

“Kill The Feed!”

Deadly Silence, Secrets Shattered

Chet Greenport



Chapter 1: The Call

Block Island, Rhode Island, June 17, 6:08AM

“Alexa, play Jimmy Buffett.” Which she promptly does, “Margaritaville,” although the lyric “there’s booze in the blender” is drowned-out by Harland Clarke’s coffee bean grinder.

He likes his black, straight-from the crankcase; out on the deck, watching the sun rise over the shimmering Atlantic and the mainland 12 miles away.

The retired TV and radio host and news executive now lives a quieter life on Block Island, “working as little as necessary,” a choosy consultant accepting only projects that fulfill his love of the craft. Otherwise, he and his wife Susan are savoring, year-round, this special place tourists only know as a summer haven. They are smelling the roses, the “shrimp there beginning to boil” that Buffett sang of. RIP Jimmy.

When the phone rings at 6:22AM, from an unfamiliar number, Clarke considers ignoring it. But something tells him to pick up.

“Harland, it’s Casey Moran,” an ambitious young reporter for Action News at the Providence TV station where Clarke worked years earlier. They had

met once, briefly, at a broadcast industry dinner, so they were neither strangers nor friends. Her call, especially at this hour, is curious.

Her whispered voice is stressed. “I don’t have much time. They are watching me. I found something...something big.”

Harland sets down his coffee mug. “Casey, slow down. Who is watching you?”

“Consolidated Omnimedia Network,” the TV station’s owner. Moran has stumbled onto information involving the media conglomerate, government contracts, and a mysterious offshore account funneling hundreds of millions of dollars. “They are not just buying stations -- they are scrubbing them. Replacing newsrooms with AI, turning real journalism into...”

Then the call drops. Not unusual in-season, when tourists multiply the small island’s population, overwhelming wireless network capacity. But Clarke’s gut tells him something is very wrong.

He hits redial. No answer.

Chapter 2: Triggered

6:23AM

Casey Moran's dropped call leaves Harland Clarke suddenly feeling very *un*-retired. The adrenaline surge is an itch that never really goes away. Once a news hound, always a news hound.

The silence gnaws at him. He could wait. See if she calls back. Maybe she's just spooked by something that could blow over by noon.

Wishful thinking.

His best contact inside Action News is pal Gus Vitale, who anchors the 6PM newscast, earning viewers' trust, and winning ratings. But Clarke cannot reach him yet, because Gus also hosts a morning radio show until 9.

Clarke pulls up the Action News website. No breaking stories by Casey. No headlines about Consolidated Omnimedia Network.

He checks her social media. Her last Tweet was cryptic:

"A nation of sheep will soon have a government of wolves." Edward R. Murrow.

That is not just an observation. That is a warning.

Too anxious to sit still, Clarke reaches out to Mark McKay, a former network executive, friend, and confidant.

“Consolidated Omni?” McKay scoffs. “Hedge-fund Frankenstein. Buys-up TV stations, guts the newsrooms, replaces local content with syndicated filler. ‘Seen it a hundred times.’”

“Nothing deeper?” Clarke presses.

“Not that I’ve heard.” Like most industry-watchers, McKay blames deregulation. “Wall Street pigged-out,” over-paying for stations at the worst possible time, with a recession looming and digital newcomers disrupting legacy media platforms. Expense cutbacks have been brutal. All too common industry carnage.

But if Casey had uncovered something *bigger* -- government contracts? Offshore accounts? That would explain the fear in her voice.

Clarke gulps a second coffee. He has Gus Vitale’s private number in his iPhone contacts. At 8:59:59AM, he hits Send.

Gus answers on the first ring. “Looks like another handsome day on the island!”

They speak often enough to skip “Hello,” and Clarke cuts straight past the small talk. “Casey Moran?”

A pause. Then Vitale’s tone shifts. Less jocular, more alert. “You too? All I know is she didn’t show up for work this morning. That’s *not* like her. And I’ve got messages stacking up from the TV station. ‘Back to you soon.’”

To Harland Clarke that sounds like forever.

Something is very, very wrong.

Chapter 3: How TV News Imitates Baseball

Action News headquarters, Providence

Both are team sports. The manager has a playbook. The goal: wins. And Action News wins the ratings that bring big advertising revenue.

Many of its players have been on this TV team for years. Viewers have come to know them. They have seen Gus Vitale for 30 years, alongside co-anchor Paula Ward who has been with the station even longer, as has sportscaster Flip Columbo. Rounding-out the Action News top-of-the-order: meteorologist Mike Simms, whose forecast can change beach-bound traffic patterns during summer in The Ocean State.

Other Action News players are more transient, and that's a plus.

Providence is a medium market, a career stepping-stone along the path from TV's minor leagues toward stations in the majors -- Boston, New York, Philadelphia in the Northeast – or network jobs. These upwardly-mobiles are energetic, diggers. Action News might be their third gig. For ambitious Casey Moran it is her second, a New England homecoming, after breaking-in at a small station down south. Harland had a well-traveled career path a generation earlier, and he cheers-on those as-determined.

Moran's enthusiasm is contagious. As is her upbeat personality, a genuine Ms. Congeniality, conspicuous in an industry impaired by egomaniacs and Debbie Downers, and the rivalries and backbiting that haunt too many TV newsrooms.

Action News plays team ball. Players embrace their News Director, who worked among them before being promoted.

The station's General Manager? Awkward. Staffers seem wary when he's in the newsroom. He asks too many questions.

In baseball terms, Moran's no-show is like a star player injury. Reporting workflow changes on-the-fly, like a batting order would. Position players' versatility is tested. Under other circumstances, the team simply adapts. But this team's winning streak is in jeopardy.

When Casey's name is removed from the weekly schedule and her bio and fetching head shot are deleted from "Meet the Action News Team" on the station web site, the newsroom gets real quiet real quick. The News Director's "always open" office door is closed.

At home on Block Island, the silence Harland Clarke finds deafening is broken. He picks-up on the first ring. It's Gus, whispering, "You didn't hear this from me..."

