

BETWEEN *the* DAWN *and* DAY



GALAXY GIRL - BOOK TWO

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BETWEEN THE DAWN AND DAY

Galaxy Girl - Book Two

by Kate Christie

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Chapter One

Ava Westbrook stared at her phone screen, her finger poised above the “Recent Calls” tab. Who should she call first, Bea or Kenzie? Then she rolled her eyes at her own whipped-ness. Kenzie was at work, and Ava wouldn’t be standing in the living room of her potential future home if not for Bea’s assistance. She hit the call button beside her oldest friend’s name and waited.

“Do you absolutely love it?” Bea asked in lieu of a traditional greeting.

“I do,” Ava said. “It’s just what I was looking for.”

The condominium she was currently being shown was located in a building at the north end of First Avenue, and offered views of Puget Sound, the Olympic Mountains, and—up close and personal—the Space Needle. The building was twenty years old, and the penthouse unit boasted ten-foot ceilings, marble floors, granite slab countertops, and four terraces with expansive views of the Seattle skyline. Compared to her suite at Hyperion Tower, even the thirteenth floor felt reasonably close to the ground.

“Your list of required amenities was pretty thorough,” her best friend said. “Including the whole-unit sound proofing. But rest assured, no one is going to hear you and Kenzie getting down to—”

“Bea! You know that’s about security,” Ava said, her voice a whisper.

“Right. Sure thing.”

“Anyway, thanks for finding it. Seriously.”

“Of course. You know I love real estate. Plus, the cloak and dagger bit is always fun. Who does the realtor think you are again? An attorney?”

“Uh-huh,” Ava said, and glanced over her shoulder at the realtor in question, who was busy scrolling through her own phone. Blonde and full-figured, she wore the slightly startled smile of a suburban mom who had decided to give selling real estate a try and now couldn’t quite believe she brought in a cool million a month.

The phone crackled as if Bea had covered the mic, but then she returned. “James wants to know if I’m the first person you called.”

“You mean, like, today?”

“You’re hilarious. Come on, out with it. Have you already called Kenzie to gush about your new place?”

“It’s not my place yet,” Ava said. Probably, it would be better not to admit that she had seriously debated whom to call first.

“You totally video chatted her from the master bedroom, didn’t you?”

Ava shook her head even though Bea couldn’t see her. “Gotta go,” she said. “Bye!”

“Is everything all right?” the realtor—*Denise*, she was pretty sure—asked as she drifted nearer, offering that same bright, semi-disconcerted smile.

“Everything is wonderful. This would make a perfect executive apartment for our firm. My employer has authorized me to make a cash offer at full price.”

Denise blinked. “Oh. That *is* wonderful news. Would you like me to get in touch with the seller, and then we can talk about getting the official offer in writing?”

“Please. And while you’re at it, let them know that if we can get the deal done in two weeks, there’ll be an extra twenty-five thousand at closing.”

Denise nodded, phone already at her ear. “I’ll reach out right now,” she said, the financial wheels in her head visibly spinning.

The condo was empty, and Ava knew from her own research that it had been sitting unused for more than a month—apparently not everyone was in the market for a luxury penthouse in Belltown. A cash offer over asking should ensure that Ava could move in sooner rather than later, assuming the inspection went well. The condo association was well-respected, and the builder had been in the construction business for more than two decades. Ava was betting the inspection would go just fine.

She glanced out the living room window toward Queen Anne Hill. In the distance, she could make out the cell phone antennas bookending Kenzie’s building, blinking red against the evening sky. Ava liked the idea of being so close to the hill that loomed over the north end of downtown. With her augmented vision, Kenzie would be able to see Ava’s apartment, and in a pinch, Ava could probably shout for her and actually be heard. Not that she intended to test that particular emergency alert system anytime soon. She and Kenzie had only been dating officially for a few days. Ava probably shouldn’t let on yet that she was that much of a lesbian.

As she was gazing up at Queen Anne, her phone vibrated with a new text: “Hi!”

Speak of the devil... Ava stepped outside and took a picture of the view from the terrace that spanned the width of the penthouse. “What do you think?” she typed, attaching the photo.

“OMG,” Kenzie wrote back immediately, “are you serious?”

“As a heart attack. Do you approve?”

“Um, YES!”

“Good.” Inside, Denise was lowering her phone and glancing around, so Ava typed, “G2G!” and stepped back into the condo.

“My client is very interested,” Denise said. “How soon can we expect to see the offer in writing?”

“Within the hour. I’ll have a representative from our holding company get in touch directly.”

Denise nodded. “I’ll be waiting.”

Ava didn’t doubt it.

As she took the elevator back to the ground floor, she asked herself if she could imagine coming home each night after work to this block, this building, this elevator. And yes, she decided, she could easily picture living in this sunlit building near the Olympic Sculpture Park, where she and Kenzie had had their first date, only a stone’s throw—or flight—from the top of Queen Anne Hill. Maybe she would even do her part to help the environment and start walking to work. Couldn’t get much more Seattle than that.

