

Chapter Twelve, Part Three
“Ripple Effect”

Thursday, March 18, 2038
Thirteen Days Until Interview
12:11 P.M.

Madison closed her eyes again. Why did humanity invent fluorescent lights?

There was a knock on her door, followed by a chipper voice. “Hey Mad-woman - you in here?”

Then a pause. “O. M. G.”

It was Oakley.

Madison sat up as straight as she could, trying to sound awake. “Hey, girl.”

The makeup artist rushed to put a hand on Madison’s forehead. “Are you all right? You look like dog crap.”

“I’m fine,” Madison huffed, removing Oakley’s hand from her head and trying to sound firm. “Just took it a bit far last night.”

Oakley inhaled through her teeth. “It shows,” she withdrew her hand, “How bad?”

Madison sat up a bit straighter in her chair. “Oakley,” she said, wondering if she should go quite this deep, “You and me have had some times right?”

“Sure,” Oakley responded, a frown creeping across her face, “why?”

Madison took a long breath. “Have you ever blacked out?”

Oakley shrugged as a frown spread over her face. Then she nodded. “Maybe once a year – those are scary. Happens to everyone, though.”

“I doubt that,” Madison mumbled to herself, mentally noting that she’d been doing it about once a *month*.

“First time?” Oakley asked, “You’ve always held up pretty well.”

“No,” Madison shook her head, “Just getting too old for it.” She tried to pivot, “Anyway, what’s the gossip? That ought to wake me up.”

“That’s my girl,” Oakley pulled out a chair and sat down, “Well, have you seen what’s going on in Dan’s office? He’s practically ransacking the place. And those pictures. Tacky.”

Madison’s headache abated a little as her brain focused. “Pictures? What’s he doing?”

Oakley cocked her head toward the door, “See for yourself.”

Madison dragged herself to her feet and made her way to the door. The light was blinding at first, but after a few seconds she was able to make out Dan’s second floor balcony suite on the other side of the arena.

Dan was directing furniture movers...and wearing his old bomber jacket?

Madison hadn’t seen that thing in years – and damned if he did still look hot in it.

There was a giant framed canvas sitting outside his office waiting to be hung, and Madison took a step back from the light. It was the same print that once hung in the front lobby of the building - a large, blown-up cover of *TIME* magazine with the headline:

New Kids on the Block: WWN’s Millennial Dream Team.

It showed three young figures crossing their arms and smirking into the camera – young Dan, young Prissy, and (most importantly) *Toby*.

That face hadn’t been allowed in the building since Prissy took over.

“Oakley” Madison said, “That’s not a picture. That’s a declaration of war.”

Aiden stumbled past the huge canvas outside the door and dumped his camera bag in the front of the office. He’d spent the morning shooting B-roll of the latest protest at the Supreme Court. The bag landed with a thud, and an unfamiliar voice said, “Hey, watch where you do that.”

He looked up to see two men in blue WWN polo shirts taking measurements on the wall, which had been cleared of the camera shelves and apparently washed.

“What the hell did you do with our equipment?” he said, voice raised.

“Just moved it in the back,” one of them said, pointing to Ty’s office and then the storage closet. “Mr. Dragovich told us to.”

Aiden looked down to see that his bag had hit a freshly delivered blue sofa, still covered in plastic. He rushed to pick it up just as two more men came in carrying a mahogany coffee table.

They were followed promptly by Dan. Well, maybe it was Dan. His mustache was trimmed, his hair slicked back, and he was wearing a freshly pressed shirt with a dated but still sharp leather bomber jacket. He had two large framed photos, one under each arm, and was excitedly bossing around the maintenance staff.

“Okay, guys, put that table in the middle of the room. And these-”

He held up one of the frames before setting them down against the wall. “I want the Syria one on the side wall, and the Nigeria one next to the couch. And that big one,” he pointed to the huge canvas outside, “goes on the back wall. I want everyone on the arena floor to see it.”

Aiden stumbled out of the way of the coffee table as it was set down, and Dan finally noticed his presence.

“Oh, hey Aiden. Sorry about the mess. Just figured this place probably needed some sprucing up.”

Aiden grimaced in confusion. “Who are you and what have you done with Dan Dragovich?”

Dan smiled and raised a graying eyebrow. “That obvious, huh?”

“Uh, yeah,” Aiden said sarcastically, “What’s going on?”

Dan cocked his head in the direction of his office, indicating he didn’t want the workers to hear. Aiden followed him in and shut the door.

Once inside, Dan sank into his old leather chair and massaged his forehead. Then he looked up. “Aiden, I’ve spent a lot of years trying not to play the game.”