A terse memo informs Action News staffers that Casey has left the station. There is no mention that she has accepted a position up the career ladder “and we wish her well,” or any further explanation. And there is no Help Wanted posting on the station web site, standard Equal Opportunity recruiting procedure the FCC requires...if the opening is to be filled.

One reporter leans into another’s adjacent work space and whispers “When someone vanishes like this, someone else doesn’t want her found.”

Casey Moran is not just MIA. She is being erased.

Chapter 4: Warning!

Block Island, 9:08AM

“Are you ready?” Susan Clarke asks her husband. She too retired, recently, after an accomplished career in corporate finance. Having swapped her conference room wardrobe for yoga pants, the athletic brunette is ready for the morning hike the couple promised each other they would do daily, weather permitting.

“Rodman’s today, right?” meaning Rodman’s Hollow Nature Preserve, among Block Island’s breathtakingly scenic trails in the Clarkes’ get-out-and-do-it rotation.

“Can’t today,” he replies. “On-deadline with something a client just threw at me,” he fibs, so as not to alarm her.

Heading out solo, Susan teases “You’ll wish you did!” as the little voice in his head silently screams “Wish I could!”

Trying not to seem as anxious as he feels: “Have a good one. We’ll do breakfast when you’re back;” although he has no appetite for anything but knowing more...and more coffee.

Digging relentlessly, Harland fills his laptop screen with tabs – broadcasting trade press, archived news articles, financial filings, government contract databases, even blog posts and pertinent chat rooms.

Clarke is not sure what he’s looking for, but he’ll know it when he sees it.

He scolds himself, aloud, alone in the room: “C’mon! Connect the dots!”

Just then, his cursor stops responding, mid-blink, as he keyword-searches “Consolidated Omnimedia Network” in an article about FCC deregulation. Then the screen freezes. Without warning, the display goes black. A second later, a blood-red window pops-up.

****STOP IMMEDIATELY. YOU ARE BEING MONITORED. ****

The message pulses ominously, its letters flickering like a dying neon sign. Reaching for the keyboard, his fingers hover hesitantly before pressing Escape, which prompts another line below the warning:

****THIS IS YOUR FIRST AND FINAL WARNING.****

Harland dives for the Wi-Fi router on the shelf behind him and yanks the power cord; and he clicks his web browser closed, leaving him staring at his wide-eyed reflection.

Slumping back in his chair, he asks -- again aloud although alone -- “What the hell just happened?”

He debates calling Gus. But if someone cracked his laptop, could they be monitoring his calls too? Rummaging through a big cardboard box of tchotchkes he had collected over his years covering the Consumer Electronics Show, Clarke fumbles for a burner phone, years old, now, finally, being unpackaged and activated. So he has a fresh phone number that nobody knows.

And reaching into the bottom drawer of his desk, he retrieves another old-tech friend: a thumb drive, a handy relic from newsrooms past, before cloud storage.

If he is being watched, his every keystroke could be logged. So, now offline, his hands shaking, he begins copying his laptop files to the external drive.

Casey’s disappearance, and now this -- someone wants him to stop digging. And they are not playing games.

In the distance, waves crash gently against the island’s rocky shore on a sunny morning. But Harland Clarke feels the storm brewing.

Chapter 5: Behind Closed Doors

Providence Police Headquarters, 9:16AM

The quickest way to make a news hound obsess about something is to say ignore it.

Especially to tireless Action News reporter Gianna Carlucci. She doesn't just cover stories, she owns them. She had tag-teamed breaking news events with Casey Moran, and the two have become close friends.

The company's official explanation about Casey's exit just doesn't sit right with Gianna. Diligent Casey is not the type to vanish without a word, and her cryptic Tweet the previous night only deepens Carlucci's concern. Unable to shake the feeling that something is terribly wrong, she decides to take matters into her own hands.

When her newsroom shift ends, she bee-lines to Providence Police HQ to ask trusted contacts there for a wellness check on Casey's apartment.

Gianna leads Officers Chip Thompson and Darlene Jamieson to Casey Moran's walk-up, just off hip Thayer Street, on the city's quaint East Side at Brown University. Casey's car isn't in the driveway, and would be easy to

spot if parked on the street. The vanity plate on her late-model blue VW Beetle: KCNEWS

After no response to that BANG-BANG-BANG door knock that cops do, Thompson knocks again, even louder this time. Still nothing. “Casey Moran, Providence Police. We need to check on your welfare.”

With no response and growing concern, they decide to enter. The landlord unlocks the door for them, and they step inside...cautiously.

The blinds are drawn. The air is stale, with the scent of untouched coffee and a burnt English muffin. Something feels off.

Papers and notes are scattered across the coffee table and sofa.

When Officer Jamieson pushes open the bedroom door, she freezes. “Chip, look at this,” she calls out to her partner.

Joining her, Officer Thompson’s eyes widen at the sight. On the bed, a hastily packed suitcase, clothes spilling out as if Casey had been interrupted.

But the most alarming discovery is the message scrawled across the bathroom mirror in red lipstick: THEY’RE WATCHING ME.

Instinctively, Gianna starts snapping iPhone photos. Suddenly, a story owns her.

But -- “with no sign of forced entry, no signs of a struggle, and nothing to classify this as a crime yet” – and nearing the end of *his* shift – Officer Thompson concludes nothing-to-see-here. “We can file a report...”

Officer Jamieson still seems half-curious.

As they leave, Carlucci spots something the officers missed, and she pockets a thumb drive found among the scattered papers in the living room.

Official channels could take weeks. If something has happened to Casey, friend and colleague Gianna doesn't have that kind of time.

This is no ordinary disappearance.

Although not assigned to the story -- and without telling anyone else at Action News – Carlucci is on it.

Chapter 6: Departures, Arrivals

Block Island, 10:57AM

Back from her refreshing hike through Rodman's Hollow, rosy-cheeked Susan Clarke prepares to whip-up breakfast, asking "Alexa, play Yacht Rock."

