

Chapter Six, Part One

“The New Romantics”

Twelve Years Earlier
Friday, May 24, 2026
8:17 P.M.

Two weeks at WWN.

The newness was wearing off, and reality was hitting twenty-six-year-old Madison Rylander like one of those new maglev trains. She'd been the toast of the town in Cleveland, but being a big fish in a small tank only made you a medium-size fish.

WWN was the biggest tank in the world, and mid-size fish got eaten. So far it had been crap stories, zero airtime, and repeated reminders from the new boss that her hiring “created an overstaffing issue.”

Prissy seemed to have bigger issues than overstaffing - the kind that required anti-psychotics - but far be it from the new girl to point *that* out.

Instead, it was Madison who was seeking treatment, at a bar called *Lair of Zod*. It was one of those trendy new space-themed places where Madison didn't think she was hip enough to darken the fake-airlock doors. She'd upgraded her wardrobe to include a few circuit-board-pattern blouses from Nordstrom - but she wasn't half as cyber-chic as the rest of the clientele. That, and no amount of clothing made you look cool when you had nerdy glasses, dark red hair, and freckles.

The bartender had recommended a green concoction that glowed under the black lights and came in a black martini glass. The menu called it a “Starkiller,” but it tasted like a mango-rita spiked with too much Yellow Dye #5.

Madison had never been much of a drinker back home, but if this week was any indication, she and Lord Zod were going to be fast friends. That said, Zod's other supplicants were less than compelling - a mixed bag of assorted DC suits and glow-haired hipsters. Too cool to talk to and, based on the snippets of conversation she'd heard, too vapid to be *worth* talking to.

Of course, Madison probably looked less than compelling herself, playing backgammon with herself on a wallet-sized board with tiny magnetic pieces.

Then, there was a sudden burst of laughter to her left, and a loud feminine voice.

“Flan, honey, that was the best ‘crack the cutie’ I’ve ever seen. You killed it!”

“I learned from the best.” Came another woman’s response.

Madison looked up from her game.

A few stools away, a crew of WWN newsies had taken seats.

Big fish.

There was Dan Dragovich – she’d been avoiding him after she almost squeed the first time they’d been introduced. He probably had so many annoying fan-girls, and he was in his late thirties, but how could you *not* crush on that. Then there was S. Flannery MacClennan - who was only the hottest-selling author in America.

Finally, there was Toby Carsten, the type of person that mere mortals just didn’t approach.

Just looking at her, in her silver cocktail dress, almost made Madison want to faint. Toby Carsten *was* cable news. The woman had single handedly made it professional for a generation of African-American women to wear silver lipstick to the office. Fashion followed Tobaya Carsten, not the other way around.

Of course, Madison thought, I can’t even drink without being dwarfed.

She went back to nursing her Starkiller. but then a voice echoed across the polished steel bar.

“Yo, Red!”

Madison looked up, almost involuntarily - it was Carsten. She didn’t know anyone named Red and looked behind her to see if someone reacted. No one did, and she looked back.

Carsten's chromed lips curled upward. "Yeah, you! You're the new girl in Prissy's shop, right?"

Then it clicked, Carsten didn't know her name - Madison was just the new redhead in the political division.

And Toby Carsten had spoken to her. Toby. Freaking. Carsten.

"Have a drink with us!" Carsten beckoned, waving her hand in a wide circle.

Madison felt her eyelids shoot up in surprise. If mere mortals didn't speak to Toby Carsten, they certainly didn't turn her down either. "Sure," Madison replied as she scooted onto a new stool.

Carsten placed a hand on her shoulder. "So, kid, you got a name? We already got a Red." She cocked her head toward MacClennan, whose fiery hair was ten times brighter than Madison's brownish auburn.

"Madison," she replied, trying to keep herself from stammering.

Dragovich cut in. "Madison Rylander. We poached her from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* - she held city council's feet to the fire, hard. Looked it up. Great stuff."

Madison felt her lips smile and her jaw drop at the same time. She hadn't expected him to remember her name - let alone Google her work.

Toby noticed and snorted in amusement. "Girl, it's our job. We drink and we know things."

"I think she's too young for that reference." Flannery chuckled.

"Am not!" Madison sat up a bit straighter.

"Whoa, hold your dragons, Khaleesi." Toby took a sip out of whatever she was drinking and set down the glass with a thud. "But yeah, if you told Dan your name once, by now he probably knows your social security number and all of your siblings' birthdays."

Madison chuckled nervously and twirled the stem of her glass.

“Oh, come on, I’m kidding.” Then Toby’s expression turned - she must have seen Madison shaking.

“Sorry,” Toby said, biting her lip. “You’re nervous. I keep forgetting that we’re supposed to be a big deal.” Then she got a mischievous glint in her eye, and the sass returned. “We’re going to need to fix this problem.”

The bartender started moving their way as Toby fixed her eyes on Madison.

“You got an office clique yet? Girl-squad?”

Madison shrugged her shoulders. The rest of the political shop had been less than welcoming, and laser-focused on work.

Toby rolled her eyes. “Course not. You work for Prissy. Love her like a sister but she’s not much for touchy-feely. That settles it, we’re adopting you.” She looked back at Dan and Flannery, “Any objections?”

Both of them seemed to nod – or was Madison just making that up? Dragovich even seemed to smile.

“That’s it then,” Toby said, “We are now officially your official friends. Sound good, Maddy? I can call you Maddy, right?”

A smile started creeping across Madison’s face. This didn’t quite feel real, but it definitely felt *good*.

“Nobody really calls me Maddy,” she replied, still a bit nervous, “but sure, I mean - sounds good, I guess.”

Toby scoffed. “You *guess*? Oh, I get it, we’re old. Trust me, we’ll do for now. So, here are the rules, okay?” She held up one finger. “First, we’re your *friends*, so you don’t get to treat us like celebrities. You shoot it with us like normal people.” Another finger, “Second, we go drinking at least once a week – no significant others - you *will* be obligated to attend these sessions. And third...”

Toby picked up Madison's drink and looked at the glowing liquid.

"I have no clue what this is, but it's not how reporters drink." She walked a few feet to the nearest trash can, dumped the glass, then strolled back to the table. In the process, she almost knocked over Madison's now folded travel-backgammon.

"Wait," she said. "You play?"

Madison nodded stiffly.

Toby chuckled, "You and me are gonna be better friends than I thought. I've been looking for a worthy opponent ever since I moved out here."

She turned back to the bar, pounded on it twice, then yelled. "Yo, bartender! Get my friend Maddy a Scotch!"