

**Chapter Five, Part Two**  
**“Small Town Girls and Lonely Worlds”**

**Tuesday, January 26, 2038**  
**Opening Day of Papal Conclave**  
**7:54 P.M.**

This had to be the most boring story Aiden Healy had ever worked. Twelve hours interviewing random passers-by, all of whom came here to watch a chimney for a puff of white smoke. There had been no danger, no action, and no excitement unless you counted Nina almost tripping over her own feet – repeatedly.

“How much longer can they take?” He leaned against a wall, setting down his camera for a few seconds. The new model didn’t weigh more than five pounds. Really, it was just a carbon fiber frame with a giant hard-drive and a big lens, but even five pounds gets heavy after twelve hours.

Nina was still pacing - she seemed to do that when she was bored, or not bored, or when she existed. “Oh, come on,” she said. “It’s not that bad. Heck, if I were back at WAPL, I’d be standing in the cold doing some stupid blizzard report.”

“You wouldn’t be working 14-hour days for Prissy and I wouldn’t be supervising your ritual hazing.” Aiden looked into the distance in mock wistfulness. “I’m thinking you’d be home, curled up by a fire with a hot cocoa and knitting an afghan.”

“Knitting?” Nina scoffed, “Do I look like a knitter to you?”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “Hell if I know. It seemed like a sufficiently stereotyped picture to go with that idyllic small-town life you keep yacking about.”

“You know,” Nina said. “I was just wondering, has anyone ever told you what a horse’s behind you are?”

“Once or twice,” Aiden snickered. “Usually by punk kids who want to be stars. That’s why I work war zones, no room for divas.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is about.” Nina yapped, “I’m just another airhead news-Barbie trying to get my fifteen minutes?”

Aiden almost snorted. “You’ve got the look. Perfect coat, perfect haircut, perfect makeup - perky ‘look at me’ attitude.” Maybe it was because he was tired, or just tired of Nina, but the adrenaline had started pumping. “Screw the news, screw the people who risk their lives for the news, screw the people suffering because of the news – all that matters is you and your shot at a starring in a Maybelline commercial. So, apologies if I resent dragging around yet another oversexed little narcissist.”

Aiden’s head was almost spinning. He’d wanted to say that to one these girls for years, and this nothing-burger of a story had finally pushed him a step too far.

Nina’s mouth was hanging open in a manner that reminded Aiden of a catfish - granted, most news-babes reminded him of catfish. They all had the same vacant eyes and, apparently, a similar intelligence level. Nina, however, had proven to be an especially chatty catfish, and there was a cathartic pleasure in shutting her up. Aiden couldn’t help but let a contented smirk creep across his face.

That was a mistake.

The catfish-mouth snapped shut, and Nina’s eyes narrowed. Aiden saw the muscles in her right arm start to tighten under her coat.

The next thing he knew, his cheek was stinging from one of the harder slaps he’d felt. It wasn’t one of those little girly slaps either - she’d put her shoulder into it.

“How’s that for oversexed!” Nina yelled, turning to stomp back to the studio.

Finally, his logical brain kicked in and he realized that he might be about to get reported – granted he might have a better case himself, but Dan and Ty would probably say he deserved it. Either way, he gave chase.

“Hey, wait, Nina! We have a story to shoot!” This, of course, was entirely the most rational thing to say to a woman who just put a big welt on your cheek. Not.

Nina whirled on her heels. “Shoot it yourself! Who needs me stealing all the attention, right?”

She unbuttoned her pea-coat, ripped it off, and hurled it in his face.

“And you can keep the perfect little ensemble. You might need it if you want to be taken seriously! What am I missing? Oh, right, the hair!”

She aggressively messed up her hair with both hands, “Better? Oh, and be glad I don’t do my nails.” She held up her clearly unmanicured hands, “See, no girly-girl scratches.”

*What the hell?* Aiden thought. He’d expected any number of bratty reactions, but this was intense - and kind of hot. *Wait no! Definitely not!* Maybe he needed water more than he thought he did. *Not the time for this crap, Healy!*

“Look,” he tried to backpedal. “I’m stressed, and I was out of line. Just get this last report done and then we can both go back to the hotel and sleep.”

He handed back her jacket, hoping she’d put it back on immediately.

She took back the coat and made a futile effort to put her hair back in place. Aiden could see the gears whirling in her head but couldn’t tell which way they were turning. He’d hit a nerve, but not the one he’d planned for.

She bit her lower lip a little too hard, then spoke through gritted teeth. “I hate news-babes almost as much as you do, and I think I’d puke if I ever saw myself in a Maybelline commercial. I do the hair and makeup because I was *part* of news story once. Having a perfectly pressed reporter on scene showed me that I didn’t need to be so scared. Insult my credibility again, and I will hurt you, but we are on the same side. So, now can we go shoot this like adults?”

