

TRUSTED VOICES

WHEN CREDIBILITY IS A COMMODITY



CHET GREENPORT

Chapter 1: Flatter and Scatter

Providence, Rhode Island, Thursday

When Casey Moran's phone rings, she is in makeup at Action News Providence, minutes before a report she will deliver in the 5PM newscast. Seeing area code 212, she's intrigued, but has to let it bounce to voicemail.

As did Gianna Carlucci, who also missed an unexpected call three minutes earlier while poised for her live shot from the Washington Bridge rebuild site.

Both journalists had earned wide acclaim after [blowing the whistle on their own company](#)'s under-the-table deal to sell positive news coverage to politicians and government contractors and other special interests. When the scandal detonated, it left corporate brass in handcuffs and these two wrapped in a protective layer of public goodwill, corporate fear, and unspoken lifetime job security. In short: they are now untouchable.

Both calls came from someone whose attention many upwardly-mobile TV news people crave. Tina Powers is VP/News Talent Acquisition for Epic Global Organization, a corporate colossus that owns stations in every city big enough to have more than one airport, and in dozens of smaller markets. Including a Rhode Island station struggling to compete with Action News Providence.

Powers is notorious for spotting rising stars in minor league markets, especially where she can poach the competition's talent. Her M.O. is legend.

Step One: Compliment them so hard that their mirrors blush.

Step Two: Offer a lucrative promotion too far away to trigger non-compete contract provisions.

Step Three: Relocate them to larger markets, "optimize their look," then watch the ratings rise.

Casey and Gianna have no idea that theirs are already among Most Wanted headshots on the conference room wall in Epic's corporate office in New York. They are about to be seduced by soft-focus dreams, flattered by flammable praise, and — if Powers has her way — the faces of a plot to disrupt TV news entirely.

Opportunity knocks.

Almost too perfectly.

Chapter 2: Sip and Speculate

30 minutes later

With credits still rolling as the 5PM newscast ends, Casey texts Gianna to confirm a dinner meet-up with Jessica Rodriguez. She is the tech whiz who assisted in the Consolidated OmniMedia Network takedown, now their bestie “J-Rod.”

Fermata is an industrial-chic downtown Providence bistro where the lighting is soft and the pours are generous.

Jessica hasn’t arrived yet, so Casey and Gianna duck into a booth in the back, away from ogling bros at the bar. They order Cosmos.

“Look at this” they say in unison, holding up their phones. Seeing the same Missed Call number, they’re laughing, as Jessica arrives: “What did I miss?” she asks, waving at the server and mouthing “Three” regarding the cocktails.

Casey plays the message, a confident, savvy voice: “Hello Casey. This is Tina Powers at Epic Global Organization in New York. I want to say how much I admired your reporting during the, well, ‘difficult’ period your station recently endured. It didn’t go unnoticed. I’d love to chat – privately, of course -- about your career.”

Gianna arches an eyebrow. “Word-for-word,” she exclaims, tapping her own phone.

“She’s good,” Casey admits. “And she knows it,” Gianna smirks. “She called us in sequence.”

“So what am oy, chopped livuh?” Jessica quips, in a mock Noo Yawk accent. They guffaw, pausing the conversation as the server delivers.

“So tell me about this Epic,” J-Rod asks.

“Big time!” Moran and Carlucci reply, again in unison. “We clobber their station here,” Casey explains, “but they kick ratings butt in big markets.”

Curious J-Rod is already Googling Epic Global Organization on her iPhone. “Whoa. THOSE checks don’t bounce,” she reckons, clicking-through financial statements.

For years, Action News Providence has been a career stepping-stone for TV faces now familiar in New York and Boston and other bigs, and on networks. Yet much of its success owes to legacy players like 30+ year anchor Gus Vitale, who – with Casey, Gianna, and Jessica – led the Consolidated exposé. Like other station lifers, Gus has made his family a comfortable home in the scenic Ocean State, where younger Moran and

Carlucci have found their footing -- although Newport's pricey menus, monthly auto loan payments, outlandish rents, and parsimonious wardrobe stipends keep them daydreaming about bigger bucks.

For a moment, they sip, and sit in silence broken only by the clink of glassware and soft laughter from other tables, and the sound system playing "Dreams" by Fleetwood Mac: "Now here you go again, you say you want your freedom..."

