunted and alone, giving off the scent of mild depression with just a hint of restlessness.

Now, though, she was picking up happiness combined with—what? She lifted her chin, sniffing slightly. *Ah, yes. Self-satisfaction.* The conquering hero. Virility mixed with tenderness.

No doubt about it. Mr. Foster had got himself a girl.

Izzy put on her work face, determined to hide her smile. “Thanks for bringing this up to the house,” she said, sounding casual. She’d ease him into a discussion of his love life. No sense being pushy. “Of course, you could have thrown in the *TV Guide*, too. It’s my last day of vacation, you know. I plan to veg out and do some serious channel surfing.” *That* was a far cry from the ice cold professional veneer she clung to at the office, but at home with her father she could be herself without any repercussions. And today, “herself” wanted to lounge about in sweats.

A frown cut across Burt’s features. “Aw, now, that’s a shame. We’ll be sorry to see you go. So will your dad.”

Izzy nodded. Leaving her dad was the hard part. She’d taken the entire summer for vacation, spending lazy days on his Colorado property, just reading and watching him tinker. But while she’d enjoyed vacation and spending time with her father, she was thrilled about going back. A new job, new responsibilities. She couldn’t wait.

She leaned forward, happy to share her news, even if Burt couldn’t know *all* of the details. “I’m actually excited about going back,” she said. “I got a promotion!”

The mailman beamed. “Congratulations! You’re some sort of counselor, right?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “They *should* give you a promotion. A woman as perceptive as you. Hell, they should give you your own TV show.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” It meant a lot, actually, that Burt believed in her. Other than her father and her uncle, it was hard to find someone in the hallowed halls of the Venerate Council who believed Izzy knew what she was doing ... much less that she was good at it. So, even though Burt couldn’t know all the details—or, really, *any* of the details of her life or job—Izzy was glad for his support, and a little saddened that she couldn’t tell him the truth. But, unfortunately, a girl simply didn’t confess to the mailman that she was, technically, a superhero.

And tomorrow, she was stepping into her new job as a Level V Re-Assimilation Counselor—a much-coveted position, and a significant promotion for her. She’d jumped straight from an entry-level position to the highest rank, skipping entirely that annoying middle ground—much to the consternation of her peers.

She’d worked her tail off for this promotion, though, to prove that she was worthy. But no matter how hard she worked or what accolades she won, she knew the whispers about her would never stop. Her peers would always look at her with wonder, jealousy, and a hint of contempt.

Well, too bad for them, Izzy thought, mentally lifting her chin in defiance. She deserved this promotion, she was damn good at what she did, and she didn’t need anyone’s approval or help. For that matter, she didn’t need anyone.

Except, maybe, her dad.

She blinked back tears. She really did hate to leave him.

“We’ll miss you around here,” Burt said again, and Izzy picked up on the unspoken thought—*I’ll miss you.*

She hid a smile, grateful that she’d been able to help him. “Did you talk to Janey?” She leaned forward conspiratorially, even though she already knew the answer.

A deep red flooded his neck, coloring his face even under the leathered bronze of his skin. “Well, yeah. I did.” He shifted the mailbag on his shoulder, and focused on his shoes. With his head down like that, Izzy could see that the blush had spread to his scalp, visible under his thinning hair.

She smiled. A flush that intense could mean only one thing. “You took her the daisies.”

He shrugged, looking up to meet her eyes. “Janey loved them. She was all smiles, and she looked at me like I was some kinda hero. She told me daisies were her favorite flower, and that I must’ve read her mind.”

Izzy flushed. “She said that? How funny.”

Burt cleared his throat. “We’re, um, going out again on Friday night. That’ll make two dates.”

“Oh, Burt, that’s wonderful!” She knew she shouldn’t—it was *technically* against regulations—but this was a good cause, and so she reached out and grabbed his hand, disguising the gesture as a friendly squeeze.

She’d touched him once before, three months prior, when she’d seen the desolation that was in his heart. Now, though, the storm of emotions, thoughts, and images that zipped through her senses held only happiness and the wonder of a budding relationship, confirming the impression—the smell—that had already tickled her mind and nose. She gave his hand a little squeeze, tinged with just a hint of self-satisfaction, and let go. “I’m so happy for you,” she said.