Nothing. She repeats the request. Still silence.

Hearing her husband coming down the stairs, she asks over her shoulder, "Is the Wi-Fi out...again?" Harland had disconnected the router earlier, leading to his second fib of the morning: "It's down...again. I called."

Fib #3 comes quickly when Susan notices that Harland isn't sporting his usual T-shirt-N-shorts summertime ensemble. Seeing that he had shaven and was wearing socks (!) and khaki slacks and a button-down dress shirt, she asks "Where do you think *you're* going?"

"It's Goldstein," he claims, referring to his client, a showy Personal Injury attorney who does goofy TV commercials. And he hosts a weekend ask-the-expert radio show which Clarke coaches. "He wants to re-do a month's worth of podcasts, to tout a big settlement he just won. So I booked studio

time this afternoon. ‘Back tonight on the last boat,’ he predicts, holding-up fingers-crossed.

Consultants earn their keep in rapid-response situations, and personal injury attorneys’ marketing is very ego-driven. Goldstein pays Clarke well, and Susan has become accustomed to her husband being a phone call away from needy clients.

“SMOOCH” he and she say in unison, as Harland and Susan kiss; and he leaves, laptop in his shoulder bag and thumb drive in his pocket. And a knot in his stomach, feeling guilty about fibbing, and fearful after those threatening pop-up messages. He is hoping to spare his wife the drama, or at least postpone it until he knows more.

During summer months, ferries shuttle back and forth almost hourly from Point Judith on the mainland to the ferry dock on the island. Harland makes the noon boat with time to spare.

He spends that time on the sun-drenched upper deck of the MV Carol Jean. She’s 170 feet long, and can carry hundreds of passengers and 32 vehicles. Her sister vessel MV Anna C is just landing on the next dock.

Watching Anna C’s passengers disembark, Clarke feels envious. After Casey Moran’s disappearance – and that sinister warning invading his

laptop – he wishes he felt as-carefree. If you saw “Jaws,” you saw what Block Island looks like in-season. Vacationers don’t just walk off the big boat, they skip...with one exception.

Most arrive in beach togs, but one man seems overdressed, in a denim jacket and black jeans. While the funsters frolic off the big boat, his pace is more purposeful, walking with a slight limp. He carries a backpack. Probably a contractor of some sort, Harland reckons.

Among the last few passengers off the arriving ferry: Gianna Carlucci.

She’s on foot, not riding in an Action News van. Her roller bag might contain the compact camera equipment that her generation of “Multi-Media Journalists” use to file stories unaccompanied by a videographer.

Clarke figures she might have come to the island to shoot her portion of the first-official-day-of-summer story that includes fellow correspondents in Newport and on various state beaches and videoing inner city kids cooling off in a pool. Warm sunlight, children laughing, the cry of the gull, salt air, all that feel-good stuff. It is a local TV story as perennial as mobbed airports before Christmas.

Or maybe Gianna is just here for a beach day. Harland couldn't know that earlier that morning, she had been at Casey Moran's apartment -- searching for answers -- before rushing to the 11AM Point Judith departure.

Either way, Carlucci knows Block Island. She had covered the devastating fire that totaled the historic Harborside Inn several summers earlier. Now she's back, and, unofficially, working the story.

As is Harland Clarke. And -- truth-be-told, if not to his wife -- he is not rushing off-island to see Attorney Goldstein.

Chapter 7: Cyber Shadows

Wakefield, Rhode Island.

20-something, strikingly attractive, wild hair, Aviator eyeglasses. Jessica Rodriguez looks more like a Bond Girl than the nerd who spends her days cloistered in a cramped storefront across from CVS, next to a drab laundromat.

She tunes-up people's computers. Most days, her only human contact is customers dropping-off and picking-up. Among them, Harland Clarke.

“J-Rod!” he grins, entering. “HC!” she replies, slipping off her glasses, smiling coyly. They had met several years earlier, when Harland spoke to her class at New England Tech. “Thrice in one year?” she smirks. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Clarke brings in his laptop every six months, to delete unnecessary cookies and other accumulated cyber driftwood, speeding it up to like-new. On the check-up checklist: malware, usually just a software update. Not this time.

Glasses back on. “Let's take a look.” Booting-up HC's laptop, her playful expression fades. As her fingers dance across the keyboard with practiced

ease, the butterfly tattoo on her wrist seems to flap its wings. She navigates directories, her brow furrowing deeper with each discovery.

When Harland describes the menacing pop-up threat that took over his screen, she shrugs. It's not unusual for customers to bring her computers infected because they got hooked by a phishing scam, clicking a link in an authentic-looking Email pretending to be from a bank or the IRS or Netflix or any number of other faux senders. Such pop-ups are "scareware," malicious code designed to deceive users into believing their system is compromised, prompting them to take actions that further compromise security. "BUT..."

She pauses, glasses off again, staring at the wall momentarily.

"Harland," she begins slowly, "This is not just malware. You've got sophisticated spyware embedded here. It monitors keystrokes, and can access files, even activate your webcam without detection." Still exploring, she surmises "they probably have everything, your Emails, contacts, client files, everything."

Clarke tells her how quickly he yanked the Wi-Fi plug. "Smart," she nods, "and real smart of you to copy all your files to a thumb drive before whoever's-doing-this could have deleted them remotely or held them for ransom."

Perusing further, her expression turns grave. “This level of intrusion is not random. It is targeted. Someone wants to keep a very close eye on you.” Having ingested nothing but cup-after-cup of coffee since this eventful day dawned, and now this, Harland would kill for Roloids.

Without sharing the Casey Moran situation, he asks “Can you trace it? Find out who’s behind this?” Uncertain, she perseveres: “I can try. But whoever did this covered their tracks well. And this is NOT some team hacker chain smoking in a cubicle in Russia. This code is military-grade.”

Jessica knows, having learned encryption techniques used in government-sponsored cyber ops, doing projects she’s vague about.

