

**Chapter Twelve, Part One**  
**“B.C.E. (Before Cable Era)”**

**Nineteen Years Earlier**  
**Washington, DC**  
**Sunday, June 9, 2019**  
**10:53 A.M.**

*Life observation #6,527: The new Publix across from the cathedral rocks.*

Twenty-seven-year-old Tobaya Carsten inked the words in her beat up journal. She was sitting on a park bench a block from the National Cathedral and eating grocery-store sushi from a plastic tray. Other girls were probably less formal with their diaries, but other girls had actual diaries.

Toby, on the other hand, had a painstakingly numbered list of one-sentence quips dating back to age 13. The first one was a mission statement for the project:

*#1: People think girls with diaries look smarter – so now I have a diary.*

Then there were the more recent ones.

*#6,382: I'm the only black girl on the Forbes 30 under 30 list. Not sure if that's awesome or just messed up.*

*#6,425: Leaving MSNBC doesn't scare me. Joining Brinkman's start-up web-channel does scare me.*

*#6,513: Politico just called WWN 'the hottest new thing on online.' This might actually work!*

She smiled again and shoved the book into her new handbag - a treat she'd bought herself to celebrate the raise.

Her mother had always taught her to be stingy with money, but never to skimp on the good things when they came. Right now, there were a lot of good things, and she wasn't skimping. There was the new silver sundress, the new silver stilettos, and the new blonde highlights.

For an online news reporter, looking good wasn't a luxury; it was an investment.

A Kawasaki motorcycle came to a stop next to her, and a black-clad figure dismounted. Prissy Davis, Toby's bestie and roommate, removed her helmet to release a cascade of whip-straight brown hair down her back.

Toby grinned. "Well, you came after all."

Prissy shrugged her shoulders. "For Brinkman, I'll make an exception."

Toby dropped her jaw in mock-surprise. "Wow. Prissy Davis bends her rules - must be a sign of the apocalypse."

"The apocalypse happened when President Clinton announced for re-election. Part of me wishes Trump had beat her just so that we could have a real progressive this time."

Toby rolled her eyes hard. "Priss, I'm off the clock. No politics."

Prissy giggled and shook her head. "That's why I keep you around."

The bells of the cathedral started ringing, and Toby got to her feet.

"That's our cue. Dan texted and said he'll meet us there."

The two made their way across Wisconsin Avenue and down the block to the cathedral. They were met on the front steps by foreign correspondent Dan Dragovich in his usual bomber jacket and aviator sunglasses. He looked like he hadn't shaved today, as usual.

"Hey, Priss," he said. Then his thoughts seemed to skip a beat as he registered Toby's presence, "Oh, hi, Toby. Ready to see the boss's larva get sprinkled?"

"Hi, yourself," Toby fired back, "and yes, I'm here to see my editor's son baptized, and we're going to be late."

She forcibly turned him around and started walking toward the church.

“Come on,” Dan teased. “Brinkman himself called it a grub, and it's his kid. Besides, you know you just love my biting sarcasm, right, Priss?”

Prissy was unmoved. “If you have to tell people how biting it is, you've already lost - plus I just want to get this over with.”

“Why, you got a hot date?” he prodded.

“Right, Dan, I totally have time for a love life right now.”

Toby resisted the urge to smack both of them. This was how the ‘Three Musketeers’ stayed inseparable.

Toby was too proud to say she liked a spaz like Dan. Dan never noticed because he was too busy drooling over Prissy - who in turn was oblivious, emotionally unavailable, and having a torrid affair with the word-processor on her office computer.

Dan tried again. “So, Priss, NaQuan showed me some of the interviews you did for tomorrow’s story. Really cool stuff.”

Prissy let out a long breath. “It’s crap. Brinkman’s idea.”

Toby wanted to blurt out *He likes you, idiot!* Instead, she settled for talking about the story.

“Never know, girl, if those guys you talked to are right, that’s, like, epic.”

Priscilla started massaging her right temple. “Is there anyone who hasn’t been reading my stuff behind my back? This isn’t a sci-fi novel, and we are *not* going to break the internet by maxing out the data capacity of undersea fiber-optic cables. It’s a right wing scare tactic to gin up cybersecurity spending.”

Toby shook her head as they reached the front steps. “You really need to learn to take a compliment.”

“I’ll take it when it’s deserved. I didn’t come over from *Politico* to do stupid non-stories. I want meat.”

Toby stopped in her tracks as they passed the cathedral's iron gates.

“Priss! I don't care. It's the weekend. Leave it alone.”

“Sorry. I just-”

“No.” Toby returned fire, “You don't get how good you have it.”

“I'm gonna go find a seat,” Dan mumbled and disappeared. He always seemed to do that.

Toby kept her focus squarely on Prissy. “Girl, we are 27, beautiful, and at the top of our game. I don't care how many meaty stories you get in five years. You see those girls over there?”