Outside, Ramón nodded at her as she slipped into the Tesla’s back seat, and she returned the gesture. While the car moved quietly down the street, Ava removed her baseball cap and shook out her ponytail. If this had been New York, she never would have been able to fly so low under the radar. But here in Seattle, there was no such thing as paparazzi. Few people outside the tech world—or tech reporting world—recognized her, especially without any pesky photographers shouting her name.

Her phone vibrated again, and she pulled it out, already smiling before she read the message: “So? Are you just going to leave me hanging?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she texted back, and pressed the phone icon.

“That place is amazing!” Kenzie said when she answered.

“I agree. That’s why I’m having my holding company make an offer tonight.”

“Your holding company?”

Ava frowned a little as a delivery bike zipped past the Tesla on crowded First Avenue.

“That’s off the record, right?”

“I think we can safely assume everything is off the record at this point. But if you’re buying an apartment, does that mean you’re planning to stay in Seattle?”

“Possibly.” Ava made her voice teasing. “I guess you’ll just have to wait and see.”

“It’s like you think I’m capable of being patient.”

“One of us should be. What are you up to, anyway?”

“I just got home and am currently eyeing the pathetic contents of my refrigerator.”

“Want to go to dinner with me?” Ava asked, and then held her breath. Being nervous was ridiculous, she knew. Even if Kenzie rejected her invitation, it didn’t mean they wouldn’t see each other soon.

“You mean, like on a date?”

“Yes, exactly like a date.”

“I’d love to. Where do you have in mind?”

Ava thought about inviting her to her hotel suite but immediately dismissed the idea. For all she knew, her mother—or Chloe?—had installed additional listening devices since the last security sweep. That was why Ava had decided to fast-track the purchase of a residence. If she and Kenzie were really going to date, then they needed a private, secure space to spend time together. Also, Ava needed to live somewhere that didn’t double as her office. Her work-life balance had suddenly begun to take on more importance.

“How about the Pink Door?” she suggested, naming the Italian restaurant a few blocks from Pike Place Market that had recently become one of her favorite dining spots.

“I think they’re usually booked up.”

That might be true, but finding restaurant reservations typically wasn’t an issue if your last name happened to be Westbrook. Ava’s brother’s arrest on terrorism charges hadn’t entirely

destroyed their family's clout. One might even argue that Nick had elevated their brand—in the aftermath of his trial, no one seemed to want to make an enemy of a Westbrook.

“Let me see what I can do,” she said. “Call you back?”

“Can't wait!” Kenzie said, her smile audible through the phone.

Ava shook her head at Kenzie's open affection. What would it be like to walk through the world practicing such vulnerability? Which was ironic, because as a Zattalian, Kenzie was one of the least vulnerable beings on the planet.

As soon as they hung up, Ava opened her phone's browser and tracked down the Pink Door's phone number, barely able to contain her own sense of anticipation. Usually, the women she spent time with were more concerned with appearances than actual enjoyment. Not Kenzie, though. She was kind and caring, and she seemed interested in the smallest details of the world that had become her second home. Even Ava struggled to maintain her customary cynicism in Kenzie's presence. If she wasn't careful, she might find herself falling too far too fast.

She really could be such a lesbian sometimes, Ava thought as she dialed the restaurant. No doubt Bea would approve.

#

Half an hour later, Ramón guided the Tesla into the parking lot behind Kenzie's building, parking on the brick path beside the burbling fountain. Seattleites certainly seemed to like water features in their outdoor spaces. Maybe she would get one for her new condo—assuming the written offer was accepted. She should know soon. In the meantime, dinner with Kenzie would more than distract her, she decided as Kenzie stepped out of the shadows draped in a cami wrap

dress in a shade of gray-blue that Ava was beginning to suspect was her favorite color, her strong, smooth shoulders left bare.

An image of Kenzie pressed against the door of Ava's suite a few nights earlier flashed into her mind, and she closed her eyes briefly. Maybe they should get take-out and come straight back here because, really, how was Ava supposed to keep her hands off Kenzie in that dress? But then she remembered Kenzie's relative newness to the adult dating world and took a breath, pushing the surge of attraction down to a more manageable state. She hadn't had sex in a while, and a few more weeks or—*god help her*—months wouldn't kill her, but pressuring Kenzie very well might destroy the feelings growing between them.

Before Ramón even had the car in park, Kenzie was there opening the door for herself and sliding into the back seat next to Ava. "Hi," she said almost reverently, her gaze sweeping over Ava and lingering on the faint cleavage revealed by her black midi dress.

"Hi," Ava said, smiling into Kenzie's eyes even as she shifted to put extra space between them. "You look beautiful."

"So do you," Kenzie said, her voice soft.