Still squinting at her iPhone, Jessica suggests confiding in mentor Harland Clarke, a longtime broadcast talent and executive, now friend, largely retired on scenic Block Island. He had their back during the risky Consolidated investigation, and he understands what makes people like Tina Powers tick.

Casey texts Harland: "Are you and Susan around this weekend?"

Chapter 3: Back to The Block

Friday

Casey, Gianna, and Jessica catch the 4PM ferry. Casey buys a round of Narragansett tallboys, Jessica takes selfies, for which Gianna makes faces, and they all watch the mainland shrink behind them, and squint ahead for the island 12 miles offshore.

As they land an hour later Susan Clarke is waving there at the dock. With hugs and air kisses, they toss luggage into her husband's SUV (long-time-no-carwash). Dodging rented mopeds, they head up Spring Street toward the Clarkes' home, where fellow sleuths from that Consolidated episode are always welcome.

Harland is out on the deck, looking the part in a faded Red Sox sweatshirt with vodka martini in hand ("Goose, up, super-cold, super-dry, slightly dirty, one bleu cheese olive). He has swordfish kabobs on the grill, and Alexa is playing Jimmy Buffett (RIP).

"HC!" the smiling houseguests cheer in unison. After hugs, Harland tells them to "drop your bags upstairs, then come down and tell me about Epic." Wide-eyed beyond-curious wondering how he knew, they were back in less than a minute.

They reconvene on the deck, Adirondack chairs circled around a cheese board worthy of a hedge fund conference. Susan is a foodie. She holds up two wine bottles, Chardonnay in one hand, Pinot Noir in the other.

Kabobs are served, but Casey, Gianna, and J-Rod are hungrier for information.

“Tina Powers reached out to me,” he confides. “I have worked with – and competed with – her over the years. She’s the real deal, brilliant, relentless, empowered to offer you a life-changing deal...and three steps ahead of whoever thinks they’re playing her.”

He continues, voice low and steady: “Look, every promising talent eventually gets The Call. I’ve gotten those calls and I’ve made them. New adventure, bigger bucks, wardrobe allowance, maybe even a makeup artist who actually knows your undertones. It’s seductive. But here’s what you need to ask yourselves:

One: Are you being offered a job...or a role in someone else’s script?

Two: Will this move grow your career -- or just inflate your profile and shrink your autonomy?

Three: Are you leaving something broken...or just chasing something shinier?”

Susan nods knowingly, as the girls listen, rapt. HC says “Guys who are Gus Vitale’s age are being sidelined by big-city stations, replaced by up-and-comers your age. THOSE guys would kill for a smaller-market gig like his.”

Polishing-off his martini: “You’ve got bird-in-hand jobs right now. Stability. Credibility. Community. You have personal cell phone numbers for two governors, four senators, and a half-dozen U.S. Reps. You can walk into Capital Grille without a reservation and get seated. People know you here. That’s power you don’t have to audition for.”

“But,” he allowed, “I get it. You’re unencumbered, and now famous enough to be tempting to someone like Tina. When the next step calls, just make sure it isn’t off a cliff.”

Casey and Gianna call it a night, and Susan steps inside to close-down the kitchen. Jessica lingers, whispering to Harland: “You didn’t tell them everything.”

Harland nods. “No. But I will.”

Chapter 4: The Plot

Block Island, Saturday morning, early

The morning fog is just lifting as Casey Moran steps onto the deck with a mug of strong coffee and a squint that says *barely slept*. Gianna Carlucci follows, barefoot, hair still wet, quaffing deep drafts of refreshing salt air.

Harland Clarke is in his kitchen flipping blueberry pancakes, while his wife Susan is at the dinner table flipping through folders on her laptop. Jessica Rodriguez joins her, with iPad in-hand and caffeine and code running through her bloodstream. Both had been up for a while.

Casey's phone buzzes. "She just texted me!"

Then Gianna's does. "Me too!"

Same message to both, from Tina Powers: "Let me know when you're free to talk, even now over the weekend. Completely confidential. Nothing formal, just a chat."

"That's not outreach," Harland mutters, "That's orchestration."

He came up with a list of recent Epic Global Organization hires, courtesy of a fellow consultant. And canny J-Rod – who has never met a firewall she couldn't jump -- managed to scrape a slide deck from an unsecure Epic

Global Organization server. It's an internal "EGO Advance" strategy briefing:

Phase One: Talent Repositioning.

Phase Two: Trusted Voice Deployment.

Phase Three: Narrative Synchronization in Local Broadcast Channels.

