

**Chapter Four, Part Three**  
**“Like No Business I Know”**

**Tuesday, January 26, 2038**

**Opening Day of Papal Conclave**

**9:30 A.M.**

“Thanks, Lester. Let me know if you hear anything more on that Biggs kid. Talk to you soon. Glass, disconnect.”

Vinya took off her smartglasses. She wasn’t sure whether to raise her fists in triumph or go to just put her head on the desk and sleep. She’d been up since four A.M. making “after-dinner” phone calls to record label sources back to the states.

She snapped her tablet screen back into its keyboard-mount and pulled up the feature length article she’d been working on for two days now - the longest thing she’d written in at least two years. If everything went as planned, it was going to be the lead article on WWN Lifestyle. She had scooped the L.A. outlets on the Brilltones’ record-company issues, along with ample details on the tension between the three ‘Tones. The most shocking detail was that the group had been asked to take a drastic pay cut on their next album based on “trends research” that indicated a looming collapse of the Brill scene within two years. Earth’s most popular act had been written off as “dated” at the height of their dominance.

All of this thanks to “sources close to the band,” natch.

Vinya clicked the “Save” button and attached the finished product to an email to her editor.

If this didn’t prove she was a responsible adult, nothing would. Now she needed a nap.

Then her glasses started vibrating on the desk.

Wiping her eyes, she shoved them back on her face. The projected screen read, *Call from: Nina Constantinos.*

“Glass, answer.”

The frame around Nina's face flipped from red to green, indicating that the call was live, "Hi, girl," Vinya answered. "what's up?"

"Um - did you finish your article?"

"Yeah," Vinya said slowly, "Just sent it in. Aren't you supposed to be working?"

Nina laughed, a bit nervously. "This call is work. How good are you at doing makeup?"

Vinya sat up straighter. "Wait. What?"

"Oakley is puking her guts out." Nina said. "They asked me to call and see if you could fill in since you're into fashion. I told them you were working on a big article, but I'd ask."

Vinya put a hand against her forehead. "Right, ask the pop-music girl if she can do TV makeup. Perfect."

"I'm sorry," Nina said, "I tried to tell-

"Not your fault." Vinya interjected with a heavy sigh.

Part of her couldn't believe that she was being asked to do this - but on the other hand, what the else was she going to do? Knowing herself, she'd just sit here hitting the *Refresh* button until her article popped up online. "Sure," she said, "I can't believe I'm doing this, but I need something to take my mind off the article. Give me a few minutes to shower."

"Seriously?" Nina replied, "I was just calling to get a formal negative, but I guess I'll see you soon."

The green frame around Nina turned red again.

Vinya showered as quickly as she could, then slipped on a black blouse and slacks - that screamed "unassuming makeup artist." She checked herself in the mirror as she shoved in a few dangly earrings. Simple, silver, but still artsy.

Lipstick: Nothing too crazy with this year's styles, but she settled on fire-engine red. She definitely looked the part she was trying to play, but still wasn't satisfied.

In L.A., she'd gone to work in T-Shirts, but she'd figured out quickly that D.C. was different. Half her reason for being here was to prove she could hack suit-and-tie world.

"Nope," she said the mirror, "You're a professional, V, dress like one."

She marched back to the closet and pulled out a hanger with an Italian dry-cleaning label. She'd already worn the blazer twice this week, but a third wear wouldn't kill it.

Her sister Yasha had helped her pick it out on her last day in Cali, half of a matching pair they'd seen randomly in a window on Rodeo Drive. A few weeks before, there'd been a shouting match with their brother Digant (the lawyer) and their mother (the one with expectations) about whether music blogging for the *Los Angeles Times* constituted "being an adult" – no matter how well it paid.