“You’re good now,” she reports, having banished anything malevolent from Clarke’s laptop and thumb drive. And, for the umpteenth time, she tells him to change his home router from the factory default security settings, handing him a page of instructions she keeps handy for careless customers.

Rodriguez charges \$60 per hour, a bargain compared to rent-a-geek fees at big box stores. Pretending to seem relieved, Harland thanks her, and pays in cash.

“If – AFTER you have changed passwords for your router and everything else -- you still have problems, call me,” she offers. “Any time at all.”

Before his CVS coupon expires, Harland stops in for Roloids, and the Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups that his wife calls her guilty pleasure. And he grabs a sandwich to-go from Subway, his first nourishment of the day. Then back to Point Judith to catch the next boat back to the island.

Aboard the 55-minute ferry ride, he gobbles the sub and washes it down with a cold Narragansett Beer, figuring mission half-accomplished. His computer is OK now, but where is Casey Moran?

Block Island Police greet each ferry, scanning the crowd for drunks and known troublemakers. “HC!” he hears as he walks off the boat. It’s Officer Dan, Susan Clarke’s high school classmate. In the smallest state, you keep bumping into the same people.

The patrolman asks Harland “Did your friend find you?”

An island visitor has been asking-around.

Chapter 8: Coming Clean

Block Island, 5-ish

As he makes his way up Spring Street heading home, his mind racing with the events of the day, Harland Clarke rehearses, aloud, how he will admit his fibs to Susan.

She greets him at the door with a warm smile, and their sweet ritual “SMOOCH.”

In one hand, her pour from the shaker, their like-clockwork 5PM Martinis (Grey Goose, up, super-cold, super-dry, slightly-dirty, one bleu cheese olive). In her other hand, a platter, two steaks she has been marinating, headed straight for the grill now that he’s home.

With food on the fire, she joins him in their side-by-side cedar Adirondack deck chairs, where his chaotic day began with Casey Moran’s truncated call. “How’s Goldstein?” she asks, alluding to the cover story for his hasty day trip. “Come inside,” he whispers, gulping down his half from the shaker.

Harland feels like he is stepping into the confessional from his strict Catholic upbringing. With Wi-Fi still down, Susan is playing DirecTV’s reggae channel #863. As he sits her down in the living room, Harland

grabs the remote, to turn the music up, not down. If they could hack-into his computer and activate the camera, they could be listening now, somehow. Music will mask their conversation.

Puzzled, Susan asks, “Is everything okay?”

He whispers, “There’s something I need to tell you. I haven’t been entirely honest about today.”

Taken slightly aback, she listens intently, as he recounts the day’s events, starting with the pop-up threat on his laptop. Susan interrupts, dismissing it as just another hacker prank. “Those things happen all the time. You know that. It’s just wise guys.”

“It’s more than that,” he continues, his voice growing more serious.

“Remember Casey Moran, from Action News? We met her at the Rhode Island Broadcasters’ dinner?”

“Yes, super-cute!” Susan recalls. Super-cute-enough to quickly earn 110% of any wife’s attention when her husband discloses: “She called me early this morning, before you were up.” An awkward cliffhanger when it’s time to turn the steaks. Susan does, then scurries back inside.

“She was panicked,” Harland describes. “Said she found something big, and then the call was abruptly cut off. I tried calling her back, but she didn’t answer.”

Susan’s expression shifts from concern to alarm. “Why YOU? And why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Harland admits, guilt washing over him. “I’m sorry. I should have been honest with you from the start.”

Susan’s face softens, and she gives him a forgiving hug, spilling just a drop of her drink. “It’s okay. I know you were trying to protect me. But we are in this together.”

After Harland chronicles his trip to the computer whiz, and Officer Dan’s comment, they spend the rest of the evening trying to make sense of the situation.

He barely touches his steak. And when he surprises Susan with the Reese’s Peanut Butter cups, she puts them in the fridge. Her appetite has faded too.

Killing the music, their soundtrack shifts to the calming sound of ocean waves and the Southeast Lighthouse fog horn in the distance, and chirping

tree-frogs nearer. They decide to call it a night, hoping for some clarity in the morning.

Clarity would arrive, by moped, at 7:07AM

Chapter 9: Guess Who's Coming to Breakfast

Block Island, June 18, 7:07AM

Harland Clarke has been up since 5, changing passwords for EVERYTHING, and noting the changes in handwriting, un-hackable.

As he fires-up Mr. Coffee, he asks, “Alexa, what’s the temperature?”
“Good morning Harland,” she answers, reborn. “On Block Island, it’s 63 degrees, heading for a daytime high of 74.”

When Susan gets up, he will tell her to keep her laptop off Wi-Fi and use her iPhone as a hotspot. And because Alexa is always listening – otherwise, how would she hear you say her name? – “assume we are being eavesdropped.”

Powering-up his phone for the first time in 24 hours, he finds several Unknown Caller hang-ups, and a whispered voicemail from Gus Vitale: “Call me!”

Using his antique but adequate burner phone, he texts Gus the new number: “It’s Harland. Use this number only, TFN. I will explain when we speak ASAP,” although he expects not to hear back until Vitale’s radio show ends at 9.

Two minutes later, he is slurping strong black coffee on the deck, the morning routine Casey Moran's call had interrupted the day before.

The Clarke's home is not easy to find, two turns down dirt roads after leaving paved Spring Street, where the only clue is "Clarke" on a signpost among surnames of abutting neighbors. Entering at dusk? Don't hit the deer.

Sound approaching: tires on gravel and the familiar whine of a rental moped engine. The town prohibits them on dirt roads, but some tourists are unaware or too carefree or scofflaw to comply. Maybe this one is just lost.

Hearing the moped pull in behind the house, Harland walks through, from the front deck to the back door, where the rider is dismounting. Long brown hair escapes as she removes her helmet. Although they are meeting for the first time, she needs no introduction, but extends one and a businesslike handshake.

"Harland Clarke? Gianna Carlucci. We need to talk."