"All set?" Ramón asked.

Ava nodded and looked out the window as he guided the car around the fountain and back onto the street. The fewer lingering gazes the better for her libido.

"Hi, Ramón," Kenzie said, leaning forward to chat with him while they drove the short distance to Pike Place Market. She interrupted herself as the car glided down the steepest portion of Queen Anne Avenue to tell Ava, "This is one of my favorite views of the city. Doesn't the Space Needle look like something out of the Jetsons?"

And yes, Ava had to admit, the resemblance was uncanny from this angle.

“You’re not old enough to remember the Jetsons, are you?” Ramón asked.

“I, um, enjoy stories about space,” Kenzie said, pushing up her glasses.

At this rate, it was going to take Ramón all of three seconds to figure out Kenzie was an off-worlder. In addition to being her primary driver, he was also ex-special forces. Everyone on her security team was.

“That’s right,” Ava said, “you like Rey from *Star Wars*, don’t you?”

Kenzie nodded enthusiastically, and they spent the rest of the drive ranking *Star Wars* films. Or Kenzie and Ramón did, anyway. Ava mostly sat back and wondered how much of her future would be occupied with preventing Kenzie from inadvertently outing herself. A lot of it, she hoped, watching Kenzie argue good-naturedly with Ramón about where *The Force Awakens* fell in the rankings.

Ramón let them out at Virginia Street, and soon they were strolling arm in arm down Post Alley toward the restaurant. As a longtime New Yorker, Ava wasn’t usually a fan of narrow alleyways. But with Kenzie—or rather, Galaxy Girl—beside her, Ava could give her internal alert system a rest. She had never felt so safe walking around a city at night, not even with a Hyperion security team shadowing her.

When they walked into the restaurant together, heads immediately turned. Ava released Kenzie’s arm and shifted away, careful to maintain a slight distance as the host led them toward their table in a quiet corner.

Kenzie didn’t say anything until they were seated and the host had retreated. Then she asked, “Are you okay?”

Ava kept her eyes on her menu. “Absolutely.”

She could feel Kenzie's gaze on her. "Really? Then why did you pull away back there? And don't say you didn't. I have super senses, remember?"

As if she could forget. "I suppose it occurred to me that being seen in public together might not be the best idea."

Kenzie's head tilted in the way that always reminded Ava of a curious puppy. "Because I'm a reporter?"

"That, too. But I'm more concerned that you would be at risk personally if people found out about our relationship." She swallowed, tightening her grip on the laminated menu. "If my brother's followers were to come after you..."

"I'm pretty sure Galaxy Girl would save me." Kenzie's voice was almost cocky now, and was that an actual wink? "Besides, aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself? This is only our first date. Maybe we should wait and see how the evening pans out."

"This is not our first date," Ava said.

"It isn't?"

"No, the Sculpture Park was."

Kenzie laughed, and she looked so pretty under the fairy lights and candlelight chandeliers hanging from the restaurant's rustic wood beams that it was all Ava could do not to lean across the table and kiss her. She restrained herself, though, inwardly cringing at her own impulses. She was acting like a teenager, for god's sake. Again, she had no doubt that Bea would approve.

Kenzie seemed almost relieved when their server approached. Or perhaps *enthusiastic* was the better term. Ava had already decided on her order, so she sat back and watched as Kenzie asked detailed questions about different items on the menu, charming the young server with her sweet smile. By the time they'd finished ordering enough appetizers and entrées to feed a small

dinner party, they knew their server's favorite dessert on the menu, how many siblings he had, and his projected date of graduation from Seattle Pacific University. Kenzie's interest in the storytelling aspects of her job clearly came naturally.

They didn't have to wait long for their food. The first round of appetizers arrived quickly, and it was quiet for a while as Kenzie did her usual impression of, as Ava eventually told her, a hummingbird.

"A hummingbird?" Kenzie frowned around a bite of potato gnocci. "But they're so tiny!"

"Yes, but their metabolism is so high that they have to eat the equivalent of their body weight in nectar and insects every day just to stay alive."

Kenzie swallowed and grinned. "I love that you know that! Did you know that peregrine falcons can fly two hundred and forty miles per hour? They're the fastest living creature on Earth."

Ava lowered her voice. "I thought *you* were the fastest living being on Earth."

"Oh." Kenzie's ears turned pink. "I meant the fastest Earth *native*."

"Ah." Ava hid a smile and reached for another piece of gnocci.

The dishes were still coming when Kenzie's head snapped up, and she looked at the nearest wall over the top of her glasses. After a moment she glanced back, eyes apologetic. "I'm so sorry, Ava. Really."

What was she talking about? Before Ava could ask, she heard it in the distance: multiple sirens from what had to be an entire fleet of emergency vehicles.

"There's a gas leak at an apartment complex on Capitol Hill," Kenzie explained, head tilted again to one side, her gaze unfocused. "The fire department needs help evacuating."

