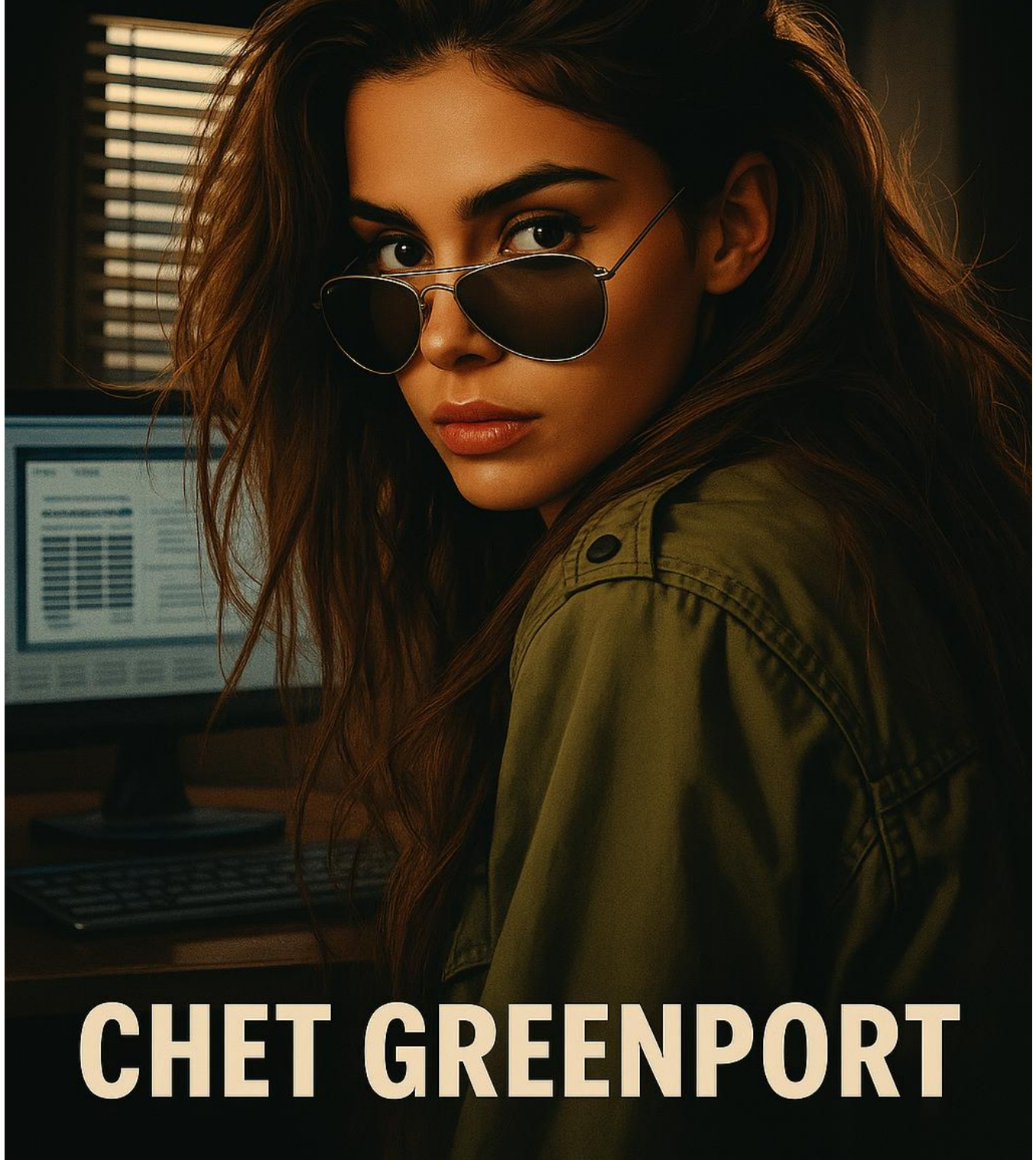


ECHO PROTOCOL



CHET GREENPORT

CHAPTER 1: Crash Landing

Virgin Atlantic Airways, westbound, somewhere over the Atlantic

Up in First Class, Jessica Rodriguez reclines, sipping her second silver tequila. As she scrolls through the seatback screen menu, she feigns interest in a podcast. But she's secretly savoring silence. The noise her earbuds is canceling is small talk from the ogling guy in 3B.