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**Washington**

**2:26 P.M.**

**(8:26 P.M. Rome Time)**

Emma Poissonier pressed her thumb to the touchscreen at the exit of the Chinatown Metro station.

“SmartPrint recognized,” the console responded in monotone as the gate snapped open. The screen on the gate displayed her picture and account details, and she made a mental note that her balance was down to twenty dollars. That wouldn’t last her two days.

Little details like that were the only thing distracting her from thinking about what she’d done to Polinski. He wasn’t the first guest she’d eaten alive for Priscilla but damn this one stung.

Most of her fellow passengers continued up the escalator into the sunlight, but Emma stopped at a metal door with a thumbprint reader. Above it hung an art-deco sign reading, “The Hiram Fong.”

She pressed her thumb to the pad and heard the lock clunk open. She pushed the huge door inward and walked into the plush apartment building lobby.

“How’s it going, Nurul?” she asked the concierge at the front desk.

“All good, Miss Emma,” he responded with a smile and a Burmese Rohingya accent. “You?”

Emma checked her mail and decided to leave on the full Cajun drawl. “Been worse – but been a lot better.”

Nurul nodded. “Hard day at the TV station?”

Emma made her way to the elevators. “You might say that. I couldn’t possibly comment.”

Nurul let out a tiny snort of a laugh. Somehow it had once come up that both of them loved old *House of Cards* reruns.

“Don’t worry, Miss Emma, it will pay off. I told you, one day you’ll be a big star, like Zoe Barnes. I know, I got the sight about these things.” He tapped the side of his head knowingly

The elevator opened with a soft beep. “Thanks, Nurul. I’ll remember that.”

He always seemed to think that was a compliment – whereas Emma always remembered that Zoe ended up under an oncoming train.

Even with no-one else on board, the descent to the 8th floor seemed to take longer than usual. There was a level of claustrophobia that came with any ant-farm, even a “premium subterranean living space” like The Fong, but today was worse than normal.

The elevator opened and Emma practically ran to Apartment 829. She wanted a beer and her bed, not necessarily in that order.

Flinging open the door, she was pummeled the smell of burning grass and charred sheep.

Sinéad had left the damn *iWindow* running again.

Most ant-farm dwellers, at least those with any salary, installed artificial windows with non-glare screens and atmospheric scrubbers that freshened and scented the air. Emma had insisted on a top-of-the-line, depth-enabled, multi-window system. The only thing that made this gopher-hole even remotely livable was that fact that she could open any of the three windows, stick her head out, and feel the breeze.

That said, she’d failed to consider that the windows allowed her roommate to literally live in her own fantasy world.

And the dragon was staring at her.

“Good boy, Dumby,” Emma said soothingly to Sinéad’s ‘pet’ out the window, “It’s just me.”

‘Dumbledore06520’ was, at last count, the fourth longest-lived *PixelPet* in the United States. Most of his kind looked comparable to dogs – sometimes horses.

However, Sinéad had been fastidiously feeding Dumby and maintaining his virtual castle environment since middle school.

He looked like a damn elephant.

An elephant with wings and teeth that had never liked her - which is why he normally wasn't allowed in the living room windows.

Dumby gave a low growl as flames came out his nostrils and heat leaked into the room. Just as she felt like she was about to be eaten, a green text box popped up.

*Pre-Scheduled Exercise – Play Fetch.*

Out the window, a crew of soldiers rolled a giant catapult onto a parapet. One of them blew a trumpet, drawing Dumby's attention, and the dragon began wagging his tail like a dog waiting for a ball. Another knight pulled a lever on the catapult, which flung out a flailing sheep carcass at a highly unrealistic rate of speed. Dumby sprang into the air, winging his way toward the horizon and catching the sheep just before it hit the ground. By the time he returned and dropped it into the parapet, the soldiers had loaded a second (and very alive) sheep, which launched skyward with bleat of utter terror.

Emma clenched her fists, reminded herself for the umpteenth time that the dragon was not real, and shouted "Google, close window!"

Dumby's hellscape faded and was replaced by the home-screen – a smiley photo of Emma and Sinéad at last year's WWN New Year's Bash. Emma exhaled and added, "Display location: Delcambre, Louisiana. 504 Wilfred Landry Street. April 21, 2022."

The windows faded back up, displaying a gravel road and the muddy water of the Delcambre Canal. The stink of swamp wafted into the room – and the humidity started rising.

That was better.

