**Chapter Three, Part Two
“Off the Record”**

**Saturday, January 16, 2038**
**Six Days Until Papal Conclave**
**4:23 P.M.**

Nina stumbled into the hotel lobby, trying desperately to keep her eyes open. Three full working days in Rome and she still hadn't gotten over the jet lag. Of course, it didn't help that the two times Priscilla always wanted her on the air were five A.M. to hit the eleven PM hour back home, and eleven P.M., which was five P.M. doldrums in Washington.

She glanced at her watch. Four in the afternoon and all she wanted to do was sleep, but she was too hungry. She schlepped herself to the hotel restaurant, but just looking at the “Please wait to be seated” sign almost made her nauseous.

“Rookie!” came a loud voice from inside. “Come take a load off!”

Dan Dragovich was seated at a table in the back, napkin shoved in his collar, chowing down on something definitively un-Italian and beckoning with one hand.

Nina practically ran to his table. Normally, it would have taken a second for her to process that this was *Dan Dragovich*, but at this point she just wanted to get off her feet. Dan flagged down a waiter.

 “Giancarlo, get this woman a fresh pitcher of ice water – she'll need the whole thing.”

He refocused on Nina. “You know something? This hotel is probably the only idea I've sold to Priscilla in the entire time she’s worked at WWN. You know why? They cater to Americans.”

He used his fork and knife to hack a large chunk off what Nina now realized to be a cheeseburger.

“This, for instance, is the only decent burger I've found in Italy. Bar none. Also, next time an older male co-worker asks you to have dinner alone, don’t be that trusting. People in this business suck.”

“This a public restaurant.” Nina said, still not processing enough to be starstruck, “and I have my head screwed on tightly, thanks.”

“Good.” Dragovich responded, shoving a forkful in his mouth. “Drink water, you look like you just got tear-gassed.”

The waiter arrived with the pitcher, and Nina took a quick glance at the menu, then at Dan’s dish.

“You're in Rome and you want a cheeseburger?” She turned to the waiter, “I’ll have the Spaghetti Bolognese.”

Dan practically broke down laughing. “Let me get this straight. You’re calling me an ugly American and you order the spaghetti with red sauce? You do realize this is Rome, not Brooklyn, right? Giancarlo!”

The waiter rushed back.

“Cancel this girl’s order – bring her that Rigatoni con la Pajata.”

The waiter snapped to attention. “No problem, Mr. Dragovich.”

“You can’t do that!” Nina shot back.

“I just did,” Dan said, “I’ve known Giancarlo for fifteen years. I could probably tell him to serve you rat poison, and it would come out garnished with caviar. I also get a side of leaked info on visiting dignitaries, and you just got a much more authentic dish than what you ordered. Can I eat my cheeseburger now?”

Nina shrugged. “Ok, you win, will you at least tell me what I'm getting?”

He dove back into his food, shoving a large bite into his mouth. “Is Prissy finished hazing you yet?”

“She's working me hard, but I know what I signed up for.”

Dan chuckled sardonically. “I love you fresh-off-the-farm types. You all come expecting to work long hours and then think it’s normal when Prissy tosses you into the woodchipper.”

The waiter returned, setting down a plate of red-sauced rigatoni with some odd-looking bits of meat in it.

Nina poked it with her fork a few times and gave Dan a stink eye. “Are the calf intestines supposed to scare me? I’m a fourth-generation restauranteur.”

She speared the rigatoni with her fork, took a huge bite, and gave a few over-dramatic chews. Then she closed her eyes did her best Food-Network-ready “mmm.” Finally, she swallowed. “Not bad – they cleaned the intestines right, but I feel like they could have stewed them a bit longer.”

Instead of responding, Dan was distracted checking his watch - and something caused him to suddenly sit bolt upright.

“What?” Nina asked.

Dan didn’t seem to have heard her but spoke anyway. “Rookie, what would you say if I asked you to help me out with a story tonight?’

