

Chapter One, Part Three “As Seen on TV”

Monday, January 11, 2038
Washington, DC
7:32 AM

Nina rushed up the escalator at the Gallery Place-Chinatown Metro Station. She was already one train behind schedule, having missed the first Green Line train into town from her uncle’s house in the suburbs. Now, she was rapidly losing her chance to catch the last transfer to the Red Line.

Her new smartwatch wasn’t helping. It had been flashing “7G SERVICE UNAVAILABLE” ever since the train ducked underground, obscuring even the basic clock.

Nina crested the moving staircase just as her train settled onto the upper platform, then broke into a run in the hope of getting on before the doors closed. She dodged several locals trying to hold onto their winter scarves, almost getting run over by a taller man who didn’t see her five-foot-two frame barrel in front of him.

“Step back. Doors closing,” blared a recorded voice.

No one listened.

Nina kept running along with the crowd and bounded on to the over-full train. She wedged herself into the last remaining chunk of space and felt a puff of air as the doors clicked shut a few inches from her nose.

So, this was what her daily commute would be.

The train vibrated softly, rose a few inches as the magnetic levitation kicked in, then whooshed out of the station.

On one side, Nina was shoved against an overcoat-clad commuter whose earbuds rendered him dead to surrounding sound. On the other were two college-age

brills. They carried posterboard signs reading, respectively, *HI MOM!* and *←SHE'S SINGLE!*

Apparently, everyone had a Mim in their life.

“Think we’ll get on TV this time?” said Hi-Mom - a studious blonde wearing a pink Jackie Kennedy overcoat and a chunky seafoam headband.

“We better,” said the other, sporting green hair and gaudy horn-rimmed glasses. “Four tries ought to be enough.”

Four tries? Just to get in the background of the WWN morning show?

Nina snuck another look at the pair, noting green-hair’s sweat-shirt said, *See Things Differently*.

Two more stops passed as Nina counted off in her head. *Judiciary Square. Union Station.*

The train glided into daylight as the underground portion of the Metro ended and the track sloped up to become an elevated train. Nina blinked as they pulled into a gleaming silver station, and felt the car drop onto the tracks as the maglev disengaged.

The station marker read *NoMa-Gallaudet-WWN Plaza*.

The doors whizzed open a little faster than Nina had planned, and she fell into the winter air as Hi-Mom tried to push past her. Both of them stumbled out onto the platform, catching their balance before either fell entirely off their feet.

“I am so sorry!” the young woman said, bending over to pick up a glossy copy of Priscilla Davis’ autobiography, *The Whole Truth*.

“No worries.” Nina did her best to dust herself off. “That’s a good book, by the way.”

Hi-Mom smiled. “Yeah, I’m really enjoying it.”

“Sophie!” See-Things-Differently shouted as she ran for the escalators. “We’re gonna be late!” She disappeared down the stairs, revealing that the back of her shirt said *Drop Acid*.

“Nice meeting you,” Sophie said politely, rushing to join her friend.

Making her own way to the escalator, Nina noticed a crowd gathering on the plaza below. It looked like *WWN FirstLight* was having a concert. Some new girl group, judging by all the bobbysoxers.

After pushing through the sea of poodle skirts, she arrived at the front door of what used to be the Washington Coliseum, a hulking mass of red brick and concrete built as an ice-hockey arena 1940s. Over the years it had hosted basketball, inaugural balls, served as medical station during the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King, and hosted the first Beatles concert in the United States.

Now, it sported a shiny blue WWN logo, serving the network’s main newsroom and the centerpiece of WWN Plaza. Behind it rose the 20-story glass monolith of WWN Tower, the tallest building in Washington, but everyone knew that the real action was in the arena. A digital ticker scrolled headlines over the huge double doors.

PRESIDENT’S PUSH FOR FIBER-CABLE FUNDING FALLS SHORT...PILGRIMS FLOCK TO ROME FOR TOMORROW’S PAPAL FUNERAL...PAOPAO BUBBLECOFFE TO DISCONTINUE PUMPKIN SPICE LATTE AFTER 37 YEARS...

