

Chapter Ten, Part Three

“Game Theory”

Monday, March 8, 2038

Twenty-Three Days Until Interview

9:28 P.M.

Vinya wondered whether today was the right day to wear heels that blinked when she walked. Granted, nobody was going to run her over, but the green flashes let the whole neighborhood know she was walking alone.

She shoved her keychip into the door of the new house, making a mental note that they probably needed to replace the busted-out porch light. The mail was already gone from the box, so Nina must have beat her back from the office, but the lights in the living room were dark.

Vinya pushed the door open. “Sup, Roomie? I’m home!”

No response. The place was eerily quiet and the only light in the room was the soft blue glow from Vinya’s hair.

“Nina?”

Still nothing.

The sound of running water was hissing through the walls, and the air felt humid – like, ridiculously humid.

Vinya walked slowly up the stairwell to Nina’s room. The green flashers in her stilettos illuminated the passage as they thudded against each old wooden stair, and it was quiet enough she could hear her earrings jingle with every step.

The door to Nina’s bathroom was cracked open, and steam was billowing out through a shaft of light.

“Hey girl, you all right?” Vinya called.

Not a peep.

Vinya normally tried not to be too paranoid, but her meds were wearing off to begin with, and her internal creepy-meter was going nuts. She quickened her step and felt a wall of hot steam smack her face as she entered the bathroom.

She tried to re-orient herself, “Everything okay in here?”

“It’s fine,” a small voice replied. “Leave me alone.”

Though the haze, Vinya saw that the shower curtain was wide open and water was spilling out onto the floor. Nina was sitting motionless on the floor of the tub, legs clutched against her chest, staring off into space as the hot shower pelted her naked back.

“That’s not what fine looks like,” Vinya retorted. “You look like a shrivelly white raisin. How long have you been in there?”

“Since I got home,” Nina said, the words gurgling through the water streaming down her face. “Vladimiro was right – the water heater never runs out.”

Vinya surveyed the pathetic-looking scene in front of her. This looked like a scenario that was going to call for large amounts of chocolate, but it was going to take a long time to talk Nina off whatever ledge she was on. Vinya had been on a few similar ledges, and her sister Yasha had a few tricks for jolting reality back into focus. This was probably the time for one of those.

Vinya reached into the shower, grabbed the shower’s hot water handle and slammed it firmly into the “off” position.

The jet of ice-water sent Nina straight to her feet and back to her senses.

“What the hell!” Nina shouted, rushing to turn off the shower as goosebumps rippled across her skin.

Vinya pulled a towel off the rack and threw it at her. “You needed that.”

“Maybe,” Nina shivered, gulping air as she tried to dry herself, “but I’m still going to kill you in a few minutes.”

Vinya leaned against the sink. “Then my last request is to know what happened. Aiden problems?”

“I wish,” Nina said, grabbing a sweatshirt off the sink. “Priscilla meltdown.”

Vinya recoiled. “What? She’s done everything short of kiss you on the mouth with this pope story.”

That seemed to hit Nina the wrong way, and she seemed to start shivering under her shirt. She sat for a few tense seconds, but then the entire story game gushing out.

Vinya had heard some crazy boss stories, but assault was a new one. She grasped for something worth saying but all that came out was a long exhale mixed with a few obscenities.

Nina, on the other hand, was just getting warmed up. “My skin was crawling all day, and when I got home, I felt so dirty that I came up here and washed myself like three times. After that, my brain shut down and...well, you saw.”

Vinya sat down next to her on the edge of the bathtub. “So, what now? HR complaint and then ‘Adios amigos’ after the big interview? You know she’s full of crap about you never getting another job. Dude, you’re magic pope girl.”

“Is that what I am?” Nina said blankly, sinking into what looked like deep thought. “Anyway, there’s no point filing a complaint. Priscilla *owns* HR. And I don’t think she was joking about blackballing me – she never says anything she isn’t serious about.”

“Then call the cops.” Vinya said.

“You’re not listening, Vinya,” Nina’s voice grew harsher, “She’d retaliate, and I’d lose the pope interview at minimum.”

“So what?” Vinya shot back. “You’re legit telling me you’re not doing anything about this?”

“No,” Nina got up and started pulling on a pair of jeans, “but if she scares me out of my job, she wins.”

“Right,” Vinya said, not at all convinced, “So you want to go up against the most powerful journalist on the planet after a month on the job. How exactly do you plan on pulling that one off?”