Jessica has come a long way from recovering deleted files and replacing fried motherboards in a cramped computer repair storefront.

After she helped expose AI-driven fake news schemes within the [Consolidated Omnimedia Network](#) and [Epic Global Organization](#), her name is now synonymous with ethical tech. She is a folk hero among cyber-libertarians worldwide; and now in-demand consultant, choosy even when offered six-figure projects.

To give back, Jessica built RIsupport.net, a pro bono portal that helps fellow Rhode Islanders in need, with benefits navigation, emergency resources, mental health check-ins, and real-time chat with volunteers. Frustrated after witnessing glitches in similar services the state has fumbled, she funds this project herself, and maintains its “plumbing” and trains the moderators.

Rodriguez is homeward-bound from some high-ticket work in the UK, so she has been offline while her flight hopped the pond. Her phone pings the instant she lands at JFK for her PVD connection. Now she is back online, and she is horrified.

RIsupport.net has crashed. Service outages, user lockouts, and a hemorrhage of data packets. To her, this is not just a system failure. It's a fracture in the web of hope she had poured her heart into building, a wound that could cause pain up and down the Ocean State.

Making the most of her 90-minute wait, she nurses a Venti, black, at Starbucks in Terminal 4, tracing logs on her laptop.

The code trail is unmistakable. The breach is surgical -- a logic bomb masked as a routine server update. It detonated with surgical precision, triggering a cascade of failures. The code signature doesn't match anything in RIsupport.net's admin. It came from outside.

Drilling-deeper, she finds a chilling tag: *Echo Protocol*.

She hasn't seen that in two years, since she and Action News Providence TV reporters Casey Moran and Gianna Carlucci cracked the Epic Global case.

That investigation – and the earlier Consolidated Omnimedia Network takedown – earned Moran and Carlucci Emmys and the prestigious Edward R. Murrow Award. But – as for many in TV news – their work hours eventually got-old. Swapping deadlines for daylight, Casey is now Director of Corporate Communications for an insurance company; and Gianna has a similar, equally cushy gig with a regional bank. Both companies, and their customers, are suddenly, painfully, impacted by this RIsupport.net crash.

There, in the hubbub of a JFK Starbucks, Jessica concludes, aloud, although alone -- “Looks like we’re gettin’ the band back together.”

CHAPTER 2: The Menu is Rigged

Historic Federal Hill, Rhode Island's real-deal Little Italy, same day, Friday, 515PM

Enter iconic Camille's restaurant and you feel like you've stepped-into a scene from "Goodfellas." It's a beloved throwback where the veal (Vitello alla Francese) is legendary, the background music is Sinatra, and no one questions why that corner table is always reserved.

"J-Rod!" Casey and Gianna call out, from the bar, as Jessica arrives. Hugs and air kisses. After Cosmos there, and with long-time-no-see small talk accomplished, they're seated for dinner. They have some serious business to talk.

As they pick at the Carpaccio di Manzo appetizer, Jessica gets an earful. Gianna: "By noon today, our mortgage re-fi platform had locked out seventy-plus users. 'Missing credentials.'"

Casey leans in, her voice lower. "My office flagged a batch of health claims for 'behavioral volatility.' No explanation. Policy holders just got error messages. 'These aren't data anomalies, Jess.' 'This feels like...targeting.'" Jessica nods, wincing. "I've got logs. Someone didn't just crash it -- they're actually parsing people."

They pause while handsome server Carmine pours the Chardonnay – a 2021 Antinori Umbria Bianco Cervaro della Sala -- Jessica's treat, she can afford it.

Then Casey continues: “This crash doesn’t bottleneck the whole system. It seems to dismiss just certain people. Single mom, two kids, rerouted to voicemail four times in one hour.” And she observes that “low-income seniors are being singled-out as ‘emotionally high-risk.’ What the hell does that mean?”

Gianna: “I had a whole cluster of applications reflagged as ‘pending review,’ even though they had already been approved. Mostly seniors or low-income.”

Suddenly less hungry, Jessica stares at her sea scallops (Capesante alla Giovanni): “This isn’t just form glitches or metadata. The system seems to be scoring, deciding who’s worth a response...and who isn’t.”

The background noise of clinking glasses and happier conversations fades beneath the weight of the moment.

