

## Chapter Four, Part Two

### “Need to Know”

**Sunday, January 24, 2038**

**Three Days Until Papal Conclave**

**2:57 A.M.**

Nina nervously bent the corner of her little red envelope back and forth with her thumb as she stood in the doorway to a hotel suite that had been converted into the production control room for *On Site with Dan Dragovich*. On screen, Dan was wrapping up his show, which was shooting in a studio in the next room over – the one with a view of St. Peter’s.

Ty Crianças, both the producer and the technical director, was calling the end of the show and clearly enjoying barking orders at the crew they’d borrowed from Priscilla. His Boston accent clanged off the wall as he bellowed.

“Tighter! Tighter! Okay good, now back out slowly, he’s gettin’ to the good part of the monologue. Okay he’s wrapping....pan over to the cathedral...zoom...zoom!” He raised his hands as if conducting an orchestra, “aaaaand logo screen and outro!” He dropped his hands with a whoosh as the screens faded to the program logo and the theme music blared through the speakers. Ty ripped off his headphones, “That’s all folks, have a nice night – and someone tell Aiden he’s on jacket duty. He’ll know what it means.”

The crew started getting up from their seats, clearly a bit stunned from Ty’s hyperactive directing. A few seconds later, Dan burst past Nina into the room and angrily ripped off his suit jacket, hurling it against the wall.

“Hey, hey!” Ty yelled. “That’s a frikkin’ thousand-dollar jacket!”

“Provided to us by Joseph A. Bank as product placement,” Dan retorted as he started rolling up his sleeves. “I’ll do whatever I want with it, especially if I have to keep deviating for these damn fool congressional stories!”

Ty shot back. “Dude, if it’s as big as it looks, this Social Security stuff is gonna be the story of the decade.”

“Whatever. I’m here for the conclave, not this garbage back home.”

“You have a nice night too, boss!”

Dan was pacing, so focused on unbuttoning his cuffs that he still hadn’t noticed Nina’s presence.

“Umm, Dan?” She ventured, mostly to prevent him from colliding with her.

Dan finally looked up, coming to such a sudden halt that he almost fell backwards. “Oh, hey rookie. Why the hell are you still awake?” He went back to the cuffs.

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all. Dan seemed like a decent guy most of the time, but right now he looked spazzed beyond belief - and angry.

“It’s not that urgent,” she stammered. “It can wait ‘til morning if you need some space.”

Dan finally got his cufflink open and looked back up. “Bull.”

“Excuse me?” Nina replied, almost as a reflex.

Dan rolled sleeve up, still not looking at her. “I said that’s bull. You’re in my control room while I’m shooting at three in the morning. Whatever it is clearly can’t wait.”

“Maybe,” Nina said, “but you look very wound up and-”

Dan held his hand up in a “stop” gesture. “I’m fine – just need a minute”

“He’s always like this after the show,” Ty’s voice echoed from the other side of the room, “which is probably why he got a bunch of weirdos for a production crew.”

“I can do this myself, Ty,” Dan barked.

“No, you can’t,” Ty laughed, walking over and putting a hand on Dan’s shoulder. “That’s why you keep me around.” He exited the room and yelled down the hallway “Aiden! We need to talk about the angles on those closeups!”

Dan turned back to Nina, starting to look a bit calmer. “Ladies and gentlemen, Ty Criancas. Now, why are you in my studio?”

Nina looked down at the envelope again. Maybe this was a bad plan, but –

“Okay,” she said, locking eyes with Dan, “but is there somewhere private we can discuss this?”

“My dressing room is down the hall,” he said, “Come with me.”

He led Nina out of the control room and down a corridor to room where a piece of paper with his name was taped to the door. Inside was a table, two metal folding chairs and a mirror - nothing else except a decanter of Scotch and two glasses on the table.

“Leave the door open,” Dan said as they entered.

“Actually, this is sort of a big–”

“Open!” Dan almost barked. “At least a quarter of the way. I respect your confidentiality, but I don’t have a glass door here and people say things. Talk soft.”

Nina gingerly slid into one of the chairs, watching Dan pace the room like a caged animal. After a few laps, he finally slowed down and opened the decanter,

“Care for a drink? It’s Ardbeg Ten.”

“No, thanks.” Nina said curtly.

He raised an eyebrow. “Have it your way.” He finally sat down, poured a dram, and took a slow sip as the muscles in his face loosened.

“Sorry,” he said, massaging his forehead. “The show gets me worked up. I try to cool off before I talk to anyone other than Ty.”

Nina debated one last time about whether this was worth it. She’d idolized Dan Dragovich her entire career, but that version of him was steady as a rock. This version, off-screen, was volatile, anxious and almost a little scary. On the other hand, he seemed to be one of the few senior staff who was genuinely good.

She let out a long breath, “Okay, remember when I took that phone call from Priscilla at dinner?”

Dan nodded. “You were pretty shaken up when you got back, what’d she say?”

“Nothing much,” Nina shook her head, “but I bumped into someone in the alley - a cardinal.”

