

Chapter Seven, Part One “First Star I See Tonight”

Eleven Years Before Present

Friday, May 21, 2027

7:13 P.M.

Madison Rylander checked herself one more time in the wall of mirrors that lined the walkway from WWN Tower to the main newsroom in the old arena.

She didn't belong here.

Yes, she'd gotten the hang of working at a “big-time” network, and at some point in the last year she'd figured out how to get on and off the DC Metro without risking death or dismemberment, but tonight was different. The BuzzPower Ball was the hottest ticket for DC's young and semi-famous – Capitol Hill staff, pundits, all of them. Was she that? It didn't feel like it. Her reflection was practically screaming at her, “Go back to Cleveland!”

Her auburn hair was styled decently – but not a masterpiece – and it sort of clashed with what she'd *thought* was the perfect dress. Everyone said “sci-fi chic” was the way to go this year, so she'd picked up a white and gold number that looked straight out of an old Star Trek episode. It was a bit daring – mid-thigh was a bit higher hemline than she usually went for – but it compensated with a high neckline and long sleeves that flared out to gold-rimmed cuffs.

The white go-go boots and rocket-ship earrings might have been a little much, though.

She looked like a kid playing dress-up. No matter how many stories she got or who she was dating or how many times the editor-in-chief bragged about her, it still felt like she was waiting for the clock to strike midnight and all of this to go away.

As she reached the newsroom, Editor-in-Chief Jim Brinkman was coming the other way. His hair hadn't grown back quite the same since he'd beaten prostate cancer, but he was back in the office and looked energetic for 60. He was accompanied by his protégé – an absolutely radiant Toby Carsten. Her silver gown went clear to

the floor, but the neckline plunged almost as far. That's what a real star looked like.

"Girl!" Toby practically squealed, "I love, I love, I love the dress!"

"Ah yes, another of our princesses ready for the ball!" Brinkman bellowed.

"Thanks, sir," Madison said with a nervous smile.

"Enough with the 'sir' crap, Maddy," he laughed. "I think we're past that."

"I'll try, sir."

Brinkman shook his head, "You're hopeless, kid."

"Turn for me." Toby ordered giddily.

Madison obliged, and Toby straight-up *giggled*.

"A-mazing," Toby said, then leaned in a bit closer, "you show the boyfriend yet?"

"Not yet," Madison replied, attempting a Toby-style wink and being three times too dramatic.

"Lucky man," Brinkman broke back in, "and I hope you don't mind an old man saying that you look like a million bucks."

"I'll allow it on BuzzPower night...sir."

Brinkman let out a belly laugh, then offered his arm to Toby. "Well, Ms. Carsten, I suppose we should head over. Have a great time, Maddy!"

With that, he and Toby took off down the hall, but Toby shouted over her shoulder. "You might beat me for best dressed this year – seriously!" And then they were off.

Madison turned back to her reflection and saw a TV starlet – words from Toby tended to have that effect. She *was* really here, she *did* belong, and she was *really* best friends with *Toby freaking Carsten*.

There was, however, one last stop before the ball. Madison dropped by her workstation to retrieve her purse and make sure there were no last-minute emails – which there usually were.

Here, she made another critical miscalculation in assuming she'd be alone and able to leave. She should have known that even on BuzzPower night, the boss lady would be hard at work.

“Madison,” Prissy barked, emerging from her office. It was obvious that she was ticked, but it was impossible to take her seriously wearing an ice-white tuxedo with black sequined lapels.

Madison decided that the best move was feigned obliviousness, and she struck a runway pose. “Hey, Priss, like my dress?”

“It's...” Prissy searched for an adjective, “short.”

Madison gave a playful smile. “Well, that *was* the intention.”

Prissy re-focused. “Look, we really need to talk about the story you filed for Monday. We've been over this, there's no way in hell I'm letting you go to air with this. We are not throwing a hand-grenade into the United States Senate over some tawdry family drama. That's not up to our ethical standards.”

“Not up to standards?” Madison gawked. “Priss, the woman laundered three million dollars of campaign money to cover her pothead son's lifestyle at Stanford. That's not tawdry, that's high-grade corruption, and we have a duty to report it.”

Prissy gritted her teeth and lowered her voice. “It's nothing. Everyone else in that chamber has to have done something at least that bad, and the dollar amount is negligible at best.”

“Not really,” Madison said, checking the contents of her handbag. “I checked, and no other Senator seems to have done anything like this - and I can’t speak for DC, but in Cleveland, three million dollars is a lot of money.”

Priscilla huffed. “Well then, do we want to talk about your lack of national perspective on money in politics or your clear inability to suitably investigate 99 out of 100 members of the Senate?”

Madison snapped her handbag shut and looked Prissy straight in the eye. “Priss, Sparks is a hot mess without the hot. I was hired because I’m good at digging through political financial trails, and I am telling you that this is by far the biggest thing we’re going to find.”

“Madison,” Priscilla sniped, “I’m asking you to cease and desist for your own good. If you continue, I have to file an HR complaint against you tomorrow for breach of ethics and attempted use of WWN resources to harass a public figure. We can still save your career here, but I need a formal retraction by Monday including an apology and admission of your ethical lapse in pursuing this story.”

