

## **Chapter Two, Part Two “First Class Upgrade”**

**Wednesday, January 13, 2038  
Nine Days Until Papal Conclave  
Greenbelt, Maryland  
6:54 AM**

Rain in January was just wrong.

January was supposed to be for snowmen and ice and clear winter mornings – but apparently in D.C. it was for ugly freezing downpours.

The sky had been making fitful attempts at precipitation since Nina arrived in D.C., but of course it hadn't cut loose until the day she needed to fly out of the country. Now it was coming down in buckets, freezing solid when it hit the steel frame of her Uncle Spiro's porch awning.

Nina pulled her white trench coat tighter around herself and muscled through another sip of the powdered hot chocolate her aunt had given her, doing her best not to daydream about proper cocoa and steaming whole milk. It would have been so much easier just to drive to the airport herself, but she'd been assured by Sinéad – repeatedly – that such things were simply not done at WWN. They'd send a driver.

So, Nina was standing out in the rain at with a suitcase at six thirty in the morning - after three hours of sleep.

A long blue van appeared at the end of the street, straining to make the tight turn. As it came closer, Nina saw the WWN logo emblazoned on the passenger side door. Then it stopped, idling right over a giant puddle in front of the house.

Nina started lugging her suitcase through the front yard, the frigid water penetrating her shoes almost instantly. A driver sprung out of the van, apparently oblivious to rain, and met her half-way.

“I've got that for you.” He said with a smile, practically snatching the rolling bag from her and sprinting to the back of the vehicle. Nina made it the rest of the way to the van door just in time for him to get back and notice the puddle.

“Oh,” he said, “I –“

“Don't worry,” Nina trudged straight through the water, “I'm a reporter.”

“Thanks, Ms. Corsantios,” he replied – he’d clearly been rehearsing the mispronunciation all morning, “Have a pleasant ride.”

“It’s just Nina,” she said as the door closed. She threw her dampened self into one of the two captain’s chairs in the middle of the van and immediately removed her shoes in the vain hope that they would dry during the half hour ride to the airport.

Only then, as the driver started the car, did Nina become aware of the sound emanating from behind her.

“I know, right! I mean, like, seriously – I *told* Rishma not to go with the brilled-up pink saris, but nobody listens to me. And what happened to Hiral? Like, I hadn’t seen her since Samvatsari but is she *on* something? Like, the chick is totally pinked out - for *real*.”

Nina turned to see a woman sprawled across the back bench-seat, stiletto heels propped up on a suitcase that she’d clearly not allowed to be loaded in the back. She was talking into a set of red and black smartglasses and dressed in a vintage Katy Perry t-shirt, dangly silver earrings, and tight black jeans with beads of light travelling up down the seams. Her black hair faded to spiky tips of bioluminescent blue below her shoulders, casting a faint glow on the walls.

How did such a person end up in a news van?

The woman seemed to notice Nina and gave a one-handed wave before going back to her conversation.

“None of my business, I know. Oh, and let me know if Josh gets any more of those Jimmy Chus he gave you... like, otherwise I’m going to kill you and take them right off your feet! ...Yeah, well all’s fair in love and fashion.”

Nina tried to keep her jaw from falling open and turned forward. She checked that she could read the billboards out the window, thinking this might be one of those weird dreams where you only *think* you’ve woken up.

“No,” She heard behind her, “No permanent housing yet. Still slumming it on Arusha’s couch. Yeah, yeah, I got work too, talk at you later!...Glass, disconnect.”

Then there was finally silence, and with the noise gone, Nina felt sleep rushing over her.

Not for long, unfortunately.

“Hey!” came the voice from the back seat.

Nina's eyes bolted open and she straightened in her seat. The woman had put away her glasses and planted her feet back on the floor where they belonged.

All Nina could manage in response was a groggy "Hello."

"You on the Pope plane too?" the woman asked.

Nina nodded and tried to stifle a yawn.

"Awesomeness," the woman said, not missing a beat and sticking out a hand, "Vinya Jain."