Ava pictured the adults, children, and pets who might at that moment be on the verge of a terrible death and nodded, trying to project support. “Go. We can do this another time.”

“I really am sorry,” Kenzie said as she rose and reached for her coat and bag. “I’ll text you later, okay?”

“Please.”

And then Kenzie leaned across the table to kiss her cheek, the always surprisingly delicate scent of her perfume lingering even after she was gone.

Their server seemed almost more disappointed than Ava felt when she called him over to pack up the remainder of the food, but Ramón only gave her a knowing look when he picked her up.

“Another ambulance to chase for Miss Shepherd?” he asked.

Ava settled the embarrassingly large to-go bag on the seat beside her. “Unfortunately.” And here she’d thought her own schedule was unreasonable. Between working at ECM and moonlighting as a superhero, Kenzie’s availability was almost nonexistent. The anticipation Ava had felt earlier in the evening had fizzled, leaving her more tired and irritable than she had a right to be. This was why she hadn’t bothered trying to date much since Nick’s arrest. It was just too complicated, and her current lack of emotional resiliency meant she didn’t manage the low points well. Honestly, maybe she would be better off staying single.

Back at her hotel suite, Ava changed into leggings and a sweatshirt and carried her laptop to the couch. There, she kept tabs on the condo offer (it had been accepted) and answered emails from Hyperion’s Asian subsidiaries while simultaneously monitoring Twitter for any Galaxy Girl sightings. By nine thirty, Seattle’s local hero had helped the Seattle Fire Department evacuate the complex and transport the injured to the hospital. It was nearly midnight, however,

before Kenzie finally texted that she was home—apparently she'd detoured to foil not one but two armed robberies along the way. She offered to come over, but Ava had an early meeting in the morning.

“Raincheck?” she texted as she brushed her teeth. “Thai food tomorrow night?”

“Yasssss! But takeout this time at my place?” Kenzie replied.

“It's a date.”

“Woo hoo!” Kenzie texted back, followed by a string of emojis that Ava had no idea how to interpret. Where had she even found an emoji of an alien holding a fishing pole?

She blew Kenzie a kiss via text and signed off. Their age difference, usually a non-factor, was showing. Seven years in Internet time was like multiple decades in real life. Although, come to think of it, Ava didn't know if Zattalians aged like humans. Did Kenzie's former planet have a similar orbit around its sun? Or did the length of Zattalia's orbit even matter given that Kenzie had been born in space? Someday, Ava hoped to have the answers to these and other questions.

For now, though, she went to bed and scrolled through her Kindle bookshelf, settling on a fantasy by Mercedes Lackey that featured a strong woman who made her life by the sword. Escaping for a few hours into a world without advanced technology or alien registration policies was exactly what she needed tonight.

As the book loaded, Ava glanced at the empty spot beside her on the king-sized bed. She didn't normally feel lonely, which might have been because she was good at keeping herself too busy to notice how much time she spent on her own. But in the wake of Bea's visit and Kenzie's revelation that she had feelings for Ava, something had shifted. In New York, she would have made a few calls and had a handful of invitations to spend time with people she'd known from before her brother's drift into insanity. But here in Seattle? Her options were far more limited.

Her screen flickered and she turned back to the Kindle, pushing away the longing for a certain someone's company. She couldn't afford to fall headlong into whatever this was with Kenzie. She needed to stay clear-headed, especially with so many of her brother's minions still on the loose and apparently up to no good. She had set up a news alert to track alien disappearances across North America and Western Europe, and over the past couple of weeks, the numbers had been rising slowly but surely—just as they had the last time Sentinel attacked the off-world refugee community.

Her contact in Boston had asked to meet in person somewhere secure, and Ava had suggested they rendezvous in New York the following weekend, where she was scheduled to wine and dine one of Hyperion's largest investment groups. Soon, she hoped, she would find out more about the mysterious Labyrinth and determine if her paranoia about Sentinel was justified. Knowing your enemy was crucial. Because while Kenzie might be superpowered, she probably wasn't completely invulnerable. In Ava's experience, few people were.

Chapter Two

In her studio at the top of Queen Anne Hill, Kenzie rushed through the shortest shower in her personal history. Though that wasn't saying much. While growing up in space, she'd learned to conserve limited resources from pretty much the moment she'd become aware of the inalterable fact that space was always actively trying to kill anyone foolish enough to attempt to live outside a planetary atmosphere. Even with their robust genetic modifications, Zattalians couldn't survive in a vacuum. Or not for long, anyway.

The shower was necessary—and necessarily short—because she had left work early to respond to a request from Panopticon for assistance with an unruly off-worlder terrorizing the animals in the African Savanna section of the Seattle Zoo. The presence of so many families with small children had made the Seattle Police Department's usual containment protocols unsuitable, and the same was true for Panopticon, which Sloane liked to say was basically the SPD's Alien Affairs Bureau on steroids. D'aman had met Kenzie at the exhibit in question, where they had safely apprehended the off-worlder—a powerful Troolimpigo with little interest in conversation—with minimal damage to the zoo facilities, animals, or visitors.

