

## Chapter Sixteen, Part Two

### “Mirror, Mirror”

**Wednesday, March 31, 2038**

**One Day Since Interview**

**7:55 A.M.**

Sinéad was pacing in front of an iron gate with a thumbprint scanner. The gate was itself wedged between an unmarked garage door and an apartment building about ten blocks from WWN Tower. The unmarked back entrance to the Center for the American Dream, DC’s most conservative public policy research institute. She’d probably walked by this door a million times without thinking it was anything important – although, come to think of it, she’d seen it in some of Prissy’s private investigator photos.

“No wonder she didn’t want to meet at WWN,” Sinéad muttered to herself, “National security professional. C.A.D. My birth mother’s a trigger-happy warmonger. Hey, mom, wanna do some bonding and drone some Muslims?”

Maybe this explained why Sinéad hated tacos so much.

7:59, and the door buzzed open. A small, besuited woman in her late forties swung open the door. “You Sinéad?” she asked, with a hint of a Cuban accent.

Sinéad nodded as brightly as she could. This woman clearly wasn’t her mother – in addition to being Hispanic, Sinéad towered over her. She wasn’t sure how she felt about having a mother who dispatched a receptionist to meet her.

“Come on in,” the woman said, offering a firm handshake, “I’m Maria-Andrea, by the way.”

Sinéad took the shake and followed Maria-Andrea through a concrete courtyard and into the back of an office building. “Your mom and I go way back,” Maria-Andrea narrated. “I can tell you some stories, trust me.”

“Oh,” Sinéad said “I’d love to hear some.”

Or maybe she wouldn't, but either way, at this point Sinéad was in just-go-with-it mode and hoping to get out alive.

“Don't worry, you'll hear 'em,” Maria-Andrea said. “Here's the staff lounge, espresso machine's over there, make yourself comfortable and I'll go see if I can grab her.” She turned to go, then stopped and pulled a business card out of her pocket, “Oh, and if she doesn't tell you about what she did in Venezuela, just call me.” She handed over a business card:

**Maria-Andrea Quiroga-Detweiller, Ph.D.**  
**Director, Rubio Center for Latin America**  
**Center for the American Dream**

So, not a receptionist.

Sinéad stared at the card for a few seconds, then walked over to the complicated-looking espresso dispenser and debated how hard it would be to get a decaf. Then there was a sound of clicking heels on the tile behind her, and a disturbingly familiar voice. “I wouldn't mess with that thing.”

Sinéad turned, expecting to see an unfamiliar-yet-jarringly-similar face. Instead, she saw S. Flannery MacClennan.

*Skylar*. Flannery. MacClennan.

It was one of those moments where time slowed down, which was weird considering that Sinéad wasn't on study drugs. Was this even possible? She'd met the woman a million times – usually in situations where she'd had to bluntly tell Flannery that “Ms. Davis wasn't interested in whatever neoliberal scare you're pushing this week.”

Thinking about it, it did add up in a weird way. Flannery was tall, about as pale as they came, and had a shockingly bright head of red hair. How the hell had Sinéad never figured that out?

“Wait,” Sinéad stuttered, “No... you can't ... you work at the Samantha Power Center. You're...you're a Democrat, right?”

Flannery laughed gingerly. “Maria-Andrea and I have a Women’s Rights working group on Wednesday mornings – yay bipartisanship. Wanna have a seat?”

They took uncomfortable chairs at a white plastic table, and Sinéad finally decided it was safe to exhale. “Nice location. For a second, you had me visualizing mother-daughter gun-range sessions.”

Flannery raised her eyebrows and seemed to stifle a laugh. “Actually, I go shooting twice a month if you ever want to come.”

The silence that followed was somewhere beyond awkward and just shy of *get-me-out-of-here-now*.

Sinéad was the first to attempt speech. “So, um, my mom, I mean-”

“No, it’s okay.” Flannery said. “Tiff’s your mom. I’m...I’m not sure what I am.”

Sinéad took another deep breath, “Well she gave me some details, but...I mean...I have too many questions to pick one.”