Tuesday, March 9, 2038

Twenty-Two Days Until Interview

10:17 A.M.

The glass-walled offices surrounding the newsroom floor were almost as intimidating as Priscilla’s office upstairs. They weren’t huge, but they made it obvious that the big personalities were a step above everyone else. Most of them were lavishly decorated – which Nina thought was mostly to demonstrate superiority over the lower ranking-talent on the newsroom floor.

Madison’s office was no exception. Small, but oozing with style. All the furniture was stark white but accented in bright purples and oranges. There was a purple lava lamp, a square orange clock with purple hands, and an ungodly display of vintage Taylor Swift memorabilia on the back wall. There was one thing that was different though. Most of the other offices were decorated to look like dens of serious journalism, but Madison’s was a middle finger to the entire concept of “serious.”

Nina noticed that the door was open, and decided to let herself in. Madison was on the phone, sitting with her Jimmy Chu’s kicked off.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said into the phone, shooting Nina a momentary glare. “Let me know if you hear anything else about the toxicology report. No, really, you’ve been a godsend on this story. Definitely, let me know when you’re in D.C. and we have to do brunch or something...Mmm’kay. Talk at ya’ later. Buh-bye.”

She hung up the phone and started typing on her computer at a breakneck pace.

“Well, if it isn’t our new star,” she said, not stopping, “Is there an actual reason you’re interrupting me or are you just my karmic punishment?”

Madison seemed so much more lucid than she had in Rome. Maybe she was in her element, or maybe she just wasn’t sauced right now. Either way, she kept banging the keys until she reached the end of whatever she’d been focusing on, then finally looked up.

“Well?”

Nina had been trying to piece together the strands of thought that brought her in here and was failing miserably. She knew she needed to say something that sounded professional, but all that came out was word vomit.

“Priscilla yelled at me and called me a whore.”

She opted to leave out the assault part – for now.

Madison giggle-snorted and turned back to her screen. “Oh, you poor baby. Should I get a violin?” She tried to keep typing but winced a little and massaged her forehead. So, she wasn’t hammered, but she was hung over.

Nina kept pressing. “You’re the only person here who can tick off Priscilla without paying for it. Why?”

Madison finally stopped typing but didn’t respond. Instead, she grabbed her Gucci bag, pulled out a nail file, and started neurotically grinding on her left pinkie finger.

“Well, look at this,” she said, not looking up. “Nina the pure comes groveling to the scarlet lady of WWN. What a shocking plot twist.” She blew the nail-dust off her finger. “Never saw that one coming. Not.”

“So?” Nina felt her pulse quickening. “Any tips? I don’t know - what do I do now?”

Madison set down her nail file and gave Nina full eye contact. It was the first time Nina had looked directly into the piercing sapphire eyes Madison was famous for. On air they sparkled, but here they burned. Whatever used to be in them had reduced down to smoldering blue coals.

“Get used to it or get lost,” Madison said. “That’s what you do. If you don’t like it, go back to wherever the hell you came from.”

That wasn’t how this was supposed to go. Nina tried to form a protest. “But that can’t be the only-”

“Look,” Madison interrupted. “We’re not friends. You’ve been nothing but condescending to me since the day you walked in here, which is pretty arrogant, seeing as I have twelve years seniority on you. This place isn’t your fantasy, and I clearly don’t meet your standards. Now you know what my life has been for the last decade.” She winced again and rubbed her forehead, almost as if to emphasize the point. “So, yeah, my advice is to cut the sanctimony and buzz off.”

Madison went back to typing and Nina just stood there, processing. She’d never stopped to think how Madison must have felt about their few interactions – not least because she’d figured Madison was too big of a deal to care what she thought.

“Sorry,” Nina said meekly, “I didn’t mean to-”

Madison stopped typing and gave Nina a death stare with those million-dollar eyes.

“Just go,” she said, “Please.”

Madison watched Nina skulk out of the room. If anything, she’d done the kid a favor.

She could feel her hands shaking from anxiety, and on top of that, it felt like a little elf was jackhammering the inside of her skull. She debated popping a Tylenol gummy but settled on something stronger. One sip on the job certainly wouldn’t kill her, and it would help with this headache.

Every time Nina spoke, she sounded more like Ally.

A quick glance revealed that nobody was peering through the glass, so she pulled the bedazzled flask out of the bag and snuck a sip. She made a point of only carrying nasty

booze on her person - *Fireball* in this case - as built-in “drink only in case of emergency” warning.