“Yeah, well, I’ve got you to thank.” The red had faded, but still colored his cheeks a bit. “Especially since you’re the one who told me I should talk to her in the first place.”

Izzy rolled a shoulder in a half-shrug. “Woman’s intuition.”

“More than that,” he said. “How *did* you know she’d like daisies? How’d you know she’d like *me*?”

“Oh, Burt—what’s not to like?”

“I’m serious,” he said, standing up straighter, an invisible shield of male pride clinging to him, just waiting to be pierced. “You didn’t go into town and, well, *talk* to her, did

you? I mean, you told me her favorite flower. Her favorite restaurant.”

The possibility clearly mortified him. “Dugan’s is my favorite restaurant, too. It’s not like we’ve got a lot of choices around here.” Hardly a booming metropolis, Izzy’s hometown of River Run, Colorado, lacked the big-city amenities she’d gotten used to in New York. Like restaurants, coffee bars, and twenty-four-hour grocery stores.

“But the daisies,” he said. “Are they your favorite, too? Or did you talk to her?”

“Actually, tulips are my favorite.” She looked him in the eye, then drew a cross between her breasts. “And no, I didn’t talk to Janey. I swear.”

The perfect answer. Because she absolutely *hadn’t* talked to Janey. Izzy hadn’t said one single word to the cashier at the Larkspur Grill. Was it her fault their hands had brushed as Janey handed Izzy her change?

That one unexpected touch was all it had taken. For just an instant, she’d been Janey, watching Burt from afar, wondering if he’d ever say anything, *do* anything. And fantasizing that one day he’d walk into the restaurant bearing daisies.

Izzy couldn’t just sit back and do nothing. Not with such a grand romance in the making.

And it was only a little bitty violation of the rules. And for a very good cause ...

“—is that?”

Izzy realized she’d tuned Burt out. “Hmm? I’m sorry. What?”

“That noise. What is it?”

For the first time, she heard the *pound, pound, zip, whrrrr!* “Daddy,” she said simply. The noises filtered up through the floor from the basement workshop below, but Izzy barely noticed. She’d grown up with her dad’s banging and rumbling and tweaking and tightening. The man was forever working on some new and exotic invention, and after twenty-seven years of hearing his hammering, a few metallic bangs and well placed curses were hardly enough to distract her.

Bang! Ka-chung! Ching! Pow!

“I should have known,” Burt said. An ardent inventor, Izzy’s dad had never quite risen to the level of his idol, Thomas Edison. Or *anywhere* close, to be exact. But he kept on trying, and the folks in town didn’t mind his idiosyncrasies. Especially when Harold Frost was single-handedly responsible for keeping Main Street Hardware in business.

“Well, anyway,” Burt continued, “thanks for suggesting the daisies.” He gestured over his shoulder. “I’d better get going.”

They said good-bye, and Izzy headed back inside, flopping down onto the couch and switching her laptop on. She clicked straight to the Council website, www.superherocentral.com, entered her password, and started scrolling through the news, wanting to see if the announcement of her new position had made the Daily Update. And if so, if anyone was posting nasty gossip about it on the Council's message boards.

The promotion had come from the High Elder himself, and it was just a coincidence of birth that Zephron happened to also be her uncle. So while some Protectors might look down their noses at her skills and whisper that she received special treatment, Izzy was determined not to be cowed; she deserved this promotion, and she intended to prove it.

For the last two years, she'd worked with low-level Outcasts—interviewing them, analyzing their psych profiles, and using her innate abilities to judge if they were worthy of returning to the fold. Starting tomorrow, though, she'd be dealing with the rogue Protectors who'd undertaken a lot more serious offenses. The promotion was exciting, yes, but also a little bit scary. Not that she'd ever admit *that* to anyone.

She scrolled down, staring idly at the colorful screen, but not really seeing. Her job was tough, no doubt about that. A lot of Protectors simply didn't want Outcasts reentering the fold, and Izzy could understand their reasoning. After all, as superheroes in the mortal world, the Protectors' sworn duty was to watch over mortals. Outcasts, though ...

Most Outcasts had managed to break that sacred trust, and they'd paid the price by being shunned, stripped of their right to use their powers. Not that the censure stopped the truly nefarious Outcasts; they just continued in secret their evil plotting against the mortal race.