“Then I’ll start,” Flannery said, “I had an affair with my thesis supervisor in grad school. He figured out that I was young and impressionable and wasn’t used to getting a lot of praise. That said, I was an eager and willing participant in that game, so it’s not something I’m proud of. I found out later that there were at least three other girls like me. He wanted me to get rid of it...of you, and he threatened to get me thrown out the grad program if I didn’t.” Flannery stopped, taking in a long breath. “His name was Magnus Acklund, he was about thirty years older than me, and he died of a heart attack ten years ago. Any questions so far?”

Sinéad was blinking in disbelief, but she shook her head “no.” Flannery gave a nod and continued, as if this she’d rehearsed this a thousand times – which, if she was anything like Sinéad, she had.

“The only people who wanted you gone more than Magnus were my parents, who threatened to cut off my funding. They were both professors at Rutgers-Camden in New Jersey, and they were...are very angry at life. They wanted the validation of raising a big-time academic, and they were already mad that I wasn’t on the Ph.D. track. They were very, very blunt that they didn’t want me wasting myself on

single motherhood. I think it was my mom who told me I didn't have the right to flush her work down the toilet in a fit of Victorian emotionalism – her work, not mine. They're both in a nursing home in Trenton and we are barely on speaking terms. I finally quit valuing their opinion the day my third book, which my dad called vapid and unserious, got shortlisted for a Pulitzer."

Sinéad bit the inside of her lip before speaking. "Sounds like a barrel of fun."

Flannery exhaled. "You have no idea. And frankly, I'm glad you don't. Not sure I'm glad about much else, but I'm glad you didn't have to deal with them."

This was the point where Sinéad found her words again, asking the only question she really wanted an answer to. "So, why?" She tried to elaborate. "What's the point? Why am I even here? I mean, thank you, I guess, but everyone would've supported you if you just moved on. That's what I would have done."

Flannery rubbed her head with her hand. "Is it?"

"Well, yeah, I mean, you're pro-choice. I'm pro-choice. I mean—"

"That word again," Flannery said flatly. "The etymology implies choosing between multiple valid options. I *chose* this one."

"Sorry, I just—"

Flannery finally made direct eye-contact, cutting Sinéad off with her legendary stare. "Are we really both so in our heads that the whole birth mother reunion thing is going down a political rat-hole?"

If that look worked on terrorists, Sinéad didn't have a chance. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Of course, you didn't. You've never had to think about it. I wanted it that way."

"Never had to think about it?" Sinéad shot back. She'd been ready for a lot of things to bubble up inside her, but aggression wasn't one of them. "I thought about it every day in high school. I can see the not going through with it and I can see the keeping the kid, but why go through with it and then dump me? I mean, I

always figured it was a combination of fundamentalism and lack of money, but you *had* the money.”

“Not then, I didn’t,” Flannery said. “I had an angry thesis supervisor trying to blackmail me into an abortion, angry parents making financial threats, and I had nothing. I wasn’t S. Flannery McClennan then. I was just a scared kid with a lot of debt, a lot of guilt, and a wrong-headed belief that I’d be out on the streets if I’d kept you. Trust me, the worst part was having my therapist tell me I probably would have been financially fine if I’d told all of them to chuck it – but that was ten years later when therapy was something I could *afford*.”

Sinéad pursed her lips hard. The old story, the one she’d made up about the rednecks on prom night, had been easier to swallow. It made sense. This had so many layers, and that was before she got to the part about having met this woman before.

She started tracing figure eights with her finger on the table. “In middle school, I used to wonder what it would have been like my parents had kept me. And it usually scared me enough that I was grateful for where I ended up. It’s just going to take a little bit to digest that I could have been S. Flannery McClennan’s globetrotting kid.”