Nina gave the hand a firm but tentative shake. "Nina Constantinos. I just started last week." She racked her mind to think whether she'd seen the woman on air before. No. She couldn't be on-air talent. Hair and makeup, maybe?

"So, Vinya, how do you fit in to WWN?"

Vinya sat up and cracked her knuckles. "Pop Music Correspondent – started three weeks ago. Music industry insider stuff, although they said they want to try some red-carpet gigs – which, like, I'd do just for the dresses."

That woke Nina up. "Pop Music? Then why are you with the Papal Conclave team?"

The corners of Vinya's mouth turned up in a sly grin. "Hitchhiking. I've been gnawing my editor's ear off to let me cover the Brilltones' European Tour, but we don't have a travel budget. Then the news division decided to throw cash at a Rome trip right as the 'Tones are swinging through Italy. So, I talked my way onto the plane."

Nina wasn't sure whether to be impressed or appalled that someone had stowed away to cover a rock concert. "Well," she said, "I'll give you points for creativity. Couldn't you just wait for the U.S. tour?"

That seemed to stop Vinya's thoughts mid-stream, her smile twitched downward before bouncing back. "I don't even like the Brill scene, but my sources are saying this is the tour to cover. Plus, I'm twisting arms to get interviews with at least one 'Tone and some of the people in the entourage." She grabbed a bottle of pink Mountain Dew out of a cup-holder and took a swig before continuing, "So where are you in the whole Pope thing?"

Nina shrugged. "Junior News Correspondent. They want me to interview pilgrims in St. Peter's Square during the election."

“Dude,” Vinya replaced the cap on her soda, “random crowd interviews are *fun*. One time for my old YouTube channel I spent twenty hours straight doing stand-up interviews at Coachella - this was before BrillSD was a thing, so, like, all of these cyberpunks were just stoned off their butts on MJ and saying random crap to the camera. Like, this one dude...”

The story went on for most of the next thirty minutes until the car pulled into Terminal A of Obama-Reagan National Airport, and Nina was forced to put her still-soaked shoes back on. When the door finally opened, Vinya grabbed her suitcase and practically flew past Nina onto the curb. “See you inside!”

Nina closed her eyes, taking in a blessed moment of quiet. She barely noticed that the driver had retrieved her bag and pulled it around to the car.

“Ma’am?” he said gently.

“Oh!” Nina sprung to her feet and out of the van. “Sorry. Thanks so much.”

“No problem, Ma’am.”

As the van drove off, Nina headed for the front door. Then she noticed a figure puffing a pencil-thin vape-stick in the smoking area, silhouetted against the line of package-delivery drones streaming out of the next terminal.

Anyone in the news business would recognize that face. Heck, anyone in *America* would recognize that face – especially paired with a white peacoat ruffed in purple faux fur. It had defined every major court case for over a decade. Even Nina’s own “signature” look – a white detective-style trench coat – had been a bit of an homage.

The milky skin, the bobbed blonde locks coming to sharp points below the ears. It was almost too much to see in person.

Nina immediately turned on her heels, hearing the wheels of her suitcase clack loudly on the sidewalk as she bee-lined to the smoking area.

“Excuse me,” She said, hearing her own voice shake, “Are you Madison Rylander?”

Madison turned to Nina, rolled her eyes and looked at her smartwatch. “Not for another twenty minutes, I’m not.”

“Sorry,” Nina said, “I just - I’m Nina Constantinos, the new junior correspondent.”

Madison looked her up and down, “You look it. Don’t you have a plane to catch?”

“Of course.” Nina continued, “I just wanted to say that you’ve been a big influence on my career and I’ve really admired your work for a long time, and-”

“That makes one of us,” Madison cut her off, taking a long drag and then stepping out of the circle and toward the door. She passed Nina without another word, leaving her slack-jawed in a cloud of tobacco-scented vapor.

She gave chase, “I’m sorry Ms. Rylander. I-”

Madison stopped cold and glared back at her. “No autographs, okay? You wanna be a reporter? Act like one and leave me alone.” Then she stormed into the airport.