Hearing all this, Susan comes downstairs, instantly recognizing the surprise visitor. The Clarkes have a nightly 6PM TV appointment with Gus, Paula,

and the Action News team. Ace reporter Carlucci is often the first live on-scene report in the newscast. “Gianna! Hi! I’m Susan. Welcome! Coffee?”

Carlucci comes in, but nobody sits down.

“I know you heard from Casey, and I have too,” she says, holding up the thumb drive she palmed in Moran’s apartment: “I need to show you something she left behind. But not here.”

“If I could find you here,” Carlucci presumes, “they can too. Where can we go?”

“Meet me in a half-hour at Persephone’s,” Harland suggests. It’s a cozy bohemian coffee shop across from the Red Bird liquor store. Saddling-up, she’s off.

Feeling increasingly creeped-out, and chastened by her husband’s warnings about Alexa and Wi-Fi, Susan decides to go sit on the beach. “Text me,” she makes him promise.

Chapter 10: Sub Rosa in the Sunshine

8:14AM

Harland Clarke leaves his car in the ferry dock parking lot, implying to prying eyes that he may have left the island.

He walks to nearby Weldon's Way, a side street that moped rental vendors render impassible as they rubber-stamp customers' wobbly driving tests.

"HC!" Leo calls-out from the Aldo's rental shed. "Uncle Leo!" Clarke replies, as they smile and fist-bump. "I sent you a customer. 'Hope you took good care of her!"

The referral claim is another useful fib. Leo bought it, knowing Harland to be a broadcaster, and connecting the dots to Gianna Carlucci. Any member of the Action News team is a familiar face in Southern New England. These TV people must all know each other he assumes.

"She wants to take me for a ride. Can I talk you out of a second helmet?" With an envious guffaw, Leo tosses him one; and Clarke carries it around the corner then another hundred yards to Persephone's.

He finds Gianna there, waiting to order, near the end of a stalled line of Noo Yawk accents asking for exotic coffee concoctions. “We should keep moving,” he urges, and they leave. Hopping on the moped behind her, Harland directs her up Corn Neck Road to the island’s northernmost point, a 3.9-mile buffer from town.

Along the way, meaningful conversation would be impractical above the engine noise, even if the matter at hand didn’t dictate whisper mode. So they just take in the scenery, and take deep breaths of such fresh air to try to calm down, until they dismount at the North Light parking area.

That is, literally, the end of the road for many island visitors. For others who can handle the challenging terrain, the 20-minute walk over a rocky driftwood-strewn beach to the circa 1869 North Lighthouse is well worth it. But stay off the dunes, where thousands of gulls nest. They will divebomb humans invading their territory. And if you follow the trail beyond the lighthouse to Sandy Point where seals flop ashore to sun, give them space too.

Clarke and Carlucci trudge to the lighthouse, so they can talk without being overheard. And she gives him an earful, describing Moran’s apartment, and the paranoia now near-paralyzing the usually upbeat Action Newsroom.

Under other circumstances, this shoreline walk in the sun and salt air would be refreshing. But Harland is being stalked by that stranger. And Gianna has much to ask...and tell.

As they rest on one of the less gull-splattered stone benches at the lighthouse, Harland's burner phone rings. Other than his wife, only Gus Vitale has the number. Waving her hands, Gianna mouths "I'm not here."

Vitale's "You didn't hear this from me," Part Deux: At the TV station, an unforced error is about to blow the Casey Moran story wide open.

Clarke hangs up. "WHAT???" Carlucci insists, seeing his wide-eyed reaction to what Gus confided.

"We better start walking," he urges, saying they need to get online, in a secure way, somewhere, pronto. Ideally somewhere that serves lunch.

But where?

Chapter 11: Enough is Enough

Action News newsroom, 12:01PM

Gus Vitale's whispered clue about roiling anxiety in the newsroom was not exaggerated. Esprit de corps is through-the-floor.

Now it gets worse for staffers already unnerved, in the form of a stunningly tone-deaf cheery announcement from the station's General Manager.

Action News Providence – a star performer among the Consolidated station group – has been chosen for “an exciting pilot project:” Casey Moran will be replaced by cutting-edge AI software the company is developing.

Lead balloon.

Don, the assistant news director, winces. Tanya, the 4PM anchor, rolls her eyes, muttering, barely-aloud, to no one in particular, “What next?”

And when it rains it pours: another player advances to the major leagues. Reporter Joanne Borrell has been hired-away by a Boston station. A staff memo more informative than the one-line announcement that Casey had

left thanks Joanne for doing solid work here and wishes her all the best in Boston.

Bad to worse: The memo adds that not-recasting her position “will enable us to build-out” the new AI system “even better and quicker.”

Colleagues’ well-wishes and high-fives for Joanne are a thin veneer. These people are freaking out.

It just doesn’t add-up. Newspapers are in a death spiral. Podcasts and satellite radio and streams are stealing ears and revenue from AM/FM radio. Networks and cable news channels and many local stations are downsizing. But Action News ratings are a (FCC) license to print money. The station’s commercial inventory is sold-out, to dueling car dealerships and furniture stores and personal injury attorneys. Sure, AI efficiencies are the shiny object now, but this station is not under financial pressure.

Staff was already in stretch mode without Casey. Now there goes Joanne. And Gianna Carlucci is burning some use-it-or-lose-it vacation time this week (or so they think).

While Action News at Noon commands all attention in the building, one exasperated employee waits until one-minute-in, then drops a dime.

His anonymous Email leaks all three memos: Casey's abrupt exit...AI will replace her...Joanne is leaving and AI will replace her too.

It is addressed to a dozen other local news outlets. Even before *their* noon newscasts end, both other Providence TV stations run with it, Davids poking Goliath. "Breaking News" at the bottom of their screens says it all.

A large-font headline atop widely-followed GoRInews.com asks "WHERE'S CASEY?"

The answer: Block Island...

