

Chapter Sixteen, Part One
“Cut to Black”

Eleven Years Earlier

ARCHIVED EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE – HULEHAN CRISIS SOLUTIONS – 12/20/2027

FROM: Y_Noor_HR@WWN.com

CC: P_Davis@WWN.com

TO: Christobal.Ortega@hulehan-crisis.com

SUBJECT: UNREDACTED TRANSCRIPT – 4/8/202

Chris,

Please find the requested unredacted transcript below, detailing the end of the segment in question. As requested, this includes all crosstalk before the camera cut off. Please let me know if we can be of further assistance in wrapping up the internal audit of the Carsten incident by end-of-year. We are anxious to get this formality off our plates.

Cheers,
Yasmina Noor
Human Resources Associate, WWN

TRANSCRIPT: WWN LIVE WITH TOBY CARSTEN – 4/8/2027
NOT FOR PUBLIC RELEASE

TOBY CARSTEN: Welcome back to WWN Live. In our top story today, streaming giant Netflix announced that it will once again lower subscription prices in an effort to keep its service afloat. This news comes as over a million Americans have switched to data-limited internet plans in the first half of the year. Analysts say that with the global fiber-

optic network stretched to its limits, the cost of data will continue to rise, driving more consumers away from video-capable internet plans. Netflix's latest rate cut has fanned rumors that the beleaguered streaming giant will seek a merger with the newly re-invigorated video rental service RedBox, which announced last week that it will debut a new thumb-drive-based video-download kiosk service. This new service, tentatively dubbed 'RACPod' will roll out video kiosks to national grocery chains starting this October.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER FROM OFF CAMERA: Cut the feed! Cut it now!

CARSTEN: With more on these developments we turn to WWN tech correspondent—”

SECOND UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Dude! She's on-air!

FIRST UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Commercials! Now, dammit!

(COMMERCIAL BREAK BEGINS)

FROM: Christobal.Ortega@hulehan-crisis.com

TO: Y_Noor_HR@WWN.com

SUBJECT: Re: UNREDACTED TRANSCRIPT – 4/8/2027

Yasmina,

Thank you for including the transcript. However, the entire point of the request was to identify the two “unknown voices,” who are obviously WWN employees. Would you be able to provide their names? Obviously, they'd be quite integral to our examination of this incident, and they should be easy to identify. Also, please be aware that copying WWN management on emails to our audit team is neither necessary nor advised – especially when the management copied are themselves subjects of our investigation.

Regards,
Chris Ortega

Audit Lead
Hulehan Crisis Solutions

FROM: Y_Noor_HR@WWN.com

TO: Christobal.Ortega@hulehan-crisis.com

CC: P_Davis@WWN.com

SUBJECT: Re: UNREDACTED TRANSCRIPT – 4/8/2027

Chris,

After a thorough investigation, we've been unable to identify either of the voices in question.

Also, your final report is due before the New Year. Our internal review finds that there is no valid reason to suspect any foul play in this incident and that you have all needed information. Hence, and further requests or negative reports would be subject to legal action by WWN.

Have a wonderful holiday,
Yasmina

FROM: Christobal.Ortega@hulehan-crisis.com

TO: Y_Noor_HR@WWN.com

CC: P_Davis@WWN.com; HR@WWN.com; P.Hulehan@hulehan-crisis.com;
Escalations@hulehan-crisis.com; Security@hulehan-crisis.com;
General.Counsel@hulehan-crisis.com

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SUBJECT: Re: UNREDACTED TRANSCRIPT – 4/8/2027

Yasmina,

Thanks for your time. We have discussed this matter with WWN’s HR executives and will be moving forward with them directly.

You will be receiving an email from our investigative team shortly as you are now a subject of investigation.

Chris

FROM: P_Davis@WWN.com

TO: Christobal.Ortega@hulehan-crisis.com

CC: Y_Noor_HR@WWN.com;

SUBJECT: Re: UNREDACTED TRANSCRIPT – 4/8/2027

Chris,

Thanks for your overzealous input on this incident. Please allow me to clear up a few things.

(REDACTED)-----

Hopefully this clarifies a few things about the appropriate handling of the April 8 incident. See that the report is finished ASAP.

