

## Chapter Seven, Part Two “Action and Consequence”

**Monday, February 15, 2038**  
**Eighteen Days After Conclave**  
**9:15 A.M.**

“Constantinos,” came a voice from behind Nina as she swigged her coffee. She spun her chair to see Sinéad carrying a tablet along with her ever-present stack of paper files. After a week back in Washington, the one thing that still boggled Nina’s mind was how Sinéad was always so awake during “morning rounds.”

Nina was starting to think the morning ritual didn’t really serve any purpose – except maybe to harass the staggering number of reporters who got assignments directly from Priscilla. Seriously, what was the point of the head editor’s assistant coming to check on everyone *every* morning?

Nina yawned and stretched, mostly for effect. “Morning, Sinéad.”

Sinéad clicked her tongue disapprovingly, “Well, you look like warmed over horse crap. Second cup already?”

“Third,” Nina replied in monotone. She’d been up late Skyping with Vinya trying to find an apartment that both of them could live with.

Sinéad whipped out her iPad. “Any-who. I was double-checking expenses from the Rome trip. I thought we told you not to loan out your company credit card to other staff.”

“I didn’t,” Nina protested. “What would make you think that?”

Sinéad gave Nina one of her stern-schoolmarm looks.

“Someone was using it at a restaurant called *Taverna del Ghetto* two days before the conclave. That can’t possibly have been you, because you’re one of *our* reporters, and the other per diem card used at that restaurant was assigned to Dan Dragovich. So, one of his syphilitic camera goons must have asked you to help with their maxed-out cards, right?”

Nina clenched a fist and closed her eyes. We're they really having this conversation? "No, that was me," she said matter-of-factly. "Is having dinner with a colleague a problem?"

Sinéad dropped the iPad to the desk, where it landed with a thwack. "Dan Dragovich is not a *colleague*, Constantinos. He is a parasitic contaminant, inherited from a previous regime. Are we clear on that?"

"I'll keep that in mind in the future." Nina said with another yawn, which seemed to anger the unwanted presence.

Sinéad planted her hands on the desk and whispered directly into Nina's ear. "This isn't Wisconsin, Cheese-Breath. Dragovich doesn't have social dinners, he has stories. If you stab us in the back, don't use our money. We will find you, and you're too new here to play with fire."

Sinéad straightened up and put her fake happy face back on before Nina could respond. "Well then, glad we've got that straightened out." She turned to leave but added one more punch. "Caffeine doesn't do anything but make you jittery. Best advice I ever got was to lay off the stimulants."

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Vinya Jain set her bedazzled purse down on her desk, taking a final chug of her morning Mountain Dew. The rhinestones on the bag refracted the neon lights ringing the top of her cubicle, creating tiny specks of light all over her workspace. When she took this job, she'd assumed this place would be a total drag, but boy was she wrong.

Everyone knew that Prissy Davis didn't give two craps about pop culture, but the boss had realized two years ago that WWN was behind the other networks on cultural stories. So, she'd hired Vinya's editor, Tony Cantara, and given him a blank check to do whatever he wanted as long as he drove up ratings and got more scoops.

Cantara, in turn, responded by taking over the twelfth floor and building an entire newsroom in his image.

Black walls soared to a vaulted ceiling that exposed the inner workings of the air-conditioning system, which had been painted into a multi-hued industrial collage. Tubes of blue and green neon ran along the tops and bottoms of all the cubicles, then snaked past the floor-to-ceiling glass windows to the front of the room. There, the glowing vines climbed up the wall – coming together near the ceiling to form the giant letters *WWN*, with *Lifestyle* in pink cursive below.

WWN Lifestyle may not be an industry leader yet, but the architecture oozed style and ambition. If anything, it was more of a head-trip than the old arena next door - a middle finger to *Vogue* magazine for passing over Tony for editor-in-chief after a decade as their number two.

That said, Vinya saw one huge difference that separated Tony's megalomania from Priscilla's. Tony came across as a decent human being who cared about his staff.

He was also leaning over the edge of her cubicle.

“So, Miss TMZ,” he said with a jaunty grin, “what’s our big scoop this morning?”

He'd chosen a tight royal blue blazer today, along with a green paisley bowtie. The ensemble accentuated his slim figure and offset his close-cropped gray hair. Everything the man wore *always* worked.

“That depends,” Vinya responded, “Do you care that the Chinettes just announced an album of Beatles covers?”

“Already read it,” Tony said with a dismissive flourish of the hand. “It’s like the record companies expect all the Brills to move from fifties retro straight to sixties retro. Even I don’t think teenagers are *that* stupid. But seriously, we need something that other people don’t have. That’s why you’re here, Orange County. So, what are those golden L.A. ears hearing that I *don’t* already know.”

This had been the last week of Vinya’s life. Her Brilltones story had blown the doors of the L.A. outlets exactly like Tony wanted – but now he wanted more.

