



DRUM *up*  
*the* DAWN

GALAXY GIRL - BOOK ONE

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## Chapter One

If not for the nightmare, Kenzie Shepherd would have been nowhere near her favorite coffee shop the moment the tweaker decided to hold it up. Instead, she would have been at work on the fifth floor of Emerald City Media listening to Aaron Mulvaney, her department head, drone on about budget cuts and click-through rates, falling subscription numbers and how they were lucky to even be employed in an industry struggling to stay afloat in the new media reality. But sometime during the previous night, she'd awakened in her dark studio, pulse pounding in her ears, eyes seeking out the flames still flickering against her eyelids.

It had taken long minutes to calm her mind, to convince herself that she was safe, that it had just been a dream. The same dream, in fact, that had haunted her for years, recurring at odd times without warning. For an indeterminate space of time, she'd struggled to get back to sleep, only to succumb at last to a slumber so deep she'd missed her alarm. She'd only awakened when the text alert she'd set for her sister went off: "Danger, Will Robinson. Danger."

The text hadn't been an actual emergency (unless a funny dog video was an emergency). After rushing around her condo, Kenzie had tugged on her raincoat and run for the bus, automatically checking her speed so that she wouldn't attract attention. Normally, she liked to walk the mile and a half to work even on rainy spring mornings like this one, but today she didn't have the luxury. Caffeine, on the other hand, was not a luxury. It was a necessity. She'd barely hesitated before joining the short line at Cloudtastic Coffee. She was already ridiculously late; what difference could another five minutes make?

At first, she wasn't sure the kid in the Nike balaclava leaning over the front counter was actually trying to rob the coffee shop. Then she caught the eye of the barista at the cash register—

Courtney, a pierced twenty-something Kenzie had gotten to know in the three years she'd worked in Belltown. The look on Courtney's face wasn't wild or fearful but rather resigned, as if she could fully believe that this was, in fact, happening.

Kenzie didn't stop to consider consequences. She didn't hear her sister's voice in her head, warning her to stay hidden. She didn't think about xenophobes or terrorist splinter groups. She simply acted. Time seemed to slow, individual seconds drawing themselves out as if she had pressed a giant pause button hovering above the planet. The people around her froze, and even sound and light waves decelerated. In the space between moments that only she seemed able to navigate, she relieved the would-be thief of his mask and gun in one swift swoop. Before a single second could slip past, she was out of the coffee shop and down the street, ducking into a narrow alley a block and a half away. There, behind a rusting green dumpster, she removed the bullets from the handgun and used her inhuman strength to bend the barrel into a pretzel. Satisfied it was inoperable, she stuffed the gun in the bottom of her messenger bag, tossed the balaclava in the trash bin, and rejoined the foot traffic on the busy city sidewalk, ducking her head so that the brim on her raincoat's hood blocked her face from view.

Almost immediately a police car careened past on the wet street, siren wailing. That was fast. But then police cars weren't exactly few and far between in downtown Seattle. Nor were video cameras, she realized, freezing momentarily. A pedestrian ducked past her, muttering under his breath, and she unfroze. The coffee shop had at least one security camera, which meant her actions had likely been captured on film. Even if they hadn't, Courtney knew her name and where she worked. She had looked Kenzie in the eye just before she'd "blurred," as Kenzie's sister called it. Courtney would tell the police what she'd seen, wouldn't she? *Who* she'd seen? They might not

believe her, and the video might be too grainy in the dimly lit interior on a dark Seattle morning to show much. But the report could find its way to the eyes and ears of a Sentinel agent.

The historic brick building that housed the Emerald City Media company loomed just ahead, and Kenzie's pulse pounded erratically for the second time that morning as she followed a man in a business suit inside. What had she just done? A decade of hiding from Panopticon, possibly blown in an instant.

The elevator to the ECM floor was faster than taking the stairs at a normal pace. Kenzie distracted herself from her dislike of small spaces by rehearsing the inevitable argument with her sister: She'd *had* to act; she couldn't just stand there and let Courtney get threatened by a meth head with a gun. Besides, it was over. No way to go back and change the past now. If she'd had that particular superpower, a botched hold-up of a coffee shop wasn't the scene she would choose to revisit.

Aaron gave her a frown when she slid into an empty chair in the conference room, but he didn't comment. He was from the Midwest and relied heavily on non-verbal communication, Kenzie had noticed in her two years of reporting to him.

Her best friend, Matt Greene, leaned forward from two seats down to mouth at her, "Dude, you're late!"

"Dude, I know," she responded in similar fashion.

Her phone buzzed, and she checked it surreptitiously. Antonio Santos, her "other best friend," as he had christened himself, had sent her a gif of a basketball player missing a basket. She watched it twice, but she had no idea what meaning she was supposed to derive from the image. Still, she glanced down the conference table to where Antonio was sitting surrounded by his "writer buds"—mostly sports journalists like him—and gave him the amused smile she hoped he was

waiting for. Then she turned her gaze toward the PowerPoint projection at the front of the room that contained website user data related to the number of characters in email newsletter subject lines, headlines, and story snips.

Sure enough, she'd arrived in time for yet another depressing meeting on the declining popularity of traditional news media.

Her sister's comment when she'd declared her major at the University of Washington half a decade earlier came back to her now, as it often did: *Are you sure you want to join a sinking ship?* But she hadn't listened, and now here she was wondering daily if her job would exist in a week, month, year. At least she was multi-talented, with skills in writing, photography, and video production. The U-Dub journalism department encouraged their graduates to be versatile—wisely, in Kenzie's opinion.

While Aaron droned on, she held her phone under the edge of the notebook she was never without, scrolling through Twitter for any Seattle news and crime hashtags that might reference the coffee shop assault. But there was nothing—yet.

“Kenzie,” Aaron said, his voice edged with something she couldn't quite read, “I'd like to talk to you. Everyone else, get back to work. Thanks, team.”

Antonio gave her a surreptitious thumbs-up on his way out, while Matt brushed past and murmured teasingly, “Oooh, someone's in trouble.”

“Zip it,” she muttered, elbowing him perhaps a tad too hard, judging from his sharp intake of breath. *Whoops.*

The edge in her boss's voice, she soon learned, was eagerness, something she didn't often associate with him. Irritation and general all-around curmudgeonry, yes. Fangirl levels of agitation? Not so much.

“Are you still working on the trade show write-up?” he asked, hand smoothing back one of the few patches of buzzed hair that still remained on his mostly bald head.

“Yes. I should have it in time for the afternoon deadline,” she said, though it would take a Herculean effort to complete the piece. She was fully capable of such effort, if a tad unwilling, so it wasn’t a genuine falsehood, was it?

“Scrap it for now. I have another assignment for you,” he said, and waved her along with him as he left the conference room. “You’re familiar with Ava Westbrook?”

Kenzie blinked as she accompanied him through the newsroom to his office with its rectangular window that looked out over Belltown, Elliott Bay gray and gloomy in the distance. Of course she knew who Ava Westbrook was. As the daughter of General Alexander Westbrook, founder of Panopticon—the US government’s alien identification and regulation bureau—Ava was definitely on Kenzie’s radar. As an innovative engineer who had recently moved to Seattle to take over as chief operations officer at her family’s company, Hyperion Tech, she was doubly of interest. The fact that she was super hot totally had no bearing on Kenzie’s awareness.

“Not, like, personally,” she said.

“I didn’t mean personally.” Aaron’s voice was impatient as he slid into his chair and typed the password to his sleek desktop computer. “She’s basically been a recluse since her brother’s trial, but today that changes. Todd Warren is going to interview her at her office this afternoon, and I want you along to take photographs. It’s just the kind of exclusive we need to lift our numbers.”

Kenzie’s eyes narrowed slightly. Todd Warren was a veteran war reporter who didn’t normally cover the tech industry. That was Kenzie’s beat, along with Matt and a handful of other staff. Then again, the arrest and imprisonment of Ava Westbrook’s older brother, Nicholas, the previous year wasn’t traditional tech news, either, and yet, here they were.

“Of course,” she said neutrally, already planning her phone call to her sister.

“I trust you can get up to speed on the Westbrooks on your own?” Aaron asked, his eyes fixed on one of his two massive screens.

“Absolutely.”

“Good. Then get to it.”

She got to it, ignoring Matt’s questioning look as she made a beeline through the newsroom, headed for the women’s restroom with her phone in the pocket of her khakis. There were two women already there, and she had to smile politely through a conversation about morning beverages before, at last, she was alone. This room was the only one on her floor that she could guarantee was free of surveillance equipment. She leaned against the door to the hall, punched a shortcut key on her phone, and waited for her sister to pick up.