Nina waited a few seconds in shock. Of all the possible reactions, she hadn’t planned for that one.

When Madison had gotten significant head start, Nina worked her way through Security and Viral Screening and made her way to gate A1. A chartered jet was parked outside, and Priscilla was seated near a window, working intently on a laptop. Madison had taken a chair three seats down, filing her nails intently. Vinya was holding a large pink cup from *PaoPao BubbleCoffee* and slurping boba pearls while talking animatedly to someone on her smartglasses.

Meanwhile, Sinéad had hijacked the counter in front of the gate and was sifting through a stack of manila folders.

Why was WWN so obsessed with paper?

Staring out the window at the landing planes was another of her idols, Dan Dragovich – the host of a the prime-time news magazine *On Site* and one of his generation’s most prominent war correspondents. He looked a little more rumpled in person, wearing an unironed short sleeve shirt that looked to have yellowed over time – but still, he had the aviator sunglasses and the thick salt-and-pepper mustache and the determined look that she’d seen so many times on TV.

However, given the experience with Madison, Nina decided to spare herself the indignity of two rejections by industry icons.

There was one other woman in the group, wearing a tie-dye blouse, but she’d just struck up an animated conversation with Madison, so she wasn’t a social target either.

That left the rest of the crew.

Nina been told that the junket would include five cameramen, two producers, and one make-up artist. She assumed that tie-dye woman was the makeup artist, and

she picked out four of the cameramen immediately. They were all wearing navy WWN polos and seated around a bald black man whose polo matched, but in white. Anyone in television would recognize NaQuan Rodgers, producer of *WWN Evening News* for the last fifteen years and WWN's chief of production for almost as long. That group looked anything but friendly.

Finally, there were two men in black t-shirts lounging in seats near the window. They looked decently approachable.

Nina wheeled her suitcase over to them and sat down two seats away, offering a polite "Good morning," to the closer of the two, a thin man with black hair and the beginnings of wrinkles around his mouth.

He gave her a big smile and offered a hand. "How's it goin'?" he said with a thick Boston accent, "I assume you're our new reporter?"

"Guilty as charged," Nina said, accepting the shake. It was so nice to find at least one pleasant person here.

The man let go, "Right, right. Nina," he snapped his fingers a few times, "it's on the tip of my tongue – "

"Constantinos," the other man cut him off. He pronounced her name perfectly but didn't turn her direction. "It's all over our work order." He was younger, lanky but muscular, with close cropped sandy hair and what Nina guessed was about five days of stubble.

"Right," the first man jumped back in, "I'm Ty Crianças, head producer for *WWN Impact*, and this mug," he pointed to his companion, "Is my head camera Aiden Healy – you get used to him."

"Pleased to meet you." Nina replied, making a mental note. "WWN Impact" was Dragovich's operation – a separate company from WWN under their parent corporation, RXN.

Dragovich had insisted on the strange structure as a way of maintaining editorial independence for the last ten years, reporting directly to the CEO of RXN instead of Priscilla.

RXN allowed it as a way of keeping him on their airwaves, and journalism schools taught about it as an example of newsroom dysfunction. It did, however, explain why these two looked so different from the rest of the crew. Technically, they didn't work for WWN at all.

That was when Sinéad's voice clanged through the terminal. "Okay, WWN Team, huddle up!"

"What does she want now?" Nina heard Aiden mutter as everyone got to their feet and gathered near the terminal.

Sinéad grabbed her stack of folders, which Nina could now see were labelled with each of their names. "Glad to see you all made it," she bellowed, "I'm sorry I can't join you all in Rome, especially since I know you'd all die without me, so I've put everything I can into these folders for you." Then she dramatically opened one packet and pulled out a stack of papers.