And it was precisely because of those plotting, scheming, conniving Outcasts that so many Protectors were against re-assimilation. And while Izzy knew where they were coming from, she also knew that *some* Protectors had been outcast for only minor infractions. Or for breaking some tenet of Protector law in order to serve the greater good. Or—

She cut her thoughts off with a sharp shake of her head. The fact that she could completely empathize with how a Protector could be outcast for a low-level offense was precisely the reason she had this job in the first place. Her primary Protector trait was empathy, and that was the skill she relied on primarily for her job. She picked up emotions in scent: a handy trait if she ever needed to know if someone was trying to pull the wool over her eyes.

She was also adept at mind reading; just one touch, and unless she'd had time to put up some heavy-duty mental blocks, she'd find herself awash in another person's specific thoughts, not just vague feelings. The skill was handy, but also draining. Even more, since Regulation 976B(2)(d) required a mind warrant or full disclosure (which re-assimilation candidates were required to give) before reading another Protector,

Izzy tended to use her touch power only during the last phase of re-assimilation.

Reading mortals was forbidden, too, and the regulations spelled out specific censures for any mind reading Protector caught in the act. Izzy knew she shouldn't have meddled in Burt and Janey's romance, but some rules were meant to be broken. Arid considering how happy Burt now seemed, she could hardly regret her breach of protocol.

Her finger slid over the trackball as she scrolled through the boards, looking for a reference to herself. Nothing. Well, good. Maybe nobody was gossiping about her. After all, her skill had earned her the promotion. *Not* her family connections.

She repeated the thought, trying to make herself believe it. She knew she was good; knew her talents were real. Unfortunately, that didn't necessarily mean that she should have been admitted to the Council in the first place.

No.

She pushed the familiar doubt from her mind. So what if she'd received special dispensation? All Halfling applications were scrutinized, and they'd let her in because she was good—*not* because the High Elder happened to be her uncle.

Besides, that had been a long time ago. She'd pulled her own weight since then, and this promotion was no exception. She was going to ace this job, and she was going to prove to one and all that her uncle's confidence was justified.

No matter what, she'd—

"Fire! Fire!" The unfamiliar voice filtered through her mishmash of thoughts, and she shot to her feet, realizing that the banging and pounding had stopped, replaced by an ominous silence. *Her father!*

Jumping Jupiter, was he okay? What had he done now?

She raced to the back door and threw it open, revealing a stocky little man who vaguely resembled a hamster. She had no idea who he was, and she really didn't care. "Fire? Where?"

"Down there!" He stabbed at the air, pointing up rather than down, but it didn't matter. Izzy could see gray puffs of smoke rising into the air. The house was built into a hill and, as she leaned over the railing for a view of the basement window, there was a horrible clatter as the window blew out in a flurry of glass and flames.

"Daddy!" Izzy shrieked. Without thinking about the hamstery stranger, she bounded over the railing, jumping the two stories to the hard and dusty ground. She landed in a crouch, dropped into a roll, then sprang to her feet, never missing a step as she raced for the door.

She might not fight bad guys in the field, but at the moment her semi-rusty Protector skills were serving her just fine, thank you very much.

As she reached the now-decimated basement window, she heard the sound of someone slipping and sliding down the craggy slope behind her. Hamster-man, no doubt.

She didn't bother to see if her guess was right. Just waved away the dust and smoke and peered inside the workshop.

She'd expected a huge conflagration. Instead, she saw a lot of smoke, some charred feathers, and other unrecognizable bits of flotsam and jetsam smoldering in the various corners. Glass bottles, plastic flasks, screws, nails, wires of all colors. Even a collection of deep purple fountain pens, scattered like Pick-up Sticks in a puddle of green goo.

And, thank goodness, her father was there, too, huddled in the corner, worrying at a large metal box with an oversized screwdriver. His white hair stood straight out in all directions, and black streaks marred his face, giving him the appearance of a rather baffled, and somewhat incompetent, soldier in camouflage.

As far as Izzy could tell, he hadn't yet seen her. For that matter, he didn't even seem to realize there'd been a fire. Much less that bits of trash were still smoldering around him.

"Daddy!"

He looked up, blinked owlishly behind his thick glasses, and then smiled. "Izzy, my girl, I think I've finally got it!"

"Got it?" She swiveled, her gaze taking in the workroom that looked more or less like the aftermath of a tornado. "Got what?"

