

Chapter Sixteen, Part Three “Equal and Opposite Reaction”

Thursday, April 1, 2038
Two Days Since Interview
9:10 A.M.

Nina had been summoned to the big office first thing in the morning, with a one sentence email from Priscilla herself. There was no hint of what was going on, no congratulations on the interview’s ratings, nothing. Nina had been wondering since she left Rome whether going off script would be enough to get her fired, and the email seemed to confirm it. Nina could feel her palms sweating as she pushed the door open and found...nothing?

There was no polished steel box of tissues.

There was no incessant tapping of Sinéad’s pen on the waiting room desk.

In fact, there was no Sinéad. Her desk had a neatly printed sign reading “On break.” Nina chuckled and resisted the temptation to touch the dog-eared copy of *A Game of Thrones* – just because she could – and noted that the bookmark was getting close to the end.

The door to Priscilla’s back office was swinging open, and the drone of the midday news was streaming out from the normally muted TV.

It was bright and airy and felt like...a normal office?

No, that couldn’t have been right. This place was a tightly-wound, custom-designed intimidation chamber.

Or was it?

“Oh, Nina, hey.” Priscilla was standing in the door of her office, leaning against the doorframe in a shaft of morning sunlight. Her blazer was off, her sleeves rolled up, and her hair pulled into a loose bun held together with a pencil. She wasn’t smiling, but she didn’t look like she wanted to kill anything either. “Door’s open,” she said, disappearing into the back room, “come on in.”

Nina resisted the urge to ask this person who she was and what she’d done with Priscilla Davis, but instead she followed, her nerves still making her back straight as a board.

Priscilla took her usual spot behind the desk - which for once had a scattering of papers and tablets - and waved at a chair. Nina promptly sat.

Priscilla let out a somewhat dark snicker, still not smiling. “You should really see how spooked you look right now. It’s hilarious.”

“Sorry,” Nina realized she was gripping the arm of the chair and forced herself to let go, “I –”

“Don’t apologize.” Prissy held up a hand, a bit of her normal ceremony creeping into the gesture. “We cultivate a certain atmosphere in here for the untested. That term clearly no longer describes you.”

“I…” Nina didn’t quite find the words she wanted, but she felt her whole body relax. “You’re telling me I can stay?”

Priscilla almost snorted with sarcasm. “Stay? Of course you can stay. You just ran our highest rated special in ten years.” She started massaging her temple, just like she had right before she’d assaulted Nina a few weeks earlier, but this was different. Tired.

“Look,” Priscilla continued. “It is absolutely no secret that you and I have major disagreements on both the style and substance of journalistic craft. That said, you’re incredibly good at what you do. I respect that and want more of it on my network. You’re getting a pay raise, a promotion to Senior Correspondent, and your own office. Congratulations.”

Nina felt her mouth fall open and her hands prickle with numbness. She tried to form words. “You’re giving me a promotion? Thanks! I mean. It’s an honor.”

Priscilla snorted again. “It’s a capitulation. You defied all of my orders as the most junior reporter on our staff, and you succeeded. You won. I don’t kill my golden geese.”

Nina barely heard the word though the sound or her heartbeat in her skull. She *hated* Priscilla but this felt amazing, and words kept bubbling out. “Thanks so much. I won’t let you down.”

“Stop,” Priscilla held the hand up again. “This does not make us friends, nor does it remove my editorial control. However, it does mean that we need a productive and respectful working relationship. Hence why you are in here *now*.”

Nina sat up a little straighter in her chair, trying to refocus. “Yes, ma’am.”

Priscilla rolled her eyes. “You hate calling me ma’am. It’s Priss. I save ‘Prissy’ for people who’ve known me a lot longer than you. Also, you’re now one of about three people who are allowed to see me in ‘work mode.’” She gestured to the messy desk and relaxed hairstyle. “I don’t like showing the world my imperfections, but you seem to think that anyone who doesn’t trumpet their vulnerabilities is a monster. So, this is the real me. Satisfied?”

Nina found herself tensing her fist and loosened it again, suddenly conscious of how high the air conditioning was turned up. “Yes ma’am – I mean Priss – I mean –”

“Good,” Priscilla cut her off. “Now. Rules. I control the overall political tenor of this network. Yes?”

Nina nodded, deciding against further attempts at speech.

“You, on the other hand,” Priscilla continued, “have a talent for piercing-yet-empathetic questions, a desire for the public to see the real people behind the façade of power. The rub comes when you counterprogram our attempt to disseminate the truth to the public on the issues that matter to them. So,” she pulled a binder full of paper out from under the table, “You’ll

excuse my taste for old-school-filing, but I think you'll like what's in here. These are the human stories that we really want to tell in interviews – open it.” She shoved the book across the table.