"Hotel information, per-diem cards that work in Italy, pre-paid Italian SIM cards for your phones, even pre-printed card keys to your hotel rooms. Yay for technology. The per-diem is enough for food and a little mad money but there's a limited amount listed in the folder. I can track where you spend it – so if you use it on any questionable pleasures, I will ask if you enjoyed it in front of the whole office. Also, we do have *some* budgetary sense, so junior and camera staff have shared hotel rooms – your roommate is listed on page one of the packet. I'll call your names and you can grab your folder as you board, starting with," she pulled a folder, "Madison Rylander."

Madison boarded without making eye contact with Sinéad, grabbing her folder with a snap on the way in.

The callouts continued in no apparent order until no-one else was left at the gate and Sinéad called "Nina Constantinos." Nina set her shoulders and wheeled her carry-on to the jetway, where Sinéad was holding out her folder.

"Enjoy your trip, Constantinos," Sinéad said, wrapping her tongue around the words as if they were some sort of threat.

"I will." Nina clamped her fingers down on the folder, but it didn't budge. Sinéad wasn't letting go.

"Just make sure you don't eff up that badly," she said, "Not that I care, but cleaning blood off the carpet takes a chunk out of my day."

Nina looked Sinéad dead in the eye, feeling her ears heat up. "That won't be needed."

"We'll see," Sinéad finally let go of the packet. "Have a nice flight, Appleton."

Nina fumed down the jetway, taking deep breaths to try to calm herself.

The flight attendants were markedly more welcoming, but Nina was well past their cheery “welcome aboard” greetings before she cooled down long enough to take in the swanky surroundings. The plane was immaculate. Widely spaced plush seats upholstered in WWN blue, armrests with dark wood paneling, and first-class amenity waiting for every passenger.

She was really here, with America’s elite news team, covering the world’s biggest story. Sinéad or no Sinéad, there was no way to describe this as anything but awesome. Everything was going to be fine.

“Hey Nina!” a voice came from the back. It was Vinya, waving the stack of papers from her opened envelope, “Saved you a seat, roomie!”

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## **Rome**

**10:12 PM (Local Time)**

The lobby was more bustling than Nina expected. Impeccably dressed guests were streaming out of the *Hotel Piazza San Pietro* into the Roman night, and apparently standards for “going out clothes” were different here than they were in North Wisconsin.

Nina had just finished unpacking and headed downstairs in her nice jeans and a Captain Janeway t-shirt, hoping to see a bit of Rome before the work started. Sightseeing wouldn’t be hard, given how much Priscilla had paid for location. WWN had booked the entire top two floors of the closest boutique hotel to the Vatican, turning it into a fully self-contained live-in studio.

As Priscilla had put it, there was no *need* for most staff to leave the hotel at all for the next week – but those who *wanted* to go out would find the neighborhood to die for.

Nina wanted to go out.

She wasn't even sure what she wanted to *do* outside. Just ... be here.



Underdressed or not, she headed for the front door, but then saw something that made her stop short. Madison Rylander was sitting in the mostly empty hotel bar, nursing a glass of something amber as her usually iconic peacoat sat limply over the stool next to her. Maybe a second, calmer approach was warranted. Nina was a lot calmer than this morning and had mostly gotten her starstruck jitters under control.

Mostly.

"Be normal," she mouthed to herself, "You're just being cordial to a new co-worker."

She let a long breath out and made her way to the bar and asked, "Mind if I join you?"

Madison looked up from her tumbler, shrugged, and pointed at a burgundy leather stool. She'd dressed in a tight white turtleneck, seafoam capris and a chunky matching headband. Nina would have said she looked like a backup dancer in an old Elvis movie, perfectly calibrated to the elevated vintage look that was in fashion with the Italian locals.

Nina slid onto her stool, feeling even more hopelessly out of synch with her surroundings.

"I," Nina started, "I wanted to apologize for fangirling all over you at the airport. That wasn't my best moment."

Madison snickered. "No, it wasn't." Then she went back to her drink.

The silence was broken by a bartender in a pinstripe shirt. "What can I get for you, signora?"

Nina noticed Madison's head silently turn her direction.

"Um," Nina scanned the bottles lined up behind him. She wanted to order something Italian but didn't even know where to start. "At home I order appletinis. What would you recommend?"

