

Chapter Six, Part Three
“Poison Ivy”

Two Years Before Present
Sunday, June 5, 2036
Dartmouth College
Hanover, New Hampshire

“...and hence we can conclude that frustration with gendered prohibitions surrounding access to traditional knowledge of cultural foodways can, and indeed has, played a role in the decisions of many young men to join terrorist organizations.”

Sinéad Szerbiak stared at the words she'd typed. It was done.

The last sentence of the last take-home final on the last day of her Ivy League education, at least the undergraduate chunk of it.

Straight As, dean's list - everything everyone expected. Not that there were low expectations for anyone at Dartmouth, but it's different when your mom is the Frances McDormand Chair of Gender and Women's Studies at Yale. It's different when there's a literal “Szerbiak Theory of Post-Structural Feminism” and your surname is practically synonymous with modern feminism in academia.

Sinéad exhaled, saved the document, and said, “Not bad for a muggle-born.”

Sure, she'd been up since 3 A.M. knocking this thing out, but it was so worth it. Her insomnia wasn't going anywhere, so why not use it for something productive.

She gave the paper one last spell check and fired it off in an email to her Terrorism and Sociology professor. Smiling broadly, she felt a wave of euphoria creep up her spine, then laid her head down on her dorm-room desk. It felt so good to be able to be able to take a break, knowing that there were no more research papers breathing down her neck.

If she wanted, she could fall asleep right now, secure in the knowledge that she wouldn't lose a single moment of study time. In fact, that sounded like a good plan, and she closed her eyes.

Nope.

Sleep wasn't going to happen.

Her heart was pounding too fast and she felt warm.

Too warm.

Sweaty, actually.

That, and Dumby was giving her a concerned stare from his PixelFrame on the wall.

"It's okay, boy," Sinéad said, scratching the touchscreen where his ears were. "Mommy's just tired." He didn't seem to be buying it and just kept looking at her with his big dragon eyes.

"Okay, okay," she relented, "I'll go get some water or something."

She walked to the kitchenette of her suite and poured a big glass of water into the one Solo cup she'd been working with since she'd packed everything else. "See," she said loudly at the frame, "this is mommy taking care of herself."

Dumby just shrugged his shoulders and turned away, pawing at a hapless peasant in his enclosure like a cat with toy mouse.

Last night in Channing Cox Hall, Sinéad thought. Unless, of course, she ended up back at Dartmouth for next spring. Then she might end up back in the same effing "senior apartment," rebadged as "graduate student housing," taking the same effing classes from the same effing professors.

Yet another reason to hope that application to Columbia came through. At least then she'd be in a craptastic grad-dump in Manhattan.

Her phone buzzed on the counter.

Call From: Mama Bear.

She swiped to answer. “Hey Mom.”

“Hey Sinéady,” came her mother’s silky smooth voice, honed over years of lecturing. “I’ve just finished unpacking myself in Dr. Glasstraub’s guest room, are we still on for dinner?”

“Yup, can’t wait,” Sinéad said with as much false perkiness as she could muster. Of course her mother would be staying with the Dean of Arts and Sciences for an entire week before graduation. There wasn’t a university in the country where the woman didn’t know someone.

“Great, meet you there?”

“You got it!” Sinéad said.

“Cool, see you then. Love you Sinéady.” The phone beeped as her mother hung up.

She was not looking forward to this dinner. Sure, she loved her mom. Hell, she even *liked* her mom. The woman was an awesome, compassionate, loving person who’d given her a wonderful childhood that she really didn’t deserve – and for someone who hated socially-constructed gender roles, she baked a mean chocolate chip cookie.

Still, the last thing Sinéad wanted to talk about now was school or research. And heaven forbid that someone recognized them and started going off about how one of her mom’s essays changed their life, and how Sinéad had quite the legacy to live up to.

Or worse, someone would actually know their history and gush about what an awesome example they were for single women considering adoption.

