



## Chapter One

She jogged up the front steps of the modern, glass building that housed the Nynatech offices. Seattle had kindly put on a sunny day with a gorgeous blue sky.

Mallory West didn't need to check her chunky Breitling Aviator watch to know that she was running late. She still had a few minutes to get to the pilots' locker room. She'd gone to bed way too late the night before. After yesterday's test flight, she and some of the other pilots had headed out to celebrate at their favorite little bar near Sea-Tac.

She'd only had one beer because she had a test flight today—a big one—but the others had gotten plastered and somehow managed to talk her into karaoke. She winced. It hadn't been pretty.

Mal pushed through the revolving glass door. She hadn't wanted to go out, but it had taken her mind off things and was better than sitting in her empty apartment.

Her gaze snagged on the coffee kiosk in the center of the huge atrium lobby. Nynatech specialized in experimental space technology and were rolling in cash. They'd spared no expense for their head office. Glass walls and ceilings soared upward, and on the back wall, images played, showing all the company's products projected up in multi-colored glory. People in suits, or scientists in lab coats, bustled through, heading to the security turnstiles that led to the labs

and offices.

Right now, all Mal needed was coffee.

There was only one person ahead of her in the line. She could nab a mocha with an extra shot and still make it upstairs before Dr. Francine Wheeler gave her hell for being late. The head of the Wormhole Drive project had a stick shoved up... Mal wrinkled her nose. The scientist was bossy, unfriendly, and didn't bother to hide her disdain for those she considered beneath her intellect. The woman had very little time for test pilots. She treated Mal and the others on the team without PhDs like a necessary evil.

Mal didn't give a shit. As long as she got her paycheck and got to fly, she was happy.

"Mallory!" Giovanni the jovial barista beamed at her. "Large mocha, extra shot, and extra chocolate?"

"Fix me up, Gio, my man." Mal swiped her card on the machine. "I am in *dire* need of caffeine, and I'm late."

"Oh, no." The older man started up the beast of a coffeemaker. "Dr. Wheeler won't be happy."

"Understatement, my friend. But nothing gets between me and my coffee."

"Big test flight today." Gio waggled his bushy eyebrows. "Are you nervous?"

Some small flutters took wing in her stomach. "More excited than anything. No time for nerves when you're rocketing through space."

Gio laughed, big and loud. "Not many of us get to do that. A bit different from the Air Force, yes?"

Mal pasted on a smile. "Right."

The flutters turned to knots in her gut. Her job now was way better than the rules and

regulations of the Air Force. Mal loved to fly, and initially, she'd loved the Air Force. She'd been desperate to find her own place in the world.

But Mal was known for pushing the limits, especially as a combat pilot.

She'd disobeyed orders one too many times—for what she firmly believed were the right reasons. There'd been no way in hell she'd ever leave soldiers to die. She'd been dishonorably discharged for her trouble. Her gut soured. She wasn't sorry to have left, but it still left a bad taste in her mouth.

Luckily for her, Nynatech hadn't cared about her DD, and they liked that she pushed the boundaries.

"Here you go, Mallory." Gio handed her the biodegradable take-out cup—one of Nynatech's earlier inventions.

Mmm, the sweet, sweet scent hit her. The first sip was always the best.

Suddenly, she felt a sharp prick in her side.

"Don't scream or make a noise," a low voice said. "I want your security pass, now."

Gio froze, the ruddy color draining from his face.

Mal looked over her shoulder. The man behind her was an inch shorter than her, a black ball cap pulled low over his face. She saw him swallow and noted the perspiration on his skin.

Her gaze dropped to the knife. "Dude, that is the sorriest excuse for a knife I've ever seen."

The man jolted. He had wide-set, brown eyes, and a lot of scruff. "Just give me your pass."

No doubt some guy with an axe to grind with Nynatech. Probably wanted to steal technical specs, or destroy something to stop the exploitation of space. It seemed like they had one or two crazies through here every month.

She saw the guy shoot some nervous glances toward the security guards by the turnstiles.

“Look, I can tell you’ve never used a knife for more than cutting your food,” she said.

“You’re holding it wrong.”

“What?” He shifted, clearly agitated.