“Exactly,” Aiden replied. “That’s the whole point. It’s what we do.”

“Not anymore,” Dan shook his head. “The game has been playing us, and this Nina thing puts us back in it, whether we like it or not.”

Aiden waited for Dan to say something else, but nothing came so he filled the silence himself.

“And this has what to do with interior decorating?”

Dan sat up in his chair. “Not giving a rip works if you’re just trying to survive, but we’re going head-to-head with Prissy. I want to win, and I want everyone in this building to *know* I want to win.”

“Win what?” Aiden said, “We have great ratings, we have our own company, and we can do whatever we want. None of this matters.”

Dan smiled and leaned forward. He had that big-story twinkle in his eye, but brighter than normal.

“Screw the ratings,” he said, “and screw independence. I want my network back.”

Nina walked into Dan's suite to find only Aiden in the half-redecorated waiting room. She'd come to discuss her final slate of pope questions with Dan, directly against Prissy's instructions, but finding Aiden was certainly a pleasant surprise. He was sitting - or rather sprawling - on the new couch, seemingly unsure how to operate in a decorated space.

"Still trying to figure it out?" she said, surprising him.

He straightened up. "Oh, hey. Yeah, it's a little weird."

Nina double checked that no one else was coming before sitting down next to him. This was her first chance to try out the new office persona on him.

"Well, the decor does have some advantages," she said, sliding closer to him and trying to be alluring. "So, we still on for tonight?"

Aiden nodded and smiled, apparently unable to form a coherent sentence. Although he did manage to get out, "Oh, yeah, definitely."

Nina locked eyes with him, "Good."

A voice somewhere in her brain was telling her not to lay it on so thick, but she had plans - and she wanted the little angel on her shoulder to shut up for a few hours.

"Okay then," she said, making a point to run a finger up and down Aiden's forearm. "I better get to my meeting."

She got up and knocked on Dan's door, thinking, *Damn, that felt good*. Something about her new look was having an effect on her attitude, and she liked it.

Dan flung the door open, "Hey Nina, come on in, I think we're really close to a final question list."

Then he seemed to notice Aiden over Nina's shoulder. "Close your mouth, Healy, you can't have her until close-of-business."

Nina chuckled and looked back at Aiden, who suddenly looked mortified.

"Ah, young love," Dan said wistfully, "I miss that."

He beckoned Nina inside and waved her to one of the chairs at his desk. She'd sent him a revised list of questions earlier in the day, trying to mix in a few of Prissy's ideas without selling out totally.

"So," he said, pulling up the list on his computer and putting on a set of reading glasses, "You're leading with Prissy's question about religion being useless in the 21st Century? Not sure that's the best opener."

"I edited it down. The heart of the question is good, and I can throw Prissy a bone without using her wording. I think her version was something like, 'The Catholic Church has been dramatically out of step with modern morality for centuries, any chance that might change?'"

Dan sniffed in disgust. "The old 'When did you stop beating your wife?' question. Prissy loves those." Then he took off the glasses and set them on the table. "And she doesn't settle for bones. I been working with her almost twenty years, and you either give her the whole steak or you get eaten. But you're probably right, at least you can say you tried. Just be ready if she doesn't like it."

Nina rolled her eyes. "Trust me, I think I'm ready for anything from her at this point."

She still hadn't told him about that encounter in Prissy's office - the last thing she needed was Dan blowing a gasket before the interview happened.

"We'll see," he said. "Look, the questions are pretty good, just make sure you're comfortable with it. That's the only thing that matters."

Sinéad sat at the bar at *Dokutsu*, the new izakaya under the M Street overpass. She was nibbling on a plate of honey-chipotle edamame pods and ignoring her miso patty melt. Mostly, though, she was just staring at her phone. It displayed the number that her mother had given her - labeled in her contacts as “Skyler - Mom?”

That was what she had of her birth mother - a first name, a phone number, and a vague sense that this person was living somewhere in the DC area.

The only other thing her mom had let slip was a laugh and an accidental joke about how “she used to hang around your neighborhood a lot – but I should let her tell you that.” Everything, apparently, was Skyler’s to tell.

Not that it had anything to do with Sinéad’s life or identity or anything.

This was the second straight lunch hour Sinéad had spent here, silently daring herself to press the “call” button.

Then again, lunch would be a horrible time to call. She could picture it now:

“Hey, this is your long-lost daughter, sorry to interrupt your important business lunch.”

Definitely not a good idea.

Although, for once, it felt good to think about her ‘genetic donor’ in a business lunch rather than some effed-up double-wide in West Nowhere, Arkansas.

A graying bartender in a black t-shirt interrupted her thoughts. “You *sure* you don’t want a drink?”