“Kenzie? Are you okay?” Sloane sounded concerned. But then, she often sounded concerned. It was understandable, given the current cultural climate around alien-human relations. While a decent number of people knew that Kenzie had been adopted by the Shepherd-Hendersons when she was twelve, only a handful were aware that she hadn’t been born on Earth.

“I’m fine,” she assured her sister, and then paused. Should she tell her about the coffee shop? But no, as long as social media stayed quiet, she should be fine. Ava Westbrook, on the other hand, was a more pressing concern.

“You can’t go there,” Sloane declared before Kenzie had even finished describing her assignment. “That’d be like walking into the lion’s den willingly.”

Through her phone’s speaker, Kenzie could hear the click of shoes against concrete and pictured her big sister pacing the central floor of Seattle’s Panopticon office, the blue, red, and black

circular seal painted over much of its surface. Across the top of the circle the following words were inscribed: “PANOPTICON: AN EYE ON HUMANITY” while the bottom of the circle read, “United States of America.” At the center was an image of a tower with a spotlight that reminded Kenzie of a lighthouse. Matt said it looked more like “some creepy-ass Sauron tower shit” out of *Lord of the Rings*. To be honest, he had a point.

“There’s no evidence linking Ava Westbrook to Sentinel,” Kenzie argued, keeping an ear out for approaching footsteps. “Unless you have information I don’t know about?”

This was a sore point between them. Her sister often withheld information on the basis of the oath of confidentiality she had sworn the day she joined Panopticon. Which was fair, but still.

“Oh, little sister, there is so much you don’t know about,” Sloane predictably replied. “But no, there’s nothing to connect Ava Westbrook to Sentinel. Other than the fact HER FATHER FUNDED IT AND HER BROTHER RAN IT.”

If she’d been human, Kenzie would have winced at her sister’s elevated tone. As it was, she merely rolled her eyes. “Obviously. That’s why I called you.”

“So we’re agreed, then? You’re not going on this little interview?”

Kenzie took a calming breath, reminding herself that her sister meant well with her bullying tactics. “Except I am.”

“But—”

“Sloane. I do not tell you how to do your job, do I?”

“That’s because I am a trained government agent, while you are...”

“Invulnerable? Is that the word you’re looking for?”

Sloane sputtered, and Kenzie momentarily felt bad for lording her alien advantages (as their parents had delicately referred to the powers exhibited by natives of Zattalia, her home planet) over her sister. But sometimes such gloating was necessary.

“Fine,” her sister said grouchily. “But I want to have eyes and ears on that office, got it?”

“Maybe. If it’s convenient. Otherwise, I’ll text you when I’m done.”

“Kenzie Min Zat Shepherd—” her sister started.

“Gotta go,” Kenzie interrupted cheerily. “Love you, sis. Bye-ee!”

As an unregistered alien, it was useful having a sister high up in the local Panopticon office, but knowing when to cut and run, as the idiom went, was also a good thing.

Back at her desk, Kenzie pulled up Nexis and typed in “Nicholas Westbrook.” As the results poured in—*oh my god*, she thought, eyes wide as she stared at the sheer number of relevant headlines—she noticed Matt waving at her from above the top of her monitor. Their desks were separated only by a low cubicle wall, a situation that sometimes reduced her work efficiency. But they had spent countless hours studying together in the Gothic reading room at U-Dub’s library—eerily reminiscent, they’d agreed, of the Great Hall at Hogwarts—and they’d both managed to graduate with honors. When it mattered, they worked well together.

“What’s up, bub?” she asked, barely glancing up from her screen. She clicked on a link to a news story near the top of the results: “Marine Captain Nicholas Westbrook indicted on charges of alien intimidation, harassment, kidnapping, and murder.” Sounded about right.

“So what did Vaney say?” Matt asked, invoking their private nickname for the boss.

“Warren and I are interviewing Ava Westbrook.”

Matt actually—and unsurprisingly to everyone who worked near him—squealed. He could be as excitable as Kenzie, which was probably what had drawn them together their first year of college.

“You are not!”

“No, really, I am.”

“Are you going to ask her about Sentinel?”

Kenzie glanced around quickly, but no one nearby appeared to be listening. “Of course not. And lower your voice.”

“Sorry.” At least he had the grace to look abashed. He’d known about her other worldly identity for almost as long as they’d been friends, and he wasn’t always the best at being inconspicuous, a fact that drove her sister crazy. “But seriously, what a sweet assignment. I mean, I know she’s related to alien-hating warmongers, but Ava Westbrook is hot *and* nerdy.”

Definitely not Kenzie’s favorite type of woman. Except she was—warmongering family members aside, of course. Kenzie had never shared the tiny fact of her bisexuality with Matt, though. Actually, she’d never shared it with anyone, not even her sister. She’d always figured it would come up if and when there was a reason—like a girlfriend or at least an impending date. So far, neither situation had arisen.

She cleared her throat pointedly. “I have to do a bunch of research, okay?”

“Oh, okay. I see you. Have fun with your ‘research,’” he said.

She ignored his implied double quotes to focus on her screen again. Matt was right about one thing—the Westbrooks were literal warmongers. The General, the architect behind Panopticon, had created the US government agency to keep an eye not on humanity, as its motto claimed, but squarely on non-humans. Rumor had it the original name was supposed to be Bureau of Alien

Affairs, but the acronym didn't work so an alternative had been chosen. General Westbrook had died a number of years earlier in a grisly murder-suicide carried out by a distraught alien who'd claimed Panopticon killed his family, an allegation that had never been adequately confirmed or denied, in Kenzie's opinion.

After the General's death, his son Nicholas had secretly used his position as head of Sentinel—Panopticon's military arm—to track down registered and unregistered aliens alike, subjecting them to a variety of experiments in the supposed name of keeping humans safe from off-worlders. After an alien with friends in the federal government managed to escape Sentinel's clutches, Nicholas Westbrook had been arrested and his unit disbanded. Numerous operatives had escaped, however, and rumor had it that Sentinel had recreated itself as an underground terrorist group with an avowedly anti-alien agenda.

This was why Kenzie's adopted parents had contended registration was risky and encouraged her to pass as human instead. There were too many xenophobic humans in positions of power, they'd argued convincingly, with the tools and desire to harm those like Kenzie whose powers made them seem like potential threats. But was Ava Westbrook like her father and brother? And what about her mother, Dr. Amelia Thornton? A physicist by training who up until her son's arrest had run the family's multi-billion-dollar business, Hyperion Tech, makers of assorted drone and robotics technologies, Dr. Thornton had recently resigned to pursue "personal matters." She'd stuck around just long enough to appoint her daughter and cousin to positions of leadership within the embattled corporation. Dr. Thornton's opinion on aliens was mostly undocumented, though some of Hyperion's products had a distinctly pro-human, anti-off-worlder bent.

Similarly, Ava Westbrook's sentiment toward aliens was unknown. In Kenzie's opinion, Ava had something going for her that her mother lacked: She had testified against her brother at his trial,

providing cell phone and email records that had helped the federal government make their case against their supposedly wayward soldier. But did that make her a friend to the resident aliens of Earth? Not necessarily. Just because Ava appeared to believe in law and order didn't mean she thought off-world refugees belonged on Earth.

Kenzie's stomach growled. Time for her mid-morning snack. Any further questions about Ava Westbrook's political beliefs would have to wait.

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Ava Westbrook's landline buzzed a moment before her assistant's voice echoed through the spacious office. "The reporters from Emerald City Media are here. Should I send them in?"

She hesitated before pressing the conference button. "Not yet. I'll let you know when I'm ready."

"Yes, Miss Westbrook," Chloe said, a hint of a smirk in her voice.

Ava ignored the semi-impertinent tone and added another item to her endless to-do list: *Interview for a new assistant*. She had inherited Chloe from her mother along with her current title, Chief Operations Officer. Frankly, neither had been especially wanted. Ava had been perfectly happy as head of Research and Development in Hyperion's New York office, but then her brother had gone off the rails and her mother had jumped ship. To keep the company in the family, Hyperion needed at least two members of the Thornton clan in leadership positions, and she had decided that the position being offered was an opportunity she couldn't pass up. While Victoria, her mother's cousin, had agreed to become CEO and president of the board, Ava had taken on the role that would allow her to oversee the company's culture.