“Sinéad,” Flannery folded her hands on the table and gave Sinéad the look again - dead in the eye this time. “I need you to hear this. S. Flannery McClennan doesn’t exist without what happened. You know what I wondered all those years? What could I have been as Skyler F. McClennan, a low-paid government intelligence grunt who spent her entire boring, middle-class life shuttling her daughter back and forth to ballet, or sports, or prom? Could I not have been the girl who started going by her middle name and ran off to do Ph.D. research in Syria just to get the hell away from her mistakes? S. Flannery MacClennan is an *act*, Sinéad, and she spent every night wondering why she was hitting the bars with Toby Carsten when she should have been picking you up from soccer practice.”

Sinéad blinked. She’d told herself that she wasn’t going to cry, but she hadn’t quite expected emotional overload. She grimaced hard and re-focused on something she could process. Something that suddenly seemed less heavy.

“So, um, my boss hates your guts.”

Flannery rolled her eyes, “Prissy hates everyone, and last I checked, you hated my guts until about five minutes ago.”

“Hate you?” Sinéad caught herself before matching the eye-roll. “Are you kidding? When I was in high school, I’d stay up at night reading your books...which, now that I think about it-”

“-were all signed first editions with glossy autographed headshots?” Flannery finished the sentence with a wink.

“Touché,” Sinéad conceded, “but seriously, the work face is my job. I guess acting runs in the family.”

That finally made Flannery lean back and laugh. “In that case, you’ve done me proud. I cried a few times after you dressed me down.”

Sinéad felt herself sober, but also something about this was disastrously funny. “I am so, so sorry, I-”

Flannery just kept laughing. “No seriously, looking back on it, it’s kind of Shakespearean. One of these days I was afraid she was going to have you shoot me.”

Apparently, gallows humor also ran in the blood.

“I wouldn’t put it past her,” Sinéad said before bursting out in laughter herself.

They both took a solid thirty seconds to stop laughing, but once that stopped, Sinéad realized something. She’d never seen the inside of Prissy’s file on Flannery. It existed. She’d seen it. It was fat.

Did Prissy know? Was this what the listening device was about?

She shook her head, trying not to think about it, but it wouldn’t go away. “So, what do I do now?” she blurted.

Flannery cocked her head. “How do you mean?”

“My boss and my birth mother are practically at war on a day-to-day basis. How do I handle that?”

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**2:48 P.M.**

If Nina signed one more autograph, her fingers were going to fall off. She'd been recognized at least fifteen times since she and Aiden got off the plane, and she'd resorted to an emergency purchase of a Washington Redtails cap from one of the tourist shops at Obama-Reagan Airport. It offended every neuron in her Packers-fan brain, but at least it was camouflage.

Judging from the walk across the pedestrian bridge to the metro station, the hat worked. Without the turquoise streak in her hair, she wasn't "NINA CONSTANTINOS" anymore. Never mind that she suddenly felt like "NINA CONSTANTINOS" was an entirely different person from Nina Constantinos.

That was going to take some time to process, but right now she was content to let Aiden drag her by the arm as she followed along in a daze. Was this even the same city she'd left?

On the metro platform, a Brill-a-pella girl group from American University was busking for donations - belting out Meghan Trainor's classic hit *Dear Future Husband*. A poster-board sign read, "Help Us Get Tickets to Regionals!"

But it wasn't the sign, or the matching poodle skirts, or the faux-vintage AU sweaters that caught Nina's eye. It was the lead singer. She looked familiar, and Nina could tell that she was staring back at her. Something about that bouncy blonde ponytail.

*Oh well, she thought as a train pulled in, it'll come to me.*

As the train started slowing down, though, Nina noticed that the music had stopped.

Then she heard a voice, "Excuse me, Ma'am?"

Nina looked up to see the lead singer standing right beside her - holding an iPad with cutout pictures of various WWN personalities taped to the back. A tiny, recently-added Nina was front and center, taped over half of Emma Poissonier.

This kid was an expert.

“I’m sorry, but are you Nina Constantinos?” The blonde asked sheepishly.

Aiden started to say, “no autographs,” but Nina stopped him and took off the hat. “You got me.”

The girl hesitated. “This might sound silly, but you don’t remember running into me on the metro at NoMa a few months ago, do you? Like, literally running into me. I fell over and dropped my books.”

