

Chapter Fourteen, Part One
"Renovation Blues"

Fifteen Years Earlier
Wednesday, January 18, 2023

Life observation #8,829: When you get to the top, the only thing up there is the question of whether it was worth it.

A snow flurry landed on Toby's lips. It melted on contact, swirling into the cherry flavor in the silver lipstick that she'd recently taken a shine to. The whole flavored-cosmetics fad had seemed a bit juvenile when it first caught on, but in the last few months she'd enjoyed tasting big moments.

That, and being "that girl with silver lips" helped cement her as a recognizable face on TV. Recognizable was important now that WWN was getting onto cable and competing with the "legacy" networks.

The icy, fruity tingle on her tongue played right into the shock and euphoria. She still couldn't quite believe what she was looking at.

"A lid for you, young lady." Jim Brinkman smiled as he handed Toby a blue WWN hard hat.

"I don't think I count as young anymore," Toby chuckled as she put it on.

"When you're as old as I am," he said, "Everyone counts as young. Besides, you're what now, twenty-nine?"

"Thirty-two," Toby corrected, "and you knew that."

"Right, Twenty-Nine," Brinkman continued down the line, "and another hat for you, Miss Davis."

Toby watched Prissy's grin break. Priss hated the term "Miss," and Brinkman knew it, but it was impossible to hold it against him with his constant childlike enthusiasm.

"And finally," Brinkman said, extending the last hat, "one for you, Mr. Dragovich."

Dan grabbed the hat with gusto.

“So,” Brinkman shouted over the din of cars whizzing by, “You ready to see this?”

Toby nodded ecstatically. The concrete roof of the old Uline Arena loomed over construction barricades, beckoning them closer. The monument to 1940s industrial architecture had sat derelict for decades, but now the letters “WWN” gleamed in fresh white paint on the ancient brick façade.¹

Brinkman unhitched a gate in the blue plywood wall, “Okay then, come on in.”

As Toby walked through the gate, the scale of the project hit her full force. The garage doors were gone - signaling the end of the building’s decades as makeshift parking garage. In their place was a massive, art-deco entrance of polished stainless steel – complete with ornate door handles in the shape of stylized telegraphs.

Brinkman caught Toby staring. “That’s just the back entrance, come see the front.”

He started walking down the side of the building. “The one problem we had with this block was that we didn’t have a public performing space, right? No space, hence no musical guests, hence the new morning show has to run out of the New York office.”

“Right,” Toby concurred. The brick wall of the arena rose on one side of the two-lane road, while the weathered limestone blocks forming the foundation of the elevated Union Station railyard dominated the other. This created a narrow canyon topped by the power lines and control-buildings in the railyard above.

Brinkman grinned. “Not anymore. We have a deal with the city, and we’re going to close this entire block off to traffic - repave it with cobblestones, put a stage up front, call it *WWN Plaza*. We’ll have concerts here every damn morning, blow *The Today Show* out of the water. Can you imagine packing a bunch of screaming kids into this space? And we want a big mural of The Beatles here on the side of the building.”

¹ Author’s note: The real Uline Arena was indeed a derelict ruin for decades. It was renovated during the writing of *Basic Cable* and in re-opened in 2016 as an REI superstore. I lived near it for many years and visited the site often for inspiration – both before and after the renovation. Given that *Basic Cable*’s history diverges from our reality in substantial ways, the decision to leave the arena abandoned until 2023 was purposeful. It’s important for anyone who knows the site that certain real-life renovations were never made here – namely the addition of large windows that would have rendered Brinkman’s mural impossible. That said, I highly recommend visiting the site and enjoying an unsweetened hot chocolate at the *La Colombe* coffee in the front lobby - where parts of this story were edited.

Toby smiled. Brinkman had always wanted an homage to the building's role as the site of the first Beatles concert in the United States.

“Oh, and Toby, you'll love this. I talked to the artist already and the mural's going to fade from the hockey team that played here in the back, then to Eisenhower, then the Beatles, then the medical station at the front - so that's what you'll see hitting the front door. The whole sweep of history.”

It did make Toby happy, in a sad kind of way. She'd been the one to bring that particular piece of history to Brinkman's attention. He'd wanted a Beatles mural, but one of the building's less glamorous historical functions was as a staging point for volunteer medics during the H Street riots following the assassination of Dr. King. Those same riots resulted in the neighborhood's decline and the building's abandonment. It was hard to see that history with all the gentrification going on, but Toby had always thought it needed to be there.