"Doesn't matter, doesn't matter. Far too complicated to go into now." He climbed to his feet and started dusting himself off, for the first time squinting around the room. "Hmmmph. Going to have to find something less flammable than gunpowder for the starting reaction, *that's* for sure."

He wasn't talking to her, and so Izzy just watched as her father patted himself down.

"Pencils, notes. Ah, yes. Here. Now then." He frowned. "Where are my glasses?" He swiveled, his gaze sweeping in an arc over the floor.

"Daddy..."

"Just a minute, sweetie. I'm looking for my glasses."

"They're on your head, Daddy."

“They are?” He looked cross-eyed, obviously focusing on the bridge piece. “So they are!”

She shook her head, fighting a smile. Her father was a dear, and not really *that* absent-minded. He just had a tendency to lose himself in his work. After two or three hours away from the basement, he’d be good as new.

“Come on, Daddy. Let’s make sure this fire is out and then head upstairs. I’ll fix you lunch, and you can tell me what happened.”

“Oh, no, no. I couldn’t go now. I’m right on the verge!”

Izzy looked dubiously at the collection of wires and circuits on his worktable. “Uh. Yeah.”

“If s just a matter of tweaking the design, so I don’t overload the transmitter or the receivers. Oh, Mr. B is going to be delighted. Just delighted!” He actually clapped his hands together, and Izzy couldn’t help but grin.

“Who’s Mr. B?” she asked.

“Oh, my dear, you’re going to love him. He’s been an inspiration. An absolute inspiration. We’ve been working together now for a year, and I swear, the man has insight into my work that’s simply—”

“Help! Get it away from me! Help!”

“Oh, my goodness gracious, the servo-bot!” her father cried.

Izzy swung around in time to see what she’d thought was a pile of tin cans and rubbish grab Hamster-man. Apparently the thing was some sort of robot, and now it stood tall, tin-can head twisting this way and that, as one hinged arm swung upward, Hamster-man dangling from a viselike grip that served as a hand.

“Help me! Put me down!”

The servo-bot (whatever the heck *that* was) didn’t seem inclined to cooperate; and instead of releasing the poor man, it simply started spinning—going round and round on the roller-skate wheels that served as feet—while its poor prisoner screamed and screamed for the metallic creation to *put him down*.

“No, no,” her father shouted. “Mr. Tucker, *please* don’t speak. The voice reactor node is damaged. The bot thinks you’re saying ‘*around.*’ ”

“I am *not*,” cried the little man. “Put me down!”

But that just got the bot riled up some more, and around and around he turned, while Mr. Tucker’s complexion shifted through various shades of green.

“Daddy!” Izzy cried. “Where’s the control? Shut that thing off before Mr. Tucker gets hurt.” Even as she spoke, she was racing to the far side of the room, toward the spinning robot and the flailing Mr. Tucker. Ideally, she’d use her innate Protector power of levitation to lift the robot off the floor and stop him from spinning. Then she could get Mr. Tucker loose before putting the robot safely out of harm’s way.

Unfortunately, she didn’t *have* any innate Protector power of levitation. That was her dirty little stigma—the fact that she’d been admitted to the Council even though, as a Protector, she was truly sub-par, unable to pass an examination of even the most rudimentary Protector skills.

“It’s not functioning,” her father yelled from behind her. “Ah, blasted thing!” She could hear him whacking the controls against something hard, curses flying from his lips.

In front of her, the bot was still spinning and Mr. Tucker’s eyes were beginning to bulge.

Well, she might not be an ace at levitation, but she still had strength and agility in her repertoire, and it was time to put them to good use. But as she started to jump into the fray, the bot’s head began to spark, the little flashes dancing around his head like lightning bugs.

“The CPU,” her father hollered. “It’s flammable. One of those sparks catches, and—”

Kabloom!

The bot’s head shot straight off, but losing his head didn’t mean losing his grip, and the now headless and flaming robot was still holding tight to Mr. Tucker.

“That’s just the beginning,” her dad cried, still banging away at the remote. “Oh, dear, oh dear, *where* did I put that fire extinguisher?”

Just the beginning? And then Izzy realized. The bot was writhing in a mass of electricity, shaking as if being attacked by a thousand electric eels. The entire thing was going to blow, and if the force of the first explosion was any indication, Mr. Tucker was going to be in serious trouble when the even more massive robot torso lit up like a Roman candle.