“I’d probably say I’ve been awake for 21 hours and can’t see straight.”

Dan smirked. “I got a tip from one of my sources that some cardinals are having dinner at a trattoria in Sant’Angelo – little Roman Jewish place where they think no one will go looking for them. I was just getting ready to head over there. You could help stake the place out, and I could give you credit for the story. If you're on my show, it's my rules, and you don’t have to spout Prissy’s crap. What do you think?”

Nina sat back in her chair. It sounded fantastic, but dangerous. “I think I’d probably get fired the next morning for not telling Priscilla.”

Dan let a sly grin creep across his face, “Not if you’re good. You have a source that nobody else has access to. Prissy might be a bit nuts, but she’s not stupid. She wants that info on her channel, even if it’s my show. Nobody needs to know your source is me, and you won’t get canned for scooping the other networks. That I guarantee. Come on, we need to go.”

He sprung up from the table, leaving his half-eaten burger.

Nina tried to protest. “Wait, I didn’t say I’d do it.”

Dan shot her a sarcastic glare. “Really? I just offered you the location of a secret meeting of the dudes that are electing the freaking pope, and you’re too chicken to take it?”

He headed for the door.

Nina leapt out of her chair. “Okay, okay. I’ll do it.”

**Stadio Virginia Raggi**
**Outskirts of Rome**

Vinya knew the Brill scene was big in Italy, but this was ridiculous.

When the Brilltones had announced the European tour, Rome’s 90,000-seat Stadio Raggi had been the first venue to sell out – twenty minutes after tickets went on sale. Now a throng of teenaged humanity was swarming around the entrance, an undulating mass of pinks and headbands. Even Vinya’s supposedly invincible backstage pass wasn’t getting her very far. At this rate, blowing through the bag-check and the fever-scan was going to be useless if she couldn’t even push her way to the front gate – which had yet to open.

Then, there was a distant clanking of metal and the entire crowd started moving toward the gates, almost bowling Vinya over in the process. She picked up speed quickly and threaded her way to the front of the pack, a skill she’d perfected at dozens of similar gigs in L.A. Of course, she drew a few Italian jeers – which she assumed translated as “wait your (expletive) turn!”

It wasn’t her fault that nobody saw her shocking-pink press pass hanging from an even pinker lanyard – not to mention that she was the only person here who didn’t look like she just walked off the set of “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.”

That, in itself, was weird.

American Brills tended toward poodle skirts, pink leather jackets, and lacy collars. This, however, was Vinya’s first encounter with a flock of genuine EuroBrills. This sleeker subspecies that took their cues from Audrey Hepburn and Fellini films. There were *so* many little black dresses – often obnoxiously paired with gaudy headbands, absurd scarfs, or the sort of manic twitch that came from “pinking out” on hallucinogenic amphetamines.

For a scene so fixated with innocence, Brills sure did love their acid.

When Vinya finally did shove her way to the front of the pack, she accidentally bumped into a particularly sweaty example of obsessive Brilldom. This person then turned and shouted at her with a full-blown North English accent, “Who do you think yer’ pushin’, glow-face!”

It was always the hair always got to them. Brills hated anything that glowed, blinked, or reminded people that tech had advanced in the last 70 years - except of course their smartphones, smartwatches, and smartcars. Apparently, those were all okay.

A stone-faced man in a yellow windbreaker was waiting at the turnstiles, looking even more traumatized than Vinya. He was the most welcome person she’d seen in hours. She held up her pass and gave him a weary look that said, “Please get me away from these people.” He obligingly scanned her in and said, in perfect English, “Turn right, take the stairs to the club level.”

She pushed her way through the turnstile just as the Brit started ranting again, “Oh, so you let blink-head big-shots in ahead of real fans!”

Vinya took a hard right before the fever-check, finding her way down a cement walkway.

Glow-face, blink-head, nuke-puke. It never seemed to stop with these kids.