When Kenzie had commented on meeting another Troolimpigo so soon after their visit to the pop-up alien bar in Portland, D'aman had shaken their head. “That *was* one of the bouncers, Kenzie. I saw in her mind an image of the same bottle of pills that our Pendran friend took. But I don't think these are opiates. From what we're seeing, I think these pills might stimulate the nervous system, much like Earth-based amphetamines.”

Kenzie had paused at the edge of the Savanna Grassland in the shade of a sycamore tree. “Do you mean like speed for aliens?”

Her former mentor had nodded.

“But how?”

“Well, where do off-worlders congregate in large numbers?”

She’d frowned. Off-worlders *didn’t* congregate in large numbers because it wasn’t safe. Then it came to her. “You mean the pop-up bars?”

They’d nodded again. “I will ask around and let you know what I find.”

If D’aman was right, whoever was behind this plan had to know that amphetamine-addicted off-worlders would put both humans and aliens in danger—and in doing so, further discredit the refugee community. There was one group Kenzie could think of who would benefit from such a plan: *Sentinel*. Was this related to the “increased chatter” Sloane had mentioned Panopticon was tracking? Was Nick Westbrook directing Sentinel’s shadow assaults on the alien community from maximum security prison? Kenzie would definitely need to follow up on all of this with her sister—assuming Sloane could be convinced to share classified information. Now that Kenzie and D’aman were partnering with Panopticon, Sloane would have to be less stingy about information-sharing, wouldn’t she?

But that was a question for a different time. Ava was on her way over, and right now, Kenzie needed to get ready for the date that her team-up with D’aman and Panopticon had almost made her late for.

Still damp from the shower, she ransacked her closet for something appropriate to wear. The previous night, she’d worn her best dress for dinner with Ava at one of Seattle’s nicest restaurants. But sharing takeout in her tiny apartment was a whole other box of wax. Ball of wax? Whatever. It should be *box*, in her un-Earthling opinion.

Her phone vibrated on the nightstand while she was speeding through her pants selection, and she grabbed it: “Thai food ETA in fifteen. See you soon?” Ava had texted. And then the phone vibrated again as a small red heart popped up.

“Yes please!” Kenzie texted back. She only hesitated a moment before sending back her own red heart.

She was dating Ava Westbrook. Oh, *god*. How was she going to tell her parents? But like the Sentinel drama, that particular conundrum could wait. Right now, she had to figure out what the heck to wear.

Superspeed was handy in many situations, this one included. Kenzie’s hair dried as she blurred around the apartment getting ready. She eventually settled on capris and a plain cotton camisole with a collared shirt unbuttoned over it, hoping the outfit walked the line between sexy and semi-casual. Instead of a crowded restaurant, she and Ava would be alone in her apartment tonight, and she couldn’t help wondering what would happen between them. Would there be more making out? She hoped so. Kissing Ava Westbrook had become one of her favorite activities. But at the same time, she knew that Ava probably wanted to do more than just make out. Kenzie did, too—in theory.

Her phone rang, and she grabbed it eagerly, happy to be distracted from the voice in the back of her head whispering that she was too old to be so inexperienced. That voice was a jerk, and she would rather talk to almost anyone than allow her insecurities unfettered access to her psyche so close to her date with Ava. But then she almost dropped the offending device as she read the name on the screen: *Jane*.

She chewed her lip, debating whether or not to answer. The timing might be lousy, but this was the woman who had given her a home when she had nowhere to go. Besides, Kenzie had already blown her off multiple times. She couldn't ignore her forever.

"Hi, Mom," she said, clearing her mail from the kitchen island and stashing it in her junk kitchen drawer.

"Hi, honey. I can't believe I actually got you. I'm not interrupting, am I?"

"Nooo, but I am expecting a food delivery."

"That doesn't surprise me in the least," her famous scientist mother said. "Do you want to call me back in a little while?"

"Um, actually, a friend is coming over for dinner, so..."

"Oh, is it Matt? How's he doing? It's been so long since you two have been up for a visit. Your sister, too. Your father and I were just saying that I-5 seems like a one-way street these days."

This was an old family joke, but Kenzie could admit that it was fairly accurate. Their parents came to Seattle far more often than Kenzie and Sloane found their way back to Bellingham. Their hometown was only ninety miles north of the city near the Canadian border, but Seattle's traffic could be ridiculous, and Sloane refused to let Kenzie fly her car over traffic jams even in the dark.

"I promise we'll come home soon," Kenzie said, ignoring the question about Matt. She was pretty sure it didn't count as a lie if she didn't answer. "But can I call you this weekend? Would that be okay?"

