



# CHASING STARS



Wen Knight *SIZZLES* in  
summer's hottest film!"

Critics are calling  
"MUST SEE roman

**ALEX K. THORNE**

# PROLOGUE

THE SHIP CRASHED 200,000 LIGHT-YEARS away from the icy cold spaceport where it had first taken off.

It happened violently and without warning—a meteor storm that pulverized the shell of the ship like a swarm of angry brittawasps. The nine hundred beings on board the broken explorer vessel hurtled toward an unfamiliar blue-green planet that the sonar maps called Earth.

The ship, all sixty-five tons of seloridium and glass, shattered apart in the middle of a hot, sandy expanse they would later discover was the Mojave Desert. The Aquels were the first to go. Their nebulous bodies shriveled under the hot sun, and they died screaming in agony. The Setokyi were next, choked by the planet's air as their four lungs filled with noxious oxygen. They turned a sickly yellow before they collapsed.

Three hundred survived the crash, but only one hundred ninety-seven passengers of the *Andromeda Voyager* were still alive when the tanks and helicopters arrived. One hundred ninety-seven passengers representing two quadrants, six planets, and seventeen races.

Ten-year-old Ava'Kia Vala of the planet Zrix'dhor was among the survivors. Her family was not.

When the men in black suits arrived, she was lost in a panicked crowd of Keelas, Nxases, Amoorties, Sqosdkorlias, Yanagharians, and a host of races whose names she had never learned.

They would become known as the Andromeda Orphans.

# CHAPTER 1

“MY HERO!”

Ava rolled her eyes and tried not to smile at her best friend’s dramatics. Nic was batting her eyelashes, with her hand pressed over her heart as though swooning.

“You’re an ass, you know that?” Ava moved her arm, yanking the offered box of donuts out of Nic’s reach. “You don’t deserve a chocolate cruller.”

“Okay, no, no! I’m sorry,” Nic said, making grabby hands at the box. “Don’t take them away from me.”

“Just pick one already.” Ava shook the box impatiently and Nic wiggled her fingers above it, contemplating. She went with a classic jelly donut and took an impressive bite.

“The OG never fails to disappoint,” she mumbled through a mouth covered in powdered sugar, which made Ava grin.

They were on the roof of one of LA’s tallest buildings. Nic had discovered the roof-access staircase on her first day as a junior science engineer at RainnTech, almost five years prior. Most of the company’s employees stayed hidden away in their cubicles or in one of the building’s basement labs. The staff canteen rivaled Google’s, and had everything caffeine-deprived, Soylent-chugging employees could ask for, so no one ever considered actually going outside, let alone to the roof. It had quickly become one of their favorite chill spots.

The wind picked up and whipped Ava’s flyaway blonde hair across her face, tickling her nose. She rubbed it with the back of her hand and inadvertently got the tip sticky with jelly.

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“So, I’m working late tonight, which means you can’t watch *Stranger Things* without me.” Nic wiped Ava’s nose with her thumb and leaned back with her palms spread out behind her as her feet dangled off the edge of the skyscraper. She was sitting hip-to-hip with Ava, whose cape flapped behind them.

“Come on! You’ve already seen it.”

The air was growing warmer, and the morning smell changed from dew to coffee and car fumes. It was almost time for work.

“Yeah, but you know it’s not as fun when I’m not there to document your reactions. My Snapchat audience will be so disappointed.”

“Oh, gosh! Not the Snapchat audience!” Ava said, but conceded. “Fine, I’ll wait.”

Nic smiled with triumph and stuffed the last of the donut into her mouth.

*Ah, the pros and cons of living with your best friend,* Ava thought.

The sky had gone from pink to blue in a second, and the sun was already hot against Ava’s skin. A typical Los Angeles morning.

Closing her eyes, Ava tuned into the sounds of the city. Below, cars honked as they inched along congested highways. A door slammed shut, a keypad was being pushed, someone on the 405 turned up their music and Ava winced—it was too early for heavy metal. Her eyes flared open at the sound of the screech. Tires against asphalt and the smell of burning rubber. Ava stood tensely, orientating herself, and trying to find the source of the screech.

She glanced at Nic, who immediately recognized the look on her face and waved Ava off with a flick of her wrist.

Ava shot into the sky like a bullet, a rocket, a bird.

She saw it in slow motion—the rusted pick-up slamming on the brakes but hitting the shiny Porsche in front of it anyway, the Porsche ramming into the SUV ahead of it, the SUV breaking through the barrier and hurtling down the hill.

She took it all in—the screams, the shattered glass, the crack of bone. Ava dove towards the falling car.

The speed at which she flew created what Nic called a wind aura, which acted as both a protective shield and a force that allowed Ava to stop and move large objects without touching them. It had taken her a long time to learn how to regulate her speed, to know how far away she needed to be

from an object to avoid crushing it with the intensity of the force. Nic had tried to explain it with equations on a whiteboard, but in the end, it was practice that made perfect. The old car lot on the edge of town was filled with her failed attempts.

She shot around the SUV in an energy burst, the blue, black, and yellow of her suit creating a dizzying blur around the car. Ava's ears hummed as she flew in the wind tunnel of white noise that blocked out all other sound.

She could feel the energy force as if it were a tangible thing. The faster she flew, the warmer it became, and Ava knew that if she got too close to the car, it would crumple like a soda can. Slowly, she moved. Higher and higher, pulling the SUV along in her wind tunnel.

Eventually, she had the car high enough to move it to the road, and she slowed until her form was visible and the car dropped with a gentle thud.

A crowd had formed, as it usually did, and Ava could hear the paramedics on their way. She quickly adjusted her mask. She had always known that she wanted to keep Swiftwing separate from Ava. It was either a mask or a full cowl, and while Ava appreciated anonymity, she also hated the way the full cowl made her look like a small Mexican wrestler. In the end, vanity won out and she went with the mask. Nic had jokingly call her Blue Zorro, before the media dubbed her Swiftwing.

Inside the car, a mother and two children—both, thankfully, strapped in car seats—were crying and shaking, trauma still clinging to them.

Ava opened the door to the front and helped the woman out. She stumbled on shaky legs and wrapped her arms around Ava's neck to steady herself. Cameras flashed from all over, as two dozen onlookers whipped out their phones.

"Bless you, Swiftwing," the woman sobbed, before scrambling to get to her children. The littlest one, who looked to be about two or three, had stopped crying and was sucking on her thumb. Her wide, wet eyes were fixed on Ava. She smiled, and the toddler smiled back.

They were shaken up, but they'd be fine.

Ava, however, was less fine. At the sound of the paramedics, she surreptitiously looked down at her watch.

*Shit.*

Late for work.

\* \* \*

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At the security booth of the studio lot, Ava flashed the parking attendant a smile and her badge. She pulled into her regular parking spot, and was in and out of the café on the lot in record time. Being late *and* arriving without caffeine might be grounds for termination.

Ava moved through the backlot with familiarity, past sound stages and exterior sets, past offices and people on bicycles and golf carts, rushing off to get to set or deliver a prop.

The sound of drilling and hammering filled the air. Ava enjoyed being back here. The past few months had been a whirlwind of press tours and hotel rooms, red carpets and plane trips. She had missed being part of this fickle family of crew members.

Weaving her way through trailers, she heard the voices before she saw their speakers.

She'd have recognized the American-British accent and specifically enunciated cadence of Gwen Knight's voice from halfway across the world. The other voice took her a moment to place.

Rounding the corner, she saw Ron Gooding—Gwen's co-star and *People Magazine's* Sexiest Man Alive for two years running—leaning against Gwen's trailer, his perfectly chiseled face set in a scowl.

"Ron, darling, you were the one who proposed this," Gwen was saying as she pushed her fingers through her hair. It had been colored dark for the movie—almost black. Ava thought it made Gwen look like a classic cinema goddess—like Rita Hayworth or Ava Gardner. It suited her, Ava thought, not for the first time. She knew that Gwen's mother was British and her father Cuban. The dark hair seemed to bring out the olive in her skin and the green of her eyes. Ava was caught between staring at Gwen's face and actually listening to what she and Ron were saying.