Vinya herself had thought the offer from WWN wasn't worth it, precisely because she *didn't* want to work for an over-formal D.C. outlet. WWN was East Coast to the core, and their Lifestyle staff was nowhere near on par with their news staff. The entire reason they'd headhunted her was that they didn't have a serious music reporter on staff and needed credibility. Not beacon of cultural journalism, and not Vinya's jam.

Then Digant had opened his big mouth about how Vinya was a "fangirl, not a journalist" and that "D.C. reporters would see right through her." That had made the decision. She was going to conquer this world and shove it in his face.

Hence, the blazer.

It was shiny, jet-black with red silk embroidery forming a flame pattern around on the cuffs of the sleeves – but the best part was the massive circular dragon embroidered on the back. It was part of a match set, and Yasha had kept the more demure version – white embroidery on cream background.

Slipping on the jacket, Vinya took one last look at herself in the mirror.

“That’s better.”

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## Washington, DC

**6:00 A.M. (12:00 P.M. in Rome)**

WWN reporter Emma Poissonier listened to the voices buzzing in her earpiece. It was weird hearing two different conversations on two different sides of the world.

On the one hand, the production staff for *WWN FirstLight* was debating how long to let Chef Manny yammer before they gave him the hook and cut to real news. While that was going on, Priscilla and her crew in Rome were organizing themselves, preparing to go live from the start of the conclave and coordinating with the Vatican on the particulars of the live feed from inside the Sistine Chapel.

Meanwhile, Emma and her cameraman were shivering in the snow on the front steps of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on the grounds of the Catholic University of America. Most of this week, she’d been shooting from *inside* local churches. Today, however, someone got the damn fool idea to shoot from the biggest Catholic Church in the nation – the only one that wouldn’t let cameras inside at 6:00 A.M. in the middle of a cold snap.

Finally, someone in the earpiece acknowledged her - her producer.

“Hey Emma. They’re thinking the cardinals’ swearing-in is gonna happen in about fifteen minutes, and we’re all ready to drag Chef Manny off the set by his Huevos Rancheros. You ready to go on?”

“About as ready as a poodle in a gator wrestlin’ contest.”

“A what?”

Emma sighed.

“Never mind. The professor ain’t here, we ain’t set up, and I’m freezing.”

“Well *get* ready, we're gonna cut to you ASAP. And calm down, your accent's slipping.”

Emma bit her lip, “You know I'm always a Yankee on-air.”

“That's my girl.”

She took a second to smooth her long, sandy ringlets, trying to get into the groove of her newscaster accent.

“My name is Emma Pwa-son-ee-ay.”

She repeated again, “Pwa-son-EE-AY,” taking great care to eliminate any hint of the Cajun “Pwa-SAWN-yay.” That was Emma-Jo the college cheerleader, this was Emma the reporter.

A youngish man with wild hair and a bow tie came running up the steps toward her. “Are you Emma?”

“That's me,” she responded in her best fake-Yankee voice, “Dr. Polinski, I presume?”

It occurred to her that she hadn't expected an expert in papal history to look so young - at least not young in a hot sort of way.

He smiled. “Sorry I'm late, morning prayer meetings, you know? And call me Aloysius.”

“I think Dr. Polinski might be easier to remember,” Emma tried to hold in a giggle, “and don't worry, we've got three whole minutes to spare.”

“Oh, that's an eternity,” Polinski said, “although I suppose that depends on your interpretation of that passage about a thousand years being as a day. I'll have to check to see how that's rendered in the Septuagint text.”

This time the giggle actually came out.

She noticed that Polinski's bow-tie was slightly askew and decided to use it to her advantage. "Let me straighten that for you. Wouldn't want you goin' on-air all disheveled."

The accent was slipping.

"I thought I was supposed to look disheveled," he joked. "I could have sworn I saw that in the release I signed: All History professors must look like a mess."

Emma smiled, but her earpiece popped to life before she could respond.

"Okay Emma, we're switching you over to the live feed. Priscilla's taking over the anchor slot for the next half-hour to cover the swearing-in or whatever. She's going to throw to you directly."

