

Chapter Seventeen, Part One “Revisionist Histories”

Friday, April 9, 2038
Ten Days Since Interview
7:20 P.M.

The first thunderstorm of the season almost drowned out the clanging in the kitchen. Rain beat against the window and thunder shook the house. Nina kept whisking the bowl of soymilk infused with guar gum. It would take some elbow grease, but she was *going* to turn this thing into meringue if it killed her.

That was when she noticed the pan on the stove starting to bubble. “S***!” Nina turned down the stove. The kitchen was a disaster zone, but at least she wasn’t staring at the two folders on the dining room table – Priscilla’s binder and Toby’s silver folder. She never wanted to touch either of them ever again.

The front door slammed shut. A few seconds later, Vinya trudged into the kitchen, folding a leopard-print umbrella. “Hey Nina, how’s...” her voice trailed off when she encountered the mess, “What the...?”

Nina put down her bowl and whisk. “I’m feeding you. Vegan chili tots with brussels sprouts - and vegan lemon meringue pie, if I can get this meringue to set.” She rushed to fish a ladle out of the drawer and a bowl from the cabinets. “I swapped out the tater tots for mochi puffs, and I found an Indian grocery that sold asafoetida powder to replace the garlic. It’s diner food *and* it’s Jain-friendly!”

“Okay,” Vinya sat down at the table. “And to what do I owe the honor?”

“Nothing,” Nina responded, “Just tired of cooking stuff you can’t eat.”

That was when Vinya noticed the folders sitting on the table and picked up the silver one. “So, the rabid fit of cooking has nothing to do with this weird folder with Priscilla’s name on it?”

Nina set a plate in front of her with a thud. “Bon Appetit.”

“You do remember how we became friends, right?” Vinya poked at the food with her fork. “Spill.”

Nina finally stopped rushing and felt her arms getting cold for no reason. “V, I told you the pope thing because it didn’t put you in any danger.” Hopefully that would stop the questions.

For a shadow of a moment, Vinya’s eyes got so wide that Nina could see the whites all the way around her brown irises, but the ‘Vinya look’ came back. That nonchalant-but-mildly-ticked-off stare that Nina now realized took a lot of practice.

“You suck at deflections,” Vinya said, spearing a mochi tot and shoving it in her mouth. Then she stopped for a second and closed her eyes as she chewed. “Okay, you win. These are *really* good.” Then her eyes snapped back open. “But if your thing is dangerous, now I *really* want to know.”

Nina sighed and offered one last opportunity for retreat. “You’re *sure*?”

Vinya’s face dropped for a moment as she took another slow bite of chili. For once she actually looked hesitant. “Yeah,” she said softly. “If it’s that bad. I’m in.”

Nina slid the binder across the table first. “That’s Priscilla’s private cache of stories. Be sure to read the bits in the back.”

Vinya opened the folder and started perusing. She smiled a little at the first few pages, the same way Nina had. Then she got to the back, where Prissy had put a copy of Diana’s information and the same threats from earlier. Vinya’s mouth dropped open, and her face scrunched into something between shock and disgust. She slammed the binder shut and placed it back on the table. For a second, Nina thought she saw a gag reflex in Vinya’s throat, but then she straightened up and took a deep breath.

“Okay, so your sister is Jane Bond. We already knew that our boss is a psychopath. She’s just upping the weird. That’s manageable. I think. She still gave you the stories.”

Nina glared at her. “Working with a gun to my head is not my forte. Hence this one.” She put an index finger on the silver folder and pushed back toward Vinya.

Vinya picked it up with two fingers. “So, not from Priscilla.”

“Oh no. Not even close.”

There was another quick glare, as if to say *what the hell are you getting yourself into*. “To be clear,” Vinya said, “am I getting capped if I open this?”

“Probably not.”

“Ringing endorsement, there.” Vinya flipped open the folder slowly, took a long look at the first page, then started flipping faster and faster through the packet, offering running commentary between page flips. “Wait...This is...no...Prissy is...you’re kidding me... this is not real. It’s-”

“Real,” Nina cut in. “It’s incredibly f***ed-up, but it’s legit.”

Vinya’s head bolted up. “Did you just drop an f-bomb?”

Nina shrugged. “So?”