"I didn't know that she'd want to be exclusive when I agreed—" Ron stopped as Ava moved closer. He pushed off the trailer and crossed his arms over his chest. The wink he directed at Ava was charming in an obvious sort of way, but she found herself blushing. He was fresh off the latest *Bourne* movie—the first black actor cast in the role. His casting had sent Twitter into a flurry, and even critics all agreed on one thing—the man was charming.

Gwen's expression had changed too. She was looking at Ron with an exasperated frown, and he turned to her before leaning in and whispering

something in her ear that made her lips pull tightly together in a sort of smile.

Ava watched the exchange with interest. She hadn't realized they were this close. Gwen was not known for making friends on set.

Ava came toward them and cleared her throat awkwardly. "Your, uh... your coffee, Miss Knight."

Gwen shoved Ron off and turned her attention to Ava. "Eisenberg. Finally. Did you get lost somewhere between falling out of bed and getting to the lot?"

"Sorry." Ava came forward, holding out the coffee, which Gwen took. "Traffic was bad on Melrose. I think there was an accident."

Gwen sighed, taking a sip of her standard almond macadamia milk latte with a smidge of maple syrup. Ava made sure the café stocked a specific Colombian brand exclusively for Gwen's morning caffeine shot.

"I should probably get to make-up," Ron said, looking between them.

"Tonight, then." Gwen gave him a pointed look, and Ava tried to decipher the expression on Ron's face before he walked off.

Gwen watched him go, then turned a sharp gaze to Ava. "What?"

"Nothing." Ava drank her own coffee in quiet contemplation. This was a sort of ritual for them. Ava arrived every morning with two cups. On Fridays, she brought donuts, and Gwen would complain about how they were nothing but sugar and fat, and entirely too sweet. By lunch time, she would have eaten two.

"Come on." Gwen gracefully ascended the steps of her trailer, leaving Ava to follow.

It always surprised Ava how comfortable Gwen's trailer felt. The 46-foot-long on-set home had been featured on *Celebrity Spaces* the year before. It was designed by some French interior decorator whose name Ava wouldn't even try to pronounce. It was light, and open and homey—gray couches with bright throw pillows. There was even a little bookshelf and desk for when Gwen's ten-year-old son came to set after school. Ava had spent countless afternoons helping Luke with his homework while his mom was off dangling in front of green screens.

Gwen settled on that expensive couch and opened the morning's *Washington Post* as Ava retrieved a bottle of LaCroix from the fridge with

one hand and pulled up the day's shooting schedule on her tablet with the other.

There was a certain predictability to their mornings that Ava appreciated. Their interplay, born out of years of working together, was like gravity, a universal constant.

Ava could feel Gwen's eyes dart up from the paper a few times, and she tried not to squirm. She always got a bit twitchy when Gwen stared too hard or for too long.

Eventually, Ava lifted her gaze from the bright tablet screen to meet Gwen's stare. It was a weirdly charged moment, with Ava questioning and Gwen looking faintly caught-out. But then Gwen tilted her chin up, just a fraction, and she was all certainty and confidence, and Ava thought she must have been imagining anything different.

"I need you to make me a reservation at the Abortorium for tomorrow tonight." Gwen set the newspaper aside and gave her full attention to Ava, who was already making a note. The Abortorium was impossible to get into without at least a three-month reservation, unless you were Gwen Knight—superstar, philanthropist and *TIME*'s 2014 Person of the Year runner-up (she'd come in behind the vice-president).

"Book it under Ronald Gooding, but mention I'll be accompanying." Gwen's eyes stayed on Ava's face, as if daring her to ask about it, but Ava only nodded, her mind whirring with questions.

"Gooding. Got it."

Gwen went back to reading, while Ava tapped on her tablet, distracted. She knew for a fact that Gwen was not particularly interested in Ron Gooding—or she thought she did.

Production on *Losing Neptune* had gotten off to a rocky start. Gwen had insisted on British theater darling Aziz Kothari as her leading man, but Kothari had had prior commitments. Gooding had been the studio's choice. He wasn't particularly known for his serious roles, and it was no secret that Gwen considered this to be her shot at the Oscars. Six times nominated, but no win.

Gwen was convinced that her politics made her controversial, while Ava had a theory that it was because Gwen made her throw out any projects produced or directed by old white men. There went Scorsese, Spielberg, Cameron, and Weinstein. She'd made an exception for Jean-Pierre Jeunet



a few years prior, which had earned Gwen her second César Award. As a general rule, however, she preferred female-helmed projects.

This one was particularly close to her heart, Ava knew. She remembered how hard Gwen had fought for it, finally signing on as a producer. She was playing a defense lawyer whose client was accused of murder. The client in question also happened to be one of the Andromeda Orphans. The film was loosely inspired by a real trial that had occurred a few years back.

Considering Gwen's very vocal feelings about the casting, it surprised Ava that she and Gooding had seemed so cozy earlier, and even more so that they should be having dinner together.

"Oh, and Eisenberg?" Ava jolted, pulled out of her musings at the sound of Gwen's voice.

"Get me the name of the person responsible for Jennifer Aniston's wedding cake. The lime ganache was inspired." Gwen tapped her finger against her lips. "Also, find out if that ginger hobbit, currently top of the charts, is available to play at a private function in two weeks."

"Planning a wedding, Miss Knight?" Ava chuckled. Gwen had been married three times, according to her most recent biography, and swore she'd never do it again.

"Don't be absurd." Gwen turned a page of the newspaper. "I'm paying someone to do it for me."

Ava heard the words, but didn't quite make sense of them for a moment or two. "I'm sorry, what? To whom? I mean, who is..." She frowned, frustrated by her own inarticulate spluttering. "Married?"

Gwen spared her a glance. "Close your mouth, Eisenberg. Before something flies in there."

Ava shut her mouth with a snap as Gwen stood, smoothed down the skirt of her dress, and sauntered past to the kitchen.

"Ronald and I have become...close."

Ava was still frowning. "Ron? Ron Gooding?"

"Of course, Ron Gooding. Keep up, darling."

"So, you're..." Ava squinted in confusion. "You're marrying Ron Gooding?"

"Eventually." Gwen opened the fridge and then closed it again, all restless energy. "The engagement will be announced in a few weeks." She

walked back to the couch and sat down. "I'm only telling you this because you'll be helping with the party."

"The party," Ava echoed.

"I'm thinking Swarovski crystals, tear-drop chandeliers. We'll have to have it at Mario's new restaurant, of course."

"Crystal, restaurant, of course." Ava wondered what a stroke felt like. "I, um..." She shook her head. "I didn't know you two were..."

"And why would you?" Gwen raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "You arrange my social life. You're not a part of it."

Ava blinked, and cleared her throat. "I-I didn't mean to imply... I'm just surprised."

"Yes, well." Gwen shrugged. "He suits my needs accordingly."

"Your needs? Oh." She floundered. Should she say congratulations? Was that even appropriate? "I wish you all the best, Miss Knight."

Ava wondered if she imagined the little flicker of displeasure on Gwen's face. "Your endorsement is noted. Now..." Ava looked back at her expectantly. "I'm going to need you to call Shayne. I need a dress for tonight. I'm thinking something bold, metallic, whatever. It has to be memorable."

"What's tonight?" Ava planned Gwen's schedule meticulously. She could recite it in her sleep, and she knew for a fact that Gwen was off tonight.

The corners of Gwen's mouth curled up. "I'm accompanying Ronald to the BET Awards."

Ava coughed to mask her choked noise of surprise. "The Black Entertainment Awards?"

"Is there a problem?" Gwen's voice was clipped, and Ava bit down on her lips and shook her head.

"Nope. No. Uh. It's just that you're so..." *White*. "... busy with... stuff."

"Reschedule whatever you need to." Gwen waved her hand. "I want those dresses here by noon." She stood and looked down at Ava, seeming satisfied. "Time for make-up."