There was a buzz of static - then the sound in her ear synced with the tablet PC displaying WWN's live coverage in front of her.

The nasally Wisconsin clang of Nina Constantinos conducting an interview rang through her head like nails on a chalkboard. Emma had only met the new girl once, but that kid had better start working on that accent *quick* if she wanted to stick around.

"Priscilla," Nina said, "The tension down here in St. Peter's square is already running high. The pilgrims are here, the flags are waving. The mournful tone of Pope Steven's funeral has cleared, and now the world's Catholics are getting pumped up to meet the new boss. Back to you."

*Dang, girl, Emma thought, stop with the cheesy lines.*

"Thanks, Nina," Priscilla cut in. "Now for a perspective from stateside Catholics, WWN's Emma Poissonier is standing by with a very special guest. Emma?"

"We're live!" Emma's cameraman bellowed.

Emma steadied herself and raised her microphone.

“That’s right, Priscilla, we’re here in Washington at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, and we have Catholic University’s Dr. Aloysius Polinski. Dr. Polinski, you’re one of the nation’s leading authorities on Church history. So, tell us a little about what we’re about to see.”

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"Now you sit down." Vinya shoved Nina into her makeup chair, "I don't know who did that face of yours, but no more ugly makeup for my Nina. Now you belong to Auntie Vinya, and she is going to take good care of you."

"Is this going to hurt?" Nina asked with a tentative laugh.

"Auntie Vinya make no guarantees, but so far today we poke out only one eye."

"That's not funny," Nina replied as Vinya laid her head back and started wiping off her amateurish home makeup job.

"Yes, it is," Vinya chuckled. "You should totally see the look on your face right now."

The old makeup was soon gone and a fresh coat of foundation applied. Vinya pulled the cap off an eyeliner pen with her teeth and started applying it to Nina's eyelids. For some reason, Nina thought this was a good time to talk.

"So, anything interesting going on in here?"

"Hold still," Vinya responded, still clutching the cap in her teeth. "We're watching the Washington feed. Emma Poissonier is totally crushing on the history nerd they have her interviewing."

Nina laughed, "Really?"

"I said hold still. And yeah. She's flirting with him every time they go off air." The eye was done. "There, now you can open."

Nina blinked a few times, then craned her neck to see the view screens in the control room.

"Oh my gosh. She's totally hitting on him."

"I've got a bet with NaQuan that she has to offer him her digits. He says the dude will pick up - I'm saying he's either oblivious or too chicken."

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"You good for one more hit?" Emma asked Dr. Polinski. "My producer says they want you to hang on while the cardinals get sworn in and explain the oath."

"Sure, I don't have any plans until after lunch."

Emma wondered if that was an invitation. "Well then, we'll just have to see how much of your time we can take up."

Polinski laughed. "Well, with such pleasant company, how can I refuse?"

*Score!*

She let the accent slip in the direction of Scarlett O'Hara. "Why, that might be the nicest thing a guest ever said to an inquiring camera girl."

The earpiece buzzed back to life. It was NaQuan. "Quit flirting and get ready. Your new boyfriend needs to make some sense of what we're seeing."

Emma blushed and put the Yankee voice back on. "That obvious?"

"There's literally a bet here on how long it takes him to ask for your number. If it makes you feel better, I bet on the side of true love." There was raucous laughter in the background, "Now finish your job and then you can make eyes at him all you want."

"Got it." She radioed back.

"Good. You're on as soon as Priscilla can throw to you. Ask loverboy what the cardinals are saying when they put their hands on the Bible."



The line went dead for a second and then Priscilla could be heard getting ready to make the transfer.

“Back to business,” Emma said to Polinski. “They want you to talk about the oath they’re taking on the Bible.”

Priscilla’s voice rang into her earpiece “...and now, to make a bit more sense of these archaic rites, we go back to Emma Poissonier with Dr. Aloysius Polinski in Washington. Emma?”