"I think so. Why don't you text me and we'll set up a time."

“That sounds kind of specific,” Kenzie said, only half paying attention as she quickly wiped up the previous night’s crumbs from the pizza she’d picked up on her way home. She’d been so hungry after helping the fire department with the gas emergency that she almost hadn’t noticed the guy smoking in the shadows on the roof of the building where she’d left her civilian clothes, and had only barely avoided outing herself as Galaxy Girl.

It wasn’t the first time Kenzie had thought Sloane’s protocol needed some tweaking. Too bad she couldn’t just transform like D’aman. But... what if she could? D’aman had given her a Taammeni headband to wear the night they’d taken her out in Portland. What if she could convince them to make the loan semi-permanent?

Her mother’s voice filtered into her consciousness, and she returned to the conversation in time to hear her say, “...you could make the time because we have something we want to discuss with you.”

Doh. That didn’t sound good. They knew about Galaxy Girl, didn’t they? And judging from the good doctor’s formal intonation, they were not very happy about her adventures in vigilantism.

Kenzie’s phone once again saved the day as a text alert informed her that Ava was five minutes out. “That sounds fine,” she said quickly. “I’ll text you, okay? Dinner’s here, gotta go!”

She ended the call without waiting for her mother’s reply and stood motionless for a second, pondering the situation she’d landed herself in. She may have dodged the issue for now, but the reprieve was only temporary. This weekend, she would have to tell them about Galaxy Girl—and about Ava.

Maybe. *Probably.* Although she might wait and see on that one.

Ava arrived at Kenzie's loft not long after the food did. Kenzie heard her footsteps in the hallway and hurried to her door, pulling it open before Ava could knock.

"Hi," she said, and then hesitated as Ava gazed at her with startled eyes. "Sorry, I, um, heard you?"

"That's fine," Ava said, appearing to recover. "And, hello." She held out a bottle of wine.

"You didn't have to do that," Kenzie said, taking it and giving the label a cursory glance.

"No, really, I did," Ava said, her lips quirking. "Not to be a wine snob, but..."

"But you're totally a wine snob," Kenzie said, laughing.

"Totally," Ava agreed.

She was so pretty in her green collared shirt and tight-fitting black jeans, her smile soft in the low light from the hallway. Kenzie gave into the urge to reach out and pull her into her arms, but slowly to avoid scaring her. "I'm happy you're here."

"So am I." Ava wound her arms around Kenzie's neck.

"Mmm." Kenzie inhaled the scent of Ava's perfume. "You smell good."

"So do you," Ava breathed into her ear.

Kenzie shivered at the sensation and almost dropped the wine bottle. And, right, that wouldn't do, especially given it probably cost more than she made in a week. She pulled back and rested her forehead against Ava's and said, her voice almost peevish even to her own ears, "I missed you."

Ava's laugh was surprised, but as Kenzie started to huff and pull away, she added, "I missed you, too."

They gazed into each other's eyes for a long moment, and Kenzie realized that the kissing might start even sooner than she'd thought. But then the smell of Thai food wafted down the hallway and caused her stomach to growl embarrassingly loudly.

Ava blinked up at her. "Are you shaking?"

"Maybe a little. I didn't have time for my afternoon snack."

"I saw you on Twitter. Everything okay?"

"Yep. Totally fine." Someday she would tell Ava about the alien speed circulating through the off-world community, likely care of her brother's minions. But not tonight.

"Come on, then. Let's get some food into that beautiful body of yours." Ava kicked off her shoes and tugged Kenzie down the hall toward the studio's great room.

She thought about resisting, but she was so hungry she could barely focus. Kissing Ava—like so many other things—would have to wait.

The kitchen island was piled with the multitude of dishes Ava had ordered for dinner, white plastic bags taking up nearly every inch of the butcher block surface.

"I wasn't sure what you liked," Ava said, sounding a little embarrassed.

"I like most things," Kenzie assured her, and began pulling out white cartons and arranging them on the island.

"Where's your corkscrew?"

"Next to the fridge, second drawer down."

As Ava busied herself with opening the wine and scouting out a pair of matching wine glasses, Kenzie savored how utterly domestic the whole scene was. They were like Sloane and Mika, practically—except without the kitchen counter sex. *Darn it.* Why had her mind gone

there? She popped half a spring roll into her mouth and chewed it quickly. Clearly, she needed to fortify herself for the night ahead.

Or maybe not: “By the way,” Ava said as she poured the wine, “I’m really sorry, but I might have to skip out early.”

“What?” Kenzie caught herself. “I mean, I thought that was my line.”

“Turns out it’s mine, too. I’m expecting a work call any time. Again, I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Kenzie said, trying not to sound as disappointed as she felt.

