

## Chapter Two, Part Three “Mantras”

**Thursday, January 14, 2038**  
**Eight Days Until Papal Conclave**  
**5:00 A.M.**

Nina wiped the sleep from her eyes and tapped her ear. She usually avoided sleeping with an in-ear alarm, but she'd been hoping to slip out before Vinya and her ever-running mouth woke up.

The plan had failed. Her roommate was not only up, but fully showered and dressed.

That said, there was very little noise.

Vinya was sitting cross-legged on her fully made bed, eyes closed and lips moving softly around sounds that Nina couldn't quite make out.

Nina slipped out of bed as quietly as possible and tiptoed toward the shower. She saw one of Vinya's eyes snap open, follow her for a few steps, then snap closed again. Now her chanting was becoming a bit more audible - a calm, winding melody in perfect pitch.

*Namo Ayariyanam, Namō Uvajjhayanam...*

She was meditating – which was exactly the *last* thing Nina would have expected from the person who hadn't stopped talking all day yesterday. Nina stopped for a second and let the soothing melody wash over her, hoping that Vinya wouldn't notice her lingering outside the bathroom.

That was when Nina's phone let out a piercing beep on the end table.

Nina ran for the phone, hoping to shut it up before it knocked Vinya's concentration entirely.

It was too late. Vinya had already launched herself to her knees on the bed and was diving for the end table herself.

Nina grabbed the phone first, blurting out, “Omigosh! I am so sorry!”

The screen was a big, flashing picture of Priscilla’s face.

“Darnit,” Nina muttered, swiping the green arrow and raising the phone to her ear.  
“Hello?”

“Oh good, you're already up,” Priscilla squawked, “I like that. Anyway, we're sending Aiden Healy down to meet you in the lobby in about twenty minutes. Hope you're ready.”

Nina's pulse was racing. Twenty minutes? Seriously?

She did everything she could to sound unsurprised. “Twenty minutes, okay, got it”

“I know, I know, you're probably not done with your makeup – don't worry too much about it. Just get b-roll interviews with pilgrims in St. Peter’s square and then come back to the studio for your war paint.”

*Make up? Nina thought. I haven't even showered.*

“You got it, boss.”

“Good. Well, have fun and get us some good footage. Just get the real story. Sane people, OK? Light on the nuns.”

Nina rushed to pull a pantsuit out of the closet. “Sure, sure.”

All right,” Priscilla chirped. “I'll let you get to work.” Then the line went dead.

Nina saw Vinya stumble into the bathroom and splash water on her face. She looked like she'd just been woken from a dream and was trying to rouse herself back to reality.

Nina took a few steps toward the bathroom. “Vinya...Sorry I interrupted your meditation...thing.”

“Navkar Mantra,” Vinya exhaled, blinking her eyes repeatedly.

“What?” Nina asked.

“It’s called the Navkar Mantra. Three times a day - two and a half today.”

Vinya shook her head violently, which finally seemed to snap her into focus. “Don't worry – I suck at getting my mantras in anyway.”

Nina tried another peace offering. “So you're Hindu then?”

“I’m Jain,” Vinya snapped, drying her face with a towel. “My last name is Jain. You know, two plus two is four.”

“Sorry,” Nina responded meekly, applying paste to her toothbrush, “The sum total of my exposure to Jainism was the religious emblems page in my Scout manual.”

Vinya rolled her eyes as she uncapped a tube of neon green lipstick. “Oh goody, I get to be the first Jain someone’s ever met - again.”

“Sorry, I-”

“Forget it,” Vinya finished her lower lip and stopped. “At least you’d heard of it. It just gets annoying.” Then the upper lip, followed by an aggressive re-capping and the emergence of a silver eye-liner pencil. “Especially since I’m actually *named* Jain. Hey everybody, this is Vinya, your screwed-up poster child for Jainism! She’s a sucky Jain, but at least she doesn't eat potatoes.”

“Potatoes?” Nina asked through a mouthful of toothpaste.

“Never mind,” Vinya went to work on her eyes, “another Jain thing.”

There was an awkward silence, and Nina caught herself staring at the ten colors of mascara lined up in front of the mirror as Vinya selected a green one to match her lips. It was time to look for a way out.

“I have to shower. Sorry again about your - uh - Nafka...I mean...sorry.”

“Let’s stick with ‘meditation thing.’”

That seemed to end things, but through the frosted shower glass, Nina noticed Vinya sneak a look her direction before brushing on some bronzer and darting out.