"They're building a network," Susan concludes, "inside the network."

"To what end?" Gianna wonders.

Jessica clicks into another folder. "I found a demo, video of stories that aired on Epic stations in Detroit and Las Vegas. Same cadence. Same language. They're reading local stories, but the framing is identical."

She hits play. Video shows parents at a PTA meeting nodding proudly as a school board member rails about "The Great Climate Panic." Cut to a classroom poster about "Fossil Fuels Powering Progress." Signing-off the report, the reporter concludes "Here at Derby Middle School, teachers are separating facts from fear about the so-called 'climate crisis.'"

Casey winces. "That's messaging. Not journalism."

"These scripts," Jessica deduces, "are AI-assisted, sentiment-optimized, and filtered for demographic resonance. It's not propaganda. It's persuasion with a welcome face."

Harland folds his arms. “And that’s why they want you two.”

As a caring aunt would, Susan advises: “You’re not just safe in the job you have now. You’re credible. You just took down corrupt executives in your own company. You will probably win ‘a Murrow.’ Epic didn’t just notice your work. They see you as leverage.”

“We earned that cred’,” Gianna says. “They want to rent it?”

Meanwhile, in New York...

Chapter 5: Saturday Session

Epic Global Organization corporate HQ, 24th Floor, Midtown Manhattan

You've seen conference rooms like this in movies. Glass walls, whisper-quiet air conditioning, a view that makes even billionaires pause mid-espresso. At the head of the table sits Tina Powers, the only person in the room not fiddling with a device.

She doesn't need notes. Everyone else there works for her, whether they realize it or not.

Displayed on the oversized screen are two headshots, lifted from the Action News Providence web site: Casey Moran and Gianna Carlucci. Both smiling. Both dangerous, in the way truth-tellers can be.

Tina stands to begin her briefing, matter-of-factly. "They are in our Engagement phase. Initial voicemails landed. Text follow-ups delivered. Assume they're curious."

Also at the table:

- Neil Riggins, Audience Intelligence. He tweaks algorithms that measure "talent-to-viewer resonance."
- Vera Nash, Legal Affairs. She hasn't cracked a smile since Q3 last year.

- Chandler Kwan, Chief Technical Officer, who speaks without looking up from his screen. “We’ve captured enough broadcast hours of both already. Deep-sim prototypes are stable at 82% realism. Once we onboard them, we can scale synthetic inserts to 90% plus.”

Tina distills the mission statement: “The media trust void is real. We are not in the reporting business anymore. We’re in the credibility leasing business.”

Chandler nods. “Think of them as holographic opinion leaders.”

Vera finally speaks. “And if they say no?”

Tina smiles, confidently. “They won’t.” Tapping her iPad, the screen fades to an aerial photo of otherworldly summertime Newport. “We’re throwing them a party,” she winks. “Very Gatsby” Neil grins. “Exactly,” Tina says. “They’ll feel important.”

Neil adds, “Per our psych’ profiling, both are wary of pitches -- but they respond well to earned recognition.”

“Which we will surround them with,” Tina affirms, as the meeting ends.

Everyone else leaves, Tina remains, alone in the conference room, with two smiling faces on the screen.

Chapter 6: The Invitation

Clarke's home, Block Island, Saturday just after 11AM

The fog has lifted, revealing the kind of postcard day tourists flock here for.

Casey Moran's phone rings. Guess who. Tina Powers, this time live. Casey answers, putting the call on speaker.

Tina's voice is velvet dipped in charm. "Casey, first of all, wow. Just *wow*. What you did on the Consolidated investigation? That was courageous. And the way you did it? That's the kind of integrity we are building our next chapter around."

Casey narrows her eyes. "So this is about a job?"

"Not exactly," Tina half-explains. "It's about a conversation. We'd love to test a soft-launch opportunity in a big market nowhere near Providence. And we'll make it worth your while, but no pressure. Just a chance to explore what's possible."

Skeptical Jessica shoots Casey a look that says, *You two are being stroked like pet cats.*

“We’re flattered,” Moran replies carefully. “Tina, I’m with Gianna Carlucci right now.” Gianna: “Hi Ms. Powers.”

“Call me Tina, Gianna. Hello,” she smiles. “I have also been following your work on the Washington Bridge commuter crisis. Action News *owns* that story, and I’m eager to meet both of you in person. Later today you will receive an invitation to a special event we’re planning up your way, in Newport. Private party, press-free, stress-free, not an interview. It’s a celebration. And you belong there. Interesting, smart people, including a few you may know.”

