

## Chapter Four, Part One

### “Faceplant”

**One Year Earlier**

**Tuesday, January 13, 2037**

**Appleton**

“Die, space scum!” Kayleigh whooped, mashing the buttons on her XBox-12 controller and almost knocking over the Chardonnay on the end table. On the screen, her character lunged toward Nina’s, attempting a beheading.

Nina ducked Uhura away from danger, then hit a series of buttons. Energy waves flew from Uhura’s earpiece, suspending a helpless Kitana in the air.

“Mommy!” came a voice from the stairs behind them. It was Fourby.

“Ugh, I thought he was safe with *Westeros Babies*,” Kayleigh punched the input button on the TV remote, pulling up a non-violent talk show and spinning to meet the toddler in one fluid motion. “What is it? Mommy’s here.”

“Helena’s hungry. She said to ask you for Cheetos.”

“Did she?” Kayleigh raised an eyebrow. “Did you tell her that Mommy’s very busy taking care of Aunt Nina’s bloody nose?”

“No,” the child replied. “I’ll tell her.” He turned and marched back upstairs.

“He’s so literal,” Nina laughed.

“No, just smart,” Kayleigh said, “I gave him ammunition. He’s going to politely tell his sister where she can shove her Cheetos.”

“No Cheetos, Helena!” Fourby’s voice echoed, “Mommy and Aunt Nina are having wine time!”

Nina fell forward laughing, feeling her face crinkle and realizing too late that this would unleash searing pain. “Ow!” She sat up, trying to contain the giggling, “I take it back, the kid has a future in investigative journalism.”

“Runs in the family,” Kayleigh took a sip of her Chardonnay “Now, since we’re paused, let’s have a look at that nose.”

She peeled back the gauze she’d taped onto Nina’s face, letting out the pain again as Nina winced.

“You’ve got a hell of a bruise,” Kayleigh said, “but it’s not bleeding or broken. You’re going to live.” She picked up her controller. “Now are you ready to finish this death match?”

Nina laughed and took a sip of her own Chard. “I mean, if you want me to continue the slaughter, I can oblige.”

“Yeah, well, let’s see you back that up,” Kayleigh plopped the glass on the end table and switched the TV back to the game.

Nina never quite understood why Kayleigh liked *Mortal Kombat*, seeing as she always lost. A few phaser blasts and comms-beams later, Uhura was watching a bloodied Kitana float midair as dripping red text flashed FINISH HER – which was where things stood when the front door clunked open.

“Hey babe, I’m home,” C.J. shouted, carrying this week’s snail mail drop under one arm. Then he did a double take when he realized that his wife was too close for shouting and there was an unexpected visitor.

“Oh, hey Short Stack” he said taking off his winter coat, “What happened to your nose?”

“Your sister ate a curb,” Kayleigh said flatly.

C.J. winced, “Ow!”

“I’m okay,” Nina jumped in, “I was taking a phone call from a source for that story I was telling you about, with the City Councilman. I got excited and tripped over my own feet.”

“And face planted into concrete,” Kayleigh finished, “That’s what happens when you overcommit to the trick, man.”

He shook his head and pointed at the TV, “*Mortal Kombat vs. Star Trek*, now that’s some toddler-friendly entertainment.”

Nina smiled innocently and punched a button, blowing Kitana's head off with her phaser. The spurting, headless pixel-corpse fell as Uhura holstered her weapon and gloated.

"Oops."

C.J. almost fell over laughing.

"Yeah, yeah," Kayleigh said, "The kids are upstairs with the Baby Starks - I'm allowed a *little* carnage. Any good mail?"

"Mostly junk." He picked out an envelope and waved it, "Late Christmas Card from Di, though."

"Really?" Kayleigh's eyes narrowed. "Where's she this year, Timbuktu?"

"Who knows?" C.J. replied. "She's still using that P.O. Box in Virginia as a return address."

He opened the envelope. "Nice picture of her with a bunch of smiling Chinese kids. Says 'Martin Luther King Friendship Academy, Chengdu.'"

"I'll take care of these empty glasses," Kayleigh snipped, grabbing the wine goblets and heading for the kitchen.

"Well, at least she looks happy," Nina sighed taking the card, "That's more than she had here."

"I hope so," C.J. said, "Probably best that way."

Nina could tell his eyes were on the kitchen, where she heard slamming dishes. Of all the people, it was Kayleigh who *still* hadn't made peace with the whole Di thing.

"I think I'll let you take care of that," Nina whispered, receiving a cautious side eye and a not from C.J.

She made her way to the kitchen and gave Kayleigh a side-hug. "Well, sis, I'd better get going."

Kayleigh stopped fussing with the dishes, dropping one a little too loudly.

“Oh...yeah.” Nina watched her try to put a smile back on, not entirely succeeding, before returning the hug a bit too hard. “Thanks for busting your nose open. I seriously needed another adult around here.”

“Any time.”

Nina let go, then grabbed her trench coat, earmuffs, and snow boots out of the closet. Once outside, she flipped open her phone as her feet crunched through the week-old snow.

“Call Isaiah,” she told her phone. It started dialing but was stopped by an incoming call. From Isaiah no less.

*Great minds think alike.*

“Hey babe,” she chirped.

