

## Chapter Thee, Part One “Help Wanted”

**Eight Years Earlier**  
**Saturday, June 15, 2030**

The sun had gone down over the Oneida Skyline Bridge, taking with it the last hints of summer warmth. The metal roof of the diner was getting colder by the second, and the sky had turned blue-black. Nina had lost track of time, but she must have been up here for hours.

At least she'd finally stopped crying.

The humble Appleton skyline across the Fox River was starting to light up, and Nina pulled her jacket tighter and watched as stars started to twinkle through the darkness. As anxious as she was to get to college, she was going to miss this view.

The pain and anger had dissipated from earlier in the evening, and she wasn't even sure who to be mad at anyway. Diana? Her dad? Both? Neither?

Maybe the entire situation was just screwed up from the get-go. Either way, it hurt.

The family feud had finally boiled over, with perfect timing. Every other birthday party or major Nina event always descended into some snit involving the diner, her dad, and Diana. Why wouldn't they save the grand finale for graduation night?

She'd really hoped that they'd be able to hold themselves together for just one freaking evening, but apparently that was too much to ask. They were just too much alike, too stubborn to *ever* back down on anything.

Was that a Greek thing, or just a Constantinos thing? Either way, Nina hadn't inherited it. Every time the family blew up, all she wanted was to be up here, alone, as far away as possible from the drama.

Tonight, she'd stayed up here longer than usual - she absolutely refused to get sucked in this time, even if it meant avoiding everyone on her own big night.

Now, though, she was cold and cried-out. Time to face home.

Maybe she could sneak in a window and avoid the living room. By this hour, her mother would be hitting the nonsensical self-blaming stage of post-argument fallout, which was almost as draining as the fight itself.

Still, Nina couldn't stay here.

She climbed down the metal ladder to the empty parking lot. It wasn't the first time she'd been here this late - not by a long shot - but it felt eerily quiet. The Skyline Bridge, normally abuzz with traffic, was almost silent.

Despite the fact that the towering bridge dominated Eagle Flats Island, you couldn't get to it from down here. It started on the other side of the river in North Appleton and went clean over the island before letting you off across the river in South Appleton. If you actually wanted to get off this tiny, post-industrial speck of land in the middle, you had to walk another two blocks South and find the much smaller Oneida Street Bridge, which didn't tower over anything - except maybe the occasional duck in the canal.

It was at the end of that bridge that Nina caught a distinct whiff of marijuana vapor - which she was *not* used to in this part of town, even at night. She didn't see anything, but then there was a biting laugh and a feminine voice.

"I'm starting to see why you like that roof so much."

Nina tried to locate the source of the sound. She found it leaning against the tiny brick building that contained the controls for the drawbridge, with the blue outline of a dragon glowing from its right arm.

Kayleigh Terlecki.

Nina stopped cold. "What the heck are *you* doing out here?"

Kayleigh took a long drag off her glowing green vape pen, then leaned her head against the brick wall as she let the steam out her nose.

“I think C.J.’s had about enough of me for the evening,” she said without opening her eyes. “I can be a bit of an angry mama-bear, and don’t think he wants to hear any more of me ranting about what a b\*\*\* his sister is. I think I’m having the worst reaction, and I just met all of you.”

Nina shrugged, “It’s your first time, and I’m the one sitting out in the cold hiding from everyone.” She sat down on the pavement, “And now I’m the one using you as yet another excuse not to go home.”

Kayleigh laughed. “CJ was right about you being the sharp one, want a hit?”

Nina waved away the offered vape pen, “Nah, not my speed.”

“Suit yourself, good-girl” Kayleigh half-snorted through another noseful of cannabis vapor. “You’re gonna get a contact high either way. I figured tonight was a good time to break out the strong stuff.”

Nina felt herself giggle, a bit unnaturally, “Well, first time for everything.”

Kayleigh took another puff. “You know, you’re not half bad for a smarty-pants little sister.”

“Is that what C.J. called me?”

Kayleigh just nodded, clearly trying to suppress further cackling, “I honestly thought you were going to suck, but you’re probably the least crazy person here.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Nina said, “Sorry if we’re a bit intense.”