“Yeah, my stepdad was a bit of an expert. Worked in the stunt industry and trained every day. Knives, swords, you name it. My mom died when I was eight, so Rusty raised me. He wasn’t exactly sure what to do with a little girl, so he trained me to fight...with knives and swords, hand to hand.” Mal smiled. “So, unluckily for you, you picked the wrong person to join you in this little knife fight.”

The man blinked and swallowed again.

“And I was just about to have my first sip of a coffee I *really* need, and I’m running late.”

“Look, lady—”

Mal shifted back and kicked the guy in the gut. He doubled over with an *oof*. With her free hand, she landed a punch to his face, then as he dropped the knife, she caught it before it hit the floor.

“See, this is how you hold it.” She tossed the knife up, caught the hilt, and jabbed it in the air.

A solid front kick and the man flew into a display of chips and granola bars. Packets sailed everywhere, and the man fell to the tile floor in an ungainly sprawl.

She caught the gaze of the security guards and waved. Two sprinted over.

“You didn’t even spill your coffee, Mallory,” Gio breathed.

“Good, or I would have gotten really angry.” She set the knife on the counter and sipped her coffee.

Yep, that first taste was always the best.

“I have to run,” she said to the security guards. “You’ve got this?”

“Sure thing, West. Might need a statement later.”

“Roger that. After I get back from Jupiter.”

The guards grinned at her, hauling up her attacker between them.

Mal jogged to the turnstiles and swiped through. She decided the stairs would be quicker, and ran up to the pilot locker room.

Drinking her mocha as quickly as she could, she used her shoulder to barge into the locker room. Two pilots were sitting on the benches between the rows of blue lockers, chatting.

“West, you’re late,” one of the men said.

“Coffee emergency.” She set her cup down and opened her locker. The first thing she did was take off her watch and carefully set it inside. Rusty had given it to her when she’d joined the Air Force. The military had cured her of any shyness, and she quickly shed her jeans and shirt. She pulled her high-tech flight suit out.

It was a deep, navy-blue with a touch of metallic silver at the seams. It fit her like a glove.

She wriggled into it. Gregson and Parker were both ex-military as well, and married. The sight of her black sports bra and panties was hardly going to drive them wild. She zipped the suit up to her neck.

“Wheeler was looking for you,” Parker said.

“Great.” Mal pulled her brown hair up in a tight ponytail.

She reached into her locker and pulled out a photo. The edges were crumpled. She was twelve in the shot, gangly, and still growing into her body. Rusty stood beside her. They were both holding swords.

He wore his favorite, battered cowboy hat. His skin was leather-brown and wrinkled from too much smoking and sun, and his hair was a mix of black and gray. He wore jeans and had a thick

moustache that he'd never once shaved off. He'd been part cowboy, part stuntman, part wanderer.

Rusty had told her that he had too much tumbleweed in his blood to ever truly settle down. The longest he'd stayed in one place had been when her mother had been alive, but even then, he'd traveled for his work.

Mal ran a finger over the picture, pain piercing her heart. He'd died three months ago. He'd been larger than life, the only father she'd ever known. Sure, he'd had no idea what he was doing. He'd taken her to bars, taught her to fight, dragged her around the country to rodeos, movie shoots, and whatever jobs he picked up.

But she'd always known he was there for her. Sometimes, she barely remembered her mom. Just her soft voice and round face. When Mal looked in the mirror, she didn't see anything of her mom, except they had the same hazel eyes.

Rusty had survived so many injuries and bar fights, but years of smoking had finally done him in. He'd died of cancer. Of course, the crusty bastard hadn't told her he was sick until it was too late.

*It doesn't matter how you die, Mal, it matters how you live.* He'd said that to her just days before he'd died. She'd sat by his bedside, filled with a mix of terror, grief, and anger.

She stroked the photo again. He was gone and now she was alone.

Yes, she was about to turn thirty, but it still sucked to realize that if something went wrong with the test flight today and she never came home, no one would care.

"Mallory!"

Dr. Poppy Ellison strode toward her, her shoulder-length, blonde hair bobbing around her face. She was already in her flight suit, which hugged her petite body. Mal was five foot seven

and toned muscle, Poppy was at least five inches shorter, and slender.

Well, one person would care if she didn't make it.

"Where have you been?" Poppy asked. "Dr. Wheeler is ranting."