Vinya just stared for a second, then took a breath and raised her eyebrows. She turned her attention back to the folder. “You know what this is, right? Priscilla’s been secretly blackmailing people to make sure that nobody can build new internet cables - for like twenty years.”

“Yup. Journalists, politicians. Everything to make sure a cable replacement bill never passes. And not just blackmail. She’s also killed bad stories – like Melinda Eberhardt, that super-conservative congresswoman Priscilla always rants against on air. Behind the scenes, Priscilla killed multiple corruption stories because Eberhardt always comes out against cable bills. She’s actually *helping* the woman advance.”

Vinya laughed darkly, “And she gets a good villain out of the deal. Great TV.” Then her face stiffened and she shut the folder, placing both hands on top of it. “You do know what this is, right?”

Nina exhaled. “I know it’s enough info to take Prissy the f*** off-air.”

“You’ve gotta stop with the f***s,” Vinya said, “it’s messing with me.” She slid the folder back over the table. “Prissy’s stopping the bills from passing so that internet prices stay high, right?”

“Right,” Nina replied slowly

Vinya shook her head. “And what happens if she stops?”

“A cable bill passes, I guess.”

“And?”

“And what?”

Vinya’s fingers started twitching on the table. “Right, you’re a politico. You don’t know the entertainment industry.” She stood up and started running her hands through her glowing hair.

“V?” Nina asked. “You all right?”

Vinya let go of her hair and seemed to gather her thoughts. “Okay, history lesson. Twenty years ago, internet video streaming almost killed cable TV. MTV and VH1 were early music casualties, Netflix and Amazon started outdoing the networks for TV shows. Cable news was the last holdout, but it came under attack from internet channels.”

“Like WWN,” Nina interjected. “I know the story.”

“Right,” Vinya continued, “But then the data-load got too high for the undersea cables, and the only way to prevent the whole internet from blacking out was to ration data. In America, that meant higher internet prices. We cleared the road by making it expensive to drive. When prices go up, nobody can afford streaming video, so all the online outlets either die or have to merge with offline companies. Spotify gets bought out by the record labels. Netflix gets bought out by Redbox. Cable TV has its own network of cables, so they go untouched – and luckily WWN has expanded onto actual TV by then. America is back to getting its news from the big three cable networks – and WWN is one of them. Priscilla games the internet collapse to increase her own influence over the public debate. Then she sells WWN to RXN – a cable company that’s swimming in dough – especially

after RACPods come out and people can download shows again through the cable network at gas stations. WWN gets a shot of RXN cash, becomes the biggest news network on TV, and goes on every RACPod for free.”

Vinya was finally cut off by a peel of thunder outside. Too close for comfort.

“I get it.” Nina was starting to get annoyed. “This is all big stuff and it’s all Prissy. That’s why I’m not sure what to do with it. This could take her down and I could get in a lot of trouble.”

Vinya sat back down as the wind picked up outside. “This isn’t just trouble, Nina, it’s an atomic bomb.” She drilled the folder into the table with her index finger. “The day after that bill passes, everyone and their idiot uncle is going to start an online TV channel. Data will be cheap, and our computers and video tech have only gotten better. RXN stock is going to tank overnight, and every cable company in this country is either going under or taking a big hit.”

The gears in Nina’s head finally caught up to where Vinya was going. “Oh.”

Vinya put her head in one hand, “RXN, WWN, our entire lives.” She snapped her fingers. “Gone. Like that. No more cable. No more me. No more you. Who gave you that?”

“Toby Carsten.”

Vinya sat up bolt straight. “What? Like, legendary nude pic scandal Toby Carsten?”

“So, you know the stories.”

“Who doesn’t?” Vinya let out a low whistle. “And she’s a casualty listed in that folder. Prissy ended her, so she wants to take the entire industry off-air. Scorched earth.”

Nina just stared, feeling the goosebumps prickle across her skin. “But what Prissy is doing is wrong. Somebody has to report this.”

“Yeah, I know.” Vinya got up again and started pacing. “But...we’ve both worked our whole lives to get here.”

“Because we grew up in the golden age of cable news.” Nina stared down at the table, “Because TV reporters became movie stars.” She looked back up. “Priscilla didn’t just strangle the internet. She created our entire reality.”

Nina felt her eyes darting back and forth. Was there even a place for someone like her in a world without cable?