She doesn’t have to name names. Casey and Gianna already suspect Harland will be there.

“Talk soon,” Powers says, ending the call.

For several seconds that seem like minutes, they all look at each other, until Harland says “Let’s head into town and grab lunch.”

Because Casey and Gianna will be working on Sunday newscasts, they retrieve their bags so they can catch an afternoon boat back to the mainland. Jessica’s computer repair shop is closed Sundays, so she will spend another night with the hospitable Clarkes. These three need to talk.

As they all pile into the SUV, J-Rod shoots HC a look that says “If you don’t tell them, I will.”

Chapter 7 – Only the View is Calm

Water Street, Block Island, Saturday, noonish.

The porch at the iconic National Hotel wraps around the front of the old building like a well-worn shawl. Diners feast on a view that turns a meal into a memory. Below, Old Harbor waters shimmer and flags flap in the breeze. Soundtrack: the cry of seagulls as they glide above.

At a five-top along the railing, Harland, Susan, Casey, Gianna, and Jessica order lobster rolls and iced teas that seem to refill themselves by magic. If heaven has a menu, this is it.

“So,” Harland begins, trying to sound casual, “are you two psyched for this ‘celebration’ in Newport?”

Casey already sounds wary. “You mean the ‘not-an-interview’ where we mingle with other ‘interesting, smart people’ while Tina Powers sizes us up like produce?” Gianna piles-on. “She practically said, ‘No pressure, just your entire future.’”

Jessica stabs a cucumber slice with unnecessary force. “Okay, I wasn’t going to say anything yet, but if I don’t, I’ll chew through this napkin.” Everyone else stops chewing.

J-Rod – who seems to have a skeleton key to every online lock – announces: “I’ve been checking-out Tina Powers and the others within Epic behind this ‘soft-launch’ scheme.”

Her conclusion: It’s not about starting a show. It’s about launching a new network brand, quietly backed by a conglomerate with data-mining arms and a political agenda.

Casey leans in, the way reporters do, as though taking notes. “What kind of conglomerate?”

Harland: “Same kind you were working for before we busted ‘em. They’re offering influence without accountability. High salaries. Total freedom... until you’re in-too-deep and too-well-paid to walk away.”

Susan folds her napkin. Having witnessed her husband’s career travails, she tells Casey and Gianna “It won’t feel like selling out. Not at first. It’ll feel like growing up. Like being smart with your brand. Then one day, you’ll be handed a script you can’t edit. Or a topic you can’t touch. And you’ll realize you’re no longer reporting – you’re endorsing.”

Jessica: “That story from Detroit? I found the raw video in a folder called “Reporter Replication Render.”

What Harland suspected has become painfully clear. What Epic Global Organization is planning is not to *prevent* what got Consolidated OmniMedia Network in hot water...they're trying to *perfect* it.

Chapter 8: The Bash

Newport Harbor, a week later.

As the launch skims across the water, Casey and Gianna sit in the bow, quietly gasping as they approach the MV Axiom – a Benetti 120 – five staterooms, Jacuzzi on the sun deck, bigger kitchen than Jessica’s walk-up. What? No helipad?

Approaching the yacht, Gus whispers to J-Rod, “Nobody throws a party like this for free.” She -- wearing borrowed heels and classic Little Black Dress -- and a snarky mood -- wisecracks “I’m just here for the Wi-Fi.”

As they board, they are greeted by uniformed crew members, a steel drum band, and Tina Powers. She is radiant in a silk wrap dress the color of sea glass, gold sandals, and oversized sunglasses. “Welcome! So nice to finally meet you in person. Let me introduce you around.”

The guest list is Epic Global Organization executives, and “names” from New York and owned stations elsewhere – but, careful to avoid Action News Providence finding out that the competition is wooing their people -- no Rhode Islanders. Other than Gus Vitale, whom Harland suggested-onto the guest list, assuring Tina of his discretion. And she bought it.

Guests are offered oysters, truffle crisps, and cocktails named after virtues, the signature slogan shown on-screen (with the company's stock symbol) at the end of Epic stations' newscasts: "Integrity, Clarity, Trust."