The barkeep gave a knowing smile. "Galliano and Pomegranate if you like sweet. My personal specialty."

"Thank you." Nina smiled back.

The barkeep turned, but Madison suddenly piped up. "Get her a Scotch."

Nina turned, mouth agape.

"You're a reporter not a tourist," Madison snapped.

The bartender hesitated.

"I don't like whiskey." Nina said slowly, not staring at Madison but loud enough to make sure the bartender heard.

"Galliano and Pomegranate." He confirmed, grabbing a highball glass.

Madison almost snorted, then downed the last of her own whiskey. "You can't even hold you liquor, and you think you can stomach WWN?"

Nina squeezed her fists and breathed out through her nose. This was not how she planned on meeting her idol. She noticed that the bartender hadn't poured anything in her glass yet. "Excuse me, sir?"

He stopped cold. "Yes, signora?"

"As delightful as that sounds, do you have any ouzo?"

He set down the pomegranate juice. "Si, we have Plomari and Pitsiladi."

"Pitsiladi," Nina almost barked, "neat."

Madison was now watching intently as the bartender set down a shot glass of clear, anise-smelling liquid.

Nina raised the shot and deadpanned, "Opa." Then she knocked it back in one gulp.

The alcohol seared the back of her throat. It tasted like every Greek wedding moment she'd ever regretted. She felt herself shake a bit before slamming the shot glass onto the bar and exhaling.

"I said I don't like whiskey," she said, synapses still tingling, "not that I can't drink. Bartender, I'd like that pomegranate drink now."

"Nice," Madison responded, resuming a blank forward stare.

The bartender chuckled and slid a tall red concoction across the bar. It was much better than the ouzo.

Nina took a yet another deep breath, allowing the pomegranate to wash out her mouth, then tried speaking again.

"I'm sorry, I just ... journalism is my whole life, and you do it better than anyone."

"Of course, I'm the best," Madison snipped as she motioned for her glass to be refilled, "but you've misstated the craft."

Another tumbler was set in front of her while Nina felt her eyes starting to widen. This was not the vivacious Madison Rylander from TV. It was someone else, *something* else. Still, this was a woman at the top of her game, even if it didn't look it right now.

Nina pressed further. "I'd still like to get to know you – just as a co-worker. There's a lot I don't know around here."

"Clearly". Madison took a long sip of her new whiskey. Then she set down the glass with a clink and made eye contact.

"Look, I know your type. You've got this whole hero's journey planned for yourself. Leave small town, encounter mentor, slay dragon." She gestured at Nina's shirt, "so let's start with this, nerd, I'm not your Obi Wan Kenobi."

Nina felt the reflex to correct the sci-fi mix-up but was cut off before she should even stifle herself.

"I know the difference between *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. Lesson one, feigning ignorance of a strongly stated fandom is a passive-aggressive act communicating firstly that I don't care about you and secondly that I'm desecrating your sacred cow in hopes that it will make you cry and go away. I am not your mentor figure and, trust me, you do *not* want me to try."

Madison stared at her glass, downed the rest of it, and set it down with finality as she got to her feet. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have better people to do with my evening."

So that settled it, Nina thought, she'd grown up idolizing a witch.

As Madison gathered her trademark peacoat, Nina shot to her feet and turned to face her.

"You know what," she said, "If you don't want anything to do with me, fine, but you could afford to be a little nicer to people who genuinely want to learn from you."

Madison laughed and slipped on the coat. "You want advice? Okay. Bicep workouts, sleeveless dresses. Blond always tests well with the focus groups, and believe it or not, alcohol is a safer coping mechanism than cocaine."

Nina could barely believe herself, but she found herself rolling her eyes, "That wasn't what I—"

Madison held up a hand and started laughing. "Oh. Oh. Right. You wanted something about *journalism*. Truth, justice. Here's the thing. This," she held up both index fingers and made circling motions, "This isn't that. This is infotainment. You wanna be on TV? Welcome to showbiz."

Then Madison wheeled and breezed out of the room.