This was sure as hell an emergency, but that didn’t make it taste any better. The cinnamon and alcohol seared the back of her throat and she felt herself wince involuntarily.

“Damn, that sucks,” she whispered as she closed the flask. It never took more than one hair from that dog, and the headache started to ease.

As her thoughts cleared, she leaned back in her chair and tried to re-focus. Failing that, she pulled out the sliding tray under her desk that was meant to have been a keyboard holder. Instead, it contained a custom backgammon set. The outside was white leather, and inside the board was neon orange with white and purple spaces.

The game was about half finished, with the purple player lagging slightly behind the white and one purple checker stuck on the middle bar. Madison picked up the dice and rolled a three and a two.

After a few seconds staring at board, she moved the purple piece off the bar, three spaces onto the board. Then she slid another piece, lurking just outside her home-section, two spaces forward.

Using her smartwatch, she snapped a photo of the board, including the dice, and texted it to a contact listed only as “Back Gammon.” Then she slid the board back under the desk and tried to get her mind back on the story she was working on – a murder-suicide case out of New York.

Her watch buzzed. There was already a text response to her move

Back Gammon: Bored, are we?

She punched in a reply:

Madison: Stressed. Golden Girl suddenly wants advice.

Back: And?

Madison: *And I told her to stfu.*

Back: *:-/*

Madison: *Srsly? Not my prblm. This isn't high school.*

Back: *So, you're saying she's cloyingly naive and idealistic regarding journalism? That doesn't remind me of anyone.*

Madison: *What r u implying?*

There was a lag of several seconds, then the watch buzzed again. Back Gammon had sent an uncaptioned picture of a drab old board showing the same game - her opponent had rolled a six and a five and moved two men into their home quadrant.

Madison waited a few more seconds to see if a response came to her actual question, then followed up:

Madison: *F U*

Nina slammed a paper coffee cup onto her desk and took a few deep breaths. What had she really expected from Madison? Any remnants of that woman's soul were buried under six feet of booze and hair bleach.

She kicked her chair. "Dammit!"

A few people at surrounding desks stopped to stare, and she noticed Emma Poissonier raised an eyebrow on the other side of her own table.

Had she just cussed? In the office? When did that start?

She sat down and sunk her head into her hands but was startled out of it by a voice from behind her.

“Where did you get that?”

It was Madison - dressed in her white fur-lined pea coat and clutching a pack of Virginia SuperSlims. She was pointing at Nina’s signed headshot of Ally Talamantez from WAPL.

Nina raised an eyebrow. “I’ve had it since I was fourteen. She was a local reporter in Appleton. Why?”

Madison took a step toward her. “You didn’t know she worked here?”

“She what?” Nina blurted, “How? I watched WWN all the time and never saw her.”

Madison inhaled slowly. “About ten years ago, and she was only ever on WWN Business Network.” Madison seemed to choke on that last bit. “Damn fine reporter.”

“Seriously?” Nina asked, “Where is she now?”

“Wish I knew.” Madison took a long, deep breath. “Look, I’m gonna go smoke cigarettes, you wanna come watch?”

“What are we doing over here?” Nina asked, breathing through the collar of her coat in a vain attempt to blunt the odor of human urine.

Madison crossed the street and walked along the stone wall for a block, then made a sharp turn on K Street, down a stone-lined corridor. These mini-tunnels beneath the Union Station railyard were a major feature of the neighborhood around WWN Plaza, and some of the ones farther from WWN served as homeless encampments after dark.

Madison produced a lighter and lit up. “This is the closest legal windbreak to smoke - not bad if you don’t mind the smell.”

Nina gave her a side-eye. There had to be better places to smoke.

Madison relented. “Okay. I know nobody’s going to see us here. Heaven forbid one of Prissy’s stooges sees us passing notes in class.”

She took a long puff off her cigarette and tapped a few ashes onto the ground. “So, what did you want me to tell you earlier?”

Nina hadn’t really planned on being asked something quite that blunt. “Why you’re still here, maybe? Priscilla can’t stand you. Same as me.”

Madison chuckled. “No, she hates you more. I mean, I’m honored, but it’s been *years* since she was that mad at me.”

Another puff.

“I’m still here because I’m too good a reporter for Prissy to dump me, and she thinks I’m less dangerous working for her than against her. I stay out of her lane, she lets me get ratings.”