Nina opened the first page and read the name, “Kensie vander Heusen.”

“Former Prime Minister of Canada,” Prissy said, “newly minted Secretary General of NATO. Next you'll find Tanya Zherdeva, the new UN ambassador from Nakhchivan, etc. It's a who's who of people the world needs to know better – and people who you and I will largely agree on. On top of that, you're in charge of covering any major trips by the Pope, and I want to try you out on international human rights protests. However, you stay far, far away from domestic politics of all sorts. Other than your Vatican friend, we are not humanizing people who do harm to the populace. Am I clear?”

Nina felt her fists clenching again, and this time not from nerves. She should have expected there to be catch. She let out a long breath and responded with a clipped, “Yes. I understand.”

Priscilla rolled her shoulders, causing an audible pop. “Good,” she said, “And don't look so glum. You just got shifted to an area where you'll have minimal oversight, meaty stories, and a lot of exposure. I think this is going to work out just fine for both of us.”

Nina nodded and tried to look for something other than the giant block of topics she was now banned from. “It is a pretty good assignment.”

“It's the best assignment at this entire network,” Priscilla said. “Now one more thing.” She picked up a folder off her keyboard. “You also need to know I have this.”

She laid the folder on the desk and used one finger to slide it across. Something in the pit of Nina's stomach started to sink as she gingerly picked it up and opened it, then she almost dropped it in revulsion. She'd seen the face staring daggers back at her from a photo. She'd seen the black curls a million times, but never that dead-eyed, determined stare. Nina's eye's scrolled down the page.

TOP SECRET

SPECIAL COMPARTMENTED INFORMATION

Agent Diana Rodanthi Constantinos

Division: Special Project “Teach for Peace”

Public Alias: Diane Mantegna

Public Occupation: ESL Instructor, Preparatory Academy Nie Li

Current Location: Urumqi, Xinjiang, China.

Assignment: Form strong relationships with children of local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials in orbit of Xinjiang governor Guo Kuo-Shi. If possible, secure private tutoring assignments in anticipation that Guo will become a lead player in Beijing following retirement of current CCP leadership.

Nina stayed frozen in place. Diana was a poor expat English teacher. She lived in Guangzhou. She sent postcards. She'd given up on Criminal Justice years ago, just to get somewhere where her family couldn't reach her. She was irresponsible, she was spastic, she was unfocused, she was –

Lying.

Diana was lying.

This made sense. The Diana that Nina remembered had never lost focus on anything. The free-spirit expat act had never made sense. Now it did.

Nina's hands started shaking as she closed the folder and set it down.

Priscilla snatched it back as soon as it hit the desk.

“Nina,” she said, “You've earned your place here, and I am giving you more leash than I've given anyone in years. But you need to know that this information,” she planted a finger on the folder, “is not something I'm afraid to put on air. If you interfere in any way with my ability to set the tone for this network, this photo will be on every screen in America within two hours. If you leave WVN for another network, this goes to air. If you express any dissatisfaction with your employment here, and I hear about it, this goes to air. Your sister will be arrested, and I'll leave what happens next to your imagination. I know enough people in China that I'll probably be able to get recordings of what happens to her, and I will personally stand over your shoulder and make you watch. Am I making myself crystal clear, Ms. Constantinos?”

Nina's throat felt dry and her vision started to swim.

“Nina.” Priscilla's voice cut through the fog. Calm and almost soothing, like a mother correcting a child, “Can we move forward or do I need to start prepping the story now? I need you to affirm that you understand what's necessary.”

That snapped the world back into focus. Nina sprung up from her chair and grabbed the binder. “I understand. Thank you for the promotion. May I go?”

Priscilla started buttoning the cuffs of her long sleeves. “You may. Shut the door on your way out. I have a new reporter coming in after you.”

Nina felt her face heating up as she marched toward the door, head starting to spin with the ramifications.

She was almost out when she heard Priscilla's voice again. “Nina.”

“Yes,” she wheeled on her heels, trying not to let out the tear she felt coming.

“You're not better than me.” Priscilla said. “You sold your soul to the business the day you walked in here. Everyone does. But you – I mean, you've set a record for quickest transformation from journalist to,” She gestured to Nina's new dress, “To whatever that is. You'll be happier than a pig in slop with those stories I gave you. And besides, you've got

everything you wanted. Validation, fame, power – and, trust me, you can have sex and luxury too. And the best part is you never have to go back to Wisconsin. Am I right?”