With no time to waste, Izzy stood stock-still in the middle of the room, ignoring all the sound, and especially ignoring Mr. Tucker’s screams to please get him down *now*. She couldn’t afford the distraction. Couldn’t afford to mess up. She had one shot and one shot only.

And then she heard it. A faint electrical crackle as the CPU ignited. She wasn’t ready—hadn’t let her power fully fill her—but hopefully she was ready enough.

With one quick movement, she lashed out, sending a shower of icy sparks flying from her fingertips. Her aim was dead-on ... and her timing was perfect. Just as the bot started to explode, Izzy's ice storm enveloped it, essentially dousing the flames and leaving nothing but the gentle sizzle of steam rising to fill the room.

"I... what... who ... help ..." Mr. Tucker's weak cries filtered through the haze, and Izzy picked her way to him, then pried open the bot's viselike hands so that the little man could fall, uninjured, to the ground.

"Oh, good job, Izzy." Her father rushed up behind her, clapping his hands. Then he reached down and helped Mr. Tucker to his feet, and began shaking the little man's hand vigorously. "Mr. Tucker. So very, very good to finally meet you. As you can see, things can get a little out of control here in the lab. But that's the exciting life of an inventor."

"I, yes. Yes, I see that." Mr. Tucker squinted at him. "You *are* Harold Frost?"

"Of course. Of course. And this is my daughter, Izzy."

She wiggled her fingers in a little wave. "Hello."

"But who... how?"

"Another one of my inventions," Harold lied. "Izzy's testing my, um, my..."

"Freezing beam," Izzy said helpfully. "Top secret. Government. Very hush-hush. Do keep it quiet."

Mr. Tucker nodded, looking absurdly proud to have been rescued by a top secret device. "Of course. Of course. But what a pity it's a secret. Something like this would liven up the speech considerably."

Izzy frowned. "Speech?" She looked between her dad and Mr. Tucker, finally settling on the newcomer, who smelled of self-importance. "Who are you?"

"Why, I'm here to interview your father, of course. The ceremony is just days away!"

"Ceremony?"

"But of course. Your father is receiving the prestigious Thomas Edison Award from the North American Inventors' Association. Of course there will be a ceremony. In Manhattan, no less. The chairman asked me to speak to your father and then write his speech for the presentation."

"Daddy!" Izzy threw her arms around her father, who managed to hug her back with equal enthusiasm while still maintaining a humble aura.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded, wishing her skills worked on her father so

that she could simply see into his soul and share his joy. Her entire life, her father had been trying to make something out of himself and his inventions. She knew the last year had been really good for him, but she'd had no idea he'd done so well. And to now be receiving such a prestigious award, it was ... well: "It's fabulous, Daddy. I just can't believe it."

"I wanted to tell you, sweetie. But I thought it would be more fun to surprise you. No one knows. Just me and Mr. B."

She frowned. That was the second time her father had mentioned this person, and she had no idea who he was.

Mr. Tucker apparently wasn't at a similar loss. "Ah, yes." He pulled a notepad out of his front pocket and flipped a few pages. "Your mysterious benefactor."

"Not so mysterious," Harold said. "More inspirational."

"Who?" Izzy asked.

"About a year ago, I met the most remarkable man," her father said. He gestured toward the door, then started walking that way, leaving the broken remains of the bot and his other experiments behind. "Let's go have a spot of tea and I'll tell you all about it."

"Daddy!" Izzy stayed rooted to the spot. "Just tell me *now*."

Her father adjusted his glasses. "Well, there's not much to tell. He's provided me with some financial backing, which, as you know," he said, turning to Mr. Tucker, "is so very important." He turned back to face Izzy. "But mostly he provided me with a sounding board. Someone to discuss my theories with. He always said he wasn't an inventor himself, but I don't believe him. The man has a remarkable head on his shoulders. Remarkable."

She was still confused. "So, this man just popped in and gave you money? Why?"

"Well, because he supports my work, of course." Her father grinned. "And he's commissioned me to invent a few things for him, too."

"Things? What things?"