She kept quiet as they filled their plates, trying to readjust her expectations for the evening ahead. At least Ava hadn’t canceled outright. She was here, and they could still have a nice dinner. The apartment was clean, and she’d set a vase with fresh flowers on the dining table runner along with candles of assorted heights and colors. Not only that, but the plates, cloth napkins, and silverware all matched. Adulting wasn’t that hard, really.

“So, what’s going on at Hyperion tonight?” she finally asked, facing Ava across the table.

“I’m expecting a report from an investigator I asked to look into a potential case of industrial espionage.”

“Meaning, someone outside Hyperion broke into the company and stole something?”

Ava nodded, washing down a bite of pad thai with a swallow of the wine she’d brought.

“That, or one of our employees did the stealing themselves.”

“Do you need any help? I could always ask Mika to make a call.”

“No!” Ava looked alarmed at the prospect. “There are viable legal channels we can pursue,” she added, and went on to explain the matter in the vaguest of terms—a (nameless) rival firm in Silicon Valley had just released a fuel cell prototype that was remarkably similar to a Hyperion

product in final testing. The internal review should show where the leak had occurred, and the appropriate authorities would be notified.

“At least, that’s how we hope the situation plays out,” she finished. “There’s always the chance that the bastards simply get away with ripping off our tech. That’s capitalism for you—still more laissez-faire and Wild West than org charts and HR benefit booklets would have you believe.”

“I could pitch an investigative piece for the Tribune,” Kenzie said, still in fix-it mode. “I’m sure Aaron would green-light it.”

“No,” Ava said again, just as quickly. “This whole thing is off the record, okay?”

“Of course. I told you, that’s the case unless you tell me otherwise.” She paused. “Actually, that reminds me. I don’t think I can, um…”

“Use me as a source anymore?” Ava said, half-smiling at her across the table.

“Right. And, uh”—she gulped before plowing ahead—“I’m going to have to tell my boss why, according to the ECM handbook.”

Ava’s hand stilled, wine glass halfway to her mouth. “There’s an ECM handbook that deals with this sort of thing?”

Kenzie nodded. “More of a code, but yeah, there’s a section that discusses conflicts of interest. We’re supposed to reveal potentially compromising situations as early as possible.”

“Huh.” Ava took a long swallow of wine. “Apparently, journalism is less laissez-faire and Wild West than the paparazzi’s general conduct would suggest.”

“Apparently so.” Kenzie hesitated, licking lips that tasted of garlic and ginger. “So, are you okay with me telling Aaron about us?”

Ava waved a hand. “I’ve been out since high school, Kenzie. I think the question is whether or not you’re okay telling him.”

Kenzie nodded, the motion fast enough it would probably have given a human whiplash. “Absolutely. I mean, who wouldn’t be proud of dating you?”

Ava’s eyebrow did its sexy tilty thing, and Kenzie realized belatedly that there were probably quite a few people who wouldn’t view dating Nick Westbrook’s sister as something to shout from the rooftops. Sloane, for example, and their parents.

“If you’re okay with people knowing,” Ava said, fiddling with her wine glass, “then why the hesitation about telling your boss?”

Kenzie shrugged. “You mentioned the other night you were worried about people finding out, so I guess I wondered...” She took a huge bite of noodles, her eyes on the window over Ava’s shoulder so she wouldn’t have to maintain eye contact. Was that a siren? Did someone need her help?

“You wondered?” Ava prodded.

She was going to have to finish this conversation, wasn’t she? “I wasn’t sure if *you* were embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed?” Ava frowned. “Why would I be embarrassed?”

“Because.” Kenzie waved at Ava, hardly believing she needed to spell out the obvious. “You have multiple degrees and a handful of patents to your name. Oh, and you’re also a top executive at one of the largest tech firms in the world. Meanwhile, I’m a junior reporter who only has a job because I also happen to be good with a camera. How could you not be embarrassed?”

“Are you serious?” When Kenzie ducked her head, Ava reached across the table to take her hand. “Hey, being at the start of your career is nothing to be ashamed of. Besides, you’re a

wonderful, selfless person who helps perfect strangers—at considerable risk to yourself, I might add. Admittedly, U-Dub might not be MIT, but it’s a decent little school in its own right.”

Kenzie stared at her, lips quirking at her teasing tone. “Have you ever considered you might be biased?”

“About U-Dub? No.”

“Ava!”

“Oh, you mean about you? Absolutely,” she said.

Then she leaned across the table and, at the same time, tugged on Kenzie’s hand, urging her forward so they could meet halfway. Kenzie savored the way Ava kissed her, the press of her lips both eager and modulated as if she was trying her best not to overpower her when, really, Kenzie didn’t think she would mind being overpowered one bit.

And then, just as the kiss began to deepen into something more fervent than controlled, Ava’s phone rang.

“Fuck.” Kenzie’s eyes shot open as Ava pulled back to smile bemusedly at her. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Ava said, reaching for her phone and squinting down at the screen. “It’s not like I wasn’t thinking it.”