“Look, Tony, just because I know people in the music industry doesn’t mean they have something for me. Heck, give me some time.”

Tony raised a single eyebrow. “Did you just say ‘heck’?”

“I do use that word on occasion,” Vinya lied, making a mental note to guard against Nina’s Wisconsinisms. “And maybe I can call some of the record labels and see if they have any new acts.”

Tony was unphased. “I can grab *that* off the wires, honey. We can do better. Where do *you* think the next big one is hiding? Screw the current stuff, what are we not watching?”

Vinya bit her lip; this was annoying, but she had the glimmer of an idea. “A contact on the ‘Tones story said to look into a guy called Che Biggs. Said that’s where the labels saw the money going. Turns out he’s the it-boy for the underground Rev scene out of New York – just signed the first big-label deal for a revver.”

Tony took a step back. “Rev scene? Like the guys who did that beheading in the Bronx.”

Vinya shrugged. “That was an extreme case, but yeah, that’s the subculture. Vigilante gangs patrolling the Bronx. I’ve seen a few low-end music videos – lots about dishing out vengeance to drug dealers and being the new order.”

Tony chuckled nervously. “You think you know enough to write something?”

Vinya shook her head. “Not my world – and not close. It’s underground, it’s from the hood, and it’s New York. I’m a California rich kid.”

“You’re also a top-notch reporter,” Tony gave her a sly smirk. ‘And if this story scares the bejeebies out of me, imagine what it will do for readers. You’re doing it. Big exposé on revvers.” He rubbed his hands together, and Vinya had to admit it could be fun to dig into.

“An exposé on what?” she asked, “I mean, I can’t report on street gangs.”

Tony recoiled. “Oh no, honey, not that. The music. The subculture. You know, get deep into the underground clubs or whatever they’re calling them these days.”

Vinya pretended to play with the idea, bobbing her head back and forth. “Bronx trip? I like it. When do I book tickets?”

Tony let out a small laugh. “Oh no, honey. See if there’s anyone local first.”

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Emma Poissonier dabbed her watering eyes as she stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. She did not need tears right now, not even little ones.

“Come on Emma-Jo,” she whispered. “Pageant face on. Mama’d kill you if she saw this.”

There were plenty of reasons to think this meeting would be good, but it didn’t *feel* good. She thought she’d put the incident with Dr. Polinski behind her, but getting called in to the big office had dredged it right back up.

She exhaled and faced herself in the mirror. “Makeup crisis averted,” she said to herself, “You did your job right, now go up there and kill it.”

It was just a few stairs up to Priscilla’s suite, but it felt longer. She found the waiting room empty and Sinéad’s desk unoccupied.

What exactly was she supposed to do? Knock?

She decided that would be a bit trashy. Instead, she poked her head into the inner sanctum, where Priscilla was intently reading the contents of a folder.

“Ms. Davis,” Emma said softly, “You asked for me?”

Priscilla snapped the folder shut and smiled.

“Emma! Yes, by all means. Have a seat.”

Emma showed herself to a chair and sat gingerly. She hadn’t seen the inside of this office in ages and hadn’t the slightest clue what to say to the woman who ran this entire place. Yet, Priscilla seemed to be waiting for her to make the first move.

Emma took a risk on breaking the silence. “So. what can I do for you?”

Priscilla laughed. “Oh nothing. I just called you up here to tell you that I was really impressed with your work during the conclave. Not everybody rose to the occasion the way you did. Honestly, a big part of me wishes I’d taken *you* to Rome instead of Constantinos. But then, what would we have done without you holding things down stateside? Great stuff, absolutely wonderful.”

For the first time this morning, Emma allowed herself to crack a smile.

“Why, thank you Ms. Davis.” she said, polishing the Cajun accent into her best Southern Belle. “I mean, comin’ from you that means a lot.”

Priscilla raised a hand. “Don’t be silly. You’ve earned it. I just want you to know that we see your work. How many years have you been with us again?”

“Four, Ma’am. It’s been quite a ride.”

“I’m sure.” Priscilla took another quick look at her folder, then removed it from the desk and placed it in a drawer. “Sinéad speaks quite highly of you, and everything I’ve seen from you on *FirstLight* has been high-quality. I generally don’t like the morning-show fluff - but you’ve got a real talent for it. You’re a pure drop of sunshine.”

“That’s my job,” Emma attempted a grin. “Wouldn’t be much of a morning girl if I didn’t brighten the day a little.”

“Exactly,” Priscilla chuckled. “And personally, I’d like you to brighten a lot more days – in one of the big chairs.”

Emma felt blood rush to her brain. Had she heard that right? The big chairs? The main set? She strained to focus back in.

“Now,” Priscilla continued, “There isn’t an opening on the main *FirstLight* set at the moment, but I’d like to position you to take one of those chairs soon. Would you like that?”