"I'm right here. All ready to go."

Poppy was the head scientist for the wormhole drive. She was super-smart, straightforward, and in possession of a killer eyeroll for fools. She treated Mal to one now.

Mal grinned. When she'd first come to work at Nynatech five months ago, she'd never guessed that she'd actually like any of the scientists, let alone become best friends with one.

Somehow, despite their differences, she and Poppy got on like they'd known each other for years.

A door banged open, and the tall, painfully thin form of Dr. Francine Wheeler strode in.

*Ugh.*

"West, you're late," the scientist said.

"I'm ready when you are, Doc."

Wheeler shot her a hard stare. "Both of you out to the launch pad. Need I remind you that this is an *extremely* important test for Nynatech? History-making."

*Yeah, yeah. You're a special snowflake and I'm a lowly pilot.*

"We're ready, Dr. Wheeler." Behind the doctor's back, Poppy made a face and jerked her head at Mal. *Don't talk back. Let's just get going.*

Mal sniffed. *I'm just standing here.*

Poppy grabbed Mal's arm and hauled her out of the locker room. "Let's go to space."

Mal wiggled her shoulders, shaking off her tension. "Let's do it."

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“Control, all systems are green, and we’re in a stable orbit,” Mal murmured into her headset.

“The view is *spectacular*.”

She finessed the controls of the sleek, experimental starship. Outside, the Earth was a beautiful, blue-green orb suspended in the black of space.

She smiled and shifted in the curved seat that molded to her body. Sensors in the chair were monitoring her vitals. It didn’t get much better than this: getting paid to test experimental starship technology with the best view in the solar system.

“Acknowledged, Hotshot One. Stay in position while we finish diagnostics.”

Mal raised a brow at the control panel. “Hotshot One? That’s the best you could come up with, Simmons?”

Her controller, back on Earth in the control room in the Nynatech office, snorted. “It suits you, West.”

“I’m not buying you an after-test beer. Hotshot? That’s so lame.”

“Well, you can be a bit hotheaded sometimes.”

“I’ll show you hotheaded,” Mal drawled.

“Keep the comm line clear,” the sharp voice of Dr. Wheeler cut across the line.

She was probably looming over Simmons’ shoulder. Mal pulled a face.

“Let Dr. Ellison finish her calibrations in peace,” Dr. Wheeler added.

Mal switched to the internal comm line. “How you doing back there, Poppy?”

Poppy was seated behind Mal in the tight cockpit of the experimental ship.

“What?” Poppy sounded a little preoccupied.

“How’s it going?” Mal repeated.

“Everything’s fine. I just need to finish calibrating the wormhole drive conductor.”

“Take your time.” Mal didn’t want to get Poppy started on all the science speak. Mal’s eyes usually glazed over, and her brain went numb.

She grabbed a jar of peanuts from the pocket of her seat. She popped some in her mouth. She’d gotten addicted to the things in the Air Force. From the hours of sitting on a tarmac, waiting to be called up for an extraction. She hummed a little under her breath, checking her systems. All good.

She had a few days off coming up. She tapped her short nails on the console. Maybe she’d head to the beach somewhere. Warm sand, cold beers, a hot one-night stand with a surfer, and some snorkeling.

Normally, she’d spend her time off with Rusty.

Her stomach contracted. *God*. She rubbed her chest. It was still hard to believe he was gone. He’d left her his old truck, and his sword and knife collection.

*Stay focused, Mal.* “Poppy? How’s it going?”

“Mal, this isn’t like tuning a car engine.”

“Hell, Pop, I don’t even know how to tune a car engine.”

“Sorry.” Poppy blew out a breath that echoed over the line. “This isn’t easy and it isn’t like there’s an instruction manual when you’re doing something for the first time.”

“Well, Rusty used to say that if the road is easy, you’re likely going the wrong way.”

“Sounds like your stepdad had a saying for everything.”

Mal smiled. “He sure did.”

“Well, I’m almost there. I definitely want to get this right.”

Hell, yeah, she did. They were testing an experimental wormhole drive technology. They definitely needed it right.

Especially when it was based on alien technology.

Over a year ago, the Fortuna Science Space Station orbiting Jupiter had been attacked by an alien ship.