“No,” Kayleigh said, pulling the vape pen away from her mouth and sitting up a little bit straighter, “That’s not it. You’re all great. I just...”

Kayleigh’s voice trailed off, and she stared out into the darkness for a few seconds before refocusing. “I just don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what? That we’re explosive?”

“Not that,” Kayleigh seemed to be growing more serious, even as the high made it harder for her to articulate. “Just...you guys don’t understand what you have, do you?”

Nina shrugged her shoulders, “An old diner and messed up family politics?”

“You *have* a family!” Kayleigh spat. “At *my* graduation dinner, my mom got so s\*\*\*-faced that I was up until three A.M. helping her puke into a bucket.”

Nina raised her eyebrows. “Well, I guess that gives us something in common.”

Kayleigh started chuckling again, this time with more bitterness, “Ruined graduation nights? Yeah.”

She almost put the vape pen back in her mouth, but instead looked at it, turned it off, and shoved it in the pocket of her frayed jean shorts.

“Nina, can I say something stupid?”

“Everyone else has. Why not?”

Kayleigh let out a long breath, “I like it here. Like it’s a drug. I’ve been here like a day and a half, and I’ve gotten more hugs than I’ve had in two years. I’ve seen the roof, your mom was trying to teach me how to make lasagna – and nobody said s\*\*\* about my tattoos. Hell, I feel like I’m sitting here spilling my guts to you and I don’t trust *anybody*. You’re all, just, like, this firehose of supportiveness and it’s like - I took heroin once in high school - and the scary thing about it is it hits you so hard and it feels so good that you just want to stay on that high, even though it’s not real. And I know this isn’t my life, but like, I don’t *want* to go home to Milwaukee. And then Di...I just...why would anyone who has this place mess it up like that?”

Kayleigh took another smoke and muttered. “Sorry. I know, you all love her - she’s *family*. It just – I don’t get it. I’d do anything I could to stay here.”

Nina just sat, digesting the words. She'd never thought about how being around her family must feel to someone from such a different world. That had to be weird trying to process all of it at once.

"We're not perfect, Kayleigh, we just have our own brand of messed-up – and Di had it a bit harder with Mom and Dad."

Kayleigh shook her head. "I know, but she complains because she thinks this place is normal and-"

"It is normal." Nina interrupted.

"Not to me! It's like watching Mark Zuckerberg complain that he doesn't have enough money."

Nina shoved her tongue into her cheek, trying to make sense of the outburst but also feeling a bit sorry that Kayleigh had been thrown head-first into the family drama.

"Look," she finally said, "Di..." she shook her head, "Di came into the picture before they got the family stuff figured out all the way - not like me and C.J. And if you haven't noticed, my parents are all about tradition and family and Appleton. It's a big happy family as long as you want those things. Di wanted more."

Kayleigh banged her head against the brick and huffed. "I know, C.J. said the same thing. I just – I'm trying to come down off the high this place gave me. I think the whole tradition and family thing clicks for me. I didn't think it would, but it does."

Nina stared out into the night and chuckled. "Skater girl likes it here. Didn't see that coming."

Kayleigh paused a second, then took a long breath. "Skater girl likes it a lot."

Nina leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes, really starting to feel a bit of a contact buzz. “It’s mutual. I don’t want to talk about CJ’s exes, but let’s just say we all want you to come back – even Di.”

Kayleigh cocked her head. “Can’t say I’ve ever gotten that sort of pressure from a guy’s family before.”

“Oh.” Nina said, “we’re *old-school* dysfunctional. Mom’s probably already planning your wedding.”

Kayleigh took a deep breath and smiled, calmer now, “I think I can handle that. Wedding planning beats some of the other s\*\*\* I’ve seen – although I guarantee your mom would hate my taste in dresses.”

“You’re probably right about that.” Nina said, noting that Kayleigh hadn’t recoiled. She thought about it for a second, sizing up the violet-maned, tattooed personage in front of her. “Let me ask you something. You got a summer job lined up?”

Kayleigh shrugged. “Not really. I did telemarketing last year, might try again, why?”

Nina got finally got to her feet. “Well, best I can figure, Dad was planning for Di to take her normal summer slot. It’s a family business and, as of a few hours ago, we’re short a waitress.”