

## Chapter Two, Part One

### “Born to Run”

#### Eight Years Earlier

Saturday, June 15, 2030

Nina looked out over the Appleton skyline as the sun dipped below the horizon, zipping up her new *University of Wisconsin* jacket to ward off the evening chill. The inside of the diner was the province of the elder members of the Constantinos clan, but the kids had figured out years ago that the roof was theirs for the taking. These days, there was a cooler up here stocked with beverages of questionable legality, along with some old lawn chairs and a game of corn-hole that usually ended with beanbags in the parking lot below.

It occurred to Nina that she might not get many more of these moments. In a few months she'd be in Madison at college, and the chances of her coming back after that were pretty slim.

Still, there was something special about sitting on the chrome roof of the old dining car, watching the sun set over the increasingly rusty shell of a city. In the information age, there was less and less use for a town built around paper mills.

Paper was funny like that – Appleton made paper to store the ideas that made paper obsolete.

Nobody really understood how, but Appleton soldiered on – better than most towns in these parts, honestly. Nina liked to think that it was because a town that made books had to be at least a little smart.

She heard footsteps on the fire escape behind her.

“So, how's our newest high school graduate?” C.J. asked as he reached the roof.

“Not bad,” Nina said, “Feels good to be done.”

“Yeah, well college is gonna kick your butt, so enjoy it while you can”

“Not as hard as it's kicking yours, babe” came another voice from the ladder, “your sister has a brain. Here, take these.”

A disembodied hand appeared, holding a six-pack of hard-lemonade bottles. C.J. took the pack as his new girlfriend, Kayleigh Terlecki, hauled herself onto the roof.

C.J. sure did know how to pick women. This one was particularly eccentric, having shown up with bright purple hair, a glowing dragon tattoo creeping down her entire left leg, and a parade of inked-on pink stars sleeving her right arm.

“Anyway,” C.J. continued, “Now that you’re 18 and graduated, I figure that makes you an official adult. So, I can officially not feel guilty about buying alcohol for your personal underage consumption.” He slid the six-pack across the shiny metal roof toward Nina, “Because I sure ain’t drinkin’ this crap.”

“Oh, come on,” Kayleigh chimed in as C.J. fished a beer out of the cooler. “Don’t go corrupting your *innocent* baby sister like that. Look at her, all ready for school in her shiny new jacket and we’re...I mean...*you’re* up here trying to get her doxxed.”

C.J. choked on a laugh, shooting beer out his pursed lips.

Nina twisted the cap off a lemonade bottle and took a swig, “If I were *that* innocent he wouldn’t know what I like to drink.”

C.J. plopped himself onto the cold steel of the roof while Kayleigh grabbed a lemonade and sat on his lap. He looked at his bottle for a second – with that thoughtful face he made when he thought he was being profound – then he raised it.

“To my little sister, the only one in this family with any sense. May she go on to do great things, but hopefully not great enough to show us up for the small-town idiots we are.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Kayleigh said, clinking her bottle against Nina’s. “Cheers.”

“I’ll drink to half of it,” Nina said. “You’re on your own for the rest.”

C.J. chuckled and checked the time on his phone. “That’s weird. I told Di we were gonna be up here.”

“Nice!” Nina said. “It’s been a while since it was all three of us. Want me to text her?”

“Nah, I got it,” C.J. tapped on his phone. “She was gonna stop off at home and tell Mom and Dad about the whole Teach for Peace thing”

Nina felt the blood drain from her face. “Oh, no.”

“What?” C.J. prodded. “She needs to tell them eventually. I mean, yeah, it’s China, but it’s not like we’ve seen her much anyway since she went to school. And the job is cool - *legit* cool.”

“No, not that,” Nina replied. “Well, sorta that. I mean, it’s Di. But Mom and Dad aren’t at home, they’re downstairs doing payroll. I said hi on my way up.”

“Crap.” C.J. nudged Kayleigh off his lap and scooted to the edge of the roof, peering down over the side. “Yup, that’s her car.”

He got up and ran to the back corner of the building, above the back office, then laid down and pressed his ear to the metal.

“Is there a story I need to know here?” Kayleigh asked in confusion.

Nina shrugged and rolled her eyes. “Di does a lot of high-decibel family bonding.”

Nina watched C.J.’s face contort, then his eyebrows shot up. He sprang to his feet and ran to the front of the building as Kayleigh shouted, “What’s going on?”