Jessica: “Whatever it is, it’s not an accident. This bug wasn’t meant to crash the system. It was meant to test who gets shut out first.” So she asks her ex-journalist BFFs: “How do we shine a light on this?”

The same thought hits them all at once. In unison: “Let’s ask HC.”

CHAPTER 3: Blue Seas and Red Flags

Saturday afternoon, just after 1

The sea breeze rolls into the open windows of Jessica's sleek modern beachfront home on Sand Hill Cove Road, Point Judith's quiet, moneyed corner.

'First time there for Casey, who, herself, is now also living larger on her insurance company salary. Still – seeing J-Rod's 2Modern furniture, brushed concrete countertops, an espresso machine with more buttons than a cockpit, and THAT VIEW -- she smiles "You've done alright for a girl who used to fix printers with a Swiss Army knife."

Jessica winks "Let's just say the digital apocalypse has a consulting budget."

Gianna arrives, moments later, windblown, with her overnight bag, water bottles, snacks, and a sixpack of Narragansett beer.

They stroll to the nearby Block Island Ferry terminal. Tourists are lined-up with coolers, bikes, sunscreen-slicked kids, and joyfully barking dogs.

As their 3PM boat lands an hour later in Old Harbor, two islander friends are there waving hello.

Harland Clarke is a longtime TV and radio host and news media executive, now largely retired. He hasn't shaven today and tanned ankles suggest that he hasn't worn socks in a while. Beside him, beneath her floppy sun hat, his wife Susan. She recently concluded an accomplished career in corporate finance, trading-in a big salary for \$18 an hour working the counter two days a week at the island airport (remember the TV sitcom "Wings?").

These five share a friendship carved in stone after surviving together the risky Consolidated Omnimedia and Epic Global investigations.

As they toss the girls' luggage into the Clarkes' sandy SUV, Harland deadpans "I assume this isn't a social call."

J-Rod wrinkles her nose: "I brought wine."

"Then you're forgiven," he grins, sliding Jimmy Buffett's "Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes" into the dashboard CD player, and they head up Spring Street to chez Clarke, near the Southeast Lighthouse.

Harland glances at Jessica in the rearview mirror. "So what's up?"

Casey answers before Jessica can. "RIsupport.net is on the fritz..."

Jessica: "...officially. Unofficially? Something worse."

When they arrive, Harland lights the charcoal grill then ducks into the kitchen for a veggie platter. As the others circle Adirondack chairs on the deck, Susan probes “You think it’s intentional?”

Uncorking the Chardonnay she brought, Jessica: “Early media coverage is treating this it like a garden-variety outage. ‘Unexpected technical issues,’ blah blah blah.”

“Meantime,” based on what Casey’s office has already experienced, she adds “people are being hurt.”

Gianna: “We’re seeing patterns. It’s like the system’s running silent bias in the background.”

Harland’s smile fades. “And nobody in a newsroom sees this?”

Casey: “I’ve called buds at Action News. They’re treating it like a power outage, like a car hit a utility pole. No red flags. They’re accustomed to the state’s portal going down so often.”

Gianna – who simply owned the ongoing “Commuter Crisis” story when she covered it for Action News – observes that “The Washington Bridge rebuild is all anyone’s talking about now that new federal funding is in the bank.”

Checking the charcoal, Harland summarizes (the way editors do): “So we’ve got a vital public service platform gone-rogue, vulnerable users suffering, and no one in the press connecting the dots.”

Susan: “Yet.”

He turns, smiling. “Well. Maybe it's time someone gave them a few dots to connect.”

CHAPTER 4: Island Calm, Mainland Chaos

Block Island, Sunday morning, too darn early

After what turned into quite the wine tasting before, during, and after dinner the night before, the coffee bean grinder is getting a workout. Alexa is “playing Mellow 70s Gold,” the Alan Parsons Project “Eye in the Sky.”

Jessica and Susan have been up since first light, building a spreadsheet of RIsupport.net error messages. Casey and Gianna are smothered in desperate Emails from work that have been piling-up since Friday morning. Harland sets the DVR to grab “Meet The Press.”

Once everyone is showered-up, they’re out the door, heading to Block Island State Airport for breakfast at Ellen’s, a hip diner there. Afterward, Susan -- in her crisp New England Airlines polo -- steps behind the counter for a day of passenger check-ins, luggage weigh-ins, and not-smirking as New York accents shave a few pounds off their own declared weight.