“V,” she finally said, “Priscilla created *us*.”

7:38 P.M.

Madison walked out onto the concrete balcony at the rear of the Kennedy Center - overlooking the Potomac River. The only reason she ever came out here anymore was to have drinks when she saw a show. Today, though, she was here for old reasons. She'd cleaned out her closet today – one of the many distractions she'd invented in her last few days before leaving for rehab – and found a faded black blouse with a circuit board pattern.

It practically screamed late-2020s.

“Vintage” wasn't even the right word, it was just horrendously dated. Still, it made her smile. Unlike most people, Madison actually missed the whole hacker-chic fad, mostly because those had been good years.

So, she'd thrown on the blouse and walked down here, feeling a little too nostalgic.

Dan lived across the street at the Watergate, and he always used to sit here at sunset and watch planes come in. The approach to Obama-Reagan Airport went straight over the river, and you could sit here all night and watch a steady stream of aircraft come in to land. He'd started that long before they met, but back in the day, they had sat here for hours, his arm around her, guessing where the planes were coming from. Los Angeles? Miami? Cleveland?

Madison really had no clue what Dan did on Friday evenings anymore. Things changed. People changed. Cutting the booze and putting on an old blouse wasn't going to change that.

He wasn't here.

The balcony was almost deserted and there was a chill in the air, despite the fact that cherry blossoms were bursting out around the city from all the rain.

Madison sat on the massive concrete rim encircling the balcony, pulling her knees to her chest and feeling the cold cement through her jeans.

What the hell was she doing?

At least the wind felt good, and the spring air felt clean. It had been a long time since she'd perceived spring so crisp and clear – even if it did come with residual detox headaches.

She sat there, alone for a few minutes, waiting. Finally, a blinking yellow light appeared on the horizon. It drew slowly closer, separating into two points, then developing tiny wings and a pointed nose. By the time it banked right over the Potomac, it had grown to a massive supersonic jet, flashing a red and white paint scheme as it passed almost overhead.

Madison let the sound of the engine roll over her. “Air Canada,” she mused, straining her neck to keep her eyes on it. “Montreal, maybe? That sounds romantic.”

Part of her wanted to smile at the bittersweet memory, the other part of her wanted to cry.

Then, she heard the sound of shoes behind her.

“That’s an Airbus A520. Montreal’s romantic but a plane that size is probably the non-stop from Vancouver.”

Dan sat down cross-legged next to her and gazed out at the horizon, pointing to another distant light. “Now, that one’s flying lower. Subsonic, smaller craft - that one might be Montreal - or Buffalo.”

Madison turned to him and smiled. “I wasn’t sure you still came down here.”

Dan took his eyes off the sky and focused on her. “You of all people should know I have a strong resistance to change.”

“What you mean.” Madison smirked, “is that you’re a stubborn old cuss.”

That drew a nervous smile. “I suppose. Where did you find that blouse? I haven’t seen that in years.”

“You won’t see it again for years,” Madison gave him a side-eye, “Just cleaning out my closet. I’m thinking of having a minidress burning, want to light the match?”

Dan laughed - the kind of laugh that Madison didn’t think him capable of anymore. “With pleasure.”

Then they both looked out at the river again. It wasn't so much that they didn't know what to say, it was just that neither of them had said anything in so long.

Dan finally mustered the courage to at least try. "I do miss those days, you know, before it all went to hell."

"I think..." Madison tilted her head, eying another distant plane. "I think everyone misses times when things worked."

"It did work," Dan said, "We burned pretty bright for a little while. Had a good run. Ended how it had to."

The wind picked up, blowing through Madison's hair.

"Did it?" she asked.

"Maybe," Dan shrugged. "Anything that burns that hard has to burn out eventually, right?"

In the old days, this would have been the part where Madison laid her head on his shoulder and nobody had to say anything. Instead, she was sitting here talking about burning out. "Well," she said, "At least it was good to be young and stupid."

"*You* were young," Dan corrected.

"And *you* were stupid." Madison offered a mischievous grin.

Dan didn't object. Just raised his eyebrows and smirked.

"I don't regret that we ended, you know," Madison said to the horizon. "But I do wonder if we really tried as hard as could have. Whether there was something there that we missed."