She took the call down the hallway, her voice hushed. When she came back, her forehead was furrowed, her eyes apologetic.

“What did they say?” Kenzie asked, although she was pretty sure she already knew.

“The investigator discovered actionable evidence.” She reached for her purse. “I’m sorry, Kenzie. I’m going to have to take that raincheck. I need to meet with my team to discuss next steps, and since our chief counsel is currently eating dinner at her desk…”

“No, I totally get it,” Kenzie said, even though she felt like stomping her foot in a less-than-mature demonstration of her current mood. Were they seriously never going to get to finish a meal together and... do whatever it was that adult women who were dating did after dinner? Of course, she had some ideas, especially after walking in on her sister and Mika, but someday, she hoped to experience the real thing.

As Ava’s thumbs danced across her phone screen, Kenzie tamped down the urge to hurl the blasted device into planetary orbit. Destroying Ava’s personal property would probably not earn her a third date. Fourth date? *Whatever.*

“Can I at least pack you some food to go?” she asked.

Ava slipped her phone into her purse. “No, that’s okay. I’m sorry I can’t stay. Maybe one of these times we’ll actually get to enjoy dessert.”

She probably hadn’t intended anything lascivious with her remark, but that didn’t stop Kenzie from zeroing in on her lips. “I hope so,” she said, her voice slightly deeper. Apparently, she channeled Galaxy Girl when she was thinking about sexy times.

Ava licked her lips, and Kenzie’s hand shot up to adjust glasses that weren’t there. Laughing softly, Ava rounded the table to press a kiss to her temple. Kenzie lifted her chin in unspoken invitation, and Ava hesitated.

“I’m afraid if we start, we won’t want to stop,” she said.

“That’s kind of the idea.” Kenzie wagged her eyebrows semi-wickedly.

“Kenzie Shepherd, who knew you could be diabolical.”

“I can be diabolical!”

“Sure you can,” Ava said in a patently disbelieving tone.

“Why does literally no one believe that I can be evil?”

“Because you can’t.” Ava turned and headed for the hall. “I would delay this meeting if I could, but they’re waiting for me.”

“I understand.” Kenzie followed her to the door. “We’ll try this date thing again, okay?”

“Promise?” Ava asked, her voice wavering slightly as she stepped into her shoes.

Was she nervous, too? That possibility hadn’t occurred to Kenzie. “Of course.” She pulled Ava into a warm hug. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily. Unless, I mean, you want to.”

“That’s the last thing I want.” Ava’s voice dropped, and she whispered against Kenzie’s hair, “Kiss me goodnight?”

In response, Kenzie backed Ava up against the door, much as Ava had done to her the night they first kissed. This kiss, too, was deep and passionate, and she hoped Ava could feel her sincerity. It was ridiculous, really, how attached Kenzie had become in such a short time to this one person, this amazing woman whose arms around her were solid and warm and heart-stoppingly tender.

She pulled away at last and leaned her forehead against Ava’s. “Text me later?”

“I will.” Ava pressed one last kiss against the corner of Kenzie’s mouth, and then she was turning and slipping out of the apartment.

The door closed behind her with a quiet click, and Kenzie focused her attention, relying on her super senses to track Ava’s progress. Ava’s steps were smooth and measured as she walked away down the hall, her heels clicking against the floor, but at the stairwell, she paused and hesitated for several seconds, as if she might change her mind. But then her notifications went off again, and Kenzie heard her sigh, long and low. A moment later, the stairwell door creaked open, and that was it—for now, at least. There was always later. After all, Kenzie only lived a short bus ride—or flight—from Hyperion. How long could Ava’s meetings really take?

Probably, Kenzie should warn her first before dropping in. No need to get Hyperion security all in a tizzy again.

She seated herself back at the dining table and reached for the pad thai carton. Maybe after dinner, she and Matt could play *Minecraft* or *National Geographic Challenge* from the comfort of their own homes. Matt. Holy crap. She was going to have to tell him she was dating Ava, wasn't she? And Antonio, too. While Matt would probably fangirl over how lucky she was—she hoped—Antonio seemed likely to take the news less well. As did her parents.

She groaned slightly and shoved more noodles into her mouth until she was sure she must look like a chipmunk. Why did she have to inform the people in her life about the inner workings of her heart? It wasn't fair. Straight people didn't have to plan out how to tell their friends and family they had met someone. Although, in this case, the people who loved her would probably be less shocked by Ava's gender than her last name. Yay for progress.

Grabbing the TV remote, Kenzie settled down on the couch to watch TV until Ava texted her. Hopefully, there wouldn't be a city-wide emergency, and Panopticon wouldn't reach out to her and D'aman, and Ava would be open to a late-night visit. An image of Matt popped up in her mind, but she pushed it away as Netflix loaded. He could wait, and so could her parents. What they didn't know couldn't hurt them.

In theory.