As COO, she was convinced she could guide Hyperion away from its roots in weapons systems and robotics and into more progressive industries like artificial intelligence and clean energy. She was confident that with time, she could help the organization recognize the business sense in changing courses. Recent growth in wind power, solar photovoltaics, and fuel cell technologies presented a huge financial opportunity. Hyperion could be on the forefront of the inevitable move away from petroleum products—which were finite, after all—toward renewable resources that weren't only better for the environment but offered significantly less risk.

Ava spun in her seat, taking a breath to settle her worry over the impending interview. While her mother's former assistant might not be ideal, she had to admit that the office digs were spectacular. A wall of windows opened onto a balcony that looked out over Seattle's vibrant downtown and Elliott Bay, with the Olympic Mountains visible to the west on a clear day and Mt. Rainier's impressive mass dwarfing the Cascade Range to the south. Still, she missed her comfortable, windowless lab back in New York. Seattle felt like a small town compared to the crazy energy of Manhattan, which fancied itself the center of the universe. Missed, too, the sense of quiet competence of working in R&D. She had never quite been able to shake her name, but her projects had spoken for themselves. No one whispered charges of nepotism when her nano technology brought in billions. Since coming to Seattle, though, the whispers had grown to a near chorus. It didn't help that despite her MBA, she felt out of her depth at the helm of a company mired in controversy, thanks to her brother's depraved crimes against Earth's alien community.

She stared out at the gray clouds hanging over the city and bay on a cool spring day. This interview was just another obligation she didn't want to manage. But Victoria wasn't giving her a choice, and worrying wouldn't prevent the meeting from taking place. Better to get it over with and return to work as quickly as possible.

Swiveling her chair back to face the interior of her office, she pressed the intercom button. “Chloe, please send my visitors in.”

“Yes, Miss Westbrook.”

She winced. Chloe’s insistence on invoking her last name at every turn felt purposeful, particularly given that Ava had asked her not to. Maybe she should place finding a new assistant at the top of that endless list.

The double doors at one end of the wide room opened, and as the first of two figures entered, Ava rose and walked to meet the pair. She was rehearsing her greeting—strong but polite—in her mind when she focused on the woman in the lead, and all at once she forgot about first impressions with the local press. This reporter was beautiful, with blonde hair pulled away from her face in a neat chignon, blue eyes that were inquisitive behind chunky black frames, and broad shoulders that seemed out of place on a writer. Not that Ava minded them. In fact, muscles paired with ephemeral beauty was one of her favorite combinations.

Inwardly, Ava groaned. Great. Now she was a nervous *gay* mess for her first interview with the media. Just perfect.

She took another deep breath and fastened a smile to her face, turning her attention to the man hulking behind the female reporter. Her stomach dropped again but far less pleasantly as Todd Warren stared back at her. Ava knew this man. He had penned several inflammatory articles about Sentinel in general and her brother in particular at the time of the trial. Nothing he had written had been inaccurate, of course; it was just that Ava would have appreciated a tad less besmirching of the Westbrook name given that her brother was mentally ill and her father wasn’t around to defend himself.

“Mr. Warren,” she said silkily, waving the pair toward her desk. “What a surprise. I didn’t realize you were based at Emerald City Media.”

“Not all writers work out of New York,” he replied, holding out one of the chairs for his colleague.

And, *ew*. Chivalry equated a bit too closely with misogyny in Ava’s mind. Apparently, Warren’s fellow reporter agreed—she gave him a narrow-eyed look before pulling out the other chair for herself and settling into it. Then she sprang back to her feet, nearly knocking the chair over.

“Sorry, I’m Kenzie Shepherd,” she announced in a rush, and thrust her hand toward Ava almost forcefully.

Ava couldn’t help smiling at the other woman’s awkwardness. It was always good to realize you weren’t the only nervous one in the room. “Miss Shepherd,” she said, and delicately took the extended hand in her own. Which was a mistake, she realized belatedly, as her mind decided to catalog the unusual warmth and softness of the skin against hers, of the strength in the long, elegant fingers gripping her own, of the fascinating blue color of the other woman’s eyes as they widened slightly...

*Right*. That was more than enough chaotic gay energy for a meeting with the press.

Ava released Kenzie’s hand and turned away. Instead of returning to her executive chair, she detoured to an armoire along a nearby wall. “Can I get you anything to drink?” she asked as she poured herself a glass of water from a Brita pitcher.

“No, thank you,” Warren said. “Actually, I wanted to ask—”

“And you, Miss Shepherd?” Ava interrupted. “Would you care for a beverage? I have water, soda, or even something a bit more interesting, if you’re so inclined.” *Oh my god, Ava, shut up shut up*

*shut up*, she told herself. Flirting with a pretty reporter was not a good idea even without Todd Warren present to witness the exchange.

Kenzie ducked her head, and Ava stared as the other woman's neck turned a delicate shade of rose. "No, thank you."

*Crap*. She was straight, wasn't she, and Ava had made her uncomfortable. Just another embarrassing social exchange in the life of a nerdy lesbian technophile. There was a reason Ava preferred laboratories to executive suites, product demonstrations to feature article interviews.

She took a long gulp of water and returned to her desk. "So," she said breezily, pretending the last minute hadn't actually happened. "What can I help the two of you with?"

The interview format was pretty much what she had anticipated: questions about her ascension at Hyperion, about where her mother had gotten to, about the difficulties for the family-owned company around her brother's xenophobic assaults on innocent alien refugees. Warren, like most members of the press Ava had met, was clearly a progressive when it came to alien relations, and she tried not to bristle too overtly at the way he lumped Hyperion and the Westbrook family in with Nick's bizarre acts. Her brother had never been officially diagnosed with personality disorder, but it didn't take much imagination to see a correlation between their father's death and Nick's paranoid delusions. And yes, she had helped put him away, but that was because it had been the right thing to do. It didn't mean she didn't love her brother less, even if she would never forgive him for the terrible things he had done.

She could feel Kenzie's curious gaze on her as Warren made yet another snide suggestion about Hyperion's technological focus on the alien community, and it was probably that awareness that made her suddenly push back from her desk, shaking her head. "No, you know what? I'm not

doing this. I know what it looks like from the outside, and I know what you think you see. But Hyperion isn't anti-alien, and neither am I, Mr. Warren."

"Really?" he asked, his tone dubious.

"Really," she said firmly. "My interests lie in helping all the communities of Earth, no matter where they may have originated. We all share this planet now, and frankly, there are far graver issues that need our focus. Climate change is the single most complex threat facing every living being on Earth, and I am more interested both personally and professionally in finding a solution to the melting of the permafrost and the increasing acidification of our oceans than I am in debating who belongs and who doesn't. Frankly, we don't have the luxury at this point in our history to focus on the wrong priorities, which is why I'm determined to make Hyperion Tech a leading proponent in the fight to slow climate change—for the sake of the planet *and* for the sake of my family's reputation."

And, oh, *crap*, Victoria was going to be so pissed, Ava realized as her irritation ebbed as quickly as it had risen. These were definitely not the talking points she was supposed to be rolling out to the press. Careful neutrality was the safe route, not proudly proclaiming her personal views on the human-alien question. But too bad. Her mother and Victoria had promoted her knowing exactly where she stood on these issues. No way was she going to stay in the proverbial closet.

Victoria was currently at an off-site meeting, however, while Kenzie Shepherd was sitting directly across from Ava, a slow smile blooming as she appeared to digest her statement. Well, that was something, anyway. She'd managed to impress the straight girl.

"Huh," Warren said, still sounding like he thought she was about to raise her hand in Sentinel's once-secret pro-human salute. "I haven't heard you say those things before. Why is that?"

And off they went again, covering the same old territory. Ava fell back on the neat sound bites her PR chief had drilled into her, and the interview wrapped up a short time later. Except they weren't done yet, Ava realized. Kenzie had pulled a digital camera from her messenger bag and was holding it up.

"Could I get a couple of photos of you?" she asked almost shyly.

"Of course," Ava said, nodding graciously even though she longed to refuse. In R&D, the glossies had featured her team or their results, not her. "Where do you want me?"

This time, the blush was less rose and more red. Kenzie bit her lip and looked away, eyes alighting on the sofa. "What about there?"