Nobody had to answer, as Di burst out the front door below, seething as her father followed her out into the parking lot.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Gus Constantinos bellowed at his eldest daughter. “Get back in there and apologize to your mother! Now!”

“Or what, Dad? Or what?” Diana’s black curls were quivering as she shook with rage, and her teal eyeshadow was starting to run.

“What are you going to do, Dad, spank me? Ground me? Take away my allowance? I’m 22! And I have a job now, so I guess don’t need your stupid money anymore, either!”

Gus fired back, “You owe your mother an apology for talking to her that way. Period!”

“You want me to apologize? Fine! I’m sorry I couldn’t be your perfect little daughter. Actually, scratch that. I tried! Straight A student, swim team, all those scholarships. Hell, Dad, I was a mathlete! Would have been nice if you showed up for that PBS knowledge bowl show, by the way. So, yeah, what exactly do you want me to apologize for? Oh, wait, wait...I got it...I’m sorry I’m not a boy!”

“That’s not what this is about and you know it!”

“Oh, it isn’t?” Diana yelled, “Let’s review! I’m your oldest child. I worked my butt off to try to make you proud of me, and did you ever, for two seconds, think about giving your precious diner to *me*?”

“You never wanted anything to do with it!”

“Not that I let you see!” Diana was panting for breath between sentences. “Did you care about anything I actually *was* doing? Did you ever show up for-”

“I had business to run! I had to put food on the table for you and your-”

“Stuff it, Dad. You did everything for C.J. Everything! You never missed a single one of that screw-up’s baseball games – and he was *stoned* for most of them!”

Finally, Gus went silent, but Diana kept rolling.

“You know how many years I’ve been waiting to say that? So, yeah, I’m going to China and I am not coming back. At least I scared you into doing a better job with Nina, you self-righteous prick!” She turned and started marching toward her car.

“That’s it, run away!” Gus bellowed. “You’re good at that! Run from your family. Run from your roots. And don’t you dare bring Short Stack into-”

Diana whirled on her heels, and Nina saw a new fire burning in her eyes. “Nina is not a stack of pancakes, Dad! She has a name, learn it! That’s how screwed up your 1950s time-warp mind is – and I’m done!”

She climbed into her car and slammed the door, lingering for a few seconds as her father stood on the front step trying to protest. Nina saw Diana press her phone to her ear and make a call, then car started, screeching its brakes as it pulled out and sped away.

C.J.’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at the screen before letting out a dark laugh, then slid the phone over to Nina.

It displayed a text message from Di:

*Sorry, not going 2 make it 2nite. Talk l8r.*

“She’s madder than usual,” Nina said. “A lot madder.”

C.J. took a long sip of his beer and looked out over the town. “Yup. Unfortunately, she’s also right.”

“Like hell she is!” Kayleigh blurted. “Did you hear what she just said about you?”

C.J. just stared out at the fading skyline. “Mm-hmm.”

He got up and, without making eye contact, headed down the ladder. “I need to get out of here.”

Kayleigh tried to protest. “Babe, come back, it’s your sister’s graduation. We have to corrupt her before it’s too late!”

Nina put a hand on her shoulder. “You should go with him.”

“Come with us then,” Kayleigh offered. “We’ll go get Chinese or something, I’m starved.”

“Thanks,” Nina said, letting out a long breath before responding, “but I think I’ll stay up here for a while. Have fun.”

Kayleigh shook her head but said, “Okay.” Then she leaned in for a whisper, “I don’t usually say crap like this, but text me if you need to talk, okay?”

Nina nodded and gave Kayleigh a hug that she hadn’t even expected from herself. “Thanks, but this isn’t first mess Di’s left for me to clean up.”

“That I understand,” Kayleigh hugged Nina tighter, then let go and double checked that C.J. was out of earshot. “Look, my mom’s a raging drunk. I

don't do...this." She gestured to encompass the whole scene. "The family stuff, I mean. But I know a thing or two about being let down – text me, seriously – I'm here all week anyway."

Nina nodded and Kayleigh followed C.J. to the ladder.

"Hey, C.J.," Nina shouted after them, "You can keep this one, I like her."

"Noted." C.J. hollered back.

A few seconds later she heard C.J.'s old Scion start up and peel out of the parking lot - which meant it was finally safe to cry.