Isaiah’s voice crackled back. “How’s my inquiring camera girl? We still good for Mongiardo’s tonight? I might have to work late but I’ll definitely make it - might still be in a shirt and tie though.”

“I like ties,” Nina said with a slight giggle. “Besides, I busted my nose on the way out of the office, so I have a nasty bruise on my face.”

“Oh ... are you all right? We can stay home if you want.”

“No way!” Nina exclaimed, “You’re taking me out to Mongiardo’s to celebrate.”

“Celebrate what? Breaking your nose?”

“No, silly, I messed up my nose taking a phone call from a source. The story’s everything I thought! The house was paid for using laundered funds from the political action committee. We got Councilman Selski with his pants down!”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“Well, aren’t you happy for me?”

“Yeah,” Isaiah replied slowly. “Yeah.”

“You don’t sound convinced.” Nina stopped walking, hoping she didn’t have to have another halting conversation about the story. Ever since she’d started working on it, he’d been clamming up when she talked about work.

“No...It’s great. I mean - well - it’s big, I guess. I’m just worried about all of this sneaky stuff you’re getting yourself into. I mean, stay safe.”

Nina threw open her car door. “I’m fine - and there’s nothing sneaky about checking public filings and reading spreadsheets. It’s *really* scary being chained to my desk like that.”

Isaiah gave a nervous laugh. “Yeah, you’re right, I guess.”

Nina felt compelled to stomp in the snow, “Isaiah, I’m a reporter, this is what I do.”

“Is it?” Isaiah responded, his voice trailing off.

Nina took a breath and felt blood rushing to her face “All right,” she said, “Out with it. What bothers you so much about this story?”

“I –” There was a pause on the other end of line. “I thought you did positive stuff.”

“I do,” Nina fired back, “but if I find something bad, I have to report it.”

She heard Isaiah exhale. “You’re right. I just...I liked the kids science fairs stories and whatever. This isn’t you.”

“Isn’t me?” Nina cut him off, “Isaiah, I’ve always wanted to do investigative work. You know that.”

“Well, yeah.” He said, “But this thing, I mean, if it’s what you say it is, it could ruin a guy’s life. And he’s what – 79? What’s the point of-”

“The point is that he’s stealing,” Nina interjected, “Shouldn’t that mean-”

“No,” Isaiah stopped her. “It doesn’t mean anything other than he’s doing what anyone would do. He’s not hurting anyone, he’s just a nice old man who-”

“Isaiah, he embezzled thousands of dollars,” Nina raised her voice. “He’s a *crook!*”

“Then he’s a harmless crook! Nina, he’s done a lot of good and dragging him out like this? Nina, it’s feels sleazy.”

“Sleazy?” Nina screamed. “You think *I’m* sleazy?”

“No!” Isaiah backpedaled. “Not you, just... the story. It’s not right. And what am I going to do at work? I mean, hell Nina, I’m a real-estate agent and Old Man Selski owns half the town.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is about.”

“No! It’s...”

The line went silent.

“Isaiah?” Nina tried.

“I’m here,” his voice came back softly. “And I love you and I don’t think *you’re* sleazy, just the story. I mean, yeah, it could hurt business a little bit, but that’s not it. Normally you love Appleton and don’t want to hurt anyone, but now you’re like this shark going in for the kill and ready to scandalize the city.”

“I do love Appleton,” Nina retorted, “That’s why I’m going so hard on this story. Everyone he took money from is right here in town.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but for real, what’s the point? What comes out of it other than pain?”

“The truth,” Nina shot back, “Isn’t that enough?”

“Of course not!” Came the immediate response. “And you know that. The Nina I fell in love with knows when to talk and when to hold back. You’re not a sadist, and chasing this thing isn’t you.”

That was finally enough to stop Nina, and she bit her lip thinking about it. She ran back through all the stories she’d covered for her college TV station – that had been hard hitting stuff. Remembered Ally, how the energy of that crash had set this whole life in motion. Then, as she started thinking about the stories she’d been doing here, since coming home, she remembered how cold it was outside. Shivers had start pulsing through her whole body.

“Isaiah,” She felt her eyes starting to burn and gritted her teeth to hold it back. “I think I owe you an apology, because if you think this isn’t me then I haven’t done a very good job of showing you who I am – and I wouldn’t want you dating a sadistic sleazeball. I need to think about this.”

“Wait, Nina, I didn’t mean to-”

“Yes, you did.”

Nina pulled the phone from her ear and swiped the button to hang up.

She looked at her old Skoda station wagon - door hanging open in the cold. The thought of being alone in her apartment suddenly sounded terrifying. Was chasing the truth really that bad – and had she really become the girl who knows when to keep her mouth shut? She’d spent her entire life dreaming about big investigative stories, but she was doing the opposite. And Isaiah? They’d been dating two years. They’d talked about rings – not now, but maybe soon.

She slammed the car door, trudged back to the house, and knocked on the door.

After some rustling inside, C.J. answered. “Did you forget something?” Then he must have seen the mascara starting to run. “Whoa, Short Stack, everything okay?”

“Corned Beef Hash?” Nina blurted.

C.J. stepped back in surprise. “I’m not sure I-”

“I need to cut things up, beat them with a metal spatula, and fry them. I’m cooking you dinner. How do you feel about Corned Beef Hash?”