As she breezed out, Ava was left shell-shocked and speechless.

Dresses, lime ganache, reservations.

It was going to be a long day.

\* \* \*

“It makes absolutely no sense!” Ava landed on the ground with a whump and sprang to her feet to face Horace, the seven-foot tin robot. Horace was programmed to take down anything with a heat signature.

Nic sat behind a glass panel, cackling gleefully over a monitor as she manipulated the robot with a controller that made Ava think of an arcade game joystick.

“I don’t know,” Nic sang out as she thrust the controller forward, prompting Horace to ram into Ava, who blocked and hovered off the ground, just high enough to kick its head off its shoulders.

“She might be egotistical and narcissistic and possibly a little unstable—” Nic’s fingers fluttered over a series of buttons beside the joystick, and Horace’s head reattached itself, much to Ava’s annoyance.

“She’s not unstable.” Ava landed a dropkick against Horace’s knee and the robot stumbled back.

“But,” Nic continued, ignoring her protest, “some people are into that whole whip and smirk thing.”

“Whip and smirk?” Ava dodged a punch by levitating backwards with her arms flung out.

“Oh, you know what I mean. She likes the power.” Nic pushed her thumb down on the tip of the joystick, and laser beams shot out of Horace’s eyes.

“Since when does he do that?!” Ava yelled, patting her head where the laser had almost singed her hair.

“Since I added it this morning.” Nic grinned.

She was constantly tweaking Horace according to Ava’s progress. In the beginning, when they had first started training, he was barely more than a titanium punching bag. Nic, who seemed to have a knack for finding hidden places, had put him together in the building’s supply closet. Of course, supply closet was a bit of an understatement, considering that the “closet” was the size of an Ikea warehouse. Nic had found an area in the back where she could happily and privately work on her projects. It eventually became less of a craft room and more of a superhero training den.

That was almost a year ago, when Ava was learning defense techniques from YouTube videos and taking mixed martial arts at the Y.

## CHASING STARS

“So, you’re quick and you can fly,” she remembered Nic saying to her one night, when Ava had come home all bruised and bleeding. “That doesn’t make you invulnerable.”

Ava had wiped her bloody knuckles against her jaw, the bruise already fading. “I heal fast,” she had replied, knowing Nic was right. Nic, who had known her since she’d first arrived on Earth, who knew her better than anyone.

“If you’re serious about this superhero thing, Ava, then you’re going to have to learn how to fight. You can barely throw a punch,” Nic had countered.

Ava would have argued then, but Nic had been right. Her Zrix’dhorian biology reacted differently on this planet. After the crash, Ava had found she was capable of impossible things. Flying came first and was the most obvious. Flying to get away from the crash site, to escape the black vans and guns. At first, she had thought it might have been a dream, but then she noticed her enhanced hearing—the way she could detect the mailman’s footsteps three houses away, or the engines of a plane 35,000 feet up. Her reflexes had come next. It had taken a summer of catching fireflies between her fingertips for her to realize that she was not just quick, but inhumanly so.

Finally, she’d mastered flying. It wasn’t just a fluke, or something triggered by adrenaline, but an intrinsic part of her. By then, Ava had learnt how to control her hearing and hide her reflexes. But flying had made trying to be normal impossible.

She dodged Horace’s laser beams by running along the side of the wall, in a move that had Nic whistling. “Been practicing that one?”

Ava laughed. “Shut up. You’re impressed.”

“So anyway,” Nic said, slowing Horace down slightly as Ava leaned over with her hands on her knees, taking a breath. “Maybe Ron Goodlooking will be good for her.”

Ava punched Horace in the shoulder, causing the robot to stumble backwards.

“Love might melt the ice queen’s heart,” Nic continued.

“Love?” Ava looked to the window, where Nic was furiously stabbing at two buttons. She missed the way Horace came at her, and in a second, she was on the ground, looking up at the robot’s face. It was as smug as an

expressionless face could be. “You think she loves him?” Ava asked, winded and splayed out on the ground.

Nic powered down Horace, and cranked a lever that opened the training room door with a heavy groan.

“Why are you so hung up on this?” Nic gave Horace’s head a proud pat. Ava scoffed and wheezed. “I’m not...hung up.”

“I’m just saying,” Nic reached out a hand to pull her up, “methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

“The lady dothn’t do anything, except get fired if she doesn’t help plan her boss’s perfect engagement party.”

Nic laughed. “You know you only talk about yourself in the third-person when you’re stressed out.”

“Shut up,” Ava replied, but she was laughing too.

Nic flung an arm over Ava’s shoulders and they walked out of the room. “Does this mean I’m not on the guest list?”

\* \* \*

By the time Ava returned home, she was ready for a long shower and a date with the only boys she’d ever really been into—Ben and Jerry. It had been the kind of day that could only be saved if it ended in ice cream. It didn’t help that she’d been barely out of RainnTech’s basement when her police scanner had reported an incident on the subway. A bomb threat had been called in, but the bomb squad had come up with nothing. They needed Swiftwing’s ears to check for anything abnormal, just to be sure. And so, Ava had flown in, closed her eyes, blocked everything out, and *listened*. The scurry of rat paws under tracks, the drip of a pipe somewhere in the tunnel, the bustle of feet overhead, but no tick, no beep, and no bomb.

As usual, the cops seemed both relieved and annoyed to have her there. Some thought she made their jobs redundant, others resented the media attention Swiftwing brought. At the same time, they couldn’t deny that LA’s resident hero made them all feel safer.

By the time Ava left, her hair smelled of smoke, and her cape was stained with subway dirt.

It had been Ava’s adoptive mother Rachel who had come up with the costume idea. Back when Ava was little and the memories of Zrix’dhor were fresh, she would tell stories of her people, and what she remembered

of the glass-domed city where she was raised. It was the Zrix'dhorians who had first proposed an interplanetary voyager craft. They were explorers. Star-Chasers, they were called. Rachel would listen, encouraging young Ava to remember. And when Ava had first nervously told Rachel about her plan to become Swiftwing, Rachel had suggested modeling the costume on Zrix'dhorian imperial armor.

Her current suit was the third prototype. It helped that her best friend was a techie-genius.

They had both been seniors—Ava at UCLA and Nic on scholarship at Caltech—when Nic was headhunted. “A black, middle-class, Compton kid at Caltech,” Ava remembered Nic saying with a laugh. She’d planned to go into biotechnology, but then RainnTech had offered the freedom to do what she’d always wanted—play with cool shit.

The organization focused its energies on creating security devices (the word “weapon” was never used) that protected against attacks by the less “civilized” Andromeda Orphans.

*Andromeda Orphans.* Ava had never liked that name. She hadn’t been an orphan on the *Andromeda*. She’d had a mother, an older brother, friends—a family.

Ava changed out of her work clothes and the suit underneath. It clung uncomfortably after a day in the LA sun. She didn’t feel the heat as intensely as humans, but her sweat glands still worked, and she was grateful for the suit’s moisture-wicking material.

By eight-thirty, Ava was spread out on the couch, with an empty Tupperware that once contained carbonara pasta and a half-eaten pint of Cherry Garcia on the coffee table. She was switching between the news on two different channels. Ava wondered how many lives she’d have to save to balance out the heinous crime of watching *Stranger Things* without Nic.

In the end, she decided she’d never be able to make it up, and flipped until she came to a channel that was broadcasting the BET red carpet. Ava sat up quickly, nearly dropping her spoon. She had almost forgotten that Gwen was going to be there—which seemed ridiculous, considering how she’d spent most of her afternoon preoccupied with the thought.

Except, Gwen wasn’t there—or if she was, she certainly wasn’t on the arm of Ron Gooding, who had turned up with some pop-singer-slash-model who looked barely old enough to be out on a school night. Ava was

still wondering where her boss was when her phone buzzed. Darth Vader's "Imperial March" filled the apartment—Gwen was calling.

Ava leapt up to grab her phone from the table, vaguely registering two new texts from Nic.

"Miss Knight. Hi. What's up?"