It'd been a hell of a shocker of a first contact. Mal remembered watching the news and reports in horror. The space station had been ruined, and most of the scientists and station staff killed. A lucky few—or unlucky, depending how you looked at it—were abducted by alien slavers. The aliens had used a transient wormhole to travel to Earth's solar system, and they'd used it to leave again. Back to the other side of the galaxy.

As Earth had set about salvaging the destroyed space station, those who were taken were assumed lost.

Until they'd made contact with Earth using micro-wormhole technology to send messages back.

The survivors had contacted their loved ones. They'd been taken in, and were now living on the other side of the galaxy on a desert planet called Carthago.

Mal shook her head. Those poor people. They had no way home, and were now making a life on an alien planet. The good news was that they also sent advanced technology specs back to Earth.

Nynatech had won the bid to develop the new wormhole drive. The goal was a new, faster method of space travel.

The big test was today, and it should create a wormhole large enough for their ship. The plan was for her and Poppy to travel through it to Jupiter in the blink of an eye.

She was looking forward to seeing the new space station being built. The Resilience Station was currently under construction.

“Okay, Mal,” Poppy said. “I think we’re ready.”

“Think?”

The scientist took a deep breath. “No, it’s ready.”

“You okay, Poppy?”

“Yes. Just excited. We’re making history here, Mal.”

“We sure are. Ready to see Jupiter?”

“Absolutely,” Poppy replied.

Mal touched the comm. “Control, we’re ready to conduct the test.”

“Acknowledged, Hotshot One,” Simmons said.

She rolled her eyes.

“Hotshot One?” Poppy said. “That’s the best he could do?”

“Simmons isn’t known for his sparkling wit.”

“I can hear you,” Simmons said dryly.

“I know,” Mal said.

Simmons ran her through the pre-test checklist. Mal checked everything three times. She might like to take a few risks sometimes, but not with technology that was about to fling her seven hundred million kilometers through space.

“Control, we’re ready when you are.” She switched to the internal comm. “Poppy, you strapped in?”

“I’m ready.”

But Mal heard the woman’s nerves in her voice. Mal released her own breath. “Initiating flight test.”

The ship’s regular engines fired, and the ship shot forward.

Mal loved this little baby—she was a sleek, sexy beauty.

“Countdown to wormhole drive initiation.” *Here we go.* “Three. Two. One.” Mal touched the controls.

The ship launched forward at blinding speed. Sparks of blue light washed over the front of the fuselage, then everything around them turned to a streaming, blue glow. She was thrown back in her seat.

“It’s working!” Poppy cried.

“Data is coming through, Hotshot One,” Simmons said. “We need...get...by—”

“You’re breaking up, Control,” Mal said.

Suddenly, the ship was tossed sideways.

*What the fuck?* Mal was thrown hard to the side, her harness digging into her shoulder.

Poppy screamed.

They started spinning over and over. Pops of blinding light speared into Mal’s eyes. Gritting her teeth together, she pushed forward. All the controls were flickering.

*No, dammit.* “Control, abort. Abort!”

She shoved her hand on the emergency stop. There was a violent jerk, and the ship spun again.

The blue glow stopped, but the ship was still flying out of control. Everything was vibrating.

“Mal!”

“Hold on, Poppy.” She gritted her teeth so hard she tasted blood. She fought for some control. Nothing was responding.

Mal looked up and gasped. There was a huge planet ahead—dark blue and green. Beyond it was a giant red star.

It wasn't Jupiter.

It wasn't any planet she knew.

The ship was caught by the planet's gravitational pull. Alarms blared.

"Poppy, we're going to crash land. Hold on and brace!"

"Mal, the star maps... They don't match anything. Where are we?"

Only Poppy would be checking star maps in the middle of crashing.

"Brace!" Mal yelled.

They hit the atmosphere. The ship shook. Mal ground her teeth, and finally got some response out of the controls. She tried desperately to slow them down.

The next thing she knew, a rocky landscape spread out below them, dotted with sharp rock formations.

*Hell.* They were coming down too fast.

"Poppy!"

*Boom.*

There was a huge explosion. For a second, Mal was aware of things breaking, crunching, and tearing apart.

Everything was spinning. She heard screaming and realized it was her own.

Something hit her head, and then there was only merciful darkness.