Chapter 12: Guess Who's Coming to Lunch

Block Island, noon-ish

Neither twist an ankle, but Harland Clarke and Gianna Carlucci both stumble occasionally as they hustle along the rocky beach, backtracking from the North Lighthouse to her rented moped in the parking lot. Their minds are also racing, neither saying a word.

As Gianna steers back south along Corn Neck Road, Harland weighs options. Where could they grab lunch *and* get online, discreetly?

Though Carlucci enjoys – and in this case, could suffer – local celebrity, summer folk come to Block Island from all over. If you're from Buffalo it's the dang Riviera, and she isn't part of your local Action News team. So she'll be okay behind her designer shades and under a floppy beach hat.

With his computer and possibly his phone hacked, Clarke figures he could be spotted. Would his stalker look in places with lots of people? In-town eateries-with-a-view like the broad porches at the iconic National or Surf Hotels? Fred Benson Town Beach? At rockin' Ballards Resort? Among the hundred vacationers savoring summer on the sprawling lawns at the splendid Spring House or Atlantic Inn?

Or does this tracker reckon that townies like Clarke hang-out where tourists don't?

Not advisable: The Oar, at the Boat Basin marina. Great spot, big menu, better service than you expect from seasonal help. But beach music + joyfully barking dogs (welcomed at picnic tables on the lawn) + loud conversations fueled by potent Mudslides? No place for whispered discussions. Cozy Eli's or The Barn or Winfield's would be more discreet, but they only do dinner.

Just north of that town beach, as they near the main drag they should avoid, Harland leans forward next to Gianna's ear. "Let's go to the airport," where tourists tend not to linger. Ellen's diner there is a townie fave and there's free guest Wi-Fi.

Replying over her shoulder: "I have a better idea," she takes a right, onto Beach Avenue. She knows the island.

Several turns later, she drives up onto the lawn of a one of those classic Block Island cottages: single-story, greyed cedar shingles, outdoor shower, clothesline, and – like Chez Clarke – Adirondack chairs out front facing an ocean view. Harland can smell that the charcoal grill had already been lit.

Approaching the screen door as though invited, Carlucci walks right in. Clarke surmises that she had overnighted there before finding her way to his house that morning.

As he follows her inside, he spots the family surname on the door: Moran.

Chapter 13: Safe and Sound...and Determined

Moran Cottage, Block Island

Casey Moran's sudden disappearance makes it easy to assume the worst. Especially because what she scrawled in lipstick on her bathroom mirror mirrors the threats that popped-up on Harland Clarke's laptop just yesterday.

But there she is, in a faded "Got wine?" T-shirt, cutoffs, and pedicured bare feet. Quite alive, and "super-cute" as ever, to quote Susan Clarke. And surprisingly, under the circumstances, she's merely hyper, not hysterical. Clearly, last evening's suddenly-convened girls' night with Gianna helped.

"I am SO glad to see you!" Harland exclaims, heaving a two-lung sigh of relief, quipping "Welcome to Block Island."

The cottage has been in the family for several generations. Casey's mother has gathered high school buds there for a girls' weekend every summer since they were...girls. Last year, Casey joined the party, enabling proud mom to introduce her as "Action News reporter Casey Moran!"

Typically, big families time-share properties like this by claiming prime July and August weeks. Now, before the Fourth, the house was unoccupied, and Casey made tracks when things went sideways in Providence.

“We’ve all got some catching-up to do,” she understates -- ducking into the kitchen for a platter of skewered swordfish kabobs headed for the grill -- “over lunch.”

As Casey, Gianna, and Harland compare timelines, it all comes into crisp focus.

An anonymous tipster who somehow knew Casey’s personal Email address sent her documents, links, and other clues about shady stuff her employer has been up to.

Casey’s only mistake had been forwarding something from her personal Email address to her work address. Something utterly unrelated, a smartphone photo she snapped, of a stunning Newport sunset, the sort of shot meteorologist Mike Simms invites viewers to submit in exchange for a TV shout-out, and for use as the backdrop for his weather statistics.

But – as many corporate employee manuals now stipulate, sometimes buried in legalese – the company monitors its computer system, so have no

expectation of privacy. To a corporate admin, her work Email address + her home Email address + her wireless number are all now linked.

What Casey uncovered as her June 16 all-nighter continued into the wee hours of the 17th spooked her enough to bug-out, and she started packing. When one document she downloaded had a tripwire, it triggered a threatening pop-up. And her phone began ringing, repeatedly, no Caller ID, no voicemail. So she stopped packing, and wearing only what she is still wearing a day later, she rushed to catch the early morning ferry.

Before boarding at Point Judith, she shut-off her phone, for fear of being tracked. And she wished she had thought to do so sooner.

When she was spotted aboard the ferry by an avid Action News viewer, her trademark smile masked her angst as he chatted her up. Pretending that “my phone battery just died, and I need to make a quick call,” she wrinkled her nose. “Can I beg a favor?” Possibly smitten, he smiled, handed her his phone, and gave her some space by taking a Men’s room pit stop.

Her first call: Gianna, whose voicemail picked-up while she was rushing to the Providence cop shop and the apartment Casey had just left in a hurry. Her message told the whole story in 30 seconds, something reporters are good at. Punchline: “Get out to the island! That cottage we went to last time!”

Her second call was to Harland Clarke, with whom she had swapped business cards at that broadcasters' dinner. But soon into their conversation, the boat was at the halfway point, where the handoff from mainland cell towers to island towers often drops calls.

Cottages of this vintage still have landlines, so Casey used that phone to assure her parents that she was safe, urging them not to pick-up unless the call was from their familiar 466 exchange cottage number.

Brainstorming options, Casey and Gianna and Harland have an epiphany. Turn the tables.

But how?

Chapter 14: Armed and Dangerous?

Departing Moran Cottage

Harland Clarke gives the number for his burner phone to Gianna Carlucci, and to Casey Moran, who will only call it from the cottage landline. He programs all three of those numbers into his contact list, where he already has numbers for his wife and Gus Vitale.

He uses the cottage landline to check voicemails that have accumulated at his regular number, the iPhone he is keeping turned off to avoid location detection.