Emma nodded ecstatically. She'd expected a pat on the head, but nothing like this. "I'd like that very much, ma'am."

"Good," Priscilla gave a tight smile, "because it turns out that McKenna Bradley from *FirstLight Weekend* is leaving us. She just up and resigned. No notice. Anyway," Priscilla reached under the desk, "We need a co-anchor a bit younger than Tyler Farr, so I took the liberty of asking creative to do a mockup."

She came up with a piece of white poster-board from under her desk. It bore a glossy blue logo reading *FirstLight Weekends - With Tyler Farr and Emma Poissonier*.

"Think it'll work, Emma?"

Emma nodded as hard as she could. "Yes, ma'am. I - I think it will!"

"I'm glad. It's a big task but I'm sure you're up to it."

"Thank you, ma'am," Emma blurted, "I mean, it's just such an honor to—"

"No, no," Priscilla interrupted. "Just keep up the good work – which I'm sure I'm keeping you from. So, I won't take any more of your time."

"Yes, ma'am." Emma steadied herself, the euphoria was making her feel faint. Was she really getting her own anchoring gig?

"Good girl," Priscilla said. "Oh, and you have the desk next to Constantinos right?"

That question brought Emma back to earth. "Yes, ma'am. Why?"

"Tell her to clear her schedule for Wednesday at Noon." Priscilla said, her tone becoming cold. "She has a performance review - with me."

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**12:02 P.M.**

Nina stared at her phone as she sat on WWN Tower's roof terrace. There was a great view of Union Station and the Capitol up here, but at the moment she wasn't seeing any of it. The only thing she could focus on was the "Dial" screen staring back at her, displaying a New Zealand number that she was too afraid to call.

Did he even have the same phone? Were all of his calls being screened? Would he even bother getting back to her? Probably not.

"Hey," came Vinya's voice from behind her, "You are aware that it's freezing out here right? There are better places to have lunch. You know, ones with heat."

Startled, Nina looked up and blinked, her brain struggling to process something other than the phone call. "Oh, sorry, I just like it up here."

"One of these days" Vinya quipped, "you're going to need to explain your obsession with cold rooftops." She set down a paper bag labeled *Dokutsu*, followed by a pink *PaoPao BubbleCoffee* cup with a lime-green straw. "One medium, three-shot, root beer bubble-cino, extra bubbles - iced, in the middle of winter - because Wisconsin. Did I get it right?"

Nina chuckled and took a long swig. "Yup. I needed that."

Vinya sat down on the bench next to her. "For what it's worth, I took a sip of that. It's disgusting. Called your boyfriend yet?"

Nina gave her a side-eye. "Very funny. And no."

"Come on!" Vinya said, "It's just a cardinal, not a huge deal. If he were a Congressman, I'm guessing you'd be breathing down his neck."

Nina rotated the phone in her hand for the three-millionth time. "Yeah, I guess."

Vinya pulled another *Dokutsu* box out of her bag and held it up, taunting Nina with her sultriest vocal tones. "I got lunch from that new izakaya under the bridge - parmesan-crusting tofu yakitori. Call your cardinal and I'll hand it over."

Nina almost snorted. "That's supposed to motivate me? It sounds like a crime against Japanese cuisine."



Vinya's eyes narrowed. "Has anyone ever told you you're hopeless buzzkill?" Then a smile crept across her face, and she snatched Nina's phone. "Where's your send button?"

"Hey" Nina grabbed for the phone, "Give that back."

Vinya held the phone out of reach. "Why? Somebody has to make the call before we can eat, and I'm hungry." Vinya pulled the phone down and, to Nina's horror, punched the green button reading "Send" – along with the speakerphone button.

"Are you nuts?" Nina shouted as she heard the three beeps indicating that the phone had gone straight to voicemail.

Vinya just gave a toothy smile and nodded vigorously.

Of course. Crazy was her calling card.

Nina finally succeeded in snatching the phone, but failed to get it off speaker before the message played. "The phone belonging to...Fletcher Adams...is currently unavailable. If you would like to leave a mes-."

Nina punched the "End" button a second too late. Vinya's eyes were wide and her mouth was hanging open.

"Wait," Vinya said slowly, "your source is the-"

"Don't say it!" Nina shushed. "And yes, okay. *Now* do you understand why this is complicated?"

"I thought you said he was a minor cardinal!"

"He was. Now he isn't." Nina ran her hands through her hair in frustration. "And his phone is either dead or disconnected, so if you have any ideas, I'm all ears."

Vinya pursed her bright red lips into a thoughtful grimace. "Yeah, no clue. That's just...wow."

“It’s only a wow if he ever calls back.” Nina grabbed a box of food. “Now give me that yakitori, I’m starved.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes until Vinya piped up. “So, you find us any good apartments to look at?”

Nina shot her a glare, then laughed a little at the awkward change of subject. “Yeah, one.”