Nina checked her watch, making a mental note to stop by a *PaoPao* on the way home.

7:46 A.M. One minute late shouldn’t be a problem.

She reached for the chromed handle of a giant glass door, but it was shoved open from within. A woman burst out, her graying red hair swinging wildly as she yelled into a phone.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I just got out of a meeting with Davis...Yeah...Oh, trust me, I have more reasons to hate that woman than you’ll ever know...Pitched our side, but I don’t think Prissy could find a shade of gray in a freaking Crayola box.”

The voice trailed off as Nina stood starstruck, holding the door open. Less than a minute on the job and she'd already crossed paths with America's best-selling non-fiction author, documentary filmmaker, and expert on terrorism.

"You're letting the cold in," came a voice from inside. "Can I help you?"

A receptionist was seated behind a large, chromed desk, staring over her glasses.

Nina tried to recover but couldn't help herself. "Was that—"

"S. Flannery MacClennan?" The receptionist finished her question. "Mmm-hmm. Let me guess, you read *Jihad Brides* in college."

Nina found the sense to let go of the door. "I have a signed copy. Changed my life."

"You and every other girl in this joint. Name?"

"Sorry," Nina came back to herself, "I have an appointment with Ms. Davis. New correspondent."

"Name?" the receptionist asked louder.

"Nina Constantinos."

The receptionist looked her up and down, raised a skeptical brow, then picked up a desk phone and punched a few numbers. "Your 7:45 is here, should I send her up? ... Okay, I'll let her know."

The phone clicked down on the receiver.

"You're late."

"I know, I'm sorry, I just—"

"Take the elevator to the third floor. Only one office up there, so no directions needed. Welcome aboard, Ms. Consternatious."

“Thanks.” Nina smiled as nicely as she could at the mispronunciation and headed for the elevator.

She emerged a few seconds later onto a third-floor catwalk overlooking the most stunning newsroom she had ever seen. Even this early, people were rushing back and forth, yelling into telephones, waving tablets. On the opposite end of all the chaos, on an elevated pedestal behind a huge glass wall, she saw a giant blue desk.

The most-watched evening news set on the planet.

On TV, the soaring curve of the concrete ceiling made this place look like a cathedral of modern journalism. Up here, however, Nina’s head was less than three feet from that ceiling. This was a WWN’s claustrophobic bell tower.

Next to the elevator was a glass door leading to the floor’s lone office suite, complete with a gleaming silver nameplate.

PRISCILLA DAVIS

As if anyone needed reminding.

Nina yanked open the door. The walls of the suite were stark white and impeccably clean. The only decoration was a digital wall clock, and against one wall sat a hulking machine that Nina had to stare at for a second. She’d never seen a real-life photocopier.

Behind a black desk sat a young secretary with a tight, fire-red ponytail. She wore a blazer with loud black and white stripes - perfectly pressed, but a size too big – and sported bug-eyed glasses with tortoise-shell rims in shocking lime green.

“Constantinos?” The woman asked as she arrived.

“Yes,” Nina replied, “I’m the new-”

“You’re late.”

Was everyone here going to be like that?

“Sorry,” Nina took a breath and tried to project confidence. “The metro ran slower than I expected. Won't happen again.”

“It had better not,” came the clipped reply. “We spoke on the phone. I’m Sinéad Szerbiak, Ms. Davis’ executive assistant. In case you missed the first five times, its pronounced ‘shin-AID,’ and I’m only saying that once. Got it?”

Nina nodded. Sinéad looked far too young to be assistant to WWN’s top personality. Nina would have pegged her for a college kid doing an internship.

“Good,” Sinéad rose from her desk, towering over Nina by at least six inches, and moved stiffly to a heavy black door in the back of the room. “Since you’re working directly under Ms. Davis in the News and Politics division, I assume we’ll be seeing a lot of each other. Hopefully, in the future, those meetings will occur at the times scheduled.”

Sinéad did not open the door or usher Nina in. Instead, she disappeared into the back office, pulling the door closed behind her. A few seconds later, she emerged, smartly clicking it shut again before speaking.