They were lucky that they were meeting Vinya the 27-year-old culture reporter, because Vinya the 21-year-old DJ would have considered ripping the Brit’s ponytail right off her malted little head.

She finally came to a door manned by a burly security guard and a young female staffer wearing a pink blazer, polka-dot-headband, and a wireless earpiece. Was that an attempt at a “Brill professional” look?

The attendant consulted a tablet as Vinya approached, then looked up and smiled a little too broadly.

“Ms. Jain,” the woman said in an upper-crust Aussie accent. “So good to have you with us tonight.” She grabbed a handprint-scanner on handle of the glass door, causing a row of diodes on the doorframe to flip from red to green. “Do come in.”

As Vinya walked in, she could hear instrumental versions of Brilltones hits playing softly, and down the hall she saw an empty reception space full of pink-draped cocktail tables.

“Were you able to get in okay?” The attendant asked as they walked down the hallway.

Vinya tried to stifle a laugh, resulting in a snort. “More or less, after I pushed through the sea of your fans.”

“Ah, yes,” the woman gave a knowing nod, “they are indeed passionate.”

They arrived at the room with the tables, and the woman straightened herself. “Welcome to our VIP backstage reception, my name is Em-Kate, and do let myself or my colleague Gina know if there’s anything we can do to make you comfortable. The reception starts in about ten minutes and let me assure you that everything is vegan and cruelty free – including the chocolate malts.”

“Good to know,” Vinya said, thinking she might actually get to eat for once.

“Brilliant,” Em-Kate responded, taking a quick look at her tablet. “I have a note to let Lenny know that you’re here, so I’ll notify her straight away. Enjoy.”

Em-Kate disappeared down the hallway, leaving Vinya feeling simultaneously impressed with the service and terrified that she’d just seen the future of American workplace fashion.

The room was empty except for a few wait staff straightening tablecloths and a woman in a sea-green polka-dot dress wearing another earpiece – Em-Kate’s colleague most likely.

The walls were hung with giant pink banners featuring cartoon versions of the three Brilltones.

There was lead-singer “Jenny,” real name Jennifer Mangraviti, tall and blond and depicted as a near stick-figure.

“Penny” was Erin MacDougal, the nickname coming more from the color of her hair. She was depicted as more of an exaggerated hourglass.

And finally, “Lenny” was Da Len – drawn as shorter and with slits for eyes. Nothing disturbing there.

“Champagne?” came a voice from behind her. A waiter was standing with a tray, despite Vinya still being the only person in the room.

“Oh,” Vinya turned to face him, “No thanks, I don’t drink.”

He turned and walked away, but then there was another voice, this one lower and female. “Garlic French Fries?”

Vinya turned again to find another hors dourves tray with tiny cups of fries.

“Oh, thanks, but I can’t eat potatoes.”

The server walked away, but there was another voice right behind her. “Onion ring?”

So, maybe she’d died, and contrary to teaching, there was a Jain hell.

“No thanks,” she said, as graciously as could, watching yet another tray of root vegetables walk away.

There was at least a table full of plastic water bottles, all shrink-wrapped with custom Brilltones-Dasani co-branding. Vinya made a point of grabbing one, if only to look like she was engaging. What would her younger self think of who she’d become? Off-trend on fashion and sipping her water in a corner.

Half of her friends would have downed the fries, not to mention the alcohol – and most of them were better Jains than she was. So far, though, being devout-on-purpose had her six years clean and sober. It felt better to say, “No thanks, I’m Jain,” then “Yeah, I’m terrified of what would happen if I ever touched drugs or alcohol again.”

That and it made her mom happy to see her back at derasar for the weekly classes.

She took another sip of water and watched as a few wealthy-looking fans started trickling into the room. Something about the whole scene gave Vinya the heebie-jeebies, but there was also something totally mesmerizing.

So. Many. Headbands.