She tried to kick her brain into gear. *Come on, Sinéad, it’s just a thoroughly normal dinner at Red Robin.*

That didn’t make her feel any better.

Back at her desk, she opened the bottom drawer and fished out an orange plastic vial she’d hidden behind the chargers for her assorted electronics.

Was this going to be a one-pill night or a two-pill night? Was that even a question?

She popped two of the tiny, purple pills into her mouth, chewing them for quicker uptake, and chased them with what was left of her water. Dumby had started giving her the side-eye again, but she just gave him a stern mommy-knows-best look, and he went back to his toys.

Two minutes later, Sinéad's heart rate was speeding and she was back to her normal self.

Dinner would be no sweat, and she was more than ready to wow any of her mom's fans with her own thoughts on gender and terrorism. That act always got rave reviews, and she started mentally reviewing some of the upper-level theories just in case.

She actually liked high level gender theory to begin with, and she liked it a lot more when she was a bit zapped. She could hear her mom's friends reacting now.

Oh, Dr. Szerbiak, you must be so proud! And you, young lady, have quite a sharp little mind.

Damn straight she had a sharp little mind.

She was a Szerbiak, bred if not born, and in 48 hours she was going to have a shiny Dartmouth diploma - completed a year early - to dispel any doubts about *that*.

She threw on a leather jacket and some overdue deodorant - sadly in that order - and made her way down to the parking lot whistling 'Pomp and Circumstance.'

Dr. Tiff Szerbiak's purple Cadillac was sitting in the parking lot. The old lady was already out of the car and planted a huge hug around Sinéad's waist. The two of them had always made bit of an odd-looking couple - her mom was a stout, olive-skinned Serbian-American with a streak of purple dyed into her graying black hair. Meanwhile, Sinéad was a tall, pasty redhead who looked like she'd walked out of a documentary on ancient Celts.

There was never any question about the utter lack of common genetics.

“Oh, Sinéady,” Tiff said as she squeezed harder, “When did you get to be so big – you’re not allowed to graduate college.”

“I know, Mom,” Sinéad said, patting her mom on the back. “Trust me, I can barely believe it myself.”

She also couldn’t believe that her heart was pounding so fast - and winced slightly as a small pinch of pain stung her chest.

Her mother clearly felt it and let go. “Everything all right?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Sinéad covered. “Just running on adrenaline. I finished my last take home final like ten minutes ago. Sorry if I’m a bit jumpy.”

Tiff laughed. “Oh, I always hated those. Finals should be in a classroom at a desk - dragging it out like that should be considered a human rights violation. But it’s over, and I’ve always thought the best cure for academic stress is a solid margarita – preferably the kind with weird flavoring and lots of food dye.”

They both laughed as they climbed into Tiff’s spiffy car and pulled out of the lot.

“Do you mind if I roll down the window,” Sinéad asked, “It’s really hot in here.”

“Sure, if you need,” her mom replied, “but not too far, I’m actually feeling a bit cold.”

Sinéad rolled down the window and felt the wind cool her hair. It felt better, but she was still sweating and felt her heart beating faster - which was weird because she was feeling *awesome*. She let out some of the energy by drumming her fingers on the window. She stuck her head out in an attempt to feel a bit more of the breeze.

“You *sure* you’re all right?” Her mother asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Sinéad pulled her head back into the car. “Yeah. Sure. Never better. Why?”

“You just seem a bit out of it,” Tiff said. “Too much coffee and not enough sleep. We can go back if you want – trust me, you’ll crash no matter how caffeinated you are.”

“Oh, no,” Sinéad replied, “Trust me, I’m wide awake.”

That was an understatement.

She wasn’t just awake, she was feeling flat-out jacked.

For some reason, it struck her as funny that her mother would think otherwise, and she felt herself start to giggle.

“What’s so funny?” Tiff asked.

“Oh nothing,” Sinéad replied, “It’s just-”

She couldn’t stop giggling long enough to complete her thought. It was so funny, even if she wasn’t sure what *it* was.