Dan’s eyes opened wide and Nina saw his face turning red again. “A cardinal? Which one? Why didn’t you tell me? Did you talk to him?”

“Yes, okay, I talked to him.” Nina said.

“Wait, what?” Dan said

“I didn’t tell you because I had to think about what he said.”

“Think about it?” Nina could tell he was both annoyed and intrigued. “We were there looking for cardinals. You found one.”

“I know, all right?” Nina felt herself tensing hard. “Look, he saw my guidebook and freaked out because he said he hated the other guys at the meeting and didn’t want to be seen there. I wasn’t thinking and felt sorry for him, so I blurted that I wouldn’t report him, okay? I know that’s really stupid.”

She felt her hands start shaking as she thought about how angry Dan probably was with her, but his face softened again.

“I don’t know about stupid,” he said, “rookie mistake maybe, but I made a few of those in my day. We can still report it - if the story runs at all. Which cardinal?”

Nina allowed a sheepish grin to creep across her face. As scary as it was, she relished what she was about to say.

“I can’t tell you.”

Dan looked confused, but Nina could see a glint in his eye.

“Really?” he said, probing, “why not?”

Nina let her full smile out. “Because he guaranteed me his first post-conclave interview if I didn’t rat on him.”

Dragovich stood up from his chair in surprise. “He what?”

“He was just really touched by me being nice,” Nina said, “and said that he’d sit down with me after the conclave. It’s a great lead, but I sure as heck can’t tell Priscilla or the others.”

Dan sat back down and took another sip of whiskey. “You’re right about that, but if you get this interview, they’ll find out anyway. And they’ll want to know how you got it. It’s not the worst breach of ethics but it’s something, and the one thing you don’t do with somethings is hand them to Prissy Davis.”

“Right,” Nina nodded, “but you said you could give me stories without notifying Priscilla, right?”

Dan leaned back in his chair, starting to see where this was going. “Right. As long as I don’t take away your on-the-clock time. I had it written into my contract that I could use WWN reporters for *On Site* stories without them being subject to Prissy’s editorial authority.”

“So?” Nina pushed. “It was your tip.”

Dan thought for a second. “Prissy would throw a fit, but she couldn’t stop me from airing it, and she wouldn’t fire you. Getting a solid story is never a firing offense. Even if she did, CNN or Fox would grab you the next day.”

Nina met Dan’s gaze and reiterated. “So?”

He took another long pause, then another sip of whiskey, setting the glass down hard. “Deal - but if I’m functioning as your editor, I need the name of your source. You know the drill.”

“Not yet,” Nina replied, “I said I wouldn’t give him up and I’m sticking to that. Plus, I don’t want you checking into him and using his name as a lead for other stories. You can have the name the second the conclave ends.”

Dan raised an eyebrow. “You’re really going to pull my leg on this thing?”

Nina carefully placed the envelope on the table and slid it to Dan. “The name is in there, but you’re getting it after the conclave, not before.”

Dan looked at the parcel for a few seconds, then picked it up. “You’re really going to trust me not to open this thing?”

“Heck no,” Nina said, feeling her heart start to race. “We’re taking it down to the front desk, having them lock it in their safe, and telling them not to open it unless both of us are there.”

She finally exhaled. She’d put her kooky plan in front of one of the biggest names in the business. Now what?

Dan stroked his mustache, tapping the envelope on the table. Nina could tell he was rolling the idea around in his mind. Then he dropped the envelope on the table and slid it back to her. “It’s a bit ridiculous, but I like the way you think. You’re on, rookie – and this better be good.”

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## **Eighteen Hours Later**

**9:12 P.M.**

Nina stumbled into her hotel room and fell face-first onto her bed. It had been yet another fourteen hours running around St. Peter’s Square with Aiden, and at least that many cups of coffee. It was bad enough dealing with Priscilla’s sick idea of a baptism by fire, but even worse trying to hide the fact that she’d been up all night agonizing over that stupid envelope. Her brain was telling her to sleep, but her body was literally twitching from all the caffeine.

Something cold smacked her in the stomach, and she looked down to see a bottle of water come to rest on the comforter.

Vinya’s hair was casting a blue glow in a darkened corner where she was seated at a laptop, swigging Mountain Dew, and wearing a headphone-microphone-smartglass set. Vinya pressed a finger to her lips to indicate that Nina should refrain from speaking, apparently in the middle of a phone call. She was listening intently to whoever was on the other end of

the line, but pointed aggressively at Nina, then the water bottle, and made drinking motions with her hands

A few seconds later, she started talking into her headset. “Look, Hector, I’m not asking you for a quote and you owe me a serious solid after that whole Willow Smith thing. I need more...What?...Che Biggs? Who the hell is that?...*Google* it? Seriously?... Did I ever tell you I hate your cryptic guts?....Yeah, well I’m telling you again. Glass, disconnect.”

Vinya ripped off the glasses and dumped them on the table.

“Do I want to know what that was?” Nina asked, not moving.

Vinya made air quotes with her hands, “Record industry source.’ Actually, he just works for a talent management agency. He got wind that the Brilltones may be on the outs with their record label, which is massive – and which I already knew – but he wants to stay off the record when I need somebody *on*. He’s always wanted more favors than he gives out.”

