

Chapter Fifteen, Part One
“The Price of Cable”

Twelve Years Earlier
Sunday, June 14, 2026
Lincoln Heights, District of Columbia

Life observation #10,124: Here there be monsters. Proceed accordingly.

The soft beeps that came from the elevator as it passed each floor should have soothed Toby. After all, they’d probably been focus-group tested to be calming in the face of claustrophobia. But right now, the little chirps felt like they were clawing the inside of her skull.

She took a deep breath and took one last look at her new boyfriend, a Capitol Hill Press Secretary named Darius Jefferson. He seemed oblivious to what he was walking into - and his bowtie was askew.

“Let me straighten that,” Toby said, more because she needed something to do than because she wanted to help.

“I got it, Silver,” he said, attempting and failing to fix it.

“You’re hopeless,” Toby reached for the tie, “and I have a better idea.”

She quickly pulled the knot out of his tie, a move she’d rehearsed to perfection, then yanked it out of his collar and dangled it in front of him.

“You do not need this today.”

The elevator settled on the 13th floor and opened into a hallway full of newly installed apartment doors.

“C’mon, Silver,” Darius grabbed for the tie, “you know I never go out without it.”

She jerked it back, “It’s brunch with my best friend, not a job interview.”

“Same thing,” he said, “especially the way I hear you talk about this girl.”

That brought Toby back to reality. She *was* nervous, not so much about Prissy meeting Darius, just about Prissy in general.

Sunday brunch was a ritual dating back to when they’d lived together - but lately it felt different. If anything, it was a catch-up session to try and convince themselves that they were still the same old Priss and Toby.

Which they weren’t.

Toby would talk about the parties she went to with Dan and Flannery. Prissy would talk about her rooftop vegetable gardening and how soothing it was.

And they avoided the subject of work, the thing that once held them together, like the plague.

In the old days, there had always been some massive all-consuming project they were working on together. Now, they’d moved up in the world. There were no joint projects – especially not since...well...since.

They still had the same job titles, but the salaries and roles had ballooned along with the network. Toby, as afternoon anchor, was charged with upholding WWN’s reputation for class and even-handed reporting – and now she managed a high-gloss production staff. Prissy, the hard-charging political editor, was hell-bent on keeping the place edgy – and now she had a staff of seven reporters hungry for blood.

If Prissy and Toby talked during the workweek, it was usually because their underlings were about to come to blows over how a story should go to air.

The elevator dinged. They’d arrived at the 13th floor. No turning back now.

Toby led Darius to a white door marked “1311” and knocked lightly. A few seconds later, it swung open to reveal the slim figure of Anders Bryndisarson, an Icelandic photographer for National Geographic and Prissy’s live-in boyfriend.

“Tobaya!” He offered a hug that seemed to make Darius a little uncomfortable. Anders was an old friend. In fact, Toby had accidentally set him up with Prissy. It had been Toby who’d pulled the strings to get Anders’ little sister a job in Prissy’s department, and the rest had followed.

“Priscilla will be right out,” Anders said. “Taking a work call, as always, right?”

Toby chuckled. “Same old Priss.”

Then she turned to Darius, “Darius, this is Anders - Anders, Darius.”

Anders offered Darius a handshake. “You’re a lucky guy.”

“Indeed, I am,” Darius said, finally lightening up and giving Anders a tight grip.

“Come in,” Anders beckoned. “We set some mimosas on the patio.”

As Toby stepped in, she couldn’t help but think how good Anders had been for Prissy. They had their little perfectly decorated apartment, which always smelled lightly of pine, and finally it seemed like Prissy had something to take her mind off work.

Toby had just taken her first sip of mimosa when Prissy finally emerged from the back room. She was wearing black pajama-jeans, white tube socks, and an oversize white turtleneck. Honestly, she looked exhausted.

“Hey Toby,” she smiled, pulling her hair back with a scrunchie and giving Anders a peck on the lips. “Sorry I’m a mess, a big story had some loose ends that needed weekend attention.”

“No worries,” Toby said. “Pajamas are fine by me.”

“I’ll go change in a second.” Prissy grabbed a mimosa but didn’t miss a beat. “And you must be Darius. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Small talk ensued, but Toby could barely tune in – the visual was too weird. Prissy never talked this fast. She was never this social, never so easy with PDA. Come to

think of it, she was drinking her mimosa pretty fast too, especially for someone who had one drink a week, *maximum*.