Brinkman continued monologuing, but Toby felt a tap on her arm.

“Thoughts?” Prissy whispered.

“About what? The building? Sounds great.”

Prissy rolled her eyes. “No, about tonight. And the building sucks. Murals?”

“Sounds like it'll have character.” Toby snapped back, “and the med station mural sounds really cool.”

Prissy rolled her eyes. “Because the world totally needs a mural of a bunch of white doctors treating hurt black people, why don't we just put up a giant caption in that says ‘The White Man's Burden’?”

Toby grabbed Prissy's arm and yanked her to a stop as Brinkman and Dan continued. Dan looked back, but Toby shot him a look that said, “Keep moving or you'll die.”

“What?” Prissy snapped.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Toby spat, “Can you get over yourself for two seconds? I'll talk about tonight later, and I'm not going to sit here and crap on Brinkman's baby. We've got a damn *arena*. Do you get how awesome that is?”

Prissy clenched her jaw. “We have a story right now that’s way bigger than a stupid building with stupid murals - how are you not freaking out about that?”

Toby’s jaw dropped. “Girl, there is nothing bigger than this stupid building. This building cost five years of my life, the story can wait an hour.”

“This story could bring down Senator Castaneda, and that puts Pam Sparks in position to win the California Senate seat. That’s bigger than this building will ever be.”

“Yes, I know,” Toby said, “I’m the one who got the info - and I didn’t get it for your stupid politics, I got it for this building.”

Prissy snorted. “Right, and because of how you got that info, I have to freak out about the security of it.”

Toby felt her blood pressure rising. “Last I checked, that was your idea.”

“I told you that the social media database said his strategist had a weakness for women. I told you to *charm* him.”

“You said, ‘whatever means necessary,’” Toby spat back. “No limits, right? That’s your mantra.”

Prissy sighed. “Whatever. I just don’t know what to do with everything now that we’ve got it all.”

Toby jabbed her finger in Prissy’s face. “Do what I told you to do with it. Take as much of the database offline as we can. Destroy the hard drives, keep the important records on thumb drives and paper. Now, I’m going to go scope out my new office – because I bled for it. And next time you want to spring a honey-trap, do your own dirty work.”

She turned to walk away, hoping to catch up to Dan and Brinkman, but Prissy’s voice echoed after her. “I’m sorry, okay?”

Toby turned back. “You’re sorry? You pull me into *how* much foolishness, and all you can say is ‘sorry?’”

Prissy stared down at the ground, and Toby could see her licking her teeth nervously behind her closed lips.

“Look, Toby. This whole thing is out of hand, and it’s all my idea, and I’m scared and...I’m just...I’m *sorry*, all right?”

Classic Prissy. Three fourths of the time she was a bulldog, and then the minute something hit the fan, she started acting like a lost puppy. It was like her reporter brain got out of control and went before she realized what she was doing.

The real Prissy was just a sheltered church-kid from a little town in West Maryland who still hadn’t figured out how bad the real world sucked. That was what made it so hard - in Toby’s case, *impossible* - to tell her no.

Part of Toby wanted to rip the girl’s head off right now but...at the end of the day, Prissy was still Prissy. Still the lost girl with good intentions. And Toby relented – as usual. “It wasn’t *all* your idea. I did add a few flourishes.”

Prissy kicked a pebble - hard. There was clearly more she wanted to say, but she didn’t.

They started walking to the front door to catch up with Brinkman and Dan, but Toby stopped and looked at the wall where Brinkman had said the mural would be placed. She should be mad about the story, but she was stuck on what Prissy had said about the mural – *her* mural.

“Hey Priss.” She said, “Can I ask you something?”

Prissy stopped, looking hesitant. “Sure, I guess,”

“If you think my-” Toby bit her lip, realizing she didn’t want to claim credit for the med station idea right now. “I mean, if you think Brinkman’s medical mural isn’t enough, what would you put there instead? The marches maybe? I mean, this area has a ton of civil rights history. It needs to be on the wall.” She looked at Prissy, hoping that there was some good reason her friend hated her idea so much.

Prissy just stared at the wall, then shook her head and headed for the door. “I’d put nothing.”