Ava could hear Gwen breathing on the other end of the line. "I..."

"Miss Knight?"

"I'm out of ice cream," Gwen said in a clipped tone. Calling at this hour was entirely in character; many a time, Ava had been called out of bed to appease one of Gwen's whims. Sometimes it was midnight waffles, sometimes a 5 a.m. green smoothie.

But there was something different about this time. The hesitation in Gwen's voice, the fact that she hadn't shown up at the awards ceremony, and just...a gut feeling.

"Do you..." Ava started. "Would you like some? I can walk to Salt & Straw. It's like, literally a block away." Ava knew that Gwen knew that.

"No." She sounded tired. "It's...forget it."

"Miss Knight, are you sure you're—"

"Good night, Eisenberg," Gwen said and hung up.

For the second time that day, Ava was left feeling confused, a little helpless, and completely distracted by Gwendolyn Knight.

## CHAPTER 2

AVA WOKE UP IN A mood that matched the weather. The rain had been intermittent throughout the night, and the morning gave way to dull, muted sunshine.

She was restless and fidgety as she pulled up to the studio lot and made her way to the café. It was an early call morning, and Ava was still yawning when she almost walked into Daniel Cho—Gwen’s long-suffering publicist.

“Watch it, Sunshine.” Daniel hopped back to avoid a collision. He was perfectly dressed, as usual, in a grey suit, with slicked back hair. Ava had no idea how old Daniel actually was. She knew he’d been working with Gwen since forever, so he couldn’t be as young as he looked. “You’re here early.”

Ava yawned at him. “So are you.”

They had, over the years, developed the sort of grudging bond that comes from being together in the trenches. At the same time, they both tended to vie for Gwen’s attention, and she guessed that they were both surprised the other had lasted so long. Ava knew that Daniel put up with almost as much crap as she did.

“What are you doing here anyway?” Daniel usually worked out of the Third Planet Production offices across town.

Daniel shrugged. “I’m meeting with another client while Gwen’s playing hooky. What’s your excuse?”

“Wait,” Ava frowned. “I thought they were shooting the courtroom interiors today.”

“Change of schedule.” Daniel adjusted his satchel and managed to look superior. “You didn’t get the alert?”



Ava shook her head and pulled out her phone. “I guess I missed it.”

Daniel pointed at Ava’s phone. “Oh my God. Is that you?”

Ava had forgotten she’d set her lock screen for the sole purpose of annoying Nic. The picture was one of herself and Nic at twelve, with Rachel in the background. It was one of Ava’s favorites. It was also the year that Nic decided to get braids, and the ends of her dark hair were tied with little rainbow hair ties. In the picture, they had their arms around each other, and Ava was grinning. Her honey-blonde hair was pushed under a Six Flags baseball cap, and she was all sun-kissed and freckled. Rachel was making a face in the background. Although already fully gray in the picture, she must have been only about forty-something.

“Early 2000s chic.” She shoved her phone pack in her pocket and asked begrudgingly, “Do you know why the schedule changed?”

He offered her a pained expression. “Gwen’s licking her wounds after last night’s incident. God, if I had a dollar for every time I had to do damage control for—”

“What incident?” Ava asked with some frustration.

“You don’t know? Gwendolyn and Ronald had a rather public tiff last night before the BETs. Witnesses overheard Ron going on about how things were different now and yada yada yada. The rest is all rumors clogging up my inbox.”

Ava’s mind raced. Well, that was clearly why Gwen had skipped the awards. “You know about Gooding?”

Daniel gave her a look suggesting it was a stupid question, but Ava brushed it off.

“What’s the deal with them?”

“What has she told you?” Daniel asked cautiously.

“That they’re like, engaged?” Ava managed to sound even more appalled by the notion than she had the day before.

“Yeeeah.” Daniel looked skeptical. “I’m not buying it. I have spent too many drunken evenings with that woman to believe that she’s into that dimwitted beefcake.”

“Have you spoken to her?”

“She was less than charming on the phone last night, so...” Daniel grimaced. “Better you than me.”

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Ava stared at her phone for about twenty seconds after Daniel walked away. She was usually the first to know if anything changed in Gwen's schedule. It was her job to know. The fact that she had no idea where Gwen was, coupled with the weird phone call the night before, had her feeling uneasy and a little bit hurt.

Leaning back against the wall of the fake post office, she called Gwen's number. It rang for so long that Ava was about to hang up, when Gwen answered with an impatient, "Yes?"

"I—" Ava realized, rather belatedly, that she wasn't exactly sure what she wanted to say.

"I'm going to assume you're calling me for a valid reason and not just to waste my time."

"Yes," Ava said quickly. "I guess I wanted to check in. Apparently, the call schedule changed, and I wasn't sure—"

"I had some things to take care of," Gwen interrupted with no further explanation. "But since I have you, call Georgia and tell her I'm on my way. I want to see her immediately."

The last time Gwen had had Ava call her lawyer so early in the day had been almost a year ago, after a lengthy telephone conversation with her ex-husband.

Ava swallowed, waited a beat, and finally asked, "Is everything all right, Miss Knight?"

Gwen was silent for a long moment, and Ava waited, suddenly wishing she could see Gwen's face so she could assess the damage. She was good at that—just looking at Gwen and knowing. She knew every frown, every smile. She knew whether a laugh was born out of humor or spite, whether Gwen was sighing because she was exasperated or because she was just tired. Gwen was made up of expressions, tones, movement—a body of language and code in which Ava had become fluent.

"That will be all, Eisenberg."

Gwen hung up and Ava slumped against the wall. Something was definitely wrong.

\* \* \*

The rest of the afternoon played out fairly typically. After Ava called Gwen's lawyer, she decided to get a few errands done before she was

summoned again—although she couldn't help but wonder if she was going to be summoned at all. She hated days that went off schedule. They always made her feel a little lost.

Ava was coming out of the drugstore after picking up Gwen's prescriptions when news of a hold-up nearby broke over the police scanner.

Ava hated petty crime. Most criminals were kids trying their luck, or desperate people trying to pay gambling debts or fund a drug habit. Ava hated that she couldn't save them all, that the best she could do was talk them down, or worst-case scenario, stop the bullet they would have regretted firing for the rest of their lives. These usually weren't bad people, just people making bad decisions.

The kid in the little Italian deli couldn't have been older than sixteen. His hand was shaking as he pointed a gun at the young woman behind the counter. Ava could hear the terrified thump of her heart before she even entered the building.

It was over in a second. Ava had the young woman out of the deli and safe on the sidewalk before she went back in and disarmed the boy. He was cursing at her as she walked him out to the police car outside. He called her an alien freak, a fucking abomination, a plague on America. She was impressed with his vocabulary. She hoped they'd let him get his GED in juvie.

The rest of the day was slow. Ava couldn't stop thinking about the kid in the deli. He'd been so angry. Something about the way he'd looked before the cop shoved his head into the back of the car—all surly and scared—reminded Ava of her brother. She didn't think about her brother much. He was fifteen when he died. Fifteen and mad at the world. He had never wanted to be on the ship, he'd made that much clear. She remembered an argument in which her mother had told him that one day he'd feel differently. One day, he'd be proud that he was part of something so important. That day never came.

Around lunch time, she went to visit Nic at work, but her friend was buried in new tech, and distracted by all of the shiny.

"Here." Nic shoved a bag of marshmallows at her, before readjusting her goggles and turning back to her soldering iron. "Stop sulking. It's unhealthy how co-dependent you are with her."

"I am not sulking," Ava retorted, shoving two marshmallows into her mouth so that her cheeks bulged. "And I'm not co-dependent. She's my job." Ava chewed and swallowed.

"You could quit," Nic offered without looking up.

Ava said nothing. She'd never considered quitting. Not even when Gwen had called her two hours after Ava had left work and asked her to go to Beverly Hills and feed Garbo, Gwen's ancient tabby cat, because the housekeeper had gone home early and Gwen was across town getting a facial.