Nina forced herself into a sitting position and screwed the cap off the water. “Reminds me of a few calls I made to city hall back in Appleton, minus the insults.”

Vinya laughed. “You should have heard *his* end of the conversation. I’m working a big story about how the whole Brill scene is drying up with record labels. New acts aren’t getting in, established acts are getting tougher bargains - and obviously the Brilltones are the band that started the whole scene.”

Nina was puzzled. “Brill is going gangbusters right now. I can’t go out on the street without getting run over by a poodle skirt. It’s bigger than ever.”

“Which means it’s peaking,” Vinya pointed her finger for emphasis, “It’s been five years since the ‘Tones put out *Duck and Cover*. 50s nostalgia was a jolt to the system when we were all wearing chromed shoulder pads and listening to Hive Mind. Now it’s everywhere. Eighteen of the top 20 in



America are Brill, there's nowhere to go but down, and I have way better sources than Hector about how much hell is about to break loose." She stopped to take another gulp of soda, "Honestly, if I never have to wear bobby-sox to a concert again, it will be too soon."

"Oh, come on," Nina said, "It's not that bad. I mean I'm not exactly a Brill but it's catchy."

Vinya tugged at her glowing locks in frustration. "The Brilltones are easily the best band of the decade, and I'm totally addicted to Deranged Poodle. It's the scene around it that messes with me. It doesn't make any sense. It's 2038, and yet everyone's obsessed with chocolate malts and poodle skirts and Frankie Valli. What makes people do that to themselves?"

Nina didn't respond, trying to process, but Vinya apparently interpreted it differently.

"Sorry, I don't mean to dump level-9000 music-nerd stuff. It's just that when I can't figure out what makes a scene tick, or why a band blows up, I beat my head against it until I can nail it down." She started putting on her headphones, clearly thinking she'd vented too much. "And I've haven't nailed down Brill in *five years*. Like, I can see what makes the individual bands sink or swim – but the underlying scene doesn't click. Like, why? I know that sounds weird."

Nina took another sip of water. "I don't think that's weird at all."

Vinya put her headphones back around her neck, looking genuinely surprised. "You don't?"

"Of course not. When I first saw Councilman Selski's financial disclosures, I sat in my office staring at them until midnight. There was nothing wrong with them on the surface, but the thing that obsessed me was that little things that didn't add up. I didn't shut up about them for the next week - my boyfriend, I mean, *ex-boyfreind* thought I'd gone crazy."

Vinya smirked. “Hence the ‘ex’ part?”

“Among other things,” Nina said with a heavy eye roll, “but seriously, I think that’s what makes reporters different. Sometimes I think ‘investigative journalist’ is just a nice word for somebody who can’t just look at something and let it pass.”

Vinya didn’t say anything, but Nina saw a smile creep up the corners of her lips, like she was holding in a laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

Vinya blushed and looked at her nails. “Did you just call *me* an investigative journalist?”

Nina polished off her water bottle. “Yeah, so? That’s the dream, right?”

Vinya raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know about dreams but if you could tell my mom that I have a real job, you’d be doing me a massive solid.”

“Ah,” Nina said, “Family not on board with the career choice?”

“Mostly it’s just my mom and my jerk-off older brother. I swear someone dropped that kid on his head as a baby.”

Vinya paused for a second, like she’d hit some mental iceberg mid-thought. “I’m guessing your family’s super-supportive?” She almost spat out the words but seemed to catch herself. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to -”

“Forget it,” Nina cut her off. “I’m getting used to everyone assuming I’m sheltered and naïve. Do I really come across like that?”

Vinya shrugged. “Nah, us bad kids just can’t process that you’re not jaded.”

Nina felt her eyebrows shoot up. “Jaded? I’m plenty jaded, just not about my job. I think that’s the one thing I still believe in. You know, truth, justice, the American way. Sometimes I feel like if take my eye off that - I’ll look up and realize how screwed my life is.”

Vinya stretched and got up from the computer, “So, the parents aren’t that supportive after all?”

“Oh, they are,” Nina rolled her eyes, “Almost too much. ‘Sure, Nina, chase that dream. Whatever you want, sweetie.’ It’s just so fake. They’re terrified I’ll disappear and hate them like my older sister.”

Vinya shook her head again and flopped down on her bed. “Oh, we could talk all night about older sisters.”

“Well,” Nina said, “I’ve got all night.”

Vinya bit her lip for a moment, hesitating before shaking her head. “I need sleep.”

Now it was Nina’s turn to push. “Vinya...friends.”

Vinya ran a hand through her glowing hair. “Yasha’s great,” she snipped. “Dentist. Always stuck up for me as a kid, helped me get clean when I got messed up in college. Probably saved my life.” She got up and headed for the bathroom. “I’m gonna brush my teeth.”

“And?” Nina shouted after her. There was clearly an “and.”

Vinya re-emerged from the bathroom, gripping a tube of toothpaste way too hard.

“When I said I could talk about sisters all night. I was being rhetorical. Leave it alone.”