“Thanks, Priscilla.” Emma said as professionally as she could, “Now Dr. Polinski, we’re seeing all the cardinals take an oath right now. What exactly are they saying?”

“Well,” Polinski said studiously, “In Latin, the oath is ‘*Et ego – first name - Cardinalis – last name - spondeo, voveo, ac iuro. Sic me Deus adiuvet et haec Sancta Dei Evangelia, quae manu mea tango.*’”

“Wow, you can do that from memory?” Emma marveled

“I said stop flirting.” NaQuan boomed.

Polinski laughed. “It comes with the job. Anyway, it translates ‘And I, name of cardinal, promise, vow and swear. Thus may God help me and these Holy Gospels which I touch with my hand.’ It’s not all that ancient - there’s been some oath for a while, but this one was standardized by John Paul the Great in his apostolic constitution. After all of their eminences recite their oath, the next thing you’ll see is the Master of Liturgical Ceremonies declaring ‘*Extra Omnes!*’ which is literally Latin for ‘Everybody Out.’”

Emma chuckled, “So basically it’s a fancy way of say, ‘Ya’ll git!’”

“Flirting!” NaQuan bellowed in her ear.

“Not even all that fancy. A lot of these rites go back to the times when secular powers would try to influence conclaves from the outside. So, the Church took some very practical measures to ensure that the undiluted will of the Holy Spirit could-”

“He’s veering off fact.” Priscilla said through the earpiece. “Journalism, please!”

Emma had worked around Priscilla long enough to know what phraseology like that implied. Usually, it meant she’d heard a trigger and wanted the panelist eaten alive.

Emma felt herself starting to hyperventilate. This was not a time she wanted to do this.

“It’s really quite a spectacle.” Polinski continued, oblivious. “They slam the two huge doors at the front of the chapel, and then everything goes silent.”

“Emma,” Priscilla buzzed into her ear

Polinski was still running, “After that we just wait for the smoke from the Sistine Chapel chimney. Black for an inconclusive ballot, white for a new pope.”

Emma looked into Polinski’s eyes. They looked so – honest. He was just here to describe the process, and it wasn’t his job to jump through Priscilla’s hoops.

“Emma!” Priscilla crackled.

Emma’s mind snapped into focus. This job was the only thing standing between her and a one-way ticket back to Louisiana. No way in hell she was letting herself jeopardize this. She was never going back.

Not even for Polinski and his honest eyes.

She took a deep breath and locked her gaze on him.

“But aren’t these rituals just part of the church’s problem?” she asked. “I mean, don’t all the gold and incense just communicate that the Church cares more about glitz than people?”

Polinski’s expression fell, and he seemed to rock back on his heels. “Well,” he stammered, thrown off by the change of pace, “a lot of Catholics value the tradition in these ceremonies.”

The poor man looked like he was staring into the headlights of an oncoming pickup – which in fairness, he kind of was.

Emma pressed further. “But the church is shrinking. Maybe some people value this, but normal people see this and wonder if their money is just buying another gold chalice.”

“What I meant,” Polinski tried to get back on his talking points. Then he lost them. “What I meant was...I...umm...”

She had him flailing. Perfect execution.

“And that’s all from Washington,” a much-happier Priscilla said through the earpiece, thankfully ending the spectacle. “Now with more from St. Peter’s square, let’s check in with Madison Rylander.”

The red light on the camera clicked off, and Emma let out a sigh.

“Thanks for your time, Professor,” she said before Polinski could react further. “We’ll be in touch if we need anything more.” She turned as fast as she could and headed for the news van. If she stayed here any longer, she might cry – and nobody got to see that.

“Wait!” Polinski shouted after her. “Hold on! What was that? Did I say something?”

Emma kept walking, “That’s showbiz, Doc.” She shouted without looking back. “Nothing personal.”