Nina felt her ears perk up. “Her lane?”

Madison rolled her eyes. “You know - politics, religion, international affairs. The real news. You think I started out doing celebrities and serial killers?”

“Of course not.” Nina said, remembering her favorite Madison story. “I was in high school when you broke the Pamela Sparks scandal. I was glued to the TV for weeks.”

“Way to make a girl feel old.” Madison deadpanned. “Let me guess, little Nina was sitting behind the counter at daddy’s diner watching Grandma Madison take down big-bad Senator Sparks, and that taught you just how important journalism is.”

Madison exaggerated the last bit, then closed her eyes and let a long stream of smoke out her nostrils. “Don’t feel special. I get that a lot.”

Nina looked at her shoes. “Of course, I did. You were, like, what? 27 and doing all that? It was a big deal.”

“26,” Madison corrected, “and let’s just say you and I learned different things about what a big story can do.”

“Like what?” Nina tried. “How did you actually get the story through?”

That, apparently, was the button that made Madison explode.

“Do I look like I want to re-hash the Sparks story for the three millionth time? It was a long time ago, okay? You want my advice? Stay out of trouble, get some better clothes, and learn to show some leg – cleavage if you can.” Madison took another puff of her cigarette and looked Nina over, “Never mind. Leg.”

Nina recoiled and felt her face scrunch in disgust. “What? No! That’s ridiculous. And demeaning, and...No!”

“Then quit,” Madison said flatly. “That’s the job. If you don’t want the job, why are you even here?”

“I’m here because I care about the truth.”

“No, you’re not,” Madison said with an eye roll, “You’re here for your ego.”

“I’m here for the news.”

Madison set her jaw. “No. That might be why you’re a reporter, but it’s not why you’re *here*. If you were about the news, you’d want a by-line in the *New York Times*. I used to want one of those. Big, shiny, editorial page byline - Madison Rylander, New York Times White House Correspondent. Had my title picked out and everything. That’s why the degree on *mywall* says ‘Journalism.’”

Now Nina was flat-out confused. “So, why didn’t you go write?”

“Same reason you didn’t,” Madison spat. “Someone shoved a camera in my nerdy little face, and for the first time ever, I felt pretty. *I* got to be the center of attention. Sound familiar?”

Nina had never really stopped to think about it that way. It didn’t sound right at all - but then again, she couldn’t imagine a life without seeing herself on TV. Even when she’d been in local news, she’d always liked getting recognized on the street.

Still, she tried to protest. “I...I mean...no...that’s not it.”

Madison smirked. “But it’s not *not* it. Right?”

“I...umm...” Nina still had nothing. Mentally she was thinking a bunch of things she didn’t want to admit but managed to force out a simple “That’s not it” again.

Madison turned serious “Oh, really? My degree says ‘Journalism?’ Yours doesn’t. I looked you up. Yours says ‘Broadcast Journalism.’ You never wrote a *word* for your college newspaper. You did, however, record more airtime in your four years than anyone else in the history of Wisconsin’s only dedicated student news channel. I didn’t figure out I wanted to be pretty until the paper I wrote for in Cleveland figured out that I was good at talking about City Council on the local news. You’ve wanted the camera your entire, insolent, squeaky little life.”

She stopped, allowing Nina to try and digest before going for the jugular.

“So, tell me again, Miss Crusader for Truth, how much you hate being stared at.”

Nina bit her lip - hard. “Okay,” she finally admitted. “I like seeing myself on TV. I like that little girls want to be me when they grow up. I like it. Sue me.”

Madison crept closer. “Kid, little girls don’t drive cable news ratings. Men between the ages of 35 and 50 do that.”

Nina threw up her hands. “So? That doesn’t mean I have to cater to them.”

Madison finally flicked her cigarette into the street and moved away from the wall. She was an inch or two taller than Nina, and got right in her face.

“Prissy was right. You *are* a whore. So am I. So is everyone at this network. The only difference between you and me is that I’m not afraid to admit it.”

Nina felt the heat rise in her. “I’m not a whore,” Nina shouted back, “and I don’t play one on TV either!”

Madison pointed a manicured talon straight into Nina’s face. “Then don’t expect to beat Prissy at a damn thing. You want power? Learn the game.”

With that, she stormed out of the tunnel.

“I’m not a whore!” Nina shouted after her.

“Neither was Ally!” Madison shouted back. “Seen her on TV lately?”