The memory clicked in Nina’s brain and she felt herself smile involuntarily. “Oh my gosh, yes! I knew you looked familiar. Sorry for being a klutz, that was my first day at WWN!”

The girl sighed in relief. “Oh good, then I’m not crazy. I saw you covering the Conclave and it was total *déjà vu*.” She stuck out her hand, “Sophie, Sophie Lee. I’m studying journalism at American, and I’m the news editor for the college paper.”

Nina returned the handshake, noticing that her train had shut the doors and pulled out without her. “Well, Sophie Lee. Keep up those studies and maybe we’ll be working together someday.”

Now *that* felt good to say. She had a *superfan*.

Sophie giggled. “Maybe. That’d be swell.”

Then the Brill-a-pella girls started doo-wopping their next number.

“Drat, I gotta sing.” Sophie rushed back to the group, “Catch you on the flip side!”



Nina and Aiden turned back to the tracks as a new train pulled in, stepping inside just as Sophie launched into first verse of *One Fine Day* by the Chiffons.

The doors snapped shut, and Nina grinned with satisfaction. She was an iPad decoration!

The car was almost empty, and it seemed like she'd finally gotten away from all her new fans. She sank into a red vinyl seat and closed her eyes - laying her head against Aiden almost without thinking. If this was what being a star felt like, she could totally get used to it.

Then a voice rang through the car. "Nina Constantinos?"

Nina's eyes snapped open. Turning in the direction of the noise, her blurred vision gradually focused on a thirty-something woman sitting across the aisle. She had an expensive-looking haircut that came to sharp points below her ears - and she wore a black, sleeveless dress. Nina noticed a tiny Orthodox icon hanging around her neck, not unlike the one Kayleigh always wore, and an Arabic tattoo on her collarbone.

Aiden sat up straighter, "I'm sorry ma'am, no autographs right now."

The woman let out smug sniff, got up from her seat, and moved toward them. Nina caught a whiff of high-end perfume. People who smelled like that didn't ask for autographs, they signed them.

"Ms. Constantinos, my name is Rafka Abad, and I'm here on behalf of my employer."

Aiden stood up to meet her, "And you found us how?"

Abad, unfazed, pulled a glossy black card out of her handbag and handed it to Nina as if Aiden didn't exist. It was made of thick plastic and had Abad's name and phone-number in fine white letters - but no address. It also had no email and no job title. There was embossed gray print across the top of the card that read "*SilverOptic Solutions.*"

“We’re a boutique public relations firm out of Silicon Valley. We specialize in legacy tech, so we have a very specific interest in the politics of fiber-optic cable. We’re seeing signs we like, so the time is right for us to move East.”

Nina looked at the card nervously, then back at Abad. Who the heck was this lady, and how the hell had she found Nina on a moving train? Aiden looked like he was starting to twitch, but Nina put a hand on his wrist. She wanted info.

“So, Ms. Abad, what is it that you want from me?”

“Nothing.” Abad gave smile that almost convinced Nina she had fangs. “You’re not on our targeted media list at all, and we will never call you.” The train pulled into the next stop, and she got up to leave. “My CEO merely told me to give you that card and tell you that you’ll know when you need us.”

“I don’t think she’s going to be needing you for much,” Aiden barked, losing his hold on his tongue.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Abad cast a side-long glance at Nina as train settled down onto the track. “We have more intersections than you think.”

The doors whooshed open, and Abad stepped out, but then she pointed back at Nina.

“It was important that you were given that *exact* card.” Then the doors flashed shut, and the vehicle re-levitated.

The train started moving, and Nina watched as Rafka Abad receded out of view.

“What the hell?” Aiden huffed.

“I know, right,” Nina said, staring down at the card and running her thumb over the embossed letters. Her index finger stopped sliding on the back of the card. Something there was waxy and oily.

Nina flipped the card over and stared. She’d just smudged the kiss-print of a woman’s lips - in metallic silver lipstick.