Madison set her bag on her desk with a thud, feeling her mouth drop open. One of her hands started shaking. She hadn’t expected Prissy to overtly call her job into question, but she knew that she had an ace up her sleeve. She tried to keep her eyes on Prissy. “I am not retracting the story,” she said slowly, “It’s valid, it’s important, and I haven’t doing anything wrong by reporting it.”

“Of course you have, Madison.” Priscilla rolled her eyes, then went back to her office to shove a few folders in a drawer, talking as she went. “Pamela Sparks is the only Senator who’s made a serious effort to advance anti-poverty asset seizure, GDP relocation, and humanitarian economic contraction. Implementing those things is the absolute ethical minimum for the non-revolutionary continuation of the current political system. So, let’s not make ourselves ethically complicit by going after the only person in Senate who doesn’t deserve to be swinging from a streetlight by their neck. Capiche?” She’d returned with a purse and had a bit of a spring in her step. “But it’s Buzzpower Night, so even I don’t want to talk about work. Have that retraction on my desk by noon tomorrow, and we forget this happened.”

With that, Prissy took off down the hall.

Madison stared after her – wondering what the hell she'd been talking about and how on Earth she'd pivoted to the ball so quick. Maybe Buzzpower night really was magic.

Still, Madison had one more piece of ammunition. “Prissy,” she shouted, forcing her boss to stop. “Brinkman told me to hold on to the Sparks story like a dog on a bone and said if I have to send it to him directly, he'd sign off.”

The smile dropped off Prissy's face as she marched back. “I am your immediate supervisor,” she snarled, shoving a finger in Madison's face. “You file your stories with me. I decide when your screwed-up idea of justice is a danger to society, and you do not trouble the Editor-in-Chief with stories he doesn't have the time or expertise to vet. Also, reaching out to him without consulting me first is grounds for HR action, which I will demand.”

Madison took a step closer. “I didn't reach out to anyone,” she said, knowing that that the next thing she said wasn't going to help the matter. “It came up when he had me and Dan over for dinner last Saturday.”

There, she'd said it. Madison was dating a major network personality, and that put her in the social circle of Prissy's boss. If the chief knew what Madison was working on, Prissy couldn't spike solid stories. Not anymore.

Prissy recoiled, baring her teeth almost like an angry dog. “Well then, if you're making your daddy issues official, I can *officially* tell you how messed up that is. I used to think Dan was smart enough not to date toddlers, but apparently he *does* think with organs other than his brain.”

Madison felt her face flush. She didn't know *why* she hadn't expected Prissy to stoop quite that low, but somehow the woman always managed to find new ways to get under her skin. A torrent of anger rose in Madison's brain, but she managed to stuff it back in its box long enough to remember that she was the one holding all the cards.

“I don't have time for this,” Madison snipped, blowing right by Prissy and toward the exit. “Run the story Monday, or I'll have it approved directly by Brinkman.” She made a point to keep walking, even though Prissy was yelling after her.

“This is going straight to HR! And you are banned from talking to Brinkman without me present, ever! You got that?”

“Have fun!” Madison yelled back without stopping.

Damn, that felt good. Scary, but good.

Prissy had nothing, and Madison had the direct backing of the Editor-in-Chief. Her hands were still quivering, but she felt like she was walking on air as she approached the front door. Maybe this was what being a star reporter actually felt like – and it felt like power.

Madison burst out the front door to a cool breeze, finding the sidewalk full of reporters in their evening finery. On Delaware Avenue, a fleet of Cadillac SUVs waiting to ferry WWN talent to BuzzPower.

Waiting to ferry *Madison* to BuzzPower.

She practically bounded to the nearest vehicle, the heels of her boots clicking against the concrete the whole way until she was ensconced in the plush leather seat.

“To the ball, ma’am?” the driver asked.

“To the ball,” Madison echoed.

Union Station was less than ten minutes away, walkable on a nice night and just one metro stop, but Brinkman had spared no expense on the transport. This, he’d said, was about making an entrance.

When the SUV pulled up to the front of the train station, it looked like nothing Madison had ever seen. The Greek columns of DC’s workday transit hub were lit up with blue-green lights. Behind the colonnade, Madison could already see the famous teal carpet. She was about to *walk* the teal carpet – and she *belonged* here.

The driver helped her out of the car, and cameras flashed as she glided onto the carpet. She looked around, and sure enough, a slim figure in a tuxedo was waiting for her outside the front door.

Dan.

He practically ran to meet her and she caught him in a hug. “So,” she chirped, “you do clean up well.”

“Only for you,” Dan gave her a squeeze, then whispered, “How’d the story go?”

Madison looked up into his big eyes. “Prissy threatened to take me to HR and I told her to shove it. It felt awesome!”

That was when a particularly impish thought crossed her mind, and she asked, “Want to have some fun with the paparazzi?”

Dan gave a nervous smile with a hint of mischief. “Depends, what did you have in mi-”

She didn’t let him finish, pulling him into a long kiss as camera flashes exploded like fireworks.