Ava rose and walked to the couch. At least she had worn a skirt. Her curves might seem less noticeable in a jacket and pencil skirt. She settled on the cool leather couch, a mid-century modern in cream that, frankly, was the least comfortable piece of furniture she had ever encountered. Her mother had said it kept her visitors from relaxing too much. Yet another item on Ava's to-do list: *buy a new office couch.*

Kenzie fussed with the settings on the camera before approaching and kneeling before her. Ava wasn't sure if she should smile or not. Before she could decide, Kenzie lifted the camera and asked, "So what's your favorite food?"

The question threw her slightly. "My favorite food?"

"You know, the things you put into your body to keep it going?"

Ava smiled at the friendly look in Kenzie's eyes, and—*there*. The camera's shutter audibly clicked a few times. "I see what you're doing, Miss Shepherd."

“It’s Kenzie.” She winked cheekily and volunteered, “Mine is sushi. Have you been to Shiro’s in Belltown yet?”

Though Ava recognized Kenzie’s strategy to relax her, that awareness didn’t appear to lessen the tactic’s effectiveness. “I haven’t,” she admitted. “I only moved to Seattle a short time ago.”

“Oh, that’s right. Well, you should definitely check it out. I go there like three times a week—it’s on my way home from work, which is frankly a bit dangerous for my bank account.”

“Shiro’s, in Belltown,” Ava repeated, filing away the name for future reference. In her book, you could never have too many sushi recommendations.

“It’s totally the best,” Kenzie said, occasionally snapping photos as she changed positions and spots around the couch. “Although, I mean, obviously there are tons of others since Seattle is the closest American city to Japan. Or, at least, the closest in the lower forty-eight.”

She was adorable and even a touch masculine in her khakis and collared shirt, lean muscles evident as her sleeves shifted across her arms. Ava was tantalized enough to say, her voice teasing, “So is this a PSA or an invitation?”

Kenzie’s head shot up and she stared at Ava, a clear question in her eyes. The shutter clicked as their gazes held, and then Kenzie glanced down at the camera and cleared her throat. “Um, I probably have what I need. Want to take a look and let me know your thoughts?”

Ava couldn’t remember ever being given a choice about which photo ran with a story about her family’s company. She nodded, inhaling subtly (she hoped) as Kenzie dropped onto the couch beside her, their arms and legs almost touching. Kenzie held up the camera so that Ava could see assorted stills of herself, and she paged through them, impressed by the quality. The final shot captured her smirking at Kenzie, one eyebrow slightly raised, and she realized she looked—a little bit devious, really. More like her mother and brother and less like the remote, all-business persona she’d

worked hard to develop since coming to work at Hyperion. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

"So, what do you think?" Kenzie asked.

"I think you're very good at your job," Ava said, and glanced up. This close, she could see the flecks of dark gray among the blue of Kenzie's irises and realized that was why her eyes seemed darker than they actually were. She could see the freckles dotting Kenzie's face, too, so light they almost weren't there.

"You should take a few more," Warren said, his voice too loud in the quiet room. "Just to be sure."

Kenzie blinked a few times and rose, ducking her head, while irritation rose sharp and fast in Ava again. She got quite enough mansplaining at Hyperion, thank you very much. She stood, too, clasping her hands together in front of her as she turned an icy glare on the senior reporter.

"Unfortunately, that's all the time I have for you, Mr. Warren. If you have additional questions, I'm sure my assistant would be happy to help."

Predictably, Warren hemmed and hawed, but Ava was resolute as she ushered the pair to the door. Just before they reached it, she couldn't resist the urge to touch Kenzie, brushing her palm against the other woman's forearm.

"It was nice meeting you, Kenzie. I hope this isn't the last time we talk?" she asked, because apparently being rebuffed by pretty blonde reporters was a kink she hadn't previously known she possessed.

Kenzie paused. "I hope it isn't, either, Miss Westbrook."

"Please, call me Ava."

“Ava,” Kenzie repeated, nodding. Then, with a last small smile, she followed Warren out of the office.

Ava resisted the urge to watch her walk away and instead let the double doors fall closed. Then she returned to her desk, dropped into her chair, and propped her head in both hands. Had she really just done that? Had she actually flirted with a member of the press? Where were her ethics? Or, forget ethics—where was her common sense? Ava was usually so practical, but Kenzie Shepherd had flashed her nervous smile and Ava’s composure had vanished. All she had been able to think was what a shame that Todd Warren had come along for the interview.

She picked up her phone and texted, “I am such a goob.”

Her best friend’s reply came quickly: “DUH!” A moment later, another message appeared. “Wait, what’s the context?”

“I flirted with a straight reporter during an interview and then told her I hoped we would meet again.” She added a forehead smacking emoji. Normally she didn’t have much of an emoji game, but desperate times and so forth.

“Aw, look at u trying to get ur game on!” Beatrice typed back, and included a clapping emoji.

“I hate you,” Ava typed. Then she added, “I miss you. Hugs to the boys.”

“Miss u too, babe. ILY!”

A cascade of hearts, rainbow flags, and kisses followed, and Ava smiled fondly before setting down her phone and turning back to her massive computer screen. Her to-do list wasn’t going to complete itself, which was just as well. Staying busy was the only way to distract her from the conviction she’d made a complete idiot of herself in front of the attractive reporter. If she was lucky, this really would be the last time they talked.

A pang of what felt almost like regret surfaced, but Ava shoved it down deep, burying it with practiced ease beneath her mountain of current responsibilities. Westbrook did not dwell on past mistakes, her father had often declared. They marched forward, carrying the rest of the company with them.

Of her own volition, Ava's fingers typed "Kenzie Shepherd" into a search field, and down the rabbit hole she happily went even though her father—not to mention Hyperion Tech's shareholders—would definitely not approve.

## Chapter Two

It all started with Courtney's questionable Instagram post.

Well, Kenzie could admit that "it" actually began with her own decision to intercede in a robbery despite every reason not to. But the police didn't contact her in the days that followed the incident at Cloudtastic, and social media stayed quiet, with no mention that she could find of a superpowered individual playing Robin Hood in downtown Seattle. The lack of local authorities breaking down her door combined with an absence of online speculation to give her a false sense of security, and she ended up spending more time on Dropbox staring dreamily at the photos she'd taken of Ava Westbrook than worrying about potentially outing herself.

That is, until Thursday morning, when she noticed "#SuperSeattleite" trending locally. Gnawing her lower lip, she clicked on the hashtag and discovered the original post that had started it. User @CourtneyLicious had included a shot of herself in her green Cloudtastic T-shirt and apron smiling into the camera with a caption that read, "So guys, I wish I knew the identity of the masked avenger—or hooded avenger, I guess I should say—who helped out during an attempted robbery last week, because I would totally give them a coffee on the house. But, alas, I don't. Whoever they are, I just hope they know I appreciate them. P.S. This is NOT an invitation to Seattleites at large to come assail for me for free coffee, so don't even bother, my dudes."

She hadn't included #SuperSeattleite, but it was a slow news day and some bored hacker type had gotten hold of a grainy video feed that clearly showed Kenzie's back as she blurred into action.

*Fudge*, Kenzie thought, scrolling nervously through the list of retweets and replies. Sloane was going to—

Her text alert went off—*Danger, Will Robinson*—and she winced as she read her sister’s furious text: “WTF DID YOU DO!!!!”

She turned off her notifications and set down her phone, but that didn’t stop the avalanche of anxiety currently ravaging her nervous system as she closed Twitter and returned to her story in progress. But her mind didn’t quite make the transition. She’d been staring blindly at the tech industry’s latest earnings report (and not at Ava Westbrook’s photos, especially not that last shot where she was gazing absolutely predatorily at Kenzie; although Kenzie’s inability to read human expressions and intentions was legendary, so there was that) for at least five minutes when Matt suddenly swiveled his chair about and scooted it around to her side, waving his phone in the air.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” he demanded, his whisper more like a poorly hidden shout of excitement, in Kenzie’s opinion.

Fully aware what he was referencing, she pretended to squint down at the screen. “What? I don’t—what?”

He leveled an impatient look at her. “Dude, that’s totally you.”

“Who?”

“There,” he said, pausing the video to point at her back.

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is! They’re your height and build, plus I recognize your raincoat.”

“It’s from REI. It could literally belong to anyone in Seattle.”

“It literally belongs to you. Besides, check the time stamp—that’s the day you strolled in late to the meeting with your Cloudtastic cup in hand. It’s totally you.”

“It’s someone who looks like me,” she insisted, glancing around to see if anyone was looking their way. They were not, and as far as she knew, she was the only person in the newsroom with enhanced hearing abilities. Not to mention, super vision, flight, super strength, and the ability to move faster than the human eye could follow, to list a few of the powers the Shepherds had insisted she keep hidden since coming to Earth a dozen years earlier.