There are multiple hang-ups from Unknown Caller, several bothersome robo-calls – “How much are YOU paying for car insurance?” -- and a message from Clarke’s pal Mark McKay, the former network executive he had queried about Consolidated Omnimedia Network.

“I think you’re onto something,” McKay messaged: “Their station here in Cleveland has started touting how ‘AI brings cutting-edge technology to the coverage you’ve come to expect from Action News!’” As Gianna leans in to listen, her eyes widen.

Having penned plenty of promos himself over the years, McKay might dismiss this as garden-variety hype...if the station had not just “retired” two longtime Action News Cleveland investigative reporters. Now, Gianna’s expression changes. Determination.

The trio agrees to lie low overnight until they meet for early breakfast at the cottage. Harland asks Gianna for a moped ride back to his car in the ferry parking lot.

As she drops him off, Harland spots “Officer Dan! Got a minute?” The patrolman does, having finished eyeballing the visitors who came ashore from the ferry just-landed.

“Remember yesterday, when you asked if the friend looking for me had found me?” Dan does, saying he found it odd that this person was asking for “a ‘Harley,’ when everyone here on the island calls you ‘HC.’”

And the patrolman adds that he had spotted the stranger again.

Block Island Grocery (B.I.G. to townies) really, really ought to install a “Take A Number” machine at its deli counter, where summer people gather two-deep, waiting their turn...or not.

Officer Dan had been there – at that point in plain clothes after his shift ended – waiting, and waiting, to order Wrap #3, Seafood Salad. That’s where he spotted the stranger again. Unlike the impatient city folk barking their orders across the counter, “your friend was the most patient customer there!”

“Almost like he was waiting for someone, or loitering?” Harland asks. Dan squints then nods slowly.

“I need to tell you something. Where can we talk?” Harland asks. “Hop in,” Dan beckons, nodding toward his SUV patrol car. The policeman listens intently as Clarke tells all, hypothesizing that the stalker could be armed.

On THAT note, Officer Dan pauses, then winks “Here’s how we can find out...”

Chapter 15: Hunter, Hunted

Here, there, and everywhere on Block Island, June 19

It's a daylong game of cat-and-mouse. Mice are Harland Clarke, Casey Moran, and Gianna Carlucci. Together, as a group, they dart from place-to-place on the island, with their regular phones turned on, calling each other at each stop, to afford the stalker ample location signals.

As they crisscross the island, the stranger is always late. By the time he gets to Mansion Beach, they are already miles away at the Manisses Hotel. He hurries there, only to detect that they have moved to the Southeast Lighthouse.

Hodge Family Wildlife Preserve, the Post Office, Malcolm Greenaway's photo gallery, Clayhead Trail, the Medical Center, Washington Trust Bank, the Beachead restaurant. Their zig-zag runs him ragged, UNTIL...

They let him find them, after dark, at Captain Nick's Rock-N-Roll bar.

Every Monday night, Nick's becomes a hilarious Time Machine. Here -- 12 miles out in the Atlantic off the rugged New England coast, and well into the New Millennium -- partiers reenact Bay Ridge, Brooklyn 1977. It's Disco Night. Flashing lights, mirror ball, the works.

Already there, and unrecognizable to the stalker, Officer Dan is dressed as an homage to John Travolta's "Saturday Night Fever" character. "He has ALWAYS been a funster," high school classmate Sarah Clarke laughs.

Harland spots the stalker, who also spots him, and Casey, deliberately undisguised. It's a target-rich environment.

When the place is packed, and incognito Officer Dan is in-position, Harland slips a ten-spot in the DJ's tip jar, mouthing the word "now."

The speakers blare "YMCA." Tipsy dancers are bumping into each other as the lyric prompts them to spell-out each letter by waving their arms. The stalker is jostled, knocking his SIG Sauer P226 pistol to the floor. Disco Dan grabs it with his left hand, and with his right he cuffs one of the stranger's wrists, and swings him to the floor.

As they struggle, with the music still blaring, some inebriated dancers don't even notice, until uniformed BIPD officers rush in to assist. Even then, the admirer whose phone Casey borrowed on the ferry spots her and wants to dance.

Rhode Island General Laws, Section 11-47-8(a): Carrying a concealed firearm without a proper license is a felony and punishable by 1 to 10 years in prison.

Could he cop a plea, sing like a canary, and expose Consolidated Omnimedia Network? Even if he clams-up, he's no longer a menace.

That relieves the symptom. Now to cure the disease...

Chapter 16: Unfinished Business

June 20, 10:30AM

Harland and Susan Clarke, Casey Moran, and Gianna Carlucci all squeeze into Casey's VW Beetle, waiting in State Parking Lot G at Point Judith since she fled 3 days earlier. Splattered sea gull poo? She got off easy.

They had taken the morning ferry from the island. They were on a mission.

Expecting them, computer whiz Jessica Rodriguez left the Closed sign on the door of her small storefront in nearby Wakefield.

After quick introductions, Casey takes orders for Starbucks, in the strip center nearby. Three-word-titled coffee concoctions for her and Gianna, green tea for Susan "if Starbucks does that, otherwise I'm OK." When Harland says "gimme a tall one, black," J-Rod calls "Ditto."

Susan recently retired from a management position in corporate finance. As Jessica downloads files -- and decrypts them with curious ease -- Susan's quickie forensic audit surfaces evidence of what Consolidated Omnimedia Networks is really up to.

“These numbers are crazy!” she gasps, looking over Jessica’s shoulder. When Casey and Gianna return, they sidle-up. In Jessica’s close quarters, the VW now seems roomy by comparison.

Among the documents, the Consolidated groupwide Profit & Loss Statement, affirming that these stations are a money machine that newsgathering cost cuts could only jeopardize.

And where that money is going reveals the real reason AI is replacing payroll reporters. Profits are being funneled into accounts under shell company names in the Cayman Islands and no-tell Swiss banks.