“Sinéad?” her mother tried again, the edges of her words blurring out.

“I’m sorry,” Sinéad giggled, feeling her cheeks flush with warmth, “I just, I can’t stop laughing.”

It was true. Everything was funny. Her mom was funny. The warmth in her head was funny. And the sudden bolt of pain down her right arm was extremely funny.

Sinéad yelped in pain, grabbing her bicep, but still – it was funny, and she couldn’t stop laughing and then – oh no – she wasn’t laughing any more.

She was crying. When had that started?

Everything around her was horrible and cold – or was it too warm - and she was sobbing or maybe laughing and the world was suddenly horrible but also wonderful and whatever it was, it was definitely spinning.

Somewhere, she heard her mother say “Okay, that’s it.”

The world was still spinning, but maybe the spinning was because the car made a sudden turn - because Sinéad definitely felt her head hit thump against the window and then slide forward in a trail of cold sweat.

It was funny and scary and cold or warm and she was laughing or crying or maybe neither because she was pretty sure she was also shivering – and then for some reason everything was cold and black.

That was weird.

And then something changed. It was still cold and dark, but nothing was funny, and she felt like she had goosebumps. There were beeping noises and the smell of rubber. Nothing was moving – and she was laying down, and her arm itched.

What the eff?

She opened her eyes and found herself confronted with a sterile ceiling and a fluorescent light. She bolted upright and grabbed the plastic railing of the hospital bed, feeling the tug of an IV needle in her arm. She fell backward onto the pillow, becoming aware of more details. The draft blowing in the open back of the gown, the weird pulse thingy on her finger – and it was dark outside. Very dark.

This was an A+ screwup with extra credit.

And her mom.

Oh crap, where was her mom.

Sinéad felt herself grip the sides of the bed harder, and her breath was speeding up in a totally natural way. There were very real reasons for very real panic, and this was one of them.

There was the sound of a door swinging open and a loud rustling.

“Thank god, you’re awake!” she heard her mother say, finding herself enveloped in a hug before she even saw the woman coming. “Don’t you ever scare me like that again.”

“Umm, I’ll try,” Sinéad sputtered, trying to pull in a breath through the bear hug. She felt absolutely exhausted. “What’s going on?”

Her mother finally let go, and Sinéad saw that her eyes were the kind of red that only happened if you’d been crying a *long* time. The expression on her mom’s face shifted from relief to anger to....something else Sinéad couldn’t pin down. Then she finally spoke.

“You had enough Profocusin-D in your system to focus a small elephant,” she said with the same matter-of-fact air she used to dismiss idiotic questions from freshmen. “They thought it was best to keep you sedated while you cleaned out. It’s been about five hours.”

Sinéad let out a long breath through her nose and gritted her teeth. “Mm-hmm, sounds about right.”

The two stared at each other, hearing the beeping of whatever contraption Sinéad was hooked up to.

It was her mother that finally said something. “What I don’t understand is the why,” she said, dry as dust – like she was evaluating a research proposal. “Sinéad. I’ve met a lot of people who actually needed to poison themselves with this crap to stay afloat, and you are emphatically *not* one of them.”

Sinéad closed her eyes and leaned back, shaking her head. “I’m still not smart enough.”

“For what?” her mother spat, “Dartmouth? Sinéady, your high school capstone project was better than most undergrad theses. You can do this in your sleep.”

“I know I’m good enough for Dartmouth, Mom.” Sinéad took a deep, difficult breath. “I’m just not smart enough to be the great Tiff Szerbiak’s daughter. Every stinking thing I say has to be groundbreaking, and I didn’t inherit your brain any more than I did anything else.”

She opened her eyes to see that the sternness was gone from the great Tiff Szerbiak's face – like someone had popped her mental balloon.

“Sinéady,” she said. “You don’t owe me anything. I wouldn’t have cared if you told me you wanted to be professional skateboarder, or business major. The world doesn’t need another me – but it sure as hell needs a Sinéad.”