Harland shuttles the others to the ferry dock. It’s a handsome, blue-sky morning that already looks like a postcard, and Casey and Gianna would love to linger longer. But tomorrow, their usually-calmer “real jobs” will be even more frantic than the TV news tempo they left behind. And Jessica hasn’t had a proper night’s sleep since London.

After seeing them off at the ferry dock, Harland hits Block Island Grocery (B.I.G. in townie speak) for lunch, Wrap #3, Seafood Salad. Then home, where – with another crankcase coffee on the sundrenched deck – he can't shake the sense that something big is unfolding.

Once a news hound always a news hound, he's mindful of where so many investigations have led since Deep Throat whispered during Watergate: "Follow the money..."

CHAPTER 5: Error 401: Humanity Not Found

Monday, everywhere around Rhode Island

At a Senior Center in Providence, the Help Desk line snakes out the door. Volunteers haul out folding chairs and hand out water bottles. Each time anyone tries to log into the kiosk, they're met with a spinning wheel and the message:

"System maintenance in progress. Please try again later."

A woman near the front of the line is distraught. Her transport to every-Monday dialysis appointments has been canceled. "They say I didn't confirm. I confirmed," she moans.

Anthony and Lisa, hopeful first-time homebuyers, stare at their phones.

"Your closing date has been rescheduled, pending receipt of requested documents."

They uploaded those files last week. When they reply to clarify, their message bounces back:

"Account inactive."

At her pharmacy, Maria, 63, clutches a manila envelope stuffed with paperwork. She's out of blood pressure meds, and the app won't renew her prescription. Behind her, a man jabs at his phone in frustration. "They froze my benefits!"

At the DMV – never a picnic -- Ronnie’s vehicle registration stalls:

“Insurance Coverage Invalid.”

He presents a print-out of his coverage binder. The clerk tries again. Same message.

At Family Court, two parents sit stiffly at opposite ends of a hallway bench. Today were scheduled to finalize their custody agreement. Instead, when they get to the harried clerk, he tells them “We can’t find your records. You’ll have to resubmit. We’re booking new dates in October.” The father slams his palm on the counter. “My daughter starts school in a month! We don’t even know who’s picking her up!”

At home, Jessica Rodriguez scrolls RIsupport.net error logs. The failures are too widespread. And too specific. Patterns emerge. Certain users -- those with complex needs, public insurance, or other issues -- are being flagged, rerouted, or denied altogether.

As she flips through stack traces and system rulesets, it’s clear: The filter isn’t based on need. It’s based on risk, defined by corporate-backed service thresholds. Risk to profitability.

Someone designed this.

Suddenly, Jessica's screen flickers. The error log is replaced by a red banner:

"UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS."

Then, her computer reboots.

Determined, she re-enters, using an admin back door she wrote into the portal's code when she designed it.

Drilling down, she finds a buried metadata field:

Attribution Key = ASR TierQ2

"ASR?" she wonders, digging-deeper.

Contract1684-RI Cluster

Next-level:

Tier Assignment Protocol = Q2 – Deferred Engagement | Resource Drag

A final note flashes before the screen locks her out again:

Routing: Bypass Standard | Route to Evaluation Layer 4

She sits back, stunned.

This isn't just a software bug. It's triage. And someone is getting paid to do it.

CHAPTER 6: Quiet Blacklisting

Providence, as The Monday from Hell continues

It's no day-at-the-beach in the office of First New England Bank & Trust (Gianna Carlucci's employer) or Seacoast Fidelity Assurance Group (Casey Moran's).

On any other Monday, these two might have met for a two-hour lunch, then returned to work, looking busy drafting self-congratulatory 400-word press releases about their companies' civic contributions.

Not today. With customers approaching torches-and-pitchforks fury, these two Corporate Communications executives are neck-deep in crisis management.

Like Jessica Rodriguez, both are beginning to see the patterns. Individual stakeholder dilemmas are merely the trees. Now the forest is coming into focus.

Reading internal case notes, Moran and Carlucci spot the same cryptic term cropping up again and again:

"Client Fit Analysis."

Meanwhile, on Block Island, Susan Clarke's dining room table looks like a war room. As Jessica Rodriguez sends her new data fields, Susan drops them into that spreadsheet of RIsupport.net error messages they had built on Sunday morning.