Best,
Priscilla Davis
Political Editor, WWN

Life Observation #10,945: Friendship does not exist.

Studio B, WWN Headquarters

Thursday, April 8, 2027

1:33 P.M.

“Cut the feed!” Toby heard NaQuan Rodgers below. “Cut it now!” He was loud but echoing through someone else’s mic. What was the head of production doing in her production room?

Toby knew her job in these situations. Stay on script until your actual producer says anything. Look like you’re on TV as long as the *On-Air* light is on. “With more on these developments,” she said in the steadiest tone she could, “We turn to WWN tech correspondent...”

“Dude!” came another voice though the speaker – her own producer, Ty Crianças. “She’s on-air!”

“Commercials!” NaQuan’s voice boomed. “Now, dammit!”

That was when the *On-Air* light cut off, along with all of the other lights in the studio.

“What the hell?” Toby yelled at the suddenly darkened room.

“Dude!” Ty’s voice crackled, “My booth! Don’t you ever put your hands on it again! You hear me?!”

Whatever happened next, Toby heard it as the ear-splitting sound of an active microphone being manhandled in back in the booth. When that stopped, it was clear that NaQuan was wearing the headset, as his voice was clear as a bell.

“Ms. Carsten,” he said, “You should come back to the booth immediately.”

Toby got up from her desk, perplexed. NaQuan, of all people, never called her by her last name. In fact, he usually called her “girl” or “sister.” This had to be bad. Like, terrorist attack bad.

Toby heard every click of her heels as she walked past the cameramen, who seemed to have been struck silent. The control room, however, was the opposite of silence.

As soon as she opened the sound-proof door, she caught Ty mid-tirade. “You cut her mid-sentence, dude, have some frikkin’ respect!”

NaQuan let out a heavy breath and used the deep, stern voice that he used on people he wanted to intimidate. “Mr. Crianças, would you mind removing yourself?”

“Seriously?” Ty said. “You’re not even telling me what’s up? Screw this.” He stormed out the out of the room, saying, “Give ‘em hell, Toby,” before slamming the door.

Toby tried to steady herself, fixing her gaze on NaQuan. “So?”

NaQuan pursed his lips and let out a long sigh through his nose, then he grabbed a remote control and tuned one of the monitors to CNN. The banner headline read:

*WWN’S TOBY CARSTEN SENT NUDE PHOTOS TO SOURCE IN BOMBSHELL 2023
STORY*

The voiceover droned. “Recently obtained photos show Ms. Carsten in various states of undress sent to political operative Marcus Jean-Francois, who at the time was a key associate of former California Senator Luis Castaneda. Castaneda was implicated in a corruption scandal by Ms. Carsten two weeks after this photo was taken. CNN experts have examined the metadata on the photos and proven them to have been taken in 2019 and not altered. WWN sources are not commenting on whether this potentially major breach of journalistic ethics will impact Carsten’s-”

NaQuan turned off the TV, and both of them stared in stunned silence. Toby felt her stomach start to quiver involuntarily, and within a few seconds the shivers were working their way up her neck.

“Brinkman’s on his way down.” NaQuan said, his voice turning soft, “I’m sorry I barged in like that, and I don’t know what to say but...I’m sorry.” He let out a long breath, then looked back up. “The only call I can make here is to give you some space. We’re going to throw Kayla Bracken in the chair and have her B.S. for a while before we say anything and-”

“Fine” Toby barked through her shakes. “Whatever.” At this point, she’d stopped listening. She marched out the studio door headed down the hallway to the old arena.

“Toby!” NaQuan chased after her. “You need to wait for Brinkman!”

“Tell him I’ll be back!” Toby shouted, not looking back. The fear was quickly turning to anger, and she knew exactly where that anger belonged.

She stormed down the hall and into the old arena as her iWatch started buzzing. It was Darius, but Toby just kept marching until the ringing stopped. Then there was another buzz, this one accompanied by a text

Darius: *Saw TV. Are you ok?!! Love you!*

Thank goodness she’d told him about this mess before they got engaged. She was going to need him later – along with a large dram of Scotch. Right now, however she needed something more cathartic. She’d reached the first floor and shoved open the door to Prissy’s glass enclosed office.