Friday, April 2, 2038
Three Days Since Interview
Arlington, Virginia
7:01 A.M.

The elevator doors clicked open, letting Nina off on the thirteenth floor of a skyscraper in the Rosslyn neighborhood. In front of her was a glass door leading into what appeared to be the only suite on this level. Inside, she found a waiting room with an unoccupied black reception desk and a stainless-steel wall with “SilverOptic” in giant black letters. There was a large Apple wafer-screen on the desk, recently unboxed and still wrapped in plastic, and boxes of unassembled furniture were stacked on the hardwood floor. The entire room smelled of sawdust and Styrofoam and fresh plastic.

The woman from the train – Rafka Abad – walked in carrying a tablet, which she almost dropped. “Well, look who’s here,” she said, lips curling into a sly smile. “And so soon. I must say, your call was amusing given how firmly your boyfriend blew me off.”

“Leave her alone, Rafka,” came a voice from the back, “You blew me off the first time too.”

An elegant woman in a gray dress emerged from behind the steel wall, instantly recognizable yet so different from the television starlet of yesteryear. The wavy, jet-black hair hadn’t faded, but it had developed stark white streaks. Crow’s feet were just starting to form around the eyes that once captivated the nation, but the piercing features were surprisingly untouched by time and unaltered by cosmetic surgery.

Tobaya Carsten seemed to have walked straight out of WWN’s video archives, minus the silver lipstick but otherwise intact.

“So, you’re the girl with the golden microphone,” Toby brushed a lock of hair out of her face as she looked Nina over. “Apologies for not meeting you at the door, I was just finishing with my style consultant. I’d forgotten how different the DC wardrobe is to Silicon Valley. I’d gotten used to sneakers, if you can believe it.”

The very thought of Toby Carsten working in sneakers struck Nina as borderline sacrilege, but then again, Toby Carsten hadn’t existed for twelve years, and Nina had never met her in the first place. Nina had only encountered Toby as a newsroom ghost, the “T-Word” that no one dared speak. The flesh-and-blood woman was something entirely different.

Maybe Nina had expected an older version of herself, or another Madison – a wide-eyed idealist who’d fallen victim to the machine. Instead, she found herself caught in the stare of a woman

who was supremely confident in what she was doing, without even a smidge of self-doubt – simultaneously transfixing and terrifying.

“Oh,” Nina stuttered, “I can wait a few minutes, I mean—”

“No, no,” Toby cut her off. “I have no intention of letting this wait. Besides, I think I need your help with this last piece.”

“Of your wardrobe?”

“You’ll see,” Toby winked. “Rafka, show Gretchen out and tell her she can leave the first two dresses. Put it on my tab. That last one makes me look like I duct-taped myself and I never want to see it again. Nina, would you step into my office?”

Rafka made herself scarce while Nina followed Toby down an unadorned hallway into a corner office. The Potomac River was just out the window, with a stunning view of Georgetown on the other side. Farther away, Nina could see the Washington Monument and, beyond it, the light glinting off WWN Tower.

The office was almost as bare as the rest of the suite - a black desk with a laptop, a floor length-mirror on one wall, and one large framed poster. It was the same *Time* magazine cover that hung in Dan’s office. Younger versions of Toby, Dan, and Prissy smiling out – oblivious to the storm of ambition about to tear them apart. Or were they?

Toby looked out the floor-to-ceiling window and smiled. “So, you really have no clue where you are, do you?”

“I’m sorry?” Nina said, “I’m not sure I follow.”

“No, you wouldn’t. Not in Priss’ shop.” She paused for a second, closing her eyes, “2001 North Lynn Street, Suite 1301. The first tenant here was a start-up online news channel – a risky venture that nobody thought had a chance in hell.”

Then it clicked, and Nina looked around, gobsmacked, “This is the original WWN newsroom?”

“Mm-hmm,” Toby nodded, “This was Jim Brinkman’s office, and the next room over was me and Prissy Davis. That’s where it all blew up, by the way, the Gabbard story.”

“I remember reading about that in college,” Nina gawked, “It was WWN’s first time scooping the major networks.”

Toby raised her eyebrows, “Am I that old?” She exhaled. “Time does fly. That night was important for another reason. That was when Prissy and I came up with the idea that became her files. You’re here, so I assume you saw yours. The whole world saw mine.”

Goosebumps started rising as Nina processed the implications. “The leak of the nude pictures. That was Priscilla.”