And to an outsider, yeah, she could see how Gwen might be considered a little...mean. But they didn't know her the way Ava did. They didn't see her tackle-hug Luke after he did well on a test, or watch how she cooed over an ill-tempered Garbo. They didn't hear how grateful she'd sounded when Ava flew to Massachusetts to get a box of Gwen's favorite cider donuts (she'd told Gwen that they were from a store in the Arts District) after *US Weekly* had published the gory details of her last divorce.

So by six, after a day of not-sulking, Ava was a little worried when she still hadn't heard from her boss. Of course, it was really none of her business. Gwen could be doing a hundred things which Ava was not entitled to know or care about. And yet she couldn't quite rid herself of the nagging worry.

Ava was still feeling vaguely anxious that night as she and Nic were debating what to watch. It was a toss-up between *Game of Thrones* and *The Great British Bake Off*. She was weighing up the options when she happened to glance at her phone.

*Meet me at the house. Don't dawdle.*

She practically sprang off the couch, phone in hand. "I, um...I need to..."

"Get Little Tommy out of the well?" Nic finished for her, immediately assuming it was a Swiftwing emergency.

"Yeah." The lie was easier than it should have been. "Something like that."

Nic sighed dramatically. "Fine, go be a hero. Leave me here to eat this ginormous pizza all by myself."

"Don't you dare!" Ava called out as she left the apartment.

If Nic wondered why Ava was leaving through the front door in her normal clothing and not out of the window as Swiftwing, she didn't ask.

Ava pulled up at Gwen's gate ten minutes later—one of the benefits of living in Studio City was how close it was to Gwen's house in the Hills.

She punched in the code and drove up the path to the mansion. Gwen liked things pretty and she liked things expensive, and the house was both. In the years that she'd worked for Gwen, Ava had seen multiple extensions and renovations to the house. She liked the way it looked now, the way it felt both spacious and lived in. It had little touches of personality—photographs on the walls, Luke's comic books scattered on coffee tables, Gwen's soft gray cardigan draped over the back of a chair. It felt like a home.

The door was opened by a small, round Hispanic woman in her late fifties. Ava didn't recognize her. Gwen was notorious for hiring and firing housekeepers.

"I'm here for—"

"Yes, yes," the woman nodded, ushering Ava in. "Señora Knight is in the back."

"Thank you." Ava smiled at the woman, who seemed surprised and offered one in return.

Ava made her way through the entrance hall, past the living room, into the kitchen, and out through the patio doors.

She loved the garden. It was slightly overgrown, green, and lush—filled with fairy lights and a little chipped fountain. There was a hammock where Luke would read for hours, and a little table where she would sometimes run lines with Gwen.

It was where Swiftwing had first visited Gwen, all those months ago, and where she returned over and over again as the masked superhero, inexplicably reluctant to abandon the strange sort of relationship they had formed while Ava was wearing the suit.

Ava wasn't sure why she'd started visiting Gwen as Swiftwing. At first, it might have been to thank her for the kind words Gwen had said about her during an interview. Later, it was to ask for advice on how to deal with negative backlash from the police department. And then, it became a sort of ritual. Gwen would spend evenings in her garden, and Swiftwing would fly down and visit.

Gwen would offer Swiftwing a drink, and she'd politely decline. They would sit in the wicker chairs where Ava the assistant ran lines with her boss.

## CHASING STARS

When the light was just right and the air smelled of lemon trees, Ava was sometimes reminded of Zrix'dhor, where the humid, tropical weather made everything smell sweet and fruity.

In the late evening, the trees made it dark, but the lights around the pool were on, as well as the little lights strung up between branches. As Ava approached, Gwen looked up and blinked, as if she'd forgotten her summons.

Ava's eyes flickered to the martini glass on the little table in front of Gwen. It was half empty. And by the number of olives missing from the jar on the bar counter, Ava guessed that Gwen was at least on her third drink.

She was strangely nervous as she took those last few steps forward.

One glass and Gwen was wittier, sharper, and a little meaner. Two and she was argumentative and impatient; she'd pick a fight and win after two. Three and she was honest. Three made Ava nervous.

"Miss Knight."

Gwen sat up straight and stared at Ava for the longest time. Her eyeliner was smudged, her face all flushed, and she looked...sad. Garbo, who had been sleeping in the chair beside Gwen, yawned and stretched before hopping off and walking to the house, likely annoyed that they were bothering her sleep.

Ava smiled brightly, as if some of her shine could rub off on Gwen. "Can I get you anything, Miss Knight?"

"Cancel it." Gwen reached for her glass, took a too-big gulp of her martini, and pulled a face of distaste. "All of it."

"I—" Ava took a tentative step forward. "Cancel...?"

"The plans. The party, the cake, whatever."

"Everything?"

"Yes." Gwen sighed, seemingly too exasperated to come up with a sarcastic retort. "Everything."

Ava stood there for a second too long, feeling helpless. She was caught between running off to complete her task (which she imagined would be particularly satisfying) and stepping forward. But then what? How on earth was she supposed to comfort Gwen? A few placating words? A hand on her shoulder?

Swiftwing would have been confident. She would have echoed some wise Zrix'dhorian proverb and offered comfort. But as Ava, the idea made

her stomach twist up with a strange kind of anticipation. It was the same feeling she got when she held eye contact with Gwen for just a moment too long, or when their fingers brushed as Ava handed over her coffee. It was a feeling she held close and tried her hardest not to analyze. She liked her job. She didn't want to complicate it with...things that were complicated.

She was saved from having to make the choice when Gwen stood, glass in hand, and sauntered over to the little bar area.

"You know he said that I was fooling myself?"

Ava swallowed, grounding herself. "He?"

"Ronald." Gwen poured clear liquid into her glass from the shaker, frowning in concentration as it filled up. She liked her martini cold and dirty. A splash of olive juice and she was all set. "Apparently he had a crisis of conscience." Gwen scoffed and whirled around; some of the drink escaped the glass.

"Maybe you should sit down," Ava suggested, only to be met with Gwen's most condescending glare.

Gwen sat anyway. "He said," she pointed her finger at Ava, "and—and this is the real kicker. He said that he didn't want to compromise his integrity. His *integrity*." She looked at Ava, as if waiting for a response. "This from a man who, up until two years ago, was doing shaving cream commercials. Who cares if it was staged? A relationship with me would have made his career."

Ava frowned and sat on the wicker chair opposite Gwen, not trusting herself to sit next to her. She might have done something stupid, like reached out and put her hand on Gwen's shoulder, or her arm, or her knee, right where her skirt was riding up. Ava narrowed her focus back to the issue at hand. One confusing revelation at a time.

"It was staged?"

Gwen hummed in confirmation and sipped her drink as if this wasn't the biggest entertainment scoop of the year.

"But, you were..." Ava started awkwardly. "You could have anyone you want. Why him?"

"Custody."

"Custody?" Ava repeated slowly, as if the word was foreign.

"My odious ex-husband is suing me for full custody."

"Of...of Luke?"

“No, of our pet Chihuahua.” Gwen rolled her eyes and chugged the rest of her drink. “Apparently, getting married to someone half his age also robbed Alfonso of half his brain cells. He thinks that because wife two-point-oh has the luxury of spending her hours arranging fruit baskets and getting manicures that they’d make a better primary household. Apparently, all the traveling I do for work is disrupting my son’s routine, which by the way, is ridiculous. He has...consistency. He knows I’m always here for him.”

“Miss Knight.” Ava wished now that she *was* sitting next to Gwen. She wished that she could reach out and steady her. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Gwen said quickly. “They won’t...I won’t let it happen.”

“Of course,” Ava was equally quick to mollify her. “Of course not.”

“The thing with Ronald was...” Gwen sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Ava made a mental note to greet her with ibuprofen in the morning. “Well, my lawyer thought that it would be a good idea to try and equalize the playing field. Alfonso’s got his walking midlife crisis. I would have—”

“Ron,” Ava finished for her.

“Two-parent households are still preferred by the courts.” Gwen shrugged. “It wasn’t going to be a permanent arrangement. An engagement announcement, a few weeks of cohabitation, cutting back on set hours, and by the time the deposition rolled around, Alfonso wouldn’t have a leg to stand on.”