Nina showered in record time, dried herself, and threw on her striped blouse and grey pantsuit. She looked a little wrinkled in the mirror as she combed her hair, but given the circumstances, it would have to suffice. She found just enough brainpower to remember her trench coat, then sprinted down the stairs to the lobby.

Aiden was leaning against the wall in a stained white t-shirt, holding a paper coffee cup in one hand and a folded camera in the other.

He glanced at his phone. “You're late. Prissy wanted you here two minutes ago.”

Nina checked her own device, confirming her tardiness.

“Crap. I'm sorry.”

Aiden almost snorted. “I work for Dan Dragovich – I could care less. I'm just ticked Dan let her assign me to you in the first place. Can we get this over with?”

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Madison took a last drag off the stub of her cigarette in the smoking area outside the hotel, then she balanced it with a swig of coffee. The caffeine still hadn't quite kicked in yet, and it didn't help that morning air was close to freezing. Why couldn't the Pope have keeled over in the summer? Rome would have been so much nicer.

She pulled up the white fur ruff of her coat, still trying to convince herself that the shaking was because of the cold.

There was a temptation to brush it off as “getting too old for this crap,” but even in her heyday there were certain points on the alcohol scale that she knew would have consequences at the office.

She'd passed that point about 11 P.M. last night, then kept going for another two hours.

It was bad enough dealing with the boss from hell, but she'd been doing that for twelve years.

What she didn't fancy, however, was dealing with said boss in close quarters while also dealing with her ex...well...whatever the hell Dan was. They'd never really established that in the first place, which was why he was now an ex-whatever.

On top of it all, she had to deal with freaking Nina Whatever-Her-Name-Was. Madison was a recovering idealist herself and dealing to wide-eyed newbies was always a bit of a nails-on-chalkboard experience – not to mention that *accent*. The girl couldn't have been any more *Wisconsin* if she'd doused herself in Miller Lite and swan-dived into an Olympic-size vat of cheese curds.

Madison pulled her rhinestoned cigarette case out of her handbag, lit up another Virginia SuperSlim, and inhaled. Chain-smoking real cigarettes wasn't really her thing either, but she had a feeling it was going to be one of those days. She exhaled through her nose, while closing her eyes and leaning against the cold stone wall of the building.

The moment of peace didn't last long – promptly interrupted by Dan Dragovich's voice. "So, how's the morning shift going?"

Madison's eyes snapped open. She really didn't need this right now, but there he was, with his graying walrus mustache and his crappy old shirt and his cracking leather jacket.

She purposefully tapped the ash from her cigarette onto his shoe, "Wouldn't know. New kid got the early shift."

"Yeah, that makes sense." Dan looked at his feet. "Rome treating you all right then?"

*Really?* Madison thought. *Mr. Never-Lost-For-Words is feeling sheepish? That's a first.*

"Rome's treating me fine," she snarked, "except for the fact that it's *frigid* and there's a bunch of holy-rollers in the streets."

Honestly, she wished he'd quit the overly familiar garbage. They had a working relationship - kind of – but they weren't what you'd call friends. The whole tortured-ex-lovers routine had gone stale ten years ago, and now it was like having some sort of

warped joint custody agreement over the daily news. Mommy and Daddy pretended they didn't hate each other "for the kids" – except in this case the "kids" were full-grown production staff who freaking knew better.

Dragovich tried again. "Look, Maddy, I-"

"What do you *want*, Dan?"

Dan rolled his eyes, snapping out of "daddy mode" and back into "annoyed ex mode" – which Madison found mildly less grating.

"Nothing. I was just literally asking how things are - like I know you or something."

"Right, because you're so attuned to other people's emotional needs."

"Okay, that's just uncalled-for. "

"Yup," Madison took another puff. "It's almost like I don't want to talk to you. So, tell me why you're still standing here."

"I -" Dan sputtered, "I just figured you'd know how things are going on with the office politics, and at least you won't give me the line about how we're all one big WWN family."

Madison let out a faint laugh. "Wait, you're coming to me for *gossip*? That's a new one."

Dan sighed again. "I haven't had my people on a joint team with Prissy's guys in ten years, and there's a rookie in there who I'm sure is getting a first-class Pristol-whipping. What's her name, Anita?"

The light bulb went off in Madison's head. "Oh, so that's what this is about. Grandpa Dragovich feels sorry for the new girl? Really?"

Dan stumbled for a response "No, I'm just...I mean..."

Madison glared at him over the top of her sunglasses.

