

## Chapter One, Part Two “The Usual”

**Eleven Years Later**  
**Monday, December 28, 2037**

“Are you on TV tonight, Aunt Nina?” asked Constantine Joseph Constantinos IV – age three. He was seated on a barstool behind the red formica counter at Connie’s Diner.

Nina chuckled. “Not tonight, Fourby. Maybe tomorrow.”

That was when Constantine Joseph III, better known as C.J., arrived with her order.

“Three black coffees, one iced. Two lattes, and one root-beer boba-frap. To-go.” He set two trays of coffee on the counter with a thud. “All good, sis?”

Nina took a long sip of her icy, syrupy frap, then set it back in its tray. “It’ll keep WAPL on-air for at least one more night.”

“Right, right,” C.J. said, grabbing a metal spatula and checking the order-screen above the grill, “the news stops for no man.”

“Or woman,” his wife Kayleigh corrected, her long brown tresses swaying as she rushed out of the back room. She gave him a peck on the cheek and then pivoted to Nina with sly grin. “Is this man bothering you, ma’am?”

Nina shrugged. “Baby sister – comes with the territory.”

Kayleigh rolled her eyes. “Some things you never get used to.” Then she turned back to C.J., “Ok, babe, payroll’s done. See you when I get home from Helena’s basketball practice. Come on, Fourby.” The toddler squealed as Kayleigh lifted him off his chair.

The two headed for the door, and Nina smiled when she noticed Kayleigh tugging down the three-quarter sleeve of her pink cardigan. Heaven forbid the world see all the old tattoos.

Once they were gone, C.J. leaned a bit more somberly over the counter and cleared his throat. “So, I’ve been...Look, is it okay to talk to Mom and Dad about your thing yet?”

Nina bit her lower lip and looked around the diner. Photos everywhere. Framed pictures of their great-grandfather, the first of the Constantines, opening the place in

1961. Their parents installing the jukebox in the late '90s. CJ and Kayleigh's wedding. Nina's glossy TV headshots.

Diana. The college graduation photo and all the yearly Christmas cards she'd sent – always posing with her Chinese school kids. Did she even know they'd hung them up?

Nina finally shook her head. "Not yet."

C.J. glanced up at the same photos. "You have to tell 'em eventually. You don't want a repeat of -"

"I know," Nina slung her purse over her shoulder, "which is why I'm not telling them *at all* unless it comes through – which it probably won't."

She grabbed a tray of coffee in each hand, drawing looks from a few customers, and headed back out into the snow. On her way out, she had to dodge a gaggle of high-school Brills on their way in.

"Have you downloaded the new single from the Chinettes yet?" said one, sporting pink earmuffs and a pinker poodle skirt.

"Better," replied another, this one with an oversize ribbon in her blonde ringlets. "I got the 45 on vinyl. It's totally *malted*."

Nina ran her hand through her jet-black pixie bob and sighed as she got into her beat-up Skoda station wagon. She was starting to miss the days when the retro vibes stayed *inside* the diner, even if the whole Brill scene had been good for business.

A few minutes later, she arrived back WAPL's newsroom, if you could call it that. Really it was an old warehouse on the outskirts of town, retrofitted with few offices and a studio that was now eight years out of date.

As Nina walked in, she could hear the 6:00 national news blaring from the flatscreen behind the reception desk.

"...the Vatican said Pope Stephen IX remains hospitalized after suffering a stroke on Christmas Eve. In other news, the stock market was down another 2,000 points today, closing under 70,000 for the first time in three years. This as firebrand Congresswoman Melinda Eberhardt announces a coalition to block President Putnam's plan to update the nation's flooded fiber-optic system when congress reconvenes. The news meant continued gains for cable and downloadables giant

Redbox-Xfinity-Netflix, led by strong income from their thumb-drive video download service, RACPod,..."

Nina mentally tuned out the screen and set a latte on the front desk. Bailey, the receptionist, immediately took a gulp.

"Thanks, Nina," Bailey said, gesturing at the TV behind her. "You hear the cable bill died again? Sucks, right?"

"Tell me about it," Nina shook her head. "Hundred bucks a month for internet, and I haven't had streaming video for five years."

"I know," Bailey leaned forward, "but at least I got my new RACPod gold drive."