Gwen ran her thumb along the side of the empty glass. “It’s come to this. For six years, I’ve dressed my son for school, made sure he had his lunch, read him bedtime stories. Six years, while Alfonso was off winning Palme d’Ors and sailing yachts in the Greek Isles, making cameos as Luke’s father. Now he marries a *Sports Illustrated* centerfold and I’m the one who has to prove competence. Can you imagine?”

As silence extended between them, Ava found she had nothing comforting to say. She felt a bit like a child, peeking through a door into a world where grown-ups had lawyers and custody battles, and the monsters didn’t have horns or sharp teeth, and you couldn’t just punch them to make them go away.

She stood and took Gwen’s glass from her, then walked to the bar and traded it for a can of LaCroix.



Gwen accepted it wordlessly and took a sip. She didn't bat an eye when Ava sat in the chair beside her.

"You want to hear the worst part?" Gwen lowered her voice and leaned forward like she was about to divulge something awful. "My son—my smart, discerning, shy boy—actually *likes* living with Alfonso and *her*. He likes that she bakes him gluten-free brownies and that they go horseback riding while Alfonso is on set. He likes her and it...kills me."

It wasn't the first time Ava had seen Gwen drunk. But at this point, she was usually dispensing advice, or bemoaning the general idiocy of men. To see Gwen so vulnerable was jarring. She was almost too real. Raw nerves underneath layers of Chanel and expensive perfume.

Ava's first urge was to fix it, to stop the hurt. But the supersuit under her shirt wasn't going to solve this problem, and her urge to use jujitsu on Gwen's ex-husband wouldn't help anyone.

"Is there anyone else who could step in? I'm sure there are a hundred people—"

"Who I could trust to be discreet about this?" Gwen cut her off. "Don't be so naïve, Eisenberg. Ronald worked because we had something to offer each other. People know we occasionally move in the same social circles. The whole on-set romance would have sold like artisanal soap at a farmers' market. He needed a career boost; I needed a convenient relationship. It was perfect."

Gwen lowered her glass onto the table and it clattered against the metal coaster tray. "Maybe he's right," she muttered, her eyes focused on the rim of the glass. "I spend more time behind a camera than anywhere else. More time around these hair stylists and make-up artists than around actual people."

Ava wasn't about to mention the fact that they were very much actual people.

Gwen looked up then, as if sensing exactly what Ava was not saying. She narrowed her eyes in annoyance.

"God knows I see your pretty little face more often than—" The shift in Gwen's expression was slow and deliberate.

Ava was still too distracted by the fact that Gwen had just called her pretty to really notice it until Gwen straightened and looked at her with terrifying focus that seemed to push through the haze of gin and vermouth.

“Eisenberg.”

Fidgeting under the intensity of Gwen’s stare, she asked, “Miss Knight?”

“It’s ludicrous,” Gwen murmured, more to herself than to Ava. “It wouldn’t be any better than what he’s doing. You’re so...young. It would likely do more harm than good.” Gwen scowled at Ava as though she was somehow at fault here.

The first inkling of Gwen’s idea became clear, and Ava’s eyes widened. It was the alcohol talking. Gwen wasn’t thinking straight. She couldn’t possibly be implying what Ava thought she was implying.

“But,” Gwen emitted a contemplative little noise, “it would cause a riot. It would make unfair discrimination a conceivable argument. We both know my last biography made the *New York Times* bestseller list because of the chapter about my flirtation with Portia back in the nineties. And besides...” Gwen sighed. “Luke likes you.”

“It’s late.” Ava attempted a smile and stood on shaky legs, hoping to escape before Gwen pursued this any further. “I should go.”

“Sit.”

Ava sat.

Gwen studied her with careful consideration and bit at the edge of her thumbnail—a habit she adopted when particularly tense. “I should probably preface this by saying that your job with me is in no way at stake. Whatever you decide will have no bearing on your employment.”

Ava shifted nervously. “Miss Knight, you’re upset and—and not thinking clearly. You can’t, you don’t want...me.”

“Oh, Ava.” Gwen’s smile was slow and calculated. “I think you’re exactly who I want.”

## CHAPTER 3

“THIS IS INSANE.” NIC WORE an expression of horror. “You know that, right?”

“It’s not *the worst* idea ever,” Ava protested for what felt like the hundredth time. There was a half-devoured slice of pizza in the box on the table, and Ava looked at it sadly, her appetite gone, thinking she should have eaten it before she brought up Gwen’s little proposal.

“Isn’t she, like, fifty?” Nic’s voice went shrill.

“Forty-four,” Ava corrected. “Not that it should matter.”

“And Rachel. What the hell is she going to think?”

Ava cringed. She hadn’t even thought about her adoptive mother’s reaction.

“She’s always been supportive about this sort of stuff.” Ava hated this. She hated being on opposite sides of anything with Nic.

“I don’t mean the—the gay thing.” Nic paused, squinting at Ava. “Although we need to talk about that too. I’m more concerned with fact that you’re considering betrothal to Tinsel Town royalty.”

“We wouldn’t actually get married.” Ava hugged a throw pillow to her chest as Nic barreled forward with her rant.

“It’s going to be everywhere. I thought you wanted to protect your privacy. You do this, and Ava Eisenberg is going to be on more covers than Swiftwing.”

“Gwen can manage the media. If anyone can limit the exposure, it’s her.”

“This is...” Nic gave an exaggerated shrug as she trailed off helplessly.

"I know it sounds crazy. It did to me too."

"I'm hoping you have a really convincing 'but' in that sentence."

"*But* I can help. I can help a friend."

"She is not your friend, Ava." Nic's voice softened as the initial freak-out subsided somewhat. "She's your boss. You've told me time and time again how little she respects and underappreciates you. God, she won't even call you by your name."

"That's not actually—"

"Did she give you a choice? Did she threaten your job?"

"What?" Ava straightened. "No, of course not. I mean," she took breath, "yes, she gave me a choice, and no, she didn't threaten anything." She thought back to how pleased Gwen had looked when she'd laid out her strangely convincing argument.

Nic did not look convinced. "She shouldn't have roped you into this at all. Are you sure the kid isn't better off with his dad? Gwen's judgment is clearly lacking, if this is anything to go by."

"Okay." Ava sighed. "Obviously, I haven't painted her in the best light. But I swear, she's an amazing mom. And...and what's happening to her is completely unfair. Luke needs her. He needs his mom, and if I can help keep them together, if I can..."

"Oh, Ava." Nic's voice did that thing where it sounded both condescending and comforting, and Ava didn't know if she wanted to hug her or yell at her. Instead, she put her hand up to ward off whatever pity was being directed at her.

"I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that I'm projecting, that this is some way for me to feel better about losing my mom and brother."

"Am I wrong?"

"This is about Gwen," she stated definitively. "And Luke. And what they deserve. I want to do this."

That was truth of it. Simple and honest. She did want to do this, even if the thought was a little terrifying. Or a lot terrifying. Ava wasn't exactly sure what Gwen would expect of her, or how far this was supposed to go. But she trusted Gwen, more than she'd realized.

Nic threw her hands up in defeat. "I guess you've made your decision."

Ava shrugged and felt small again. "Well, I don't want you to be mad at me."

“I’m not mad,” Nic was quick to say. “I’m just struggling to understand. Why did it have to be you? Why not one of the pieces of eye candy she’s always parading around at swanky functions? I’m sure there are a dozen people who’d kill to marry Gwendolyn Knight.”

“Because they don’t know her like I do. And she trusts me with this.”

Nic raised her eyebrows. “And Swiftwing?”

“What about her?”

“I’m guessing Gwen’s next UN appearance isn’t going to be about advocating for the rights of her alien girlfriend?”

Ava got a strange little thrill at the word “girlfriend” and shrugged it off. “At least we know she’s alien-friendly.”