“I know,” Sinéad sank deeper into her pillow. “But it’s not you, it’s everyone else who knows you. Professors hear my last name and they expect me to be some sort of feminist Einstein, or quiz me about your old studies, or ask me random crap about stuff I haven’t even studied yet. And if I get a B, they look at me like I have three heads – until they figure it out and realize that I probably inherited my brain from some teenage redneck who was too stupid to use a condom on prom night.”

“Don’t talk like that,” her mother shot back.

“Why not?” Sinéad gestured at herself. “Look at me, I’m in an effing hospital bed detoxing from a Proffy high. How’s that for white-trash stupidity-and-addiction genes? Just get me a trailer and a meth lab and I’ll have the whole look.”

“I said don’t talk like that,” Tiff said, louder. “First off, the inherent privilege and Euronormativism of the term ‘white trash’ is beneath you. Second, if you have any doubts about your innate intelligence, I would note your significant rhetorical skills given your current condition, and third, you should show some gratitude to the person who bought you into the world. Maybe make some more charitable assumptions about her character.”

“Sorry,” Sinéad relented, exhaling. “You’re right. I’m just...I don’t know what to do with it anymore, and I’m tired of putting up with all the effed-up academic bullcrap.”

“I know,” her mother said, taking her hand. “But school’s over. You can probably still walk next week,” she checked the clock, “After that it’s done. You’re out. Do what you want.”

Sinéad rolled her eyes. “Mom, I’m starting grad school in the fall. Nothing’s going to change.”

That got dead silence, the kind of pregnant pause that was never good.

“Sinéady,” her mother said slowly. “Have you thought about whether grad school is the right thing for you at the moment?”

Those words hit Sinéad like a sack of bricks. As much as she hated school sometimes, she knew what she wanted in life. She *wanted* to carry the Szerbiak torch.

“No!” She sat up in bed, “Grad school is what I want. Seriously. I mean, yeah, the pressure is tough, but I can handle it. Without pills. Trust me.”

Tiff took another long breath, “I know you can. No doubt in my mind. But you’ve been in an Ivy League bubble your whole life, Sinéad. Do you know that most of the world doesn’t have clue who the hell I am? Maybe you should check the real world out some time.”

Sinéad let out a sardonic laugh, “Right. There’s totally a use for an Ivy League bubble kid in that world.”

“Probably a lot more uses than you think,” her mother met her eyes, “And if you were my student, even a bright one, I would have just denied you a recommendation letter. I know what it looks like when someone’s afraid of leaving school, and that’s a lousy reason to go for a Ph.D.”

Sinéad tried to throw up her hands, but didn’t have the strength and felt the IV pinch again. “School is all I know, Mom. What exactly am I supposed to do in this wide-open world you keep talking about? Wow them with my thoughts on what fifth-wave feminism will look like whenever it arrives?”

“Maybe,” Tiff said. “Or you could do what the rest of the world does and learn some useful skills. You know I have people email me every day looking for recent graduates. I mean, just today I got a contact from Priscilla Davis - the news anchor. She’s asking around the Women’s Studies world looking for a new executive assistant. Asked if I knew any recent graduates who were ‘down for the cause.’”

“A secretarial job?” Sinéad replied, “That would be a great use of my education. Not.”

“Actually, it probably would,” Her mother scolded, “and I’m not saying you need to take *that* job. Just that maybe you should take *a* job before you jump head-first into a Ph.D. program - get your feet under you. Although I have to say, the Davis gig is one of the sweeter ones I’ve seen in a while. Just think about it, okay?”

“All right.” Sinéad tried to give a smile. Actually, picturing herself out in the real world with a real job didn’t suck, and it would definitely involve fewer of her mom’s fan club. She even felt a little smirk creep across her face, which as almost as unexpected as her laughing fit earlier in the evening. “I’ll think about it,” she said, “although I have to say, I can’t say I see myself being a particularly efficient secretary for *anyone*.”