Toby nodded. “What’s she got on you, if you don’t mind my asking? You seem too all-American-good-girl for the standard line of inquiry. Granted, you never know.” Her voice took on a hint of menace. “You’re not into BDSM are you? I won’t tell.”

“No!” Nina spat, almost involuntarily. “I—” She stopped herself. “I’m not sure it’s legal for me to tell.”

“Girl.” Toby said flatly. “We’re past that. You’re being blackmailed and you came to me because you don’t think the law can help. Spill.”

“I—”

Nina took a long breath and then exhaled slowly. “I just found out that my sister is a deep-cover CIA agent in China, when I thought she was an English teacher. If Prissy takes that to press, she’ll...she’ll,” Nina couldn’t even bring herself to vocalize what might happen next.

“That’s a good one,” Toby said, “but you clearly haven’t ‘resigned’ yet.” Toby added emphasis with air-quotes.

“She says I can stay,” Nina responded. “I’ve got a direct line to the Vatican, and she wants to give me bigger stories. She just wants me to play nice. Do things her way. Don’t make a fuss.”

“Wow,” Toby said, clearly surprised, “You *do* have her scared. What do you need me for?”

Nina took a breath and steadied herself. “It’s pretty terrifying, and I don’t want this hanging over me.”

The corners of Toby’s lips curled upward. “And what makes you think I can do anything about that?”

Nina felt a twinge of anger starting to rise. Was this woman really trying to toy with her? “You said to call when I needed you,” she said. “Now I need you. So, what do I do?”

Toby’s smile widened. “Nothing. You play along.”

“Play along?” Nina blurted, “That’s—”

“What?” Toby asked. “Counter to your journalistic ethics? Please.” She stepped back behind her desk and started rifling through a drawer, removing what looked like two tubes of lipstick.

“There are no ethics in that game. You want to stick, you be who they want you to be, and you like it”

Nina threw up her hands. “So they keep telling me. If I wanted that advice again, I’d just go to Madison.”

“Not anymore,” Toby was now sizing herself up in the mirror. “You, child, have woken up her inner idealist. Kid always was like that deep down.”

That was when Nina figured it out. Watching Toby examine herself in the mirror, seeing how much pleasure she took in her own image. It was different than anyone else she’d encountered.

“But you’re *not* like that, are you?” Nina ventured. “An idealist.”

“Who, me?” Toby flipped her hair. “Oh, hell no. My mama didn’t raise no fool.” She uncapped a lipstick tube, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m one of the good guys. I’ve spent the last ten years trying to rebuild the internet, but I never had the luxury of wanting to save the world. When you grow up like I did, the goal is to make sure you never have to go back. Now, I told you I needed your advice. I haven’t worn this in a while.”

Toby started applying the lipstick, gray and metallic but dark, not the bright chromes and silvers she used to wear. “They call this shade ‘Gunmetal.’ I think it kind of says ‘the queen is back in town,’ don’t you?”

Nina struggled to close her mouth. Up until now, Nina hadn’t pieced together just who Toby was. Yes, she might have been Priscilla’s first victim, but that was just one piece of the story. This woman has been Priscilla’s best friend, her partner-in-crime, her *mentor*.

“I think,” Nina said, her throat dry, “that you need to tell me what you actually want out of this.”

“You’re blunt,” Toby turned toward her, “I like that. Play along with Prissy’s game for now. I’d like to take action as much as you, but I need someone on the inside and you need to stay above water.”

That wasn’t satisfactory. “I wasn’t asking what you want from *me*,” Nina prodded. “You’re not here to help, and you aren’t here to save the world. So, what is it that you actually *want*, Ms. Carsten?”

“It’s Mrs. Jefferson now.” Toby capped the lipstick. “And now I see how you aced that Pope interview. You’re good.” She kept staring down her image in the mirror. “I want my name back. I want to end Prissy’s little homebrew data crisis. I want internet to blow WVN out of the water. And then, I want to sit back with a watch Prissy squirm when my file on *her* hits CNN.”

Nina shifted on the balls of her feet. “So, this is about—”

“Revenge?” Toby let the word sit in the air for a minute, like poison perfume. Then she laughed. “Child, if it soothes your moral compass, you can think of it as setting the world right. I do.”

Finally, she went back to the desk and picked up a gray paper folder. How had Nina not seen that sitting there?

Toby offered it to Nina. “I know, a little too on-the-nose, right? But Prissy’s right about one thing, you can’t hack paper.”

Nina didn’t want to touch the file, but Toby insisted. “Go on, take it.”

Nina let out a long breath and shot Toby a glare, but she grabbed the folder. It was labelled in crisp, clean penmanship.

DAVIS, PRISCILLA