Toby pointed out a tour group wearing lime green t-shirts emblazoned with the phrase, ‘Fairborn High School – DC 2019.’

Prissy took a deep breath. “Yeah. I see them. So?”

“You know where those girls are going to be in ten years? Gunning for our airtime. And they're going to be younger, hipper, and prettier than us. We will never have it this good again.”

Prissy crossed her arms and pouted. “I said I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, I know,” Toby said. “And I know your head never leaves work, which is why we're friends. But can we please just drop it for once?”

Prissy exhaled and gave one of her shy, church-kid smiles, like when they'd met in college. Things had certainly changed since then.

“Okay,” Toby relented, “you win.”

Toby took Prissy by the hand and led her into the Cathedral's cavernous sanctuary. Dan had claimed three seats in the second row of chairs from the back.

The rest of the row was filled by a family of tourists. The mother and father sat on the end of the row, sporting matching polo shirts from *Connie's Diner: Appleton, Wisconsin*.

Then there were three children, the oldest being a pre-teen girl taking pictures on her iPhone.

Toby took the seat next to Dan, while Prissy hesitated at the edge of the row. Eventually, she sat in the last seat next to the tourists.

The reverent silence was quickly shattered by a bright flash. Toby turned to see the pre-teen pointing her phone straight at Prissy.

“Sorry,” the girl said sheepishly. “You just made a really pretty picture with your face and the stained glass windows.”

It was the most adorable thing Toby had seen all day, but Prissy shot her a confused look. Toby cocked her head lightly in the direction of the girl, was still sitting wide-eyed, waiting for a response.

Prissy seemed to get the hint and forced a smile. “Well, I'm glad you think I'm photogenic, but you really should ask when you take people's pictures.”

The girl looked down at her feet. “I know I should, but people are more honest when they don't think anyone is watching. That's what my art teacher said. I'm Diana from Wisconsin, by the way.”

The kid stuck out her hand. That seemed to be too cute even for Prissy, judging by the fact that she returned the shake so warmly.

“Well, Diana from Wisconsin, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Prissy from DC. Are you having fun here?”

“Oh yes!” Diana said, “This place is, like, super awesome. We went to the Spy Museum and it was, like, O.M.G. They had all these cool hidden cameras and guns in cigarette lighters!”

“That is a fun place,” Prissy said, clearly struggling to keep the dialogue going.

She didn't need to – as Diana continued with her ecstatic narration. “It was crazy awesome! I think I want to be a spy when I grow up. Do you think they let girls become spies? Like James Bond spies, not Julia Child spies.”

That finally got a huge smile out of Prissy. Toby knew that her inner feminist wouldn't be able to resist.

“I think girls can grow up to be anything they want,” Prissy declared. Then she winked, “You would totally be an awesome spy. You got my picture when I wasn't looking, didn't you?”

“I did!” Diana agreed, “I bet I could even change my name to a secret identity. Diana Montana, super spy!”

The cathedral's massive pipe organ cut them off, ringing out to accompany the choir as they entered down the center aisle.

The service wasn't painfully boring. A few hymns that nobody recognized, then a brief sermon about the importance of children.

Then it came time for the baptisms – five of them.

Jim Brinkman, founder and managing editor at WWN, stood proudly as his son Braden tried to wriggle out of the arms of the Episcopal bishop of Washington. The whole church laughed as he was sprinkled with water. The next three babies cooed and gurgled as assorted clergy wetted their heads and presented each with a small candle.

For some reason, the last baby caught Toby's eye – a tiny girl with wisps of golden blonde hair. Unlike the others, she was silent throughout the ceremony, seemingly transfixed by the row of candles next to the baptismal font.

“And now,” said the bishop, “I invite Brian and Amy Lee to present their daughter, Sophia.”

The parents stepped forward, but the baby's attention remained firmly on the candles. She even reached out toward them as her mother carried her forward.

Taking her in his arms, the bishop scooped a handful of water from the font and poured it over the child's head. "Sophia, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

He then handed Sophia to her mother, removed the final candle from the rack, and held it in front of the baby as the child's face lit up with joy.

"Sophia, receive the light of Christ. Let it illumine your life, as you illumine others, and carry it out into a hurting and suffering world."

Having completed the rite, the bishop and several of the other clergy walked down the aisle, using hyssop branches to sprinkle water on the congregants.

"Remember your baptism," they said as they passed each row.

Finally, they reached the back row, and Toby closed her eyes at the water hit her face.

Toby wasn't exactly religious, but it did take her back to the Foursquare Baptist Temple in Houston. They baptized teenagers by dunking, and Toby remembered hers vividly.

Then she was shaken out of the reverie by a body trying to slide past her.

"Screw this" Prissy whispered, "That's the last thing I feel like remembering."

"Priss, what the f-"

Toby cut herself off before the expletive came out in church. She and Dan sprang out of their chairs to give chase, but Prissy had already sprinted halfway to the doors.