"Oh, this and that." Her father waved a hand. "It doesn't matter. The point is that Mr. Black has been a wonderful support." He turned back to Mr. Tucker. "I'd have to credit his inspiration on equal par with my daughter's support. Be sure and mention both of them in that speech, will you?"

"Of course," Mr. Tucker said, taking notes furiously. "And you'll need to write a speech, too. The members will want to hear from you after you've accepted the statue."

“A speech,” her father murmured, practically preening.

Izzy barely noticed. Her brain had stopped back when her father had said two nerve-racking little words—*Mr. Black*.

“Daddy?” she asked, then realized that her throat hadn’t worked quite properly. She tried again. “Daddy?”

“Hmmm?” He and Mr. Tucker had moved a few feet closer to the door, and now they stopped and looked back at her. “Yes, dear?”

“Uh, this Mr. Black. Is he ... that is, do you know his first name?”

“Oh, of course,” her father said. He turned back to Mr. Tucker. “But that reminds me. He insists on being an anonymous benefactor, so you’ll have to call him Mr. B in the speech. Not Mr. Black.”

“Mr. B,” Mr. Tucker said, scribbling furiously. “Right.”

They started walking again.

“*Daddy!*”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. His name. Fascinating, really. It’s Hieronymous. You hardly ever hear a name like that, you know.”

No, Izzy thought, as her blood ran cold. She didn’t suppose mortals did hear a name like that very often.

She did, though. Because Hieronymous was the most notorious Outcast of the whole Protector race.

And for some reason, Hieronymous Black was helping her father.

She had no idea what was really going on, but she did know one thing—whatever it was, it couldn’t be good.

Chapter Two

Mordichai perched on top of the Empire State Building. The wind had kicked up, and even now in the middle of August, the air this high was chilled. Mordi hardly noticed, though. His favorite propulsion and invisibility cloak was wrapped tight around his

shoulders, a barrier against the elements and a shield against prying eyes.

Of course, *this* high the only prying eyes would be the tourists with their zoom lenses peering straight up or passengers in low-flying aircraft looking to see if King Kong was home. For a moment, he amused himself by picturing the faces of those passengers if he decided to shapeshift into the giant ape, hang on to the building's spire, and beat his chest.

He bit back a grin. Fun to think about, but probably a little too flamboyant for a stakeout. Better to sit quietly and invisibly up here and wait for his quarry to appear below.

And so he waited. And waited. And waited some more. He was thrilled to no longer be on probation, to be a full-fledged one-hundred-percent member of the Council. But he had to admit that on some days a life of legitimacy could be exceedingly dull.

Not that Mordi had any regrets. He didn't. He'd walked away from his father and from the Outcast life, and he wasn't about to look back. A little tedium was worth the price for knowing that now, finally, he was doing the right thing. And besides, the moments of tedium were usually counterbalanced by unexpected flurries of pure adrenal excitement.

He stifled a yawn. At the moment, some of that excitement would be most welcome.

Forcing himself to focus, he once again aimed his binocs at the street below. There'd been many a time when he'd envied his cousin Zoë, whose superpowers included super senses, but never more so than times like these, when he was on a stakeout and could really, *really* use super hearing or super vision.

Lacking either, he instead adjusted the high-powered binocs, aiming them at the street. For three days, he'd been following Clyde, an Outcast who was wanted by the Council for violating not only the strict prohibition against Outcasts using their powers, but also for seeking to inflict harm on a mortal.

Several mortals, actually. Before he went on the lam, Clyde had been Hieronymous Black's right-hand man, doing much of the bigwig Outcast's dirty work.

It was Hieronymous's firm opinion that mortals were a substandard race, and that Protectors who sought to protect them were short-sighted and foolish. In Hieronymous's mind, Protectors were like gods, and those measly little mortals should bend to his will. If the mortals didn't like that plan... well, then too bad. Hieronymous would have no trouble at all simply exterminating their entire race.

Mordi stifled a shudder, recalling some of Hieronymous's more extreme plots. So many times the brilliant Outcast had almost succeeded. Scary, really. And now, with the Council and the mortal governments renegotiating the Secret Mortal-Protector Treaty of 1970 ... well, Mordi supposed it was a good thing that mortals didn't know

just how many times they'd come *that* close to extinction or enslavement. If mortals knew how much some Outcasts had it in for them, and how possible it was that any Protector might turn Outcast, they'd probably be supremely leery about signing a treaty with *any* of super blood—even the good guys.