“Okay, yes. Among other things, I’m worried anytime Prissy gets her claws on a rookie.”

Now it was too much, and Madison started convulsing with suppressed laughter.

“You’re worried about Cheesehead Minnie Mouse? I’m sure she’s already getting a full work-over.” She finished her cigarette and flicked the butt onto the pavement. “Girl has no clue what’s about to hit her.”

Dan stared at his shoes again but didn’t back off, so Madison decided to go for the jugular.

“You’re not hot for her, are you?” she spat, “I mean, it was messed up when it was me, but I’ve got like ten years on this one.”

His face turned a deeply satisfying shade of red. “What? No! I’m old enough to be her father!”

“Never really stopped you before,” Madison deadpanned.

“I am nowhere near old enough to be your father.”

Madison decided to twist the knife further. “I wasn’t talking about me.”

That one always got him.

“Enough!” Dan fumed. “I’m not having that conversation again. Just asking you to look out for the kid. Okay?”

“Look out for her? What? Save her from big bad Prissy?” Madison took long sip of her coffee. “Yeah, that worked like a charm last time I tried.”

Dan sighed. “Maddy, that was ten years ago.”

“Oh, of all people, I do *not* want to hear that from *you*.”

Dan shook his head, “Are we really doing this again? Look, this is different, and-”

“I said no. Just...no.”

“Maddy, she’s not -”

“Leave.” Madison cut him off. “*Now.*”

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Nina flung herself into one of the folding chairs in WWN’s top-floor headquarters back at the hotel. One morning interviewing pilgrims on St. Peter’s Square had already taught her three major life lessons.

1) Nuns loved to talk.

2) Cobblestones and heels didn’t mix.

3) Anyone who said they’d met the news industry’s biggest jerk had never met Aiden Healy.

He didn’t seem to be a hard-core misogynist, as best as Nina could tell, but maybe that was the problem. If he’d hated *women*, it would have at least contextualized why he was such an unrelenting ass. But he seemed to be more than respectful to every woman on the square, and she hadn’t once caught him checking out anyone, least of all herself. He just hated *her*.

She probably could have seen the contempt dripping out of his pores if they weren’t hidden by his disgusting five-day stubble. She’d barely made it five steps with all morning without a snide comment about how he wasn’t here to babysit rookies, and any time she’d adjusted her hair or smiled at the camera, he’d reminded her to “stop primping and report.”

Luckily, he didn’t need makeup and she did, which meant she got to sit down far away from him. Having spent all morning interviewing an assortment of pilgrims gathered to mourn Pope Stephen, it took all of Nina’s effort just to keep her eyes open.



Half of the top floor of the building was dressing rooms and production space supporting the actual set on the roof. The rest of the crew was just showing up for the morning, with the exception of Oakley the stylist. She was busy prepping two stations for the arrival of the on-air talent. Judging by the amount of attention she'd received thus far, Nina did not count as "talent."

Madison wandered in, carrying a beat-up plastic *Big Gulp* mug that looked to be about the size of Nina's head - an odd choice for a woman who seemed obsessed with designer accessories.

"Hey Oakley!" Madison said with the first smile Nina had seen from her.

"Hey Mad-woman!"

*Oh no, Nina thought, it's high school all over again.*

"So, how's your suite?" Oakley asked.

Madison slinked into a makeup chair as if it were her favorite recliner. "Not bad. I had to pay out of pocket to get my own room but it's so worth it. Mini-bar needs some work, but in exchange for a Jacuzzi, I'll take it."

"A bad mini-bar has never stopped you from finding a good time. We all remember Toronto, right?"

Madison laughed as Oakley swiveled her chair to the side, finally forcing Nina into her field of vision.

"Oh, hey kid," Madison said in surprise, "You look like garbage."

"I-" Nina started.

Madison waved a dismissive hand. "I look like garbage too right now, don't take it personally. But your blouse is doing nothing for your figure. It's wrinkled as hell, and you need *professional* help covering those freckles."

That finally seemed to alert Oakley to Nina's existence, and she patted the other chair. "Oh yes, that face needs some TLC. Come to mama."

Nina dragged herself out of her seat and tried to muster a smile to make a good impression on Oakley. "I will certainly take all the help I can get looking presentable at this hour."

Madison recoiled. "Honey, you're going to need to do a lot better than presentable. Oakley, show her how a master works."