Another of the leaked documents is a newswriting style guide, and it sure isn’t the industry standard Associated Press version. These do’s-and-don’ts come from corporate. It is a propaganda playbook. That horrifies Casey and Gianna, principled young working journalists; and Harland, who had managed a Washington DC newsroom years earlier.

The scheme is clear: Influence public opinion to benefit select products, causes, and candidates – pay-for-play misinformation and disinformation – accomplished by programming AI to choose and script stories accordingly.

Defense contractors can subsidize news narratives fanning the winds of war across Consolidated's nationwide TV footprint. Viewers have grown skeptical of commercial messages, but they trust Action News.

Meanwhile, on the island, an Action News van rolls off the ferry. That crew will meet Gus Vitale, arriving via helicopter at Block Island State Airport.

By now this story is everywhere, "blocking-out the sun" in news parlance. The other two Providence TV stations are also on-island, and Joanne Borrell's new Boston station has sent her there and she will also be feeding CNN.

Action News at Six will be must-see TV.

Chapter 17: Breaking News, Broken

Action News Providence control room, June 21

6PM, straight-up.

Director: “ID and roll intro.”

The animation montage unfolds on-screen, with a baritone booth announcer voicing-over racing orchestral theme music: “From Southern New England’s most-trusted source, THIS is Action News at Six!”

Director: “Take remote feed, mike-and-cue him.”

“We have found Casey Moran! And what she is telling us is scandalous. I’m Gus Vitale, live on Block Island.”

Whoosh.

Director: “Take studio camera 1. Go Paula.”

“And I’m Paula Ward, with big news about federal funding for the Washington Bridge rebuild.”

Whoosh.

Director: “Take camera 5. Go Mike.”

“It’s the first official day of summer! I’m Mike Simms with a 5-day forecast you are gonna love.”

Whoosh.

Director: “Take 3. Go Flip.”

“Boston blockbuster! I’m Flip Columbo with exclusive news of a 4-player Red Sox trade. Who’s in and who’s out, coming up!”

Suddenly, the station's General Manager bursts into the control room, apoplectic, breathless.

Director: "Take 1. Go Paula." Whoosh.

As she begins -- "There's a big break in a story that hits-home for us here at Action News. Gus Vitale is live on Block Island..." -- The boss bellows "KILL THE FEED!"

When Gus disappears from the screen, unflappable Paula assumes it's a technical glitch, ad-libbing that "we will reconnect with Gus in just a minute" (which, eventually, they don't). And she moves on to the Washington Bridge story.

Too late.

The same anonymous insider who leaked memos about Casey's sudden exit, and that she and Joanne would be replaced by AI, had Emailed the compromising documents from Casey's thumb drive to all local media.

GoRInews.com posts them online, momentarily crashing their server.

Although Action News killed the story so suddenly, both other Providence TV stations are all over it; and Joanne is seen live in Boston and worldwide on CNN.

This breaking story is everywhere BUT Action News, where the control room crew works in stunned silence. You could hear a pin drop.

And outside, in the distance, they could hear approaching sirens.

Chapter 18: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

The Clarkes' home, Block Island, 10:59PM

Think Casey Moran's VW Beetle felt like a clown car with her *and* Harland *and* Susan Clarke *and* Gianna Carlucci all jammed in? Add Jessica Rodriguez.

The short ride from her computer repair shop in Wakefield to the ferry at Point Judith was only tolerable because Harland drove with Susan riding shotgun, and because willowy Jessica is as svelte as her two new TV friends sharing the back seat.

They had all seen the abortive 6PM newscast and followed bombshell revelations going viral online all evening, swapping a flurry of text messages with Gus Vitale.

They make the last boat, and drop Casey at the Spring House hotel. She will catch-up with them later at the Clarkes' home, where there will be steaks and chicken on the grill and Narragansett Beers in the cooler.

"Here he is! Here he is!" Harland shouts, hushing the festivities as everyone gathers around the TV when the Action News at Eleven intro rolls.

Gus anchors live from the lawn of the stately Spring House hotel seen behind him. He is somber, earnest: “For generations, we have asked for your trust, and we almost failed you” he began. “First the good news...”

Casey steps-into the shot, emotional, thanking viewers for their prayers; and she thanks the Block Island Police “for saving my life.”

Weather and sports are abbreviated to allocate most of the half-hour to Gus, who walks viewers through an event-by-event timeline. He shows those pictures Gianna snapped in Casey’s apartment; and screenshots of the decrypted documents, which Casey describes.

As he explains why his 6 O’clock report was cut-off, the director shows video of the Providence station’s General Manager being taken into custody “just within the last hour” by U.S. Marshals. And from the network feed – whoosh -- there’s video of Consolidated executives around the country perp-walking.

Every cable news channel is now wall-to-wall. MSNBC gets the FCC Chairman out of bed. CNN’s booking producer scores the U.S. Attorney General. A Special Prosecutor will be named in the morning.

At Chez Clarke, jubilation. Everyone’s phone is ringing, and every call is interrupted by Call Waiting. Mere minutes after credits roll at the end of

the newscast, Gus and his crew and Casey arrive; followed by off-duty Officer Dan: “HC! Toss me a ‘Gansett!’”

At 11:31, Action News Providence issues a press release and posts it on its web site: News Director Dave Lasalle has been named acting station manager.

His first *very-unofficial* act: deleting the anonymous Email account which he himself had used to leak those confidential corporate documents to Casey in the first place. He was a double-agent, on the side of truth.

On the Clarkes’ deck, Gus Vitale offers a toast: “Truth and trust!”

HC: “Alexa, play Jimmy Buffett.”

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Thank you...

...to the journalists on TV and radio and the digital platforms to which newspapers have migrated. They work undaunted by corporate cutbacks that compromise local news coverage. They care.

By watching and listening and reading – and subscribing and patronizing their advertisers – you support their work, and defend truth, now under assault on social media and by agenda-driven cable news channels.

Thanks too to The Block Island Conservancy, working tirelessly to help keep this place so special. Consider a donation?

<https://biconservancy.org/>