As the sun sets and party vibe glows -- ding-ding-ding -- Tina offers a toast. Not specifically in their honor, but what's happening is unmistakable. As Powers praises "all the journalists who remind us what accountability means," and "voices that keep institutions honest," eyes drift toward Moran and Carlucci. And Rodriguez, who looks like a Bond Girl, effortlessly stunning and unapproachably indifferent.

Tina plays host with flawless rhythm. When she sidles up to Harland at the bar she plays the nostalgia card: "You still carrying that Murrow quote in your wallet?" she teases. "Only when I need to clear a room," Harland chuckles. Pretending to laugh, she lowers her voice. "I know they listen to you. That's why you and Gus are here."

Alone along the railing out on deck, Jessica is on her second silver tequila; and her iPhone, trying to hack the yacht's password. She doesn't look up as leering Neil Riggins approaches.

"Jessica Rodriguez! We've heard good things."

"Such as?" she replies, icy.

Riggins leans in, smarmy. “There could be a place for you in this ‘EGO Advance’ project we’re planning. We know that you were a big player in the bombshell Consolidated investigation. We like forward thinkers. Hybrid minds. You’d be amazed what we’re building behind the curtain. Perhaps you and I might...”

Interrupting, Jessica tilts her head. “You want a hacker who doesn’t ask questions?”

Cackling that faux laugh that Gene Hackman used to do when he played the heavy, he replies “We want people who can tell the story *before* the algorithm decides what it is.”

Masking her disapproval, Jessica summons a smile, excusing herself “to go powder my nose,” and she grabs another tequila on her way to the loo. Winking, the bartender makes it a double.

Witnessing the whole scene from astern, Gus Vitale and Harland Clarke are both holding drinks they haven’t touched. Gus scans the crowd. “What’s the play?”

Harland, without hesitation. “Make them feel seen. Make them feel safe. Make them think it was their idea.”

“Will it work?” Gus asks, rhetorically. Harland sips his drink, finally. “It’s working.”

Up at the bow, Casey and Gianna gaze at historic Fort Adams and Newport’s lights glittering in the distance.

Gianna speaks first. “This is a hell of a bash.” Casey nods. “Feels like we’re on a ship that’s already sailed.”

Pretending not to have eavesdropped, Tina appears behind them, suddenly, holding two flutes of champagne. “You’re not late,” she smiles. “You’re right on time.”

Chapter 9: “Testing...Testing...”

A week later, after paperwork formalities

Casey Moran eyes the digital clock on the wall of Harland Clarke's home office as it counts down to the scheduled video call. He gives Gianna Carlucci a wink, asking sarcastically, “Ready to meet the future of journalism?”

Gianna smirks. “Let’s give them the version of us they want. Polished. Compliant. Completely naive.” Seated off-camera, Harland and Susan and Jessica Rodriguez exchange glances.

As the video chat screen opens Tina Powers appears, flanked by deferential audience intel’ specialist Neil Riggins, tech expert Chan Kwan, and expressionless corporate counsel Vera Nash.

“Casey, Gianna, we’re excited to move forward,” Tina begins, her voice syrupy smooth. “This test project is a good way to explore how your voices might align with Epic’s direction.”

“We agree,” Casey fibs, speaking for herself and Gianna, who adds “a trial balloon makes sense. We’re ready.”

Tina explains. “We want you to produce a story for a series we’re calling ‘The New American Optimists,’ profiles of twenty-somethings who challenge emerging trends.”

Riggins chimes in: “We’re looking for stories that inspire trust and confidence for tomorrow in the institutions that have shaped our past.”

Barely suppressing her gag reflex, Gianna nods as though thoughtfully, “Yes, positive, forward-looking.” Unflinchingly, Casey nods in agreement; as Harland and Susan and Jessica stifle scoffs off-camera.

“For this piece,” Tina explains, “we’ll start you in familiar territory, the offshore wind hazard.” With the USA’s first such installation off Block Island, and others now online around New England and Long Island and greenlighted elsewhere, Moran and Carlucci are already read-in.

“We’re sending you source material,” Kwan tells them; Nash stipulating “Draft by Friday, our people will take it from there.”

“We can work with that,” Casey replies with a synthetic smile as the call ends.

Making DARN sure it has, Harland deadpans “That went well.”

“So well it makes me want to shower,” J-Rod cracks.

“Showtime!” Susan smiles, irreverently.

Chapter 10: Loaded Questions

Two days later, in Harland Clarke's home office on Block Island, discreetly distant from Action News Providence management oversight.