Tagging entries by user demographic and service type, Susan highlights the overlap between system dropouts and people flagged in backend notes as “*non-conforming*,” “*non-prioritized*,” or -- most chilling -- “*low ROI*.”

Zip code cross-tabs demonstrate fewer problems for people living in tony Barrington and East Greenwich than in urban areas like Central Falls and South Providence.

What Susan sees confirms Jessica's gut feeling: This isn't system overload.

Upstairs in his cluttered home office, Harland Clarke is onto a scent. Since Jessica tipped him off about metadata references buried deep in the crash logs, he's been looking-into “ASR,” and finds Applied Societal Risk, LLC.

This isn't just another management consulting firm peddling efficiency templates. It's a predictive modeling outfit selling quiet exclusion.

The pitch:

“Preemptive Disengagement: Minimizing Exposure to High-Risk Service Users Before They Become Liabilities.”

Among client testimonials on ASR's web site: kudos from the First New England Bank & Trust CEO. And more praise from his Seacoast Fidelity Assurance Group counterpart.

In plenty of time to upend whatever Action News Providence had planned for its 6PM newscast, Harland texts anchor Gus Vitale, his pal, confidant, and comrade in the Consolidated Omnimedia Network and Epic Group Organization investigations.

CHAPTER 7: “This just in...”

Action News Providence control room, Monday 6PM

Opening video montage. Stirring orchestral theme music.

Announcer: “Now, from Southern New England’s most-trusted source, THIS is Action News Providence.”

Director: “Camera 1, go Gus.”

“Tonight, an Action News Exclusive: A stunning discovery involving two of the most respected businesses in Rhode Island. I’m Gus Vitale.”

Cut to video of long lines at assistance agencies, state offices, hospitals and elsewhere. Caption across the bottom of the screen: *RIsupport.net CRASH.*

Gus’s voiceover continues:

“For several days since the usually-helpful *RIsupport.net* portal went down, thousands of Rhode Islanders have been inconvenienced, some imperiled, as appointments are being canceled, applications and case files go lost, and telephone help lines are unanswered.”

Director: “Camera 1, and next caption:” *Action News EXCLUSIVE*

“Action News has learned that this vital platform has been hacked.

Investigators tracing the intrusion have identified the culprit as Applied Societal Risk LLC.”

Cut to video of ARS web site, Gus continues:

“It’s a shadowy tech firm whose algorithm hacked-into *RIsupport.net*, and trained the portal to deny support to certain users in need -- based on

perceived profitability. And two of our state's legacy businesses are implicated.”

Cut to B-roll video of First New England Bank & Trust's main branch downtown and the Seacoast Fidelity Assurance Group home office.

Gus voiceover: “We are reaching-out-to both firms for comment, later tonight, on Action News Nightcast at Eleven...”

Cut to head shot of Jessica Rodriguez, lifted from a Fortune magazine profile, Gus continues:

“...when we will introduce you to the tech expert-turned-philanthropist who built and personally funds RIsupport.net. She ‘has the receipts’ that prove these bombshell charges.”

CHAPTER 8: The Morning After

Tuesday morning, 606AM

Gus Vitale is the ultimate broadcasting split-shifter, anchoring TV news weeknights at 6PM, and hosting a weekday morning radio talk show beginning at 6AM.

And after what happened – and didn’t – on TV the night before, NOBODY was calling his radio show to talk about the Washington Bridge commuter crisis on Tuesday morning.

“Recapping the Action News Nightcast” his early-riser listeners might have missed at 11PM, he plays audio from “a raw, riveting interview with Jessica Rodriguez, livestreamed from what she described only as ‘a secure location’” (her shuttered computer repair shop, bathed in shadow and stripped of any identifiers).

Her voice was calm, steady, and damning as she walked viewers through on-screen evidence that translated arcane lingo about code injections and metadata to plain English a child would understand.

“I built RIsupport.net to give people access. Now, it’s being used to lock them out. And here’s the proof.”

Narrating a diagram Action News had prepared, she traced the path to Applied Societal Risk, LLC; and two of its clients, First New England Bank & Trust and Seacoast Fidelity Assurance Group.