Matt waved a hand. “I don’t know why you’re denying this to me, of all people. I’m the one who’s been telling you for years to do this exact thing.”

Kenzie closed her eyes. “Please, not the superhero lecture again. For the last time, you cannot be my Alfred or Q or whatever, okay? It’s not my duty to save humankind from itself, Matt.”

“I hear you,” he said unexpectedly. “But what about saving alienkind from humanity? After everything Sentinel has done in the last few years, I get that coming out isn’t exactly safe. But Sentinel has made life super scary for a ton of other people, too, and not every off-worlder has your abilities, you know.”

She expelled a breath because, *dang it*, he had a point. This was actually the exact argument she’d been staging with Sloane semi-regularly—and wildly unsuccessfully—ever since Nicholas Westbrook’s crimes had come to light.

“Besides, I’ve got so many ideas for a costume!” Matt added, grinning. “And a name! How about APB?”

“Um, like the police?”

“Yeah, but in this case it would stand for Alien Protection Bureau.”

Kenzie rolled her eyes. He had read way too many comic books for her to ever take him seriously. “And on that note, get back to work before we both suffer the wrath of Vaney.”

He hesitated before scooting away. “Fine. But this conversation isn’t over.”

She was perfectly aware of that fact.

Still, her sister had a job to do as did she, so at least that confrontation should hold off for a while. As she worked on the boring article about a certain local tech behemoth’s continued rise up every list of measurable success, yada yada yada, she occasionally flicked back to Twitter to check the #SuperSeattleite tag. As the day went on, the tenor of the comments changed, morphing from a combination of excitement and the inevitable alien-bashing from thirty-year-old male virgins to a growing cacophony of questions.

In a tweet with more than a thousand likes, one user decried, “If #SuperSeattleite straight up has Wonder Woman’s powers, why isn’t she using them to help the rest of us? #slacker #selfish #seriously?”

The responses ranged from “How do you know the super alien is female?” (which inspired its own, separate argument over the hero’s shoulders: “way too broad for a chick” versus “clearly tapering into a feminine form”) to “Way to sound entitled, Becky,” and “I’m not sure we want to encourage someone who passes for human AND has that kind of power to feel comfortable in their own skin.” But the replies that got the most retweets and likes were the ones that agreed with the original post. Kenzie checked Instagram briefly, but the response was similar across platforms. Seattle, a well-known liberal haven for off-worlders, was apparently thirsty for a hero.

“Thirsty” reminded her of the interview with Ava Westbrook, and she sighed and put her head down on her desk for an oh-so-brief moment. Sometimes being a non-native Earth inhabitant was ridiculously difficult. Not because of the plethora of Earth languages to learn; her ship’s AI had made sure she was fluent in the planet’s top ten languages before she landed. But even an AI as advanced as the one on her ship struggled with culturally conditioned aspects of interaction like

body language, idioms, or sarcasm. More than ninety percent of human communication was non-verbal, and as a result, Kenzie felt uncertain about her ability to accurately parse what was being communicated at least fifty percent of the time. Possibly more.

Had Ava been angling for an invitation to sushi, or had she simply enjoyed making Kenzie blush? Had she genuinely hoped they would meet again, or was that just something people from the East Coast said? Did Ava have any idea how impossible it would be for them to become friends, let alone flirty sushi dates? But of course she didn't because Kenzie's alien identity was a secret.

Except, possibly, on Instagram and Twitter.

Mulvaney picked that moment to stroll through the bullpen. "I don't pay you to nap, Shepherd," he commented, and continued on toward his private office.

*Right*, Kenzie thought, lifting her head. Back to work. At least this article would give her more time before Sloane attempted to lock her in her condo and throw away the key. Or, worse, lock her in a Panopticon cell, which could conceivably hold her but only because Sloane knew her weaknesses. Along with their parents and D'aman, Kenzie's former Alliance caseworker, Sloane was one of the only people in the world who knew that she hailed from Zattalia, a planet whose citizens had been forced to become space nomads after they'd used up all of their natural resources—sort of like Earth was in the process of doing right now. For centuries, none of the more advanced planets in the Alliance had allowed large groups of Zattalians to settle in their territory, not only because her ancestors had destroyed their own planet through greed but also because of the genetically modified abilities that meant they were perceived as a threat to most other life forms.

If Kenzie was being honest, Zattalians *may* have helped create that animosity by, you know, keeping people from other planets as slaves for a few millennia. But they'd liberated the slaves like a thousand generations earlier, so really, to Kenzie's mind, the peoples of the universe were kind of

holding a grudge. On Earth, that would like disliking medieval Christians for hunting down and killing tens of thousands of women for being “witches” during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Or hating Germans because a couple of generations earlier, the Nazis had tried to annihilate the Jewish people in a broader quest to take over the planet and rule it under an iron fist.

Come to think of it, Kenzie wasn’t a huge fan of Christians or Germans for those very reasons. Maybe the universe’s grudge against the people of Zattalia was more understandable than she’d previously allowed.

Either way, only a very few humans knew how to weaken her and the rest of her brethren—assuming there were any other Zattalians left. The asteroid strike that had taken out their fleet had apparently left next to no survivors, according to intelligence her adopted family had been given. In fact, Kenzie might be the last daughter of Zattalia, for all she knew.

No pressure, really.

Work could only shield her from her sister’s wrath for so long. By six that evening, she knew she had to leave the building or Sloane would storm her current position and yell at her in front of her ECM colleagues assigned to the evening shift. She definitely didn’t want that, so as she jogged down the five flights of stairs, she pulled out her phone and finally responded to her sister’s half dozen increasingly succinct messages: “Sorry, just reading these now. Headed home. Want to have Chinese at my place? My treat.” She added a few smiley, cheerful emojis for good measure and hit send.

Her phone vibrated almost immediately with a message: “I’m already here.”

*Crap.*

A photo soon followed of Kenzie’s kitchen table, white cardboard containers from their mutual favorite Chinese restaurant arranged neatly at one end, and she brightened. Maybe the

upcoming lecture wouldn't be so bad, after all, accompanied as it would be by dumplings, egg rolls, spicy fish filet, and noodles. Her mouth was already watering.

As she exited the building, she glimpsed the silver tower a dozen blocks to the south that bore the Hyperion Tech logo, and spared a thought for Ava Westbrook. Was she still at work on the top floor, the dying light from the sunset piercing her wall of glass windows? If she'd wanted, Kenzie could have trained her augmented vision on the windows in question and checked up on Hyperion's newly minted executive. If she'd really wanted, she could have flown up to Ava's balcony and peered in at her from closer quarters. But not only had she promised Sloane and their mother, Jane, that she wouldn't use her flight powers in the city, she also doubted that a Westbrook would view such a visit in a positive light, no matter what progressive views they professed to possess. The fact was Ava came from a family that not only stereotyped the aliens who had taken refuge on Earth but actively encouraged others to fear them. Whatever Ava's personal beliefs, the Westbrooks had used their extraordinary power and resources to harm, even *kill* innocent aliens. A daughter of such a family—no matter how attractive and personable—could never be a close friend, let alone anything more.

Kenzie forced herself to turn away and run to the nearby stop where her bus had just pulled up. But not too fast, of course. No need to have any #SuperSeattleite sightings tonight. Sloane's blood pressure was probably high enough.

The bus ride home to her condo on Queen Anne only took ten minutes. At the top of the hill, Kenzie disembarked at the Five Spot and headed for the Galer Street Stairs. She'd had the song "Seasons of Love" from *Rent* stuck in her head all week, so she sang it quietly to herself as she walked the short distance to the former Queen Anne High School, an impressive concrete edifice squeezed between cell phone towers overlooking the Space Needle and the rest of the Seattle

skyline. *Rent* was one of her favorite Broadway shows, although, honestly, there were few Broadway shows she didn't adore.

A fountain greeted her as she approached her building, water burbling gently, and she gazed around in appreciation at the historic building's Neoclassical exterior, amazed as ever that she got to call such an interesting place home. Up until a year earlier, she'd lived in a shared apartment with two girls she'd known from college. But then Sentinel had splintered off from the bureau and started abducting aliens, targeting those who were passing as humans with particular vitriol. Kenzie's parents, both professors of science at Western Washington University, had decided it was no longer safe for her to live with humans and issued an ultimatum: move back in with them in Bellingham, 90 miles north of Seattle, or let them help her find some place secure. She'd ended up here in a fourth-floor studio with 15-foot ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over downtown. Just down the hall, a rooftop deck offered residents comfy furniture, heat lamps, and killer views of the Space Needle. As a bonus, Sloane lived only a few blocks away.