Alien-friendly was a vast understatement. Gwen had spent the last ten years championing the rights of the Andromeda Orphans. She was, in many respects, the celebrity face of the Andromeda Orphans Equality Movement. She and her ex, Alfonso Moretti, had received acclaim for their documentary on the children of refugee aliens. It had made an outstanding impact on the way people thought of AOs. It was one of the reasons Ava had been drawn to her, and one of the reasons she so admired Gwen. For all Gwen’s sarcasm and caustic wit, she cared deeply.

But Ava said, “She can’t know who I am, about where I come from. This is completely platonic. We won’t even spend that much time together. It’s like a business arrangement.”

“A skeevy business arrangement,” Nic added. “If the truth comes out—”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“There’s more at stake here. I know you want to help...a friend.” She pulled a face, as if the last word had been a struggle. “But you’re putting too much at risk. You’ve got to think of the bigger picture. There are other jobs, other bosses.”

Ava made a little sound of frustration. “Nic, you know I don’t want to be a PA forever. But this job is good. I get to be part of something I love. And I get time to work on my writing.”

“Barely,” Nic groused. “Look, I know it’s a sweet job, okay? But I also know that you take your role as Swiftwing seriously. Remember what you said when you first convinced me and Rachel of this superhero thing? You said that you had a purpose, and that you needed to fulfill it.”

## CHASING STARS

“I also said that if I could help, I should help, and I can help Gwen.” Ava fell back against the couch, feeling defeated.

“So, help her another way. Find another willing sucker. There’s gotta be someone else out there willing to fake-date Gwen Knight.”

\* \* \*

“Finally.” Gwen didn’t open her eyes as Ava lowered the coffee cup onto the counter. It was 7:02 a.m., and Gwen was already in the make-up trailer, hair curlers and all. She looked decidedly less hungover than Ava would have suspected given the previous night’s gin party. “I thought you’d flown halfway across the world to pick the beans yourself.”

Ava’s eyes went wide, and she was about to launch into a ramble when Gwen opened her eyes and looked at her with a hint of a smile through her snail-slime infused face mask. An honest-to-goodness smile.

“No, no flying, just traffic.”

“Hmm.” Gwen took a tentative sip. “Well, at least it’s hot.” She leaned back in her chair and removed her mask, presumably so that her raised brow could have maximum effect. “So?”

Ava looked down, suddenly very interested in the toe of her new shoes. Despite what Gwen had said the night before—and she had said a lot—Ava couldn’t help but wonder if refusing your boss’s fake marriage proposal was indeed grounds for termination.

“Eisenberg, I have an outstanding number of admirable qualities, but I think we both know that patience is not one of them. Last night I...” Gwen took a slow breath as she found her words. “I asked you a question. You told me you would have an answer by morning. It is now,” she made a show of glancing at her watch, “seven minutes after seven, and you have yet to accept.”

“A-accept?”

“Don’t be obtuse; it isn’t a good look for you.”

“Miss Knight.” Ava steeled herself and subconsciously crossed her arms over her chest before she realized that channeling her Swiftwing power stance might not be the best option. “I did think about it. A lot, actually—”

“Excellent.” Gwen reached forward for her face mask, as if the conversation ended there. “You can call Georgia and schedule a meeting for—”

“I can’t do it.”

Gwen blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I’m uh, declining. Politely.” Ava cleared her throat, feeling like the words were still stuck in there. “I’m sorry. I really am. But it just wouldn’t be right, and not for reasons you’d think, or—or because I don’t want to help, but I just... Well, I don’t think I’d be good at it.”

“Oh.” Gwen’s voice dropped an octave. She was surprised. And something else. Disappointed, Ava thought. Of course she was disappointed. She had drunkenly placed her faith in Ava.

“It’s just that the more I thought about it, the more I realized that there were far more suitable candidates.”

“Suitable candidates?”

“You know, um...people who would be more convincing.”

“I see.”

“I know you thought that my knowledge of, well...that I would be useful, but there must be someone who knows you better than me. I’m mean, I’m just your assistant, right? There’s got to be—”

“Enough.”

“—someone else who... What?”

“That’s enough.” Gwen had pulled out her phone and was scrolling through her Twitter feed as if this was the most casual conversation in the world. “Thank you, Eisenberg. You can go now.”

“But I—”

“Go. Now.”

Ava walked out of the make-up trailer with slumped shoulders and an air of defeat. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. This was the opposite of how it was supposed to go. Gwen was supposed to agree with her. She was supposed to blame the martinis and say something disparaging about Ava’s outfit and how ridiculous it was of her to ever consider that Ava would make a suitable substitute for pretty-boy Ron Gooding. Then, because Ava was the only one privy to this little scam anyway, they’d look over other options. Images of the two of them sitting in Gwen’s trailer poring over faces of possible candidates played through Ava’s head like a slow-motion montage.

She hadn’t expected Gwen to look disappointed. It was stupid how much it upset her, like she’d just let a bad guy get away. Worse, she felt like

she *was* the bad guy, which was crazy, because everything Nic had said the night before was true. A fake engagement would be a bad, bad idea. No one would buy that Gwen and Ava were... Ava couldn't even say it in her head. Engaged? In love? And probably doing all of the stuff that engaged people did. The thought of pretending to touch Gwen in ways that Ava had only ever thought about in her deepest 3 a.m. fantasies, was...terrifying. Exhilarating.

It would never work. Nic was right.

There *was* more at stake. She'd have to double the subterfuge if she was seeing Gwen after hours as Ava. The flimsy excuses she made when she was missing from set wouldn't hold up if she was late for a dinner or whatever social event Gwen would want them to attend. She couldn't exactly hang her cape in Gwen's guest closet. Everyone would be looking at her. It was the antithesis of everything she'd taught herself to be. She couldn't be a wallflower *and* be Gwen Knight's date, and so she couldn't be Gwen Knight's date. Ever.

Wouldn't. Couldn't. Shouldn't.

She said it under her breath like a mantra—as Gwen ignored her for most of the morning, as she shot into the sky around noon to help with a forest fire just north of the city, as she trudged back into Gwen's trailer, determined and terrified, and still smelling mildly of smoke.

Gwen barely looked up from her novel (the newest offering by Andromeda Orphan Yanus Hakk) as Ava entered. "Eisenberg, you have been dismissed. Now, unless the Academy Award nominations have been announced or Dev Patel has finally replied to my text, I do not want to be—"

"We should date."

Gwen's head darted up from the book. "Excuse me?"

"Date." Ava nodded resolutely. "We should date."

"A few hours ago, you were convincing me of how utterly unconvincing you would be in this role and now—"

"I don't think an engagement would sell, at least not right away." She paced in front of the coffee table, rationalizing it to herself as much as to Gwen. "But if we dated for a while, not for real, of course, because that would just be...silly." She hazarded a glance at Gwen. "But if we pretended to date for a while, it might come off as more realistic. It might give people



a chance to ease into the idea that we're in a relationship and that we're stable."

"And how is this different from my idea that we announce an engagement?"

"Because it's stability you're aiming for. So, we do it slowly, give them constancy. That's what your ex-husband is using as leverage, right? No one would let them take Luke from you if they saw how happy he was at home, what a good life you've created for him. If we date, then you get to showcase that life. It's like—like a PR strategy."

Gwen smiled, as if Ava had said something extraordinary, and Ava's heart did a little flip. "A PR strategy." She actually looked impressed. "That's good. That's really good. And you'd be willing to go along with that?"

"I—yes."

Nic's disapproving face flickered through her mind like a bright red light.

"If we do this, it'll be public." Gwen always seemed to know exactly what Ava was thinking. It was unnerving. "You do understand that? Your family and friends are going to know. And you will have to sell it. You can't tell anyone that this is just a ruse."

"Well..." Ava shuffled restlessly.

"Who else knows?"

"Just my roommate-slash-best-friend," Ava said quickly. "I needed another opinion. You know, to talk it through."

"You mean you needed someone to talk you out of it?"

Ava winced. "She's not exactly thrilled with the idea."

Gwen watched her carefully. "And you're doing this anyway?"