"She's ready for you." Sinéad nodded, then returned to her desk, leaving Nina staring at the door, unsure how to react, and suddenly unaware of how her hands worked.

"I said she's ready," Sinéad's voice clanged, "You can go in."

Nina took a deep breath. "Right, sorry." She took hold of the doorknob and pushed the black slab inward.

The room’s white walls were almost blinding. Pristine but undecorated and flooded with natural light from a wall of windows. The focal point on the front wall was a massive rimless screen displaying a live feed of WWN - muted. On the opposite wall was a huge wrought iron clock - the kind with just hands and no edge. The only sound in the room was the slow, metallic ticking of the arm-length second hand.

In the center sat a surprisingly small black desk and two modernist-looking plastic chairs. Of course, the true centerpiece was the woman at the desk,

trademark brown locks tied up with two oversize chopsticks, somehow typing without any sound.

Anchor. Editor-in-Chief. The most influential journalist of her generation.

Priscilla. Davis.

She did not look up.

"Ms. Davis?" Nina said, working not to let her voice quiver

"Oh." Priscilla's head jerked her direction, shaken out of her work. Then she gave a tight-lipped smile. "Right, Nina. Good to finally meet you in person. Won't you sit down?" She gestured at the chairs, then went back to typing.

Nina slid carefully into one of the chairs, realizing that Priscilla had no keyboard. The letters were laser-projected from a node at the bottom of her computer monitor, and her fingers were flying noiselessly across a sheet of black felt. After a few seconds, Priscilla hit the "Enter" key with a dramatic flourish that should have made a loud click, but only managed a soft thump. Her chair swiveled Nina's direction. "Right, where were we?"

Priscilla scanned her desk, straightened a stack of old-school paper folders, and picked up the top one - labeled with Nina's name in neat letters. She opened it, scanned the contents, then snapped it closed.

"I've reacquainted myself with your resumé," she said, "It's been a while since I enjoyed reading a portfolio that much."

Nina felt her shoulders loosen and allowed herself a bit of a grin. "Thanks. That's great to hear."

Davis smiled, again very tight-lipped. "I read a lot of boring applications from mid-level reporters in the big cities. They think this is their logical next step. You, on the other hand, took a garbage job in tiny market, then blew the doors off a local government that didn't think anyone was watching. I like that trick."

"Appleton is my hometown," Nina heard herself say. "I don't like people who take advantage of it."

"Good girl," Priscilla peered over her thick, black-framed glasses. "But I didn't hire you because of the city council scandal. I hired you because I watched what you didn't put in your portfolio." She set down the folder. "Your WAPL back-catalog was the single most mind-numbing array of irrelevant local puff pieces I have ever watched. If I'd been assigned those stories when I was twenty-five, I'd have shot myself. You threw yourself at all of them as if you were reporting the moon landing. I want that attitude here."

"Well," Nina bit her lip, thinking back on all the stories she'd done on county fairs and girl scouts, how happy they'd made her feel - suddenly wondering if she could ever love this place the same way.

"I-" She felt her words catch in her throat. "I can try."

Priscilla raised her eyebrows lightly, "I hope you do more than try." She let the words hang in the air. "Because you're new. You're going to get *our* bottom-of-the-barrel stories for a while, and even small stories require a rigorous devotion to truth. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Nina sat up a bit straighter, "and with respect, small stories here are huge where I come from."

"Yes, well, where you come from is..." Priscilla trailed off before refocusing. "Quaint."

Nina felt herself stiffen. She was still a Constantinos after all, and no Constantinos takes lip about Appleton. "Actually, I -"

"Ms. Constantinos," Priscilla cut her off, "I'll cut to the chase. It's been a very long time since I've hired from a market that small." She folded her hands on the desk.

"Well," Nina stumbled, "I know it's a big jump, and you know I'll work really hard to prove it's worth it."

"No, you misunderstand," Priscilla held up a hand. "Your work ethic is beyond question. However, smaller market outlets tend to toward brand of journalism which is, at a cultural level, rooted in the last century." She started clicking a nail against the desk. "WWN pursues *modern* journalism. Real truth, relentlessly focused on the now. Am I making myself clear?"