Or, at least, usually her proximity was a bonus. Tonight, Kenzie was kind of regretting the spare key she'd given her over-protective big sister.

The interior of her building was elegant and understated, dark wood floors covered with tasteful runners and the lobby walls lined with black and white photos from the previous century. Kenzie typically used the stairs, but tonight she took the slow, wood-paneled elevator to her floor, putting off the inevitable for as long as she could. At last she stood before her door, eyes closed, preparing herself for Sloane's ire. It would be fine, she reassured herself. If she'd survived her sister's fury that time she'd flown to Vancouver for her favorite dim sum—notably, without an airplane—she would get through this, too.

She pushed open the door and called out a cheerful, “Lucy, I’m home,” hoping the *Gilmore Girls* reference would relax her sister’s temper. But as she kicked off her shoes and walked down the narrow hallway into the studio’s great room, she realized that even the Gilmores couldn’t help her now.

Sloane was seated at the butcher block kitchen island at the edge of the kitchen space, a half-empty bottle of wine in front of her. The dining table behind her looked like it had in the photo she’d texted, and Kenzie’s shoulders dropped when she realized Sloane had polished off several glasses of wine on an empty stomach. That couldn’t be good.

“Hi,” she tried.

“Hi,” Sloane said, her voice flat, her brown eyes flatter. Her short hair was standing up in places as if she’d been running her hands through it in frustration.

Definitely not good.

Flustered, Kenzie spun around and headed back down the hallway, taking her time as she pulled off her jacket and set it and her shoes in the closet. She still hadn’t come up with a convincing lie. After all the falsehoods she had dreamt up during her time on Earth, shouldn’t she be better at pulling the wool over her sister’s eyes?

Back in the kitchen, she hesitated before moving forward to hug her sister. But a single look stopped her in her tracks.

“Seriously, Kenzie? We are not hugging. I can’t believe you right now.”

The best course of action, Kenzie knew from experience, was to get food into her sister’s body to soak up the alcohol. As if to assist this venture, her own stomach growled. Loudly.

Sloane expelled a breath. “Fine. We can eat. But then we’re talking about what happened, okay?”

“Yes, of course!” Kenzie grinned at her dour older sister and only just stopped herself from blurring to the table. She couldn’t help it, though. A reprieve *and* the best noodles in town?

Sure enough, once Sloane had some food in her belly, her mood shifted. Not by a lot, but the look she cast Kenzie across the dining table a few minutes later was more worried than angry.

“I understand the impulse to act, Kenz, I really do,” she said. “I mean, it would be hypocritical for me to tell you not to intervene in a crime, given that’s basically what I do on a daily basis. But Cloudtastic is your regular coffee shop. You’re unbelievably lucky the barista didn’t recognize you.”

Kenzie paused. Was this the moment to tell her sister she was fairly certain that Courtney did, in fact, know her and was apparently just guarding her identity for unknown reasons? Yeah, nope. No need to ruin a perfectly good meal.

“I know,” she said instead, gaze trained on the last container of pot stickers. “Do you want...?”

Sloane shook her head, an indulgent smile clearly trying to slip unnoticed onto her mouth. It failed. “What am I going to do with you? At least tell me you disposed of the gun responsibly.”

*Crap.* “Um, about that...”

“Where is the gun, Kenzie?” her sister whisper-shouted, mindful of the neighbors.

The walls were decently insulated, which had been one of the selling points for their parents. But in general, Kenzie thought as she went to retrieve the pretzel-shaped handgun from the reusable grocery bag she’d shoved it into three days earlier, keeping their voices down was a really good rule.

It took a while, but a pint of ice cream and two episodes of the new *Gilmore Girls* finally softened Sloane to the point where she seemed more like Kenzie's caring older sister than the tough, black leather-clad government agent she had become somewhere along the way.

"I just worry about you, Kenz, you know that," Sloane practically whined, her head on Kenzie's shoulder as they snuggled together under a cozy blanket on the couch that took up most of one windowless wall.

"I know. I worry about you too, Slo-mo," she said, ruffling her sister's hair in a way Sloane pretended to dislike but secretly, Kenzie was sure, enjoyed.

Sloane twitched away, eyebrows scrunched together. "It's hardly the same thing. I don't have a target on my back."

Kenzie gave her a skeptical look. "I mean, are you sure about that?"

"No, of course Sentinel would take any one of us out if they could. But that's different. It's nothing personal. It's a war, and they're on one side and I happen to be on the other. With you, though, it's completely personal. They hate you for who you are."

Kenzie hunched her shoulders and stared at the flat-screen television hanging on the opposite wall, her first purchase after she moved in. Matt had helped her choose a home theater system, and while the high-definition video and surround sound was currently wasted on Lorelai and Rory Gilmore, it made watching Harry Potter and *Lord of the Rings* a thousand times more fun.

"I'm sorry," Sloane said when Kenzie remained silent. "I know you already know that. I'm just worried, okay?"

Kenzie glanced back at her sister, eyeing her carefully. "Is there something going on with Sentinel I should know about?"

Sloane didn't look at her as she shrugged, focusing her energy on unearthing a large chunk of cookie dough from the surrounding ice cream. "Not really."

Kenzie listened for what her sister wasn't saying, honing her alien advantage in hearing on her sister's heart rate while, at the same time, focusing her super sight on Sloane's forehead, where telltale droplets of perspiration were trying to form.

She coughed and said, "Bullshit," but as usual she didn't quite get the timing right.

Her sister snickered. "The whole point is for the cough to mask the sound of the curse," she said, just as she'd done every other time Kenzie had tried that particular human vocal move.

"Whatever. The point is, I can tell you're lying. Alien advantages, remember?"

Sloane looked back at the television, her smirk slipping. "I remember." She was quiet for a minute, but Kenzie waited her out. Finally, she admitted, "There's been an increase in chatter."

Kenzie bit her lip. Another truly not good thing. "About what?"

"It has something to do with Nicholas Westbrook. That's all I know."

Nicholas Westbrook? Of course it had to do with him. Kenzie's heart sank. She'd been considering telling Sloane about her afternoon at Hyperion Tech, mostly so she could try to find a way to ask her super-gay sister if she thought Ava Westbrook had been flirting with her. Now, however, that seemed like a topic better left untouched—for so many reasons. Someday she would come out as bi to her sister. Just, not today, apparently.

"Are they going to try to break him out or something?" she asked.

"I really don't know."

"Would you tell me if you did?"

"Probably not."

“Right.” Danged government NDAs.

“Just, do me a favor and try to keep a low profile for the next little bit?” Sloane asked. “I know Comic Book Boy is always trying to get you to don a cape and pick an uber-nerdy superhero name, but if you could hold off on doing that anytime soon, I would appreciate it.”

Kenzie expelled a breath. “I mean, it wouldn’t be *that* nerdy...”

“Kenz,” her sister said, voice low. “Mom and Dad would appreciate it, too.”

“That’s a low blow and you know it,” she protested.

Sloane fluttered her eyelashes innocently. “Is it working?”

Kenzie looked back at the screen, where Rory and Lorelai were still bickering affectionately. “Fine,” she grumbled. “I’ll tell Matt #SuperSeattleite is not happening.”

*For now*, she thought but didn’t add. She could keep secrets, too.

“Thank you,” Sloane said, snuggling closer again.

Kenzie could actually hear Sloane’s heart rate settle, could sense the rush of blood through her sister’s body ease into a more normal pace. Silently, she cursed her alienness for the thousandth time since arriving on Earth. It would have been so much easier not to know.

#

Ava set her computer to sleep mode, turned off the lamp on the desk, and pulled her purse from the drawer. Another long day poring over paperwork instead of tinkering in her lab, and tomorrow would be more of the same, even if it was a Saturday. Maybe someday she would get caught up, but she couldn’t imagine it.

Her assistant had left hours earlier at her insistence. Chloe's reluctance to leave the office gave additional credence to a theory Ava had been working on—that her mother's former employee might actually still be in her employ and was diligently tracking and reporting Ava's activities. The question was why? Her mother had jumped ship voluntarily, though mysteriously, in Ava's opinion. Amelia insisted she was simply ready for a change, but at the same time, she refused to share details of whatever new venture had caught her eye. Of course, it wouldn't be the first time her mother had spied on her, so maybe there was no great mystery. Either way, it was definitely time to find a new assistant.