When Tina Powers assigned them an interview subject, Casey Moran and Gianna Carlucci suggested simply convening a Zoom call. But Epic insisted on using their proprietary video suite, a sophisticated platform that records in 4K and uploads directly to Epic's servers.

Harland and Susan and Jessica Rodriguez monitor off-camera, ears open, fingers crossed.

The guest is 26-year-old influencer Blake Caulfield, who bears an amusing resemblance to Dr. Sheldon Cooper from "Big Bang Theory."

He pops up on-screen from what looks like a pricey high-rise in Jersey City. Open collar under a sport coat, AirPods in, and the distracted, breezy arrogance of someone accustomed to thinking himself the smartest guy in the room, seldom challenged.

"Hey hey!" he waves, claiming (based on prep from Tina Powers) "Big fan. 'Saw the Consolidated stories. Bold stuff." Smiling, Casey feigns humble gratitude. "Thanks Blake! This is pretty straightforward. Gianna and I are

profiling young voices shaping the future. So just be yourself.” Growing-up entitled, that won’t be a stretch for young Caulfield.

Now recording, Carlucci begins: “We’re interested in how offshore wind fits into your vision for energy resilience and investment logic.” Chiming-in with the split-script technique which makes two-on-one interviews flow, Moran continues: “Blake, you have written that offshore wind is ‘America’s moonshot for the grid.’ What do you mean by that?”

Always hungry to be quoted, Blake is off-to-the-races: “It’s about national ambition, right? Offshore wind isn’t just about electricity. It’s about signaling -- confidence, momentum. It’s infrastructure that makes people feel like the future is already here. It’s vibes-driven economics.”

Gianna leads him where he’s already heading: “But real dollars are involved. Some critics argue the return on investment just is not penciling-out...” Casey: “...especially when you factor in construction delays, maintenance, insurance, and weather risk.”

“Oh, totally,” Blake agrees. “The raw math sucks. But ROI isn’t always financial. Sometimes it’s reputational. Political. Symbolic. You throw a few billion at turbines so you can say you did. That buys narrative control.” Off-camera, Harland, Susan, and Jessica roll their eyes.

Casey keeps her tone disarmingly neutral. “So, despite the numbers, offshore wind can be a political win?”

Slightly off-balance, Blake hesitates. “Well, define ‘win.’ Is it grid impact? Not really. Is it energy independence? Meh. But is it a PR victory? Hell yes. You’re buying goodwill with one hand while the other’s still hugging coal.”

Gianna, seizing the moment: “Any unintended consequences you think are under-discussed?”

“Oh, tons!” Blake, back on-message: “Whale sonar confusion. Fishing zones turned into no-go areas. Transmission lines that piss off coastal towns. And eventually, rate hikes. But those stories don’t trend. You bury ‘em under breathtaking drone shots and ribbon cuttings.”

He laughs, like it’s all a game. “It’s not a conspiracy. It’s just a comms strategy. You guys know how that works.” Casey smiles. “We sure do.”

Gianna: “One more question, devil’s advocate: If you had to pitch offshore wind to a skeptical ratepayer in New England, what’s your best sell?”

Blake takes the bait. “Simple. You don’t pitch the wind. You pitch the future. Paint it green, slap a flag on it, and keep the fine print in the footnotes.”

The interview ends with polite goodbyes. As soon as the feed ends – and, again, Harland makes certain it has – Casey asks “Did that just happen?” “OH yuh!” Gianna laughs, “On the record, in 4K, and all.”

Jessica refers to notes she made on her laptop: “We have contradictions, whistle-worthy admissions, and enough material for a think piece *and* a satire.”

Applauding, Susan surmises that “The trick now is to keep it dressed in Epic drag until the curtain drops.”

Casey is pacing, energized. “We start with the script they expect. All the right words. Then we slip in the truth. Their guy. Their feed. Their fingerprints.”

Chapter 11: Nice Try

Wakefield, Rhode Island

After two days spent juggling their Action News Providence day-jobs -- and their after-hours preparing to torpedo the EGO Advance scam -- Casey Moran and Gianna Carlucci reconvene with Jessica Rodriguez in her cramped computer repair storefront.

They submit a draft script, which has been previewed by confidant and coworker Gus Vitale and Harland and Susan Clarke. Lean, economical copy wrapped-around interview sound bites is upbeat on the surface -- but with embedded truths. Subtle references invite viewers' inference that shadowy interests are discouraging renewable energy innovation.