Then came the kicker, THE...WORST...POSSIBLE move for executives in hot water: Both CEOs – who had been invited to respond, on live TV – no-showed. No statement. No spokesperson. Just two empty chairs and a three-word caption at the bottom of the screen: *“Declined to Appear.”*

By 8AM at First New England Bank & Trust, the mood in the executive suite is volcanic. Overnight, stock chatter turned sour, and the firm’s legal team is already fielding calls from regulators and reporters.

“We need to control the narrative,” the CEO bellows. “Carlucci, you’re crafting the official response. I want a statement by 9 -- firm, assertive, deny everything. Frame it as a baseless media attack. And start feeding friendly financial reporters the line that we’ve been victimized by rogue code.”

Across town, same scene at Seacoast Fidelity Assurance Group, where Casey Moran is getting the same marching orders.

“Tell them this story is flawed,” the boss barks. “You used to work with these TV people. You’re our communicator. Communicate! Make it clear

we were never aware of anything unethical. Blame it on an overzealous vendor. Shift the focus to cybersecurity. Emphasize our commitment to user data. And this Jessica Rodriguez woman? Paint her as a disgruntled outsider, a techno-geek trying to drum-up business.”

Casey and Gianna are handed talking points drafted by corporate legal counsel and PR teams, worded to deflect blame and manufacture doubt.

“Client fit analysis” becomes “user experience optimization.”

“Low ROI” is now “resource rebalancing.”

Their statements are to begin: *“We take these allegations seriously.”*

And end with: *“We remain committed to serving our communities.”*

The night before, Carlucci and Moran had watched, together, that 11PM newscast, solid work done by former colleagues. Their phones had begun ringing, nonstop, after the 6PM newscast the night before, so they are letting calls bounce to voicemail. Messages from concerned friends and family ask “You knew about this?”

By 9AM – the deadline given for spin statements – two irate CEOs barge into two unoccupied offices, and find letters of resignation.

By close of business, two others are suddenly unemployed. After hastily-convened Zoom board meetings, the bank and insurance company

announced that their CEOs have “stepped-down.” And they stepped-into FBI Cyber Division custody, lawyered-up clammed-up.

What next for Casey and Gianna?

Figure out health insurance.

CHAPTER 9: This Time, Their Terms

One month later.

Slater Mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, is widely recognized as the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution. Built in 1793, it was the first successful water-powered cotton-spinning factory in the United States, marking a turning point in manufacturing. Today, it's a museum.

Other old mill buildings around the city, long-shuttered, have been handsomely restored as upscale condominiums and entrepreneurial work spaces, one of which draws a crowd for a new revolution, at a lavishly catered luncheon launch party for a new company.

Over the entrance to the suite, a banner: "Your Network: Tech, Truth, and Trust."

As a champagne toast is readied, business partners Casey Moran and Gianna Carlucci quip: "We've burned-bridges with three employers in three years, so here's to unemployability!"

Following applause, they introduce "our partners in cyber-crime-busting," Jessica Rodriguez and Harland and Susan Clarke. "And the hardest workin' guy in broadcasting. He's on radio in the morning, and TV at night, so we're interrupting his nap time. Give it up for Gus Vitale!"

Exposing scandal-stained institutions, Casey and Gianna have become something rare: whistleblowers people admire. No longer scripted or silenced, they will now do what they always wanted to do: Tell the truth, without a corporate muzzle. Thus their new venture, Your Network, which invites fellow informants, everywhere.

So the last two that many expect to see among well-wishers this day are Chairmen of the Boards of First New England Bank & Trust and Seacoast Fidelity Assurance Group, toting big ceremonial prop checks representing generous mea culpa money to seed Your Network.

Other benefactors chip-in remotely on a whole-wall video screen. One, a prominent local philanthropist, comparing Moran and Carlucci to Erin Brockovich, donates the entire first year's rent for Your Network's office.

And although the Rhode Island Broadcasters Association represents the interests of licensed TV and radio stations that are now defending against alternative media players like these two, here's RIBA president George Williams announcing that member stations will contribute no-charge airtime for *Your Network Cyber-Scam Alerts* delivered by Casey and Gianna.

As guests graze the sumptuous spread, Jessica takes them aside for see-ya-later hugs. With her RIsupport.net now re-platformed with open-source

code, transparency metrics, and watchdog access built in, she whispers
“Gotta scram, flight to DC. Let’s hit the island when I’m back.”

-- 30 --

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. As do the self-publishers blogging and podcasting, telling the stories legacy media won't.

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/>