About five minutes into the conversation, which mostly consisted of Darius and Anders geeking out over Anders' puffin photos, Toby noticed a twitch in Prissy's eye followed by a quick wipe of the hand. She tried to suppress a smirk.

The momentary "I've got something in my eye" move was something they used to use at parties to signal that they needed to be extracted from a conversation - but they hadn't done that in years.

A second or two passed as the oblivious men kept talking about birds and cameras, but then Anders seemed to notice something amiss and put an arm around Prissy's shoulder. "You feeling all right?"

Prissy forced a fake sniffle and waved him off.

"Just allergies, babe - but if you two are going to talk puffins, I'm going to show Toby what we're doing with the study." She gave him another quick kiss on the cheek and headed to the home office in the back of the apartment.

Toby knew from experience that in this house, Prissy had the "cave." The bedroom, like everything else, was Anders' decorating. The study, on the other hand, was Prissy's inner sanctum. It had a huge black desk, a plush leather office chair, and a top-end scanner/photocopier. There was also a massive wall-mounted computer screen, used for journalism but also for obsessive online gaming. It looked like both had been going full steam.

There were at least five file folders lying open on the normally immaculate desk, all displaying private-investigation photos of assorted political types. The screen was displaying what looked like a massacre in *Tyraxus Plague*. Toby knew just enough about that game to know that Prissy had custom-designed a scenario that allowed her to slash infinite low-powered enemies with no resistance.

Nothing said "stress" like a steaming pile of freshly killed monsters.

Toby almost slammed the door. "Okay, you're a mess and you're slaughtering innocent goblins - what's up?"

Prissy threw herself into the chair and switched off the screen with a remote. “Those are slime-orcs. Goblins are shorter and they throw bombs at you.”

Toby started cleaning up the folders. “Not an answer.”

She gathered the files, mostly with names she didn’t recognize, and opened the closet in the back of the room. Inside was a large file cabinet whose contents were known only to Prissy and Toby - maybe Anders, but Toby doubted it.

Toby started replacing the loose files in their slots, copiously alphabetized by the target’s last name. This was what had become of their little intern-stalking experiment – and just looking at it made Toby feel ill. She’d bowed out of the project years ago, but Prissy had taken the database offline and continued feeding it until it took up half her closet.

After a few seconds of dead silence, Toby forced the conversation back to life. “You going to start spilling?” She asked, “You’re the one that called me in here, and you know I hate these files. Otherwise, I’m going back out for another mimosa – or three.”

Prissy exhaled, pulling her knees to her chest. “I got a really, really important story.”

“I see that,” Toby snipped, “and I hate talking about your stories almost as much as I hate your files, so you’re dragging me into this why?”

“Oh, come on,” Prissy said, gesturing at the files. “You helped build this.”

“Yup.” Toby focused on the filing so she didn’t have to look at Prissy. “And I got out when it got weird. So, start talking before I remember where I put my ethics.”

Prissy swiveled her chair toward the screen and turned it back on, toggling away from the slime-orcs to reveal a half-written article and a trove of scans. “I’ve got everything I need to kill this new fiber optic expansion bill, except one last bit. Apparently, there’s a recording of Congressman Roland demanding cash from streaming platforms to add a few amendments to bill.”

Toby let out a breath and rolled her eyes. “Wonders never cease. So, you blow the lid off, big story, what’s the problem?”

“His chief of staff has the video,” Prissy deadpanned, “He likes certain types of favors – from women.”

Heat rushed to Toby’s face as the memories started flooding back. Something inside her wanted to run for the door but she kept her eyes on Prissy. “Absolutely not,” she said firmly, “Priss, there is not a day that goes by that I don’t think about the Castaneda story. You do not want to do that to yourself.”

Prissy rolled her eyes hard as she swiveled back toward Toby. “I wasn’t talking about me. But he did ask me who that Nordic girl he keeps seeing on TV is.”

Toby’s jaw fell open. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Toby,” Prissy stared over her glasses, “when have I ever kidded *anyone*?”

Toby put a hand to her forehead, feeling her breathing start to speed. “Gudrun? Priss, she’s practically your sister-in-law!”