Nina nodded, although to be honest, she was anything but clear.

Priscilla continued, "The last market that small we hired from was McAllen, Texas. That was ten years ago for a reason. You're an experiment, Nina. However," her smile returned, "I'm confident you'll do fine if you put your mind to it. Any further questions?"

Nina shook her head. She was going to have a lot of questions, but not until she came back to Earth, screwed her head back on, and decided what to even ask.

"Right," Priscilla said, pulling a folder from the bottom of her pile. "This is all the information you'll need for Rome."

Nina's mind re-entered her body. That last word has made her very present and, to use Priscilla's term, 'relentlessly focused on the now.'

"Excuse me. Rome?"

"Yes," Priscilla turned back to her computer. "You're flying out with us this Wednesday to cover the conclave to elect the new Pope. I'll trust you with our garbage stories *after* I get an up close and personal look at your work. Seeing as I'm the Editor-in-Chief, the only way I can work with you directly is if you're on our top story. Sinéad will show you to your desk. Welcome to WWN."

Priscilla gave a tight smile and went silent, which Nina figured meant it was time to leave. She pushed her chair out as silently as possible and slipped out of the room, being careful to close the door on the way out.

Back in the anteroom, Sinéad was sitting at her desk and apparently partaking in this year's hot retro time-wasting trend - Minesweeper. At the sound of the door, the secretary shot to her feet, picked up a stack of folders off the copier, then beckoned Nina with her hand. "Come with me."

Nina barely heard her. She'd noticed a thick book sitting on Sinéad's desk, with a bookmark near the end.

"Constantinos?" Sinéad said louder and with some annoyance, leaving the room.

“Yes, I'm coming.” Nina hurried after her. Catching up, she reached for an icebreaker in hopes of cracking Sinéad’s stony demeanor. “I noticed you’re reading *A Game of Thrones*. That series was epic.”

“It’s okay.” Sinéad responded blankly, opening a door marked *Stairs*. “So, I bet you think you're hot stuff for getting this Rome assignment.”

Nina stopped in her tracks, hearing the stairwell door echo shut behind her. “Well,” she ventured, “I’m certainly honored.”

“Don't be.” Sinéad dispensed with her stiff demeanor in favor of open aggression. “It's not an honor, and it's not a reflection of your importance to this network. Get that through your farm-fresh, organic head right now. Every newbie here gets a big story out of the gate. You eff up, you disappear. So, if you don't want to be back in Appleton covering the Eighty-Fifth Annual Goat-Manure Festival, don't eff up.”

Nina gulped, feeling goosebumps rise and trying to figure out what to make of the sudden outburst. “Um, I’ll try.”

Sinéad rolled her eyes and sighed. “You are so screwed.”

Then she theatrically pasted on a professional smile and exited the stairwell one floor down, into the chaos of the main newsroom.

She led Nina to a seat at a large white table near the back, subdivided to seat four reporters. It was furnished rolling office chair, a wafer-thin computer monitor and a cordless telephone. Nina didn’t recognize all the nameplates on the other seats, but noticed that one of them was Emma Poissonier, who she knew from the network’s morning show.

“This is where you'll be sitting,” Sinéad said. “If you check the desk drawer, we've also issued you a tablet and a phone. I.T. should be up shortly to help you set those up. Welcome to the WWN family – we're so happy to have you.” With that, Sinéad turned neatly on her heels and walked away a fast clip.

Nina plopped in the chair and let out a huge breath as she booted up the computer. “Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.”

While the machine loaded, she reached into her purse and pulled out the two desk ornaments she'd brought from Appleton: The Starship Defiant paperweight and the framed glossy headshot that started this whole journey.

She took a second to read the inscription in faded silver Sharpie. The thing she'd pushed for after a night of broken glass. The thing she re-read every time she wondered whether this had been the right life to choose.

Nina,

Thanks so much for shadowing me for the day! Follow your dreams!

XOXO,

Ally Talamantez