Hyperion's executive floor—the top floor in the building—was dark and quiet, except for the sound of a voice in the office down the hall. Ava tried to move soundlessly toward the elevator. She wasn't in the mood to see Victoria. She especially wasn't in the mood to talk to her after the CEO had made it clear she didn't approve of the “pro-alien propaganda” Ava had “spewed” to the ECM reporters the previous week. Victoria's response might not have been surprising, but it was disappointing. Another bigot in the family—hooray.

That thought led to another: Kenzie Shepherd. In truth, she had thought of the journalist regularly since the day they'd met. She knew Kenzie worked at the opposite end of downtown, but she couldn't help keeping an eye out for a flash of blonde hair as she grabbed coffee in the Starbucks down the street or ate lunch at the Pink Door, her new favorite restaurant in Seattle. Alas, she had not yet managed to run into one of the only people she knew in a city of three and a half million.

In the elevator, her finger hovered over the button that housed The Westbrook, a luxury hotel owned by her family's holding company. She hadn't bothered to find an apartment yet because the

hotel suite her mother had booked for her was gorgeous. Besides, it wasn't like she was there that much.

The elevator doors closed, and Ava pushed the ground floor button. At the same time, she sent a text to Hyperion's executive car service. She was in the mood for sushi.

When the flash of blonde hair at the restaurant counter actually materialized into a familiar face and surprised blue eyes, Ava was momentarily speechless. It wasn't like she'd truly expected to see Kenzie. After all, it was a Friday, and most people had probably eaten dinner by this time of night. But here she was, the very person Ava had been thinking about all week.

"Oh my gosh, Ava!" Kenzie said, approaching with a broad smile. "I can't believe you're here!"

"Well, someone did say their sushi was the best," she said, smiling back as if she weren't embarrassed to have been caught stalking Kenzie's favorite restaurant. Was it really stalking if it had taken her a week and a half to get around to it, though? It was more the poring over Kenzie's public social media feeds that fit the description. Not to mention reading every article she'd ever written and finding every photo she'd had published, even for *The Daily*, the University of Washington's student newspaper. Those activities definitely seemed questionable, in hindsight.

"I wondered if you might come here," Kenzie said, and then paused, eyes widening slightly as if she had given something away.

Interesting. Was it possible the stalking wasn't entirely one-sided? Could Kenzie Shepherd be somewhere on the queer spectrum too? Ava's smile turned flirty as she touched Kenzie's arm. "And I wondered if I might run into you here."

Kenzie stared at her, expression unreadable, for a long moment. Then she said, “What did you think of the article?”

Ava drew her hand back. “I found it unexpectedly lacking in negativity,” she admitted. Instead of trashing her and Hyperion, the article—which had featured both Kenzie’s and Warren’s bylines—had been noticeably more positive than the company’s recent press. Hers, too, for that matter.

Kenzie smiled. “I might have had something to do with that.”

Ava nodded appreciatively. “Thank you for not lumping me in with the rest of my family.”

“I believe in judging people based on their words and actions, not on the words and actions of others.”

Was she for real? But Ava couldn’t find any hint of sarcasm or irony in her bearing. On the contrary, Kenzie seemed completely earnest.

Ava was saved from replying by the cashier calling Kenzie’s name. She watched the transaction curiously, noting how Kenzie conversed longer than she would have expected with the older woman at the counter. Right. A regular, obviously.

Food in hand, Kenzie returned to Ava, smiling sheepishly as she waved two large reusable bags in apparent farewell. “I should probably let you order, shouldn’t I.”

“I suppose so.” Ava eyed the bags. “That isn’t all for you, is it?”

“Oh! Um, no?”

Ava raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, most of it, yeah, but I’m having drinks with friends at my place, so...”

“I see,” Ava said, struck by a sudden pang. If she were still in Manhattan, she would have been doing much the same. Instead, here she was in a new city in the Pacific Northwest, a part of

the country that prized waterproof jackets and hiking boots over silk blouses and Louboutins. For the hundredth time, she questioned her continued loyalty to a family who didn't appear to have the same compunction when it came to her.

“What about you?” Kenzie asked. “Big plans tonight?”

“No, I just left work. I haven't made any plans past sushi.”

Kenzie bit her lip, which was adorable and distracting just like everything else about her. Maybe that was why Ava nearly missed her next words, spoken in a rush: “Any interest in coming over?”

“Coming over?” she echoed, trying to process the meaning of the question.

“Yeah. I live on Queen Anne.” Kenzie waved vaguely in a northward direction. “It's nice out, so we're just having drinks on the patio.”

“The patio?” Ava repeated because apparently her brain was feeling especially sluggish during this portion of their conversation. Most of her brain power seemed caught up in the realization that Kenzie appeared to be asking her over. For drinks. Tonight.

“My building has a rooftop patio that looks out over the city. There's a view of the Space Needle. Oh, and heat lamps! There are totally heat lamps if you're someone who, you know, gets cold.”

Adorable and nerdy was a potent combination, in Ava's opinion. And yet, even though she would love to spend more time with Kenzie Shepherd, even though she was lonely and didn't know anyone in Seattle other than her mother's cousin and a boarding school classmate she'd never particularly liked, she paused. Kenzie's friends were likely to know who she was. More worrisome, they would almost assuredly know who her brother was—and what he'd done.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to,” Kenzie said, her shoulders falling slightly. “I only thought since you’re new in town—”

“No, I’d love to,” Ava interrupted. “It’s just, the Westbrook name doesn’t make it all that easy to be social, I’ve found. Especially lately.”

Kenzie blinked and frowned, a slight V of worry forming between her eyebrows. “I didn’t think of that. I promise, though, my friends are totally open-minded.”

Ava didn’t doubt that. But did their open minds extend to a conservative, militaristic family that was embarrassingly vocal about loving guns and hating anyone who hadn’t been born on Earth? Still, Ava didn’t encounter many people who made her want to risk the complications that came with trying to have friends. Psychotic siblings aside, being one of the wealthiest women under 40 in the world made it difficult to find people she could trust.

Decision made, she nodded and said, “I’d like that. Thank you for the invitation.”

“Really?” Kenzie appeared almost shocked by her response. But then her wide smile returned, blue eyes warming with seemingly genuine happiness. “Awesome! That’s so great. I can text you the address, and when your order is ready you could come over?”

“Sounds good,” Ava said, and gave Kenzie her private cell phone number, the one only a handful of people on the planet possessed.

A moment later, Kenzie practically skipped out of the restaurant, waving enthusiastically at Ava who waved back with a tad more decorum. An invitation to hang out *and* a smooth request for her number—maybe Kenzie Shepherd really wasn’t so straight, after all.

While the restaurant prepared her seaweed salad, dragon roll, and order of salmon nigiri, Ava had the company driver take her home to change. With the downtown buildings flashing past

beyond her window, she texted Bea, a silly grin on her face: “I have a friends date with the journalist!”

“Hold on!” came the reply. “U, making friends? How?!”

She filled her best friend in on her evening so far, and Bea agreed that either her sushi timing had been ridiculously fortuitous or, just possibly, Kenzie had been spending more time than usual at her favorite restaurant in hopes of running into Ava.

“I have a good feeling about this,” Bea wrote.

Ava’s phone buzzed again immediately, and a photo came through of Bea and her husband, James, grinning cheesy selfie smiles and brandishing earnest thumbs-ups. Bea’s, Ava knew, was ironic, while James’s probably wasn’t.

She sent back a laughing emoji just as the car pulled up in front of her building. “Gotta jet,” she typed, reaching for her purse. “I have a social gathering to attend. Give Rowan a kiss from me.”

“Let sleeping babies lie! Also, ur sex starved body begs u 2 restrain ur inner nerd tonite.”

Whatever. It hadn’t been that long. Besides, with her luck, it seemed likely that Kenzie was just a friendly, absurdly clueless straight woman. Either way, it wasn’t like Ava would be getting action anytime soon.

“GTG,” Ava texted back. “ILY!” She didn’t usually resort to text shorthand, but her driver was looking at her expectantly and, more importantly, Kenzie Shepherd was waiting for her.

Now she just had to figure out what to wear.

Ava readjusted her sweater and looked up at the rear entrance of the former Queen Anne High School, waiting for Kenzie to answer her text. She felt overdressed. Not that that was anything new; she seemed to spend much of her time in Seattle feeling overdressed.