This was home. Specifically, home when she was thirteen. Old enough to start appreciating the little details - understanding the seasoning for a perfect crawfish

boil, summer nights around a campfire. Too young to realize why country songs were about monotony, drinking, and heartbreak - and that home was stuck on infinite repeat. Thirteen was the last time home felt good.

The only thing Emma needed from home was the smell and the breeze. Other than that, she wanted nothing more than to stay here, in the city, away from that life - forever. Speaking of which, she had some leftover Chinese in the fridge,

Making her way to the kitchen, she found a handwritten note on the counter.

*Emma,*

*Saw your feed this morning. Sorry you had to go through that with the professor. I know it sucks, but good work.*

*Hugs,*

*Sinéad*

*P.S. Look in the freezer.*

Emma raised her eyebrows and yanked open the freezer, Inside, other than the normal stuff, she found a bottle of Jack Daniels, a half-gallon of Breyer's Habanero Rocky Road, and a RACPod Drive with a receipt indicating that Sinéad had downloaded a stupidly-long menu of turn-of-the-millennium rom-coms. Also, there was also another note.

*Pick Two of the three gifts (I wouldn't recommend the Jack and 'The Notebook' together.)*

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**Rome**

**8:29 P.M.**

Aiden and Nina had given up the pretense of waiting on their feet and taken seats on the cobblestones, leaning against one of the great pillars near the back of St.

Peter's Square. Between their aching feet and their earlier...whatever that was...neither one of them were particularly interested in standing, speaking, or doing much other than staring blankly at the roof of the chapel and waiting for the stupid smoke.

Honestly, Aiden liked it this way. It was the first time he'd gotten peace and quiet in three days.

Unfortunately for him. Nina was still Nina, and she still couldn't abide silence.

"Seriously," she piped up, "how long can they take?"

Aiden snickered. "Have you ever had to report on one of those senior citizen's bingo nights?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Think about it," he said, still staring ahead at the chimney. "It's the same thing. Bunch of old dudes calling out names and stacking papers. You know there's going to be at least one of them that can barely move - and that one grandpa in the back who shouts 'Bingo' and then everyone realizes his eyesight sucks so bad that he's reading his numbers wrong."

Nina laughed out loud - which was the first time she'd smiled all morning. "That's horrible."

Aiden kept staring and shook his head. "Just the straight-up truth."

"You've been to that bingo game, haven't you?" Nina teased. "Too specific to make up."

"August 3rd, 2017."

"You remember the date?"

Aiden sat up a bit straighter. "V.F.W. hall in Cimarron County, Oklahoma. I was nine. Mom left me and my brother with gramps, and it was bingo night. He



decided to take us with him. Probably the dumbest thing the old codger ever did. So, I'm sitting there on my iPhone playing mobile games all night - bored to tears. The caller says 'I-36' and this little skinny dude in the back yells 'Bingo!' Must've been like 90 or something - really old. Caller comes back to check his card, and it turns out his eyesight was so bad that he put his little token on I-28 thinking it was a 36. And then the dude starts arguing, screaming that it really is 36. I don't know why, but I was being a little snot and decided to take video on my phone. I'm rolling, and suddenly, dude jumps out of his chair and starts wailing on the caller with his cane and cussing him out - which is weird, because then how is he even standing up if he needs a cane? Anyway, he keeps beating on this poor guy, and eventually they get two or three other old people to pull him off. I got the whole thing on tape."

He looked over at Nina, feeling the same elation he had when it happened. She was smiling, which made him feel a lot better than it rightfully should have.

"And that's why you became a cameraman," she concluded.

"Yup," he turned his gaze back to the chimney. "Thing got like 14,000 views on YouTube. After that, I started taking video of anything I could - annoyed the hell out of our chickens. It's still online, too, look up 'Grandpa's Bingo Beatdown.'"

Nina laughed. "That's exactly what a nine-year-old boy would call that video."

"Hey!" Aiden retorted, "I was proud of that title."

Nina smiled again, shook her head, then leaned back against the pillar. "You know. You're not bad when you aren't being a total ass."

"Thanks, I guess." He rolled his eyes and turned back to the chimney, "And for what it's worth, I think you're one of the better reporters I've seen come through."

There was silence again.

"Thanks," Nina said, "That means a lot coming from..."

Her voice trailed off as a wispy black strand billowed out of the Sistine chimney.

“Black smoke!” Aiden shouted, “No pope. Get ready for air.”

Nina shot to her feet, not realizing that she’d lodged one of her heels in the gap between two cobblestones. She pitched forward, breaking the fall with her hands before she smacked into the pavement.

It was enough to remind Aiden that he was still on babysitting duty, and that Nina was still...Nina.

“I’m fine,” she said, refusing the hand he offered. “Wouldn’t be a big story without at least one Nina faceplant.”