J-Rod had added invisible tracking code to the document before it was uploaded to Epic's content management system, "to show us who touches it, how it changes, and where it goes" once submitted, which she monitors.

At startling AI-velocity speed, Epic's edit trail lights-up like a Christmas tree. The tone of their copy is softened. Quotes are changed. A line about regulatory evasion was converted to praise for "nimble innovation." The piece was rebranded with a new headline: Bright Minds, Bright Futures.

J-Rod forwards this scrubbed version to Gus, Harland, and Susan, now conferenced on speaker.

They are more stunned than surprised. “They’re not even subtle,” Susan scowls. Gus: “You saw the size of that yacht, right?”

Suddenly, usually-cool J-Rod freezes. “We just got pinged from an encrypted relay server. Someone inside Epic is using our tracking code to send us a message.”

On her screen, a single line appears in a secure chat window: “I saw what you did. I’m not the only one. Don’t trust the next meeting invite.”

Harland breaks a fearful silence. “This game just got real.”

Chapter 12: Small World

Next night, 6PM Pacific Time

Like most industries, TV news talent is a community. As friends' careers advance, far-flung reporters keep in touch. Like baseball players who suffer trades and exploit free agency, these TV players are one big extended family, whether they are teammates or their stations are rivals.

So imagine her surprise when an anchor at Epic's station in Las Vegas sight-reads her teleprompter's intro for "this special report from our Gianna Carlucci," her years-earlier classmate at Syracuse.

The story was unrecognizable compared to the package Casey and Gianna uploaded to Epic. This new version includes convincing deepfakes of them saying things they never said.

They were also hearing from friends at Epic stations in Phoenix, Pittsburgh, and Raleigh-Durham.

Small-font boilerplate in the Memorandum of Understanding that Moran and Carlucci had signed grants Epic "all right, title, and interest, in perpetuity" to what was described to them as a one-off pilot project, Translation: legalese for "we own your face now."

J-Rod quickly downloads this story from two different Epic stations. Both packages are identical, except for the sign-offs that the Casey and Gianna AI clones have customized for each station. In the Raleigh-Durham version, they drawl slightly.

“That wasn’t syndication,” Gus Vitale frowns when he sees the clips. “That was theft.”

As impressed as they were offended, watching their own faces lie to them only steeled the resolve for what Moran and Carlucci were planning next.

“They faked our faces,” Casey vows, “Now they can watch those faces go live...with the truth.”

Chapter 13: Feed This

Next day, 6PM Eastern Time, control room, Action News Providence

Opening video montage, stirring orchestral theme music, announcer:

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

Studio camera 1, two-shot.

“Tonight, an Action News Exclusive, but it sure wasn’t meant to be! I’m Casey Moran.”

“And I’m Gianna Carlucci. This *is* really us, and this is *not*...”

Cut to video from the Las Vegas deepfake story, their clones’ custom station sign-off. Splice to similar clips from Pittsburgh and Raleigh versions.

Casey: “This is what happens when corporate media crosses the line...again.”

Gianna: “When our company tried it, we took-out our own trash, and our competition was quick to pile-on.”

Casey: “So much for holier-than-thou. Our investigation has uncovered evidence that Epic Global Organization is now abusing Artificial Intelligence to steal our identities and sell you fake news, bought-and-paid-for by special interests to rip you off.”

Gianna: “Here is former Epic Global corporate counsel Vera Nash.”

Video: “This was fraud,” Nash states, poker-faced, “and I won’t be complicit.” She continues with damning details, and disclosing that she has

retained a former federal prosecutor turned crusading litigator, the kind who shows up on 60 Minutes.

The suit, citing whistleblower laws, is filed in New York state, where Epic's holding company is incorporated. The damages? Potentially millions.

A stammering "Special Statement" by Epic's local Rhode Island station manager claims that this is all way above his pay grade.

In coming days, ratings at already-dominant Action News Providence skyrocket. Parent company Consolidated OmniMedia network hands Jessica a lucrative consulting deal. Casey and Gianna are invited to speak at broadcast industry conferences and J-school graduations. They are nominated for national news awards, and showered with job offers from big-city stations and CNN and MSNBC.

Heady stuff. But over lunch with Harland and Gus, they keep coming back to the same feeling: coastal Rhode Island, with its endearingly stubborn local vibe, seems like home.

"Thanks," Gianna tells the news director at Eyewitness News Los Angeles. "But I already have an ocean view here."

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.

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