“Ava! Hey!”

The voice was coming from above, and Ava looked up, squinting against the lights on the outside of the building. Kenzie was hanging over the edge of the roof, her eager waves looking like they might tip her over the edge at any moment. Was she that drunk already? It had only been 45 minutes since they’d run into each other downtown.

“Hi,” Ava called, barely holding back a strangled *be careful* as she waved.

“I’ll be right down!”

“Okay,” Ava said faintly, but Kenzie was already disappearing behind the railing.

In what seemed like no time at all, Kenzie was holding the door open for her and gesturing her inside the foyer.

“I’m so glad you made it!” she said as she led Ava to a stairwell. “We’ll just stop by my place and grab you something to drink, okay?”

“Okay,” Ava repeated, allowing herself to be pulled along on the tide of Kenzie’s enthusiasm.

The condo ended up being a rather small studio, which was—fine. She was building equity and it was better than having roommates, Kenzie told her, though sometimes she did feel lonely without anyone to talk to. Personally, Ava had never had roommates, nor could she remember ever having been inside a studio before. She looked around curiously as Kenzie led her down a narrow hall into the great room. The high ceilings and tall windows definitely lent the space a sense of airiness she could appreciate, and the sleeping loft above the kitchen made it feel more like a one-

bedroom. Instead of a ladder, a black iron spiral staircase stretched up to the loft. Somehow, the whimsical staircase seemed to match Kenzie perfectly.

The decor did, too. The great room was decorated in warm colors, with a gray and dark red wool rug occupying most of the floor and a cream-colored sectional that left plenty of space for a wide square coffee table covered in magazines and books. A quarter of the wall opposite the sectional was taken up by a large bookshelf, and a cursory glance at the loft space revealed at least two more bookshelves, all occupied with more books than knickknacks.

“I’m old-fashioned,” Kenzie said, following her gaze. “I prefer the feel and smell of paper to eBooks. I guess that makes me a bad Millennial, right?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Ava said. “I’ve been told I’m the worst Millennial ever.”

“Who told you that?” Kenzie asked as she pulled a glass out from one of the cupboards and placed it on the butcher block island at the edge of the kitchen.

“Beatrice, my best friend.”

Her head tilted sideways, reminding Ava of a Labrador retriever Bea’s family had owned when they were young. “Where does she live?”

“LA.”

“Ooh, California. I know as a Washingtonian I’m supposed to hate it, but I sort of like California.”

Ava wasn’t sure what to say to that. She was well-versed in the biases of the East Coast—New Jersey was totally the armpit of New York—but West Coast prejudices eluded her. She only nodded and glanced at the drink selection.

“So, what can I get you?” Kenzie asked. “We’ve got beer, wine, rum, vodka, whiskey. Oh, and apple juice, too, if you don’t drink.”

Ava examined the whiskey bottle and held back a wince. Kenzie appeared to be a typical Millennial when it came to alcohol, anyway—quantity over quality. “I’ll have a glass of pinot noir,” she said. It was hard to ruin pinot noir.

Kenzie looked at the array somewhat helplessly until Ava pointed at a bottle of red wine. “Right! That’s Mika’s favorite. She’s my sister’s girlfriend.”

“Your sister’s *girlfriend*?” Ava repeated, hoping she sounded suitably casual. She was really hoping that Kenzie meant the gay kind of girlfriend, not the soccer mom type.

“Yep. Sloane, my sister, just came out recently. You’re cool with that, right?” she asked as she poured way too much wine into the glass, her gaze fixed on the task before her.

“Very,” Ava said, wondering if this was the moment to reveal her own Sapphic tendencies.

Before she could decide, the door to the corridor opened suddenly and a short-haired brunette in a leather jacket strode in, her walk brash and confident. “Hey, Kenz, sorry I’m late—” Her voice cut off as her gaze alighted on Ava. “Wait. What is *she* doing here?”

So much for open minds.

As she had learned to do since her brother’s arrest, Ava stood straighter and stared down her would-be antagonist even though her conflict-averse inner self longed to make an immediate retreat. At the kitchen island, Kenzie morphed suddenly from friendly pup to growling wolf, her body visibly taut as she faced the newcomer.

“Are you serious, Sloane?” she demanded. “She’s here because I invited her.”

“You invited her? I thought you said your relationship was professional,” the woman who was evidently Kenzie’s sister shot back, her wary gaze never leaving Ava.

Relationship? That meant they must have talked about her, and Kenzie had apparently assured her sister they weren’t friends. Great. Just perfect. This was why Ava was happier drinking alone and reading herself to sleep. Unlike Kenzie, she adored the comfort and ease of eBooks, and had at least a dozen in progress on her Kindle at any given time. In fact, maybe she would be better off at home tonight with one of those than witnessing the Shepherd sisters stand-off.

“Who I choose to be friends with is none of your business,” Kenzie said, her voice harsher than Ava would have imagined possible.

“Are you kidding? It’s completely my business.”

“No, it’s not.”

And yeah, that was more than enough of that.

“It’s okay, Kenzie,” Ava said, adjusting her purse over her shoulder. “I’m actually fairly tired. Maybe I should just head home.”

Kenzie glanced at her, stricken. “No, Ava, you don’t have to go. Just wait here for a sec, okay? Don’t go anywhere. Please.”

Before Ava could respond, Kenzie was speed-walking her sister down the hall and out into the exterior corridor. Ava could hear their voices, low and furious, but she couldn’t make out what they were saying. She sighed, fully able to believe where her night had taken her. Since Nick had gone off the deep end, this was what her life had become. At least there was alcohol. She gulped down the wine Kenzie had poured and touched her tongue to her lips. Not bad for two buck chuck, really.

A moment later, Kenzie returned with her sister at her side. Sloane Shepherd wasn't exactly apologetic, but her hostility at least had lessened. Somewhat. Kenzie elbowed her in the ribs, and Ava saw her wince.

"I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot," Sloane said, her voice even. "I'm an agent at the bureau, so it was a little jarring seeing you here in my sister's home."

Ava stared, only barely keeping her jaw from dropping. Kenzie's sister worked for Panopticon? No wonder she was so opposed to Kenzie being friends with a Westbrook. So many questions swirled through Ava's mind, but they all vanished as Kenzie stepped forward and clasped her hand. The other woman's palm was warm, almost hot, her grasp loose but firm, and Ava felt a shiver cascade down her spine.

"Please don't go. I promise my other friends aren't as scary as my sister." Sloane huffed behind her, and Kenzie shot her a look. "Oh, come on, you know they're not."

She *was* a bit scary, though Ava would rather have been tortured by her brother's goons than admit as much. "Okay," she relented. "But only because I'm absolutely starving."

"Thank you," Kenzie said, her seriousness giving way to a relieved smile.

As they left the condo, Kenzie made a show of carrying Ava's takeout bag for her while Ava brought her glass of wine and the rest of the bottle, at Kenzie's insistence. Sloane followed them along the corridor, and Ava felt the Panopticon agent's stare burning holes in her back the entire way to the rooftop patio.

As they stepped outside, however, she forgot to worry about Sloane Shepherd. The skyline of downtown Seattle lay before them, edged by the darkness of Puget Sound at one end and the darkness of the Cascade Mountains at the other. It was an entirely different view of Seattle than she was accustomed to, and just for a moment she felt another pang of homesickness for her apartment

in Manhattan and its familiar views of Central Park. Then Kenzie's hand brushed the small of her back, urging her forward, and the longing for any place other than where she was now vanished.

She stepped forward, aware of the curious faces turned toward them from a collection of patio chairs and couches arranged about one of the promised heat lamps. Bea always said you just had to act like you belonged, which was easy enough when you were a beautiful former pop star married to a former NBA star. But Ava could channel some of her best friend's boldness. After all, she'd gone to MIT, and she was a kickass engineer with an apartment on Central Park West, a beach house in Malibu, and a leadership position in one of the most powerful tech firms in the world. These friends of Kenzie's couldn't be anywhere near as vicious as the calculating old white men on Hyperion's board of directors she was forced to confront at least once a month. And if they were, well, she had always enjoyed a challenge.

"Hey guys, this is Ava," Kenzie said, hand still barely touching her back. "Ava, this is everyone."

"Hi, Ava!" a chorus of voices rang out.

She smiled, feeling her nerves beginning to float away on the tide of friendliness and two buck chuck. Maybe everything would be okay, after all. At least, for tonight.