"Oh," Nina dug her nails into her palm, "lucky you." She flashed the best smile she could and continued into the back.

*A gold drive? On Bailey's salary? Nina's silver drive was expensive enough, and it was barely able to handle her TV shows these days. At least that was what the RACPod at 7-Eleven had told her when she tried to download the three-hour eleventh-season premiere of StormLight Archive. Yet, somehow, even Bailey had a gold drive? The world was not fair.*

"A thriller tonight at Fox Cities Stadium, as The Timber Rattlers knocked off the West Michigan WhiteCaps in extra innings. In the battle for Midwest League crown, the WestCarps...dammit!"

Mim Xiong's back-hallway rehearsals of the WAPL sports report never did end well.

Nina handed her the iced coffee. "You need that."

Mim snatched the drink and took a long chug. "Oh, god, Nina, you are a *life-saver!*"

"That's why they pay me the big bucks," Nina snickered. She tried to duck out onto the main news set as quick as possible, but Mim still shouted after her.

"And don't think this gets you out of singles night at the Paper Mill, Constantinos! Four months of single means emergency measures – re-engagement with the opposite sex is no longer optional!"

Nina stopped and exhaled. "Wouldn't miss it for the world, Mim."

Actually, missing “Star Trek Saturday” at *Bump in the Night Comics* was kind of a big deal. Thankfully, this week they were just watching *Encounter at Farpoint* again. Nina could quote that episode from memory.

Still, she didn’t see any good reason to hurl herself headlong back into Appleton’s stagnant dating pool. It was sweet that Mim still tried to look out for her after all these years. It would just be helpful if she’d define “looking out” as something other than trying to get Nina laid.

But that was Appleton for you – at least the slice of Appleton Nina grew up in. Some people would say it was the type of place where people “still looked out” for each other, which was true. A less romantic observer would have said that Appleton was just a perpetual cycle of regifting where nothing new ever happened. Even Nina was a hand-me-down. Mim had been one of Di’s cool-kid friends growing up, but now Di was gone and Mim was stuck with the nerdy little sister.

Still, there was a good rhythm here. People were happy. Small-market jobs, small-market town, small-market dreams. Singles night, Trek night, breakfast at the diner, and afternoon coffee runs where just saying “the usual” produced the entire station’s preferred order.

Everyone here was happy. Even Nina was, for the most part, happy. Did she really want to leave?

Not that she really had a right to ask. She’d scored a few big hits at the expense of the city council the last few months. She had even forced a resignation after exposing illegal donations from a homebuilding company – two resignations if you counted her realtor boyfriend dumping her over it.

At the end of the day, she was still the junior reporter at the second-ranked station in Wisconsin’s fourth-largest TV market. That meant minimal airtime and a portfolio composed mostly of puff pieces on science fairs or retirement homes.

Who did she think she was kidding with applications to the national networks? Honestly, she’d filed them the day after the breakup. Not exactly clear thinking, just the need to do something big and crazy. Waking up some old college dreams and deciding to be herself again after two years with Mr. “Bringing Appleton Home.”

Being lowest on the totem pole also meant responsibility the evening coffee run, and she still had two to deliver – both to the big desk in the studio.

The first, a latte, went to Cassidy Starnes, the over-perky half of WAPL’s anchor team. The second went to Nina’s mentor, editor, and the guy in charge of reassuring Appleton after every crime story - Hunter Grayson. He got the black dark roast.

“There it is,” he said, lounging in his chair with his suit jacket off. “Looks like I won’t have to resort to bourbon to get through the evening.”

Cassidy let out a laugh that was very bubbly and very fake, then went back to tapping on her iWatch. Everyone here had heard Hunter’s AA speech at least a half-dozen times.

He leaned in to whisper to Nina. “So, do we need a new coffee girl?”

Nina mock-punched him in the shoulder, lowering her own voice. “It was probably just a courtesy interview.”

Hunter raised an eyebrow. “Nina, they don’t *do* courtesy interviews.”

Nina took a beat to steady herself. “If you must know, it was short, and it sounded like they took me for an out-of-my-league country bumpkin. Have a good show.” She turned and walked out.

“Nina,” Hunter bellowed from behind her. Somehow, he was already out of his chair and standing next to her in the hallway, coffee in hand. “What is your problem right now?”