"I am." Ava smiled, hoping she looked convincing. "I want to help."

Gwen nodded, seemingly appeased, and Ava wished she knew what Gwen was thinking.

"All right. Good," Gwen said. "We'll go to dinner and discuss the terms."

\* \* \*

The terms (as Gwen put them) were that they would tell Luke about their relationship as soon as possible to prevent him from finding out via gossip. They were to be seen in public, but to make no official statements

about their relationship. Public displays of affection were to be discussed beforehand to avoid crossing any boundaries. Ava was to remain Gwen's assistant and perform her duties as normal. Neither party would have any outside romantic entanglements during their dating period.

Gwen didn't specify how long this dating period would be, but Ava knew that Alfonso was pushing to have the deposition at the beginning of November, which gave them just over a month. After that, Ava supposed they'd play it by ear. She didn't want to ask Gwen how long their arrangement was supposed to last. She didn't want Gwen to think that she was impatient for it to end or not entirely on board.

In truth, Ava didn't know how much more on board she could be. They were sitting side by side in a dimly lit booth in one of LA's most expensive restaurants, which catered to discretion and, based on the little floating candles and flowery centerpiece, romance. When Gwen had suggested an after-work dinner, Ava had envisioned going to the café on the lot, not being ushered into Gwen's car with a curt, "Come along, Eisenberg."

Gwen, a vegetarian, ordered the charred radish and quinoa salad, and Ava reminded the waiter to hold the pine nuts. Gwen didn't like pine nuts. Ava, who looked at the three-figure prices on the menu and almost broke out in hives, went for a hamburger with fries. It took her a second after the waiter left to realize that Gwen was still watching her with a contemplative expression.

"What? Do I have something on my face?" Ava reached for her napkin and Gwen shook her head.

"I made the right decision, didn't I? Trusting you with this."

It was more of a statement than a question, but Ava answered anyway. "I think so. I'll do my best, Miss Knight."

Gwen's lips moved up into a soft smile, the kind that Ava had rarely seen directed at anyone who wasn't Luke. "I believe you will. And Ava?" Ava's breath caught. It was a strange, almost giddy feeling to hear Gwen say her name.

"Yeah?"

"It's Gwen now."

Ava nodded, her heart in her throat. "Okay."

Dinner arrived on expensive plates, with little squiggles of sauce on the sides, and Ava thought it might be the fanciest hamburger she'd ever seen. She made a conscious effort to not inhale it in seconds.

The silence was awkward when Gwen was not directing the conversation, and Ava wondered what they were supposed to talk about. She wanted to ask more about what they were going to tell Luke, and about what exactly they were eventually going to say to the media. She liked having this secret, this project that was for just the two of them. Gwen, for her part, seemed content to let the whole thing rest as she picked at her salad and replied to a text.

“Was it important?” Ava asked, watching Gwen drop her phone back into her purse, looking more pleased than she had all evening.

“That was Daniel. Apparently, Cate has committed to some silly play in Melbourne this winter, which means Sofia’s unnamed project is without a lead.” Gwen smiled slowly, and Ava was reminded of a cartoon villain twirling their mustache. “Karma for accepting an award for a film by that slimy weasel of a man. I told Cate not to work with Allen, and she just didn’t want to—”

“Do you like sunsets?” Ava wanted to kick herself the second the words left her mouth. Of all the inane questions to ask...

But Gwen answered. “Not particularly. They remind me that I don’t have enough hours in the day. Sunset always seems to take me by surprise.” Gwen pushed her plate away and took a sip of wine. “Speaking of surprise, a quick glance at my schedule tells me that you’ve booked me for—”

“Miss Knight?” Ava smiled nervously and shook her head. “I mean, Gwen. Could we...um, try to not talk about work?”

Gwen blinked and looked at her. “What do you suggest we talk about?”

“I don’t know.” Ava glanced up at their waiter, who seemed to materialize out of thin air to remove their plates and refill their glasses, only to evaporate again. “Maybe we should try to get to know each other?”

“Okay.” Gwen’s gaze was intense and absolute. Ava could feel herself blushing. “Tell me something riveting about you that I don’t already know.”

“Well, you can’t just demand a fact.”

Gwen frowned. “Why not?”

“Because that’s not how it works.”

That earned an eye roll. “Well, then perhaps you’d like to enlighten me as to how this works. I’ve never pretended to date my assistant before, and clearly you have all the—” Gwen laughed a nervous, tinkly laugh and scooted closer until she was practically sidled up against Ava.

“What are you—”

“Jess Cagle just walked in.” Gwen leaned in, and her breath was warm against Ava’s ear. This might be the closest they’d ever been to each other, and Ava fought back a shiver.

“Jess Cagle?” Ava whispered back because it seemed like that was a thing they were doing. “As in *Entertainment Weekly*?”

Gwen nodded. “If we do this right, we may just be able to make a little noise.”

“I thought you wanted to keep it quiet.” Gwen was still so close. Close enough that if Ava were to turn her head just a fraction, she’d be able to press her cheek against Gwen’s mouth.

Gwen tutted against her ear. “I want them to think we want to keep it quiet.”

Ava thought of Nic. So much for limiting exposure.

Gwen pulled back to look at her, and she was still too close. Ava could almost count her eyelashes. “Last chance to back out, Ava.”

She wasn’t sure if it was because of the way Gwen’s perfume seemed to invade every one of her senses, or if it was the way Gwen had just said her name, all soft, rounded vowels. It might have been the fact that she was starting to realize that maybe this wasn’t *just* about helping Gwen. Whatever the impetus, Ava snuck a cursory glance at the man at the table across from them and then placed her hand over Gwen’s, making sure it was visible from his table.

Gwen glanced at their joined hands. “Okay then.”

“What now?” Ava asked, barely breathing.

“Just wait for it,” Gwen replied, stroking her thumb against the side of Ava’s wrist.

And then it happened. He looked over at them. It made her feel nervous and surprisingly giddy.

She stopped breathing entirely when Gwen moved closer and pressed her lips to the spot just below Ava’s ear.

It was fleeting, and barely there. A butterfly kiss. Ava’s skin buzzed from the sensation. When Gwen pulled back, her expression was unreadable. Then she smiled, and Ava wasn’t sure if it was for show or not.

“It was either that or be branded gal-pals for the next three months,” Gwen finally said, finishing off her drink.

Ava nodded, not quite trusting herself to speak.

Gwen looked almost amused, and patted Ava's hand lightly. "Come on. Let's go before you start to swoon."

They got the check (Gwen paid, of course), and Ava watched her smile and flirt with the *maître d'* who came over to make sure they had enjoyed their meal. Ava was used to people fawning over her boss, but as they stood to leave and the squat little man kept talking, his shifty eyes darting between Gwen's face and her neckline, Ava felt compelled to press her palm against the flat of Gwen's back and lean in to say, "We really should be going."

Gwen stiffened for a moment and then relaxed. She turned and smirked at Ava, who felt a rush of warmth replace the nerves.

"Yes, you're right." That smirk still flickered at the corners of her mouth.

The car ride was quiet. Gwen gave her driver, Jonah, Ava's address, and then leaned back against the plush leather interior. They did not speak about the events of the evening.

The journey home took them from Sunset Boulevard onto Laurel Canyon, and Ava sighed, staring out at the colorful lights and the cars passing by. She felt restless. She needed to fly, to clear her thoughts. The car stopped outside Ava's building, and she waited for Gwen to make some quip about the ever-present smell of urine on the sidewalk, but all she said was, "That wasn't entirely disastrous."

Ava opened the door before Jonah could step out and do it for her. "You think so?"

Gwen made a noncommittal sound. "You'll come over to the house tomorrow night and we'll go from there."

"Okay."

Not for the first time that evening, Gwen's expression was unreadable.

"Okay," Ava repeated, under her breath, as she climbed out. And then the door was shut, and the car pulled away, and she was left on the sidewalk wondering what the hell she had just gotten herself into.

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# CHASING STARS

BY ALEX K. THORNE

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