“How dare you?!” Toby screamed – hoping the rest of the newsroom could hear before the door closed behind her.

Prissy stared at her and blinked. “Ms. Carsten,” she said with a terse calm, “I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m not an idiot, Priss!” Toby yelled. “I only know one person with a blackmail database!”

Prissy just blinked, as if to say *Who? Me?*

Toby kept rolling, now a hundred percent sure what had happened. “You told me to my *face* I wasn’t in your files! And you hacked my phone?!”

Prissy gave Toby type of eye-roll that a bored parent gives a child throwing a tantrum. “Don’t be silly,” she deadpanned. “I wouldn’t know how to hack a phone if I tried.”

She opened a desk drawer and removed a thin file, placing it gingerly on the desk. The tab was emblazoned with crisp block printed letters.

CARSTEN, TOBAYA.

“I said you wouldn’t find yourself in the file cabinet.” Prissy opened the folder as Toby looked on in horror, removing a tiny black chip and holding it up to the light. “Which is true, I keep this in my safe. And I didn’t hack a thing. If you’re trying to make photos disappear, destroy your phone’s SIM card before you throw it in the trash.”

“You planned this?” Toby said as the shivers started again. “The whole time, you planned this?”

“Of course not.” Prissy snipped. “You’re my friend.”

“Friend?” Toby almost choked on the word. “You call this being friends?”

“Toby,” Prissy’s tone lightened. “I wanted you to be editor-in-chief someday. We could have changed the world together, and I would have been proud to work under you, but you’re a generational talent. Someone needed to have a way of stopping you in case you became a danger to society.”

Toby’s jaw dropped. “Danger to society? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Society needs a consistent ethical conscience,” Prissy said, drumming her nails on the desk, “To be that voice, WWN needs to keep data prices high. I told you that, and you responded with a wave of these save-the-internet tech stories. I love you, Toby, but this was the only compassionate option.”

“This is insane,” Toby fired back. “I’m telling Brinkman.”

“No, you won’t.” Prissy said calmly. “It wouldn’t help you anyway.”

Toby turned back, fuming, “Like hell I won’t! You want to talk about who’s a danger to society? How about the crazy lady blackmailing reporters into strangling the freaking internet!”

Prissy slid the SIM cards silently back in the folder. “You’re not going to tell Brinkman because you know there’s more on this SIM card. I only leaked photos.”

Toby scowled. “You wouldn’t.”

“Of course, I would,” Prissy said without any emotion, “but I don’t want to, so don’t make me. I’d know Brinkman’s like a dad to you and I don’t want him to see the videos”

“Okay, shut up!” Toby hollered. “What is it that you actually want here?”

“Nothing.” Prissy got up from her desk and walked so close that Toby could feel her breath on her face. “Nothing on TV. Nothing in print. Nothing with your name on it that comes anywhere close to anything I’m doing, and nothing within 500 miles of Washington or New York.”

Toby’s lips curled in disgust. “You want me to disappear.”

“No,” Prissy hissed. “I just want you to stop hurting people. If you don’t want to be part of the future, that’s your problem, but I won’t let you drag anyone else down with you.” She returned to her chair. “I’ll expect your resignation within twenty-four hours, and because you’re my friend, I won’t interfere with whatever you do next. I want you to be happy. healthy and successful – as long as you’re not harming yourself or others.”

Toby felt her face heating up as her thoughts stared spilling over – most of which involved the desire to grab Prissy’s tiny neck and squeeze until her eyes popped out.

The current mess could probably be weathered. Old photos were photos, and plenty of people had come back from worse, but if any of the *videos* on that phone were broadcast on TV, the internet would go nuts.

She turned to go, mind whirling with ramifications and eventualities. There was not an easy way out of this, and no plan – not yet at least. Someday, this was going to come back on Prissy’s head, but all that Toby could do today was uselessly fire the one arrow she had left.

“I’ll say hi to Anders and Gudrun for you,” she spat, years of friendship calcifying into raw hate. “I’m sure they’re wondering what you’re up to.”

Prissy’s eyes dropped for two seconds, but then refocused. “Twenty-four hours, Toby.”