Nina took a deep breath. “My problem is that I shouldn’t even have applied for that job. I’m unqualified. I wasted their time. It was selfish and reckless and unprofessional.”

Hunter’s face contorted. “What?” His hand ran through his silvery mane, “Are you kidding? Everyone in this business is looking for the next gig.”

“You’re not.”

“I was when I was twenty-six.”

“Mim’s not.”

“She should be.”

Nina exhaled slowly through her teeth. “Boss, I already *have* a good job.”

“Getting us coffee?” Hunter said sternly. “You’re better than that and you know it.”

That stopped her cold. Hunter didn’t dish out compliments often – if ever.

He paused for a long second, then took a slow sip of his dark roast. “This place is not enough for you. It’s not *close* to enough.”

“Hunter,” Nina said, trying to sound firm. “I love this station, I love this *town*. I grew up here.”

Another sip. “That has nothing to do with what I said.”

Nina sunk her head into her hands, scratching her nails into her scalp. Then it spilled out. “My family is in Appleton. The diner is in Appleton. Everyone I love pours everything into this town. It’s what they live for. I’m a Constantinos, Hunter. I don’t *get* to just leave.”

Hunter looked at her, brow furrowing. “You know what I told them when they called?” he asked. “I said you had the best raw intuition of any reporter I’d ever worked with, cub or otherwise. Your gut has never been wrong in four years. Not once. You have *it*, Nina.”

That should have felt so good to hear. It was the dream. But right now it was just turning her stomach. She wasn’t sure she wanted “it.”

“It” meant “not here.”

“Thanks, boss,” Nina said, “That means a lot. Seriously. I just – I don’t know.”

Hunter shook his head and walked back out for the show, while Nina skulked back down the hallway and opened the door to a large walk-in storage room. Well, most of it was a storage room, holding all the cameras and spare equipment. However, a cubicle had been set up to create an extra office.

Nina’s office.

She sank into her creaky rolling chair, old enough now that the foam cushions had molded to her body. She could never resist the urge to spin in it.

This wasn’t quite what she’d envisioned in journalism school. That version of her had been gung-ho, CNN or bust - but “home town local news girl” had turned out to be a pretty sweet gig. She’d stayed because things were good here. She *liked* the family legacy. She even liked Mim dragging her to singles nights and Cassidy’s fake laugh and Hunter’s AA speech.

The only thing that didn't make her happy was that stupid feeling that maybe she could do more. That tiny voice in the back of her head that remembered things she'd promised a long time ago to a person who'd long since vacated her life.

The phone on the desk flashed that she had voicemail – on her work line? She almost never got those, at least not since she and Isaiah broke it off. He'd thought it was cute not to call her cell. She punched the button on the decaying corded phone.

"You have two new messages." Came a robotic voice. "Message one - 2:47 P.M."

A reedy, male voice came on. "Nina, it's Isaiah. You don't have my Bullwinkle mug, do you? Also, can you get me taken off the mailing list for those Star Trek nights at your comic store? If there's anything else of mine still at your apartment, you should..."

"P'tahk!" Nina cursed in Klingon, punching the button with her bat'leth letter opener. Bullwinkle had long since met a violent end at the hands of a paintball phaser-pistol.

The phone continued. "Message two, 3:59 PM."

A curt female voice came on, with a slight but noticeable New England accent. Connecticut, maybe?

"Ms. Constantinos, this is Sinéad Szerbiak in Washington, calling on behalf of WWN - we spoke briefly during your phone interview. I wanted to make sure you received the hiring paperwork we e-mailed. We need signed scans as soon as possible so that you can start work January 11<sup>th</sup>. Thanks."

The phone beeped as the message ended, and Nina just stared at it.

Then she felt the goosebumps ripple up her neck.

Then her hands started to shake.

Was that seriously what she thought it was?

January 11<sup>th</sup>? She'd have to put in her two-weeks notice *tonight* – and that was the was the Monday after Orthodox Christmas.

She couldn't do that.

Not to Hunter, no to her parents. That was way too fast.

Then again, there was that voice in the back of her head. The one reminding her that she'd never had small-market dreams. The one that said there was more to life than she could find here. The one that sounded like Di.

And she had made a pinkie promise, after all.