

Chapter Five, Part One
“Hello from the Other Side”

Eight Years Earlier
Saturday, June 15, 2030
Appleton

Diana Constantinos already angrier than she’d been in years, and something about her dad dragging her little sister into the argument sent her straight through the roof. She could literally feel the blood throbbing through her skull as she unloaded on her father.

“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’d been fantasizing about this rant for years, but never actually planned on using it. Doing this for real wasn’t cathartic, it just hurt. All she could do was march back to her beat up Citroen and slam the door. Whatever her dad had to say at this point, she really wasn’t interested in hearing it.

“Don’t cry, Di,” she said to herself through gritted teeth. “Don’t. Freaking. Cry.”

She grabbed her phone off the dashboard and dialed the 1-800 number that was the reason for this whole mess. A robotic voice answered.

“Thank you for calling Teach for Peace, an initiative of the United States Department of Education in concert with the Sofia Vergara Foundation for Global Education. For information on our educational services, press or say ‘One’. If you are a teacher or trainee, press or say ‘two.’ If you are-”

“Screw the menu,” Diana spat, pulling the phone from her ear and typing in the sequence 9-8-0-1.

She heard two rings, then a gruff masculine voice. “Constantinos? Do you have any clue what time it is?”

She cut him off, “Do you still have that opening in Group A?”

“Diana,” the voice came back, “Group A starts tomorrow afternoon. Don’t you think it’s a little late for that?”

“Mr. Patzen, you said you’d hold an opening until the last minute if I wanted to switch from Group B to Group A. Is it there or not?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. “Yes, okay. We didn’t fill the last slot. But you know the pre-requisites.”

“Just finished them.” Diana said, sniffing to avoid a sob. “Ties cut. Where do I sign?”

“Oh.” More stunned silence. “If you can get to Milwaukee in the next four hours, there’s a red-eye to Dulles I can book you on. I’ll text the flight info when I get home.”

The phone beeped as he hung up. Four hours? She could make it.

Barely.

Pursing her lips, Diana dashed off a text message to her brother, hoping like hell he hadn’t already gotten to the roof to hear her.

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

“Understatement of the century,” she muttered, hurling the phone onto the passenger seat. She shoved the chip into the ignition, then mashed her finger down the start button. At times like these, she wished cars still made noise when you turned them on. Instead, she made it herself, spraying gravel as she tore out of the parking lot, then she sped over the bridge from Eagle Flats Island into South Appleton.

It took about five minutes to reach 306 East Harrison Street, and she threw the car into park and let it idle. She’d planned on spending one more night in that little pink house. One last hurrah on with C.J. and Nina, but that apparently wasn’t in the cards.

She pulled out, made the short drive to US Highway 41, and slammed the acceleration pedal to the floor.

Her mind didn’t stop racing for the next hour as she blazed South. Mile markers and exit signs blended together into a blur of rage - at everything. Her dad, her mom, every redneck at that stupid diner counter, everything that had made it worthwhile to do what she was about to do.

After about an hour, the adrenaline started wearing off, and her hands ached from how tightly she was gripping the steering wheel. She pulled off at the next exit and brought the car to rest on

the shoulder of some nameless rural off-ramp. That was when she realized that she was about to leave without saying goodbye – which her Dad deserved, but not C.J. and Nina.

She grabbed her phone, and yelled, “Google, call C.J.!”

His answer came swiftly after the first ring.

“Di? Where are you?”

Diana exhaled. “About 20 miles South of Fond du Lac.”

“What the hell, Di?! You freaking ruined Nina’s graduation night. You...I mean...what the hell, Di!?”

Diana heard Kayleigh trying to comfort him in the background. “It’s okay, babe, I’m here - just take it slow.”

“Hi, Kayleigh,” Diana deadpanned. She’d only met her brother's violet-maned skater princess earlier that day, but her spidey-senses told her that girl and her tattoos were going to be around for a while.

Kayleigh apparently heard her and shouted back. “Go screw yourself!”

Diana chuckled to herself. Hot, smart, and viciously loyal. The girl was perfect for C.J. – and for the diner, and for Appleton. She’d probably be the type of daughter-in-law that did the family name proud – Dad would learn to love her. She’d probably be a better sister for Nina, too – Nina deserved better. A lot better.

“Hey, babe,” Diana heard C.J. say, “just give me and Di second alone. I got this, okay.”

Diana heard what sounded like a kiss and then C.J. came back on the line. “Okay, Di, what’s up?”

“Look,” she started, feeling the tears start to trickle more freely. “I...Sorry I didn’t make it. I had a bad night with Mom and Dad and-”

“I know,” C.J. broke in. “We saw the whole thing.”

“Crap,” Diana sighed, suddenly realizing why Kayleigh was so angry. Diana had insulted her boyfriend in front of everyone *and* spoiled a kid’s graduation. “Was Nina there?”

“Of course she was there!” C.J. shot back. “Kid’s been early for everything since she could walk.” He paused, and it sounded like he took a few breaths. “Look, Di - I know you got a raw shake. And you’re right. Okay? The whole family thing is messed up. I get it. But come on - Nina’s graduation? She wouldn’t even get dinner with us, just stayed on the roof crying.”

Diana started massaging her temple, feeling her breathing accelerate. “Crap. That’s my next call anyway.”

“Good,” C.J. said sternly. “You have no clue how much that kid idolizes you, do you?”

“No, I do.” Diana said, trying to steady herself. “Just no clue why. I want to be her when I grow up.”

C.J.’s tone finally lightened a bit. “Yeah, well that makes two of us.”

Diana allowed herself a small smile. “Well at least there’s one smart kid in the family.”

There was another lingering silence, then Diana spoke again. “Look, all those things I said about you earlier-”

“Forget it, I-”

“They aren’t true.” Diana said firmly. “Not anymore and probably not in the first place. Okay? I’m proud of you and you’re the right person to get the diner. Not because you’re a boy – because you actually care. You are going to make everyone so proud. You got that?”

“Wow,” C.J. responded. “That’s a lot coming from you.”

Diana closed her eyes and took a few breaths as more tears dripped of her cheeks. “Yeah. Well I’m probably not going to be around for a while with the China thing. Figured I should say that now. And for what it’s worth, I like Skate Park Barbie. Keep her.”

That got a timid laugh. “You’re the second sister to tell me that today.”

“Great minds think alike,” Diana wiped her face with her arm. “Anyway, I better call Nina. But take care of yourself, okay?”

“Okay,” C.J. said. “See you when you get back from China?”

“Yeah,” Diana lied. “Look, I know I don’t do this - but I love you, little brother.”

“Love you too, sis,” he said slowly, “bye.”

Diana punched the red circle on her phone and took a deep breath. “Round two. Google, call Nina.”

The phone rang, and rang, then rang again. It beeped a few times, then played a voicemail message.

“Hi, this is Nina, ace omelet chef and future TV journalist. Leave a message and I’ll see you in the stars!”

Somehow, that kid always made her delusions of grandeur endearing. Diana tried to steel herself to leave a voicemail that was going to hurt, but then another voice came on, this one mechanical.

“This customer’s mailbox is full. Goodbye.”

There was a beep, then the line went dead. Diana felt her eyes starting to quiver but kept the phone to her ear and started talking to the air.

“Look, I know you’re never going to hear this, but you’re the only reason I almost didn’t do this. I know you’re probably going to hate me, and that’s okay, but if I don’t see you on WWN someday I’m coming back and literally dragging you in front of a camera. You hear me? You deserve everything!” She lowered the phone and stared at it. Nina’s name and picture were still displayed on the screen. “I love you.”