“You could have just sent in your dietary restrictions,” came a voice from beside her. “You’re on the VIP list.” An Asian woman had arrived, wearing old jeans and an oversize long-sleeve T-shirt from Hive Mind’s 2027 world tour: *C:/Rock.*

Probably event staff of some kind, although she looked dressed-down even for a roadie.

“I don’t think you’d like my dietary restrictions very much,” Vinya responded, still distracted by the huge banners.

The woman put her hands in her pockets and rocked a little. “There’s a chilled *Thums Up* waiting for you in the back, along with a pack of those Mango Twizzlers you like and some papadum chips – which I believe you said are, quote, your crack.”

Vinya narrowed her eyes and gave the woman her full attention, “You researched me?”

“Half your life is on YouTube.”

“I -”

Then Vinya felt the flashbulb go off in her mind. The face *had* seemed familiar, just not in context.

“Wait,” she said, “Lenny Len?”

“Shh,” the woman scolded her, cocking her head toward the twenty or so brills now hobnobbing over fries and onion rings. “I haven’t been made at a VIP reception this entire tour. Also, my name is Da, and my dressing room is not on this side of the stadium, so we should move.”

Dan had said the cardinals had picked an “unlikely” meeting spot, but Nina hadn’t considered all the potential meanings of that term. Now she found herself at a patio table on the Via del Portico D'Ottavia, under white awning reading, in huge blue letters, “RISTORANTE KOSHER.”

The street was a quaint but crowded mass of cobblestone in what used to be Rome's Jewish ghetto. Parked cars and motorcycles crammed both sides of the roadway, and most of the buildings seemed straight out of the Renaissance.

Half of them looked like they hadn't been repainted since.

"Now this is Rome at its best," said Dan, sporting a fake goatee, “Gentle breeze, people out in the street. Don't you think, rookie?"

"I think you look ridiculous in that beard,” Nina said through a mouthful of anchovy pie, “and that you’re missing out by not ordering. This is delicious.”

Dan chuckled. "There is a smart-mouth Twitter account, written from the point of view of my mustache, with 200,000 followers. When you get famous, you do crazy stuff to go unnoticed."

A man in a priest's cassock walked past, checking behind himself. Dan reached under the table and pulled out what looked like a travel guide to Rome. In reality, he had pasted photos of every cardinal on pages 230-245, and Nina had a second copy.

"Yup," he muttered, "Cardinal Tiziano Quintarelli. I heard he was the one who booked the table."

Nina took a sip of her water. "Okay, I'm impressed," she responded, "how did you find that out."

“The head waiter is chatty." He pulled a pen out of his pocket, yanked the cap off with his teeth, and circled Quintarelli’s picture.

"Is there a waiter in this town that isn’t in your pocket?"

"Yeah, but I'm working on him.” Dan winked. “Actually, I just get tight with the head waiter at every nice hotel I’ve ever stayed at. Hospitality staff have information networks you wouldn’t believe. Amazing what happens when you treat people like humans.”

“Oh, I know,” Nina smiled. “Receptionists are gold mines. Anyone else specific I need to watch for?"

Dan capped the pen. "Not that I know of."

Nina’s focus was broken as her phone rang loudly in her pocket. It was Priscilla.

"I gotta take this.”

Dan nodded. "Take your guidebook."

Nina grabbed the book, answered the phone, and walked down an alley next to the restaurant. "Hello?"

“You’re not here,” Priscilla's voice squawked, “so I’m guessing I don’t want to know where you are.”

“I–”

“Just use protection,” Priscilla cut her off. “Anyway, I'm moving you up to a six A.M. start tomorrow. I don't want a repeat of this morning, so get there earlier."

"No problem, Ms. Davis,” Nina replied, adding a little extra chirp so as not to sound insulted, “Anything you say."

The phone beeped as Priscilla hung up, leaving Nina staring at the device and mouthing, “What the frick?”

That was when she felt herself lose balance. Something bumped into her side and she heard a male voice say “Oof!” as she tumbled to the ground.