And for every stunt that Hieronymous had pulled, Clyde had been right there. He was the muscle enforcing his commander's will. The perfect soldier, ready to do whatever Hieronymous might ask.

Mordi stifled a grimace, wishing he could keep his thoughts in little boxes so he wouldn't keep thinking about Hieronymous. Or, barring that, he wished he could think of Hieronymous *only* as an Outcast.

He tried; really he did. But no matter how much he attempted to wrest some control of his thoughts, eventually Mordi's mind returned to the facts: who Hieronymous was—*his blood, his sire*. Hieronymous was Mordi's father.

Frustrated, he twisted on the building's spire, his gaze taking in the full length of Fifth Avenue. He and Hieronymous might share the same blood, but that didn't mean they were related. Not anymore. Yes, there was a time when Mordi leaped when his father said "boo," but that time was long gone.

He'd never once managed to please Hieronymous, and now he wasn't even trying. Mordi had moved on. He'd found a place among the Council. A place where not only was he useful, he was *appreciated*.

His mind wandered to his recent conversation with Zephron, in which the High Elder had asked that Mordi and Mordi's cousin Zoë participate in the ongoing treaty renegotiations. After all, Halflings were half-mortal; Zephron thought their presence at the negotiating table might ease the mortal ambassadors' minds.

An ironic twist of fate, all things considered. Hieronymous had always scorned Mordi's Halfling status. Now that very status had elevated him to the upper echelons of the Council. Instead of being scorned, he was needed. And that, frankly, had been a long time coming.

Right now, though, he was determined not to think about his father or the negotiations. He was here to watch Clyde. And by doing so, Mordi would catch himself yet another traitor. Lucky thirteen this one would be. And Mordi couldn't wait.

As if his thoughts had conjured the man, Clyde appeared on the street below, his hulking form emerging from one of the office buildings and loping toward Thirty-fourth Street. Mordi's fingers tightened around the binocs as he wondered if today would be the day.

As a member of the Protector Oversight Committee, Mordi had been privy to recent intelligence suggesting that a certain well-placed Protector had been assisting and

passing information to Clyde and other Outcasts.

But it wasn't Clyde that Mordi was after. No, the Outcast was proving too useful at ferreting out spies and traitors within the Council's organization.

Today, Mordi was hoping to catch Romulus Rothgar in the act.

A Protector First Class, Romulus was the last person that anyone would think was a traitor. Anyone, that is, except Mordi.

He'd been watching Romulus for months. Watching his face in particular. And his shuttered expression Mordi recognized. He'd seen it before, on the faces of his father's comrades, and on his own reflection before he'd finally come to terms with who he was and what he truly wanted.

No, Mordi had no doubts at all. Romulus had something to hide, and Mordi intended to figure out what it was.

Unfortunately, on this mission he was on his own. He'd sought approval from his supervisor, but Elder Bilius had turned him down. Romulus had a perfect record and an upstanding family, and that knowledge enveloped him, a solid blanket of protection.

So now Mordi was here unofficially, gliding through the sky, his propulsion cloak set to silent mode as he followed Clyde, hovering a good twenty feet above the Outcast and at a respectable distance behind him. If Romulus *did* meet with Clyde, then Mordi was golden; interaction between Protectors and Outcasts-on-the-lam was a punishable offense. Mordi was certain a meeting would take place ... and he intended to be there when it went down.

Clyde moved with deliberation down the street, and Mordi hoped that he didn't descend into one of the subway stations. No such luck, for after a few more blocks Clyde did just that, disappearing into the subterranean bowels of Manhattan.

Damn it to Hades! This was most inconvenient.

Mordi swooped down, still invisible, leaving in his wake a rush of wild air. The stairs were narrow, and he brushed against a woman, her startled cry from being thrust aside by something solid and invisible echoing through the corridor.

As soon as he reached the inside of the station, he stopped, glancing around until he saw Clyde, who was biding his time on the platform.

Romulus, however, was nowhere to be seen. *Hades and damnation*, surely Mordi wasn't off on a wild Outcast chase!

In the distance, a train started to rumble. Mordi leaned against a tiled pillar and waited, foot tapping. As soon as Clyde got on that train, Mordi would follow. He'd follow the