She looked up and saw that the man, who she’d ordered the food from, was looking at her with what she assumed fatherly concern must look like.

“I could use one, actually,” she demurred, “but it’s too early.”

He let out a small, worldly chuckle. “Free advice,” he said. “I been serving you suits long enough to know that some brains run so fast that you *need* something to slow ‘em down.”

Sinéad finally felt herself smile. “Guilty as charged.”

“I know your type,” he said. “Used to have a girl who was a regular here. God, must’ve been ten years ago - same way. Didn’t drink much at night, but always had half a cocktail with lunch. Said it made her mind stop running circles.”

“Ten years ago?” said Sinéad, interest piqued. “This place hasn’t been open ten months.”

The bartender snickered. “We change the name with the trends. I bought the place two years ago when it was a retro malt-bar, but I started tending bar here back in the Twenties. It was one of those space-age sci-fi joints. That’s when the lady I talked about used to come in. Hand on heart, I about fell over when you came in here - you look just like her. She always used to do that stare-into-nowhere thing at lunch.”

Sinéad played with one of her edamame pods. “That may or may not be coincidental. I heard that my -”

She stopped to think about how to say it.

“My...birth mom used to work around this neighborhood.” She was still adjusting to the idea of having a “mom” that looked like her - and it was stupid to think that Skyler was the same woman who used to come in here. Then again, she’d spent the last day thinking about which corners her birth mother had been on in this neighborhood, where she’d eaten, where she’d walked, what she’d done. It was like having a ghost follow you around.

The bartender brought her back to the present. “Small world. If it’s her, tell her José said hi.”

He set an empty martini glass on the bar. “So, what’ll it be?”

Sinéad shook her head. “I suck at ordering drinks, especially at lunch. What did maybe-my-mom used to order?”

At that, the José’s eyebrows shot up and he burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh nothing. You just...I mean...I haven’t made one of those in years. Helle, what did we call them?”

Sinéad raised an eyebrow. “Well now I *have* to have one.”

José regained control of himself and leaned on the bar. “I’m not even sure I still have the stuff, let me check.”

He disappeared for a second, kneeling to rifle through what Sinéad assumed was a fridge under the bar. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of the sight.

“Wait,” she said, laughing, “I didn’t mean to send you on a goose chase.”

“No,” José said, standing back up with a few small bottles. “I insist. This is a history lesson.”

Sinéad leaned back in her chair, mildly amused. “Okay, I’m all ears.”

José grabbed a bottle of bourbon from the back of the bar. “Just don’t drink the whole thing if you’re going back to the office in an hour. Now, the trick to this is that you use diluted, clear bitters and mix them separately. The drink is basically a Manhattan, just swapping out the vermouth for blue curacao.”

He poured the whiskey into the glass and added the curacao, stirring it into a dark amber mix that leaned toward violet. “So, we’re talking the mid-Twenties - you remember all the glowy alien stuff they liked, right?”

Sinéad shrugged. “I remember CyberTeen Barbie.”

“Okay, now I just feel old. Anyway, you take these clarified bitters and mix them on the side with bit of this stuff.” In a separate glass, José poured something from one of the old bottles, then picked up a tiny plastic vial and carefully squeezed out three drops. Suddenly, the clear liquid glowed neon purple.

Sinéad giggled. “Seriously?”

“It’s all about the show, kid.” he said, “the chemicals are alcohol-activated. So, then you carefully pour like so.”

He dripped the glowing bitters over the top of the martini glass, creating little trails of fluorescence that slowly penetrated into the darker drink. Then he slid the glass to Sinéad, being careful not to jostle the intricate patterns forming in liquid.

“And that, young lady, is what we called a Klingon Death Ray.”

Sinéad stifled a laugh. “That is the weirdest, most retro thing I’ve ever seen.”

José shrugged. “In ten years people will be saying the same thing about miso burgers, and I’ll probably be making glow drinks again. But try that, really, it’s good.”

Sinéad took a drink and tried not to cough as she set the glass down. “It’s strong!”

“Not like that!” José chuckled, “It’s a whiskey cocktail. You *sip* it.”

Sinéad gave herself a moment to re-adjust, and started to feel a pleasant mix of sweetness, alcohol, and bitterness on the back of her tongue.

“Let me try this again.”

She carefully took a smaller sip, allowing the flavors to hit her a little more smoothly.

“I think I really like this.”

José put the whiskey back behind the bar. “Maybe it runs in the family. So, you gonna make that phone call you been staring at for ten minutes? Let me guess, boyfriend?”

Sinéad looked down at her phone and decided to put it back in her breast pocket. “Family – but probably one I should save for later.”