“Quiet!” Prissy shushed, “Anders might hear.”

“That’s the point!” Toby almost screamed before modulating her voice down, “It’s not worth it, and you have people that are more important now.”

Prissy shook her head. “Nothing’s more important. I’m mad at myself for even thinking about the consequences with Anders. Not that he’ll ever find out.”

“What the hell are you even talking about?” Toby blurted, “You are not *pimping out* Anders’ little sister!”

“You’re forgetting she’s *my* reporter,” Prissy said.

“That makes it worse!” Toby said, “Do you hear yourself? Have you even talked to her about this? She’d never go for it.”

“I don’t need to justify myself to you!” Prissy exploded. “I called you in here because I needed a hug and thought you’d understand.”

“Understand?” Toby fired back. “What am I supposed to understand?”

“You’ve been there.” Prissy said, “You made the call, it benefitted you, it benefitted the world. It hurt but it was the right thing to do.”

Toby took a step forward, “Priss, I would do anything – *anything* – to take that back. Including putting that corrupt ape Castaneda back in the Senate.” Then something else hit her. “Also, Congressman Roland is exactly the type of arch-lefty that you love. On what planet do you think taking him out is important?”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Prissy said with an odd smirk. “Roland is the lead sponsor on the fiber-optic expansion bill, and he’s the guy that got the Republicans on-side.”

“So?” Toby protested, “He’s going to make sure the internet doesn’t break. Your point?”

“That *is* the point,” Prissy hissed. “If that bill implodes, we start running out of data capacity in the next five years. Internet prices skyrocket. Streaming content dies. Netflix - gone. Amazon video - dead. RedTV - over.”

“Which is horrible,” Toby said. “We started as a streaming channel, remember?”

Prissy didn’t seem to hear. She was too busy staring into her planned future. “And the new internet-based channels? BuzzNews. America Now.” She snapped her fingers, “Poof. Gone.” She started coming out of her reverie, refocusing on Toby. “You know who that leaves? Legacy Media. Cable News. Three networks, just like the old days. We’d have enough market-share to set the entire national agenda, Toby. We could be gods.”

Toby felt goosebumps prickling down her arms, and she walked all the way over to Prissy’s desk. “Priss,” she said, “That’s terrifying. You’re talking about killing an entire industry just for your own power. Nobody should want that.” Toby threw the last of the folders she was holding down on the desk and planned to storm out of the room. Then she saw the name on one of the files.

“BRYNDISDOTTIR, GUDRUN”

The ice in Toby’s veins turned to fire as she picked the folder back up and waved it in Prissy’s face. “You have a *file* on Gudrun?”

Toby opened the folder. It was all photos. Gudrun buying drugs in Iceland. Gudrun doing cocaine at a house party. Gudrun’s work visa.

Prissy closed her eyes and clenched her fists. “I was hoping you wouldn’t see that. I can’t risk her refusing the job, and I can’t risk her telling Anders.”

“You’re *blackmailing* her?!” Toby shouted. “Are you out of your mind?” Toby threw the file back on the desk but that only focused her on the one next to it.

RYLANDER, MADISON

Toby grabbed it. “This girl just started last week. Priss!”

“I didn’t have input on her hire,” Prissy said coldly, “she’s a Brinkman special and she doesn’t have the editorial discretion to work in my department.”

Toby felt her pulse thudding through her head. “So, you opened a file on her? How many of our reporters do you have files on?”

Prissy just stared, and Toby tried to keep her breathing under control.

“Priss, how many?” Toby pointed to the closet and gritted her teeth. “If I open that cabinet, am I going to find a file on myself?”

That finally got to Prissy, who swiped the folder out of Toby’s hands. “Of course not. You’re my best friend.”

Toby stared back at her, feeling her stomach start to wretch. Then she looked at the floor, thinking long and hard about the words she felt coming. Then they came out like vomit.

“Priss, I’m not your best friend. I’m not your friend at all.”

She turned and marched to the door of the study, stopping for a second with her hand on the doorknob. Two things struck her in that moment. First, Prissy wasn't trying to stop her. Not even a peep.

Second, whoever this Madison Rylander girl was, Toby was about to become her new best friend.

Toby grabbed the doorknob and shoved it open. "Darius, we're going. Now!"