"If you insist," Oakley said as she swiveled Madison's chair back toward the mirror. A few minutes later, Madison was fluffing her chin-length blond locks after the quickest makeup job Nina had ever witnessed, and Oakley had moved on to splotching different foundations on Nina's face - trying to find a pale enough shade of olive for Nina's mix of Irish and Greek skin.

"Excellent as always, Oakley darling," Madison said - and she was right. Five short minutes had transformed her from the angry woman Nina met earlier this week to the Madison Rylander that Nina had idolized growing up. Madison sprung up from her chair without a hint of fatigue. "See you upstairs kid. Oh, and Oakley, be a doll and see if we can't get Nina a workable blouse before tomorrow. Something clean, no stripes, and *this year's cut*. Expense it to Nina's per diem."

With that, Madison left, but not before sneaking one last look at her reflection.

In her mirror, Nina saw something in Madison's eyes that she couldn't quite place - just for a second. It was dark, contempt maybe - or disappointment.

Oakley brought Nina her back to reality. "All right, Local News, time for some Oakley love. It's going to be a bit tough hiding all those freckles of yours, but we'll have you looking like a star in no time."

Oakley began caking on foundation as Nina saw Priscilla enter the room out of the corner of her eye, bounding down the stairs with the spring of a woman half her age. She was clearly a morning person, and something about the atmosphere seemed to have her particularly enthused.

“Oh, Nina, there you are!” Priscilla shouted as she sprinted over to the makeup stand. “I don't have much time, but I wanted to go over your performance this morning.”

“Sure thing,” Nina replied as Oakley attempted to apply bronzer, “I'll be up in a second.”

“Never mind that,” Priscilla said, “I can talk while Oakley finishes.”

Out the corner of her eye, Nina saw Priscilla take a seat in the other makeup chair. “You did good work this morning, but your interview selection was a bit skewed.”

“In what way?” Nina asked as Oakley went to work on her eyebrows. “We got everyone. Tourists, locals, nuns – the Muslim guy selling commemorative postcards.”

Priscilla gave a forced giggle. “That was a good one, but our job is to show things as they are, not as people want us to see them.”

Her tone was syrupy sweet, but Nina could hear anger bubbling up behind it.

She scrambled for a response. “We didn't filter at all. Just let people talk.”

“That's the point.” Priscilla snipped. “I know that square is crawling with Catholics, and finding reasonable people is hard. Your job is to root the interview in truth.”

Oakley finished Nina's eyebrows and reached for the lipstick, but Nina held up a hand. “Sorry,” she said to Priscilla, “I'm not sure I understand what you're asking.”

“I think you know very well.” Priscilla said, all the sweetness draining from her voice. “What is the truth here? Not the Appleton truth, the real truth?”

Nina almost bolted upright, but Oakley's hand anticipated the reaction and pushed her shoulder back into the chair and added some bronzer to her cheek.

Priscilla tried again. “It's not a rhetorical question. What is going on out on that square? Tell the truth, Nina.”

Nina closed her eyes and leaned against the headrest. “A lot of devout Catholics are gathering here because either they came for the Pope Stephen’s funeral or they want to see the new pope.”

“That’s a lie,” Priscilla said, “Try again.”

“I-“

“Facts without truth are lies. Again, what is the truth?”

Nina took a breath, noticing that Oakley had stopped in the middle of her makeup job. The truth? Did Priscilla mean the deeper emotional aspect of telling story?

“The crowd is feeling a mix of sadness and excitement. There’s a buzz, an anticipation.”

Priscilla let out a long sigh. “You can do her lips now, Oakley.”

“Got it,” Oakley said, “Mouth open, honey.”

Nina opened her mouth and felt the lipstick slide on as Priscilla started again.

The words came out of her editor’s mouth measured and clipped, but with something seething behind them.

“You have no questions about this buzzing anticipation? I have plenty. Why would these people invest in such an ethically problematic institution? What does their uncritical presence here say about them as people? What are the consequences to our viewing audience of allowing these people to talk freely?”

The lipstick was done, and Oakley was adding some final rouge on the cheeks.

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re asking me to do,” Nina said.

Priscilla got up from her chair. “I think you do,” she said, walking off, “And I think you know how seriously I take this.”

“And done,” Oakley said, setting down her brush, and yanking Nina’s mind back into her chair. “Am I good or am I good?”

Nina sat up and stared forward into the mirror. Her reflection looked every bit the WWN news-goddess. Not a hair out of place, skin perfect and porcelain. Oakley had even pulled in a subtle green eyeshadow to match her eyes.

The woman in the mirror looked like she belonged here, but Nina had no clue who that woman was.