

Chapter Eight, Part One

“New Era”

Ten Years Earlier
Thursday, April 27, 2028

Madison appraised her reflection in the glass wall of WWN Tower as she approached the front door. She'd made a mess of herself doing a “happy dance” on her way back from the White House. It was too much fun finally getting to sit in ‘the chair’, even if she was just filling in for WWN’s normal White House Correspondent. How many people got a front row seat at the White House by age 28?

Answer: freaking nobody.

She ran her fingers through her auburn bob, straightened her glasses, and tucked her circuit board-patterned blouse back into her pantsuit. There, now she looked less like a giddy high schooler. Granted, she was still planning to go back to her new office, close her new office door and blast Taylor Swift songs. Because she could, because WWN thought she deserved an office with a door, and because she was Maddy freaking Rylander.

Not that she hadn’t always been, but now it *meant* something.

Her phone buzzed in her purse, and on further investigation the viewscreen said, “Call From: Dan.” She smiled.

Dan was literally in the air, covering President Kyrsten Sinema’s trip to Syria, but he must have seen Madison at the press conference. How many girls get congratulatory phone calls from their famous boyfriends direct from Air Force One?

Answer: freaking nobody.

“Hey babe,” she answered, trying to sound more alluring than normal, “Did you see me?”

“Unfortunately not,” came the reply. Dan sounded out of breath. “Maddy, I-”

His voice cut off.

“Dan?” Madison asked, feeling her pulse start to speed up. This was not how this was supposed to go.

“I’m here, Maddy. I just got off the phone with Yolanda and...I...Maddy, Brinkman’s dead.”

“What?” Madison practically vomited, or felt like she was about to. She steadied herself against the arena’s brick outer wall. “How did...? He just went on medical leave three weeks ago. He looked fine!”

“Apparently it was always more advanced than he let on. He’s - I mean – he was always like that.”

Dan, who never cried, sounded like he was barely holding it together. Madison wanted to feel like that. Brinkman was a mentor, a friend. She wanted to be thinking about him right now, but there was something else bubbling up – something ugly that shouldn’t belong in this moment.

“Dan,” she asked, feeling her tear ducts warming. “Do we know what happened with the succession plan?”

“Don’t say that out loud!” Dan shushed. “You’re not even supposed to know about that plan.”

“Dan,” Madison snipped. “Tell me. Now.”

There was a long pause. “He told me he was going to look at it, but I don’t know. He didn’t really want to talk about it after – after Toby. It’s supposed to move immediately, so we’ll see.”

Madison lowered her voice to a whisper, feeling the tears trying to push out. “Dan! You know I can’t...She hates me! Like, passionately!”

“I know, I know,” Dan said, “but you’re one of the best we’ve got and we’ll make it through, okay. You’re gonna be fine.”

“I’m not going to be fine, Dan!” Madison whisper-screamed. “You know where this is going! She might fire me first thing!”

“Look, Maddy,” Dan said, “they’re doing a press availability with the First Lady. I have to go. But we’re going to take care of it and everything’s going to be good, okay? I love you and I’ll call as soon as I can.”

“Love you too.” Madison took a shaky breath and pushed the red “end call” button on her phone. So much for this being the best day of her life. Before she could put the phone away, an envelope icon appeared at the top corner of her screen.

Work email – and the headline said it all.

WWN Editor-in-Chief Jim Brinkman dead at 67. Political Editor Priscilla Davis Named as Replacement.

“This isn’t happening,” she whispered to herself as she swung open the front door. The eyes got warmer. “No crying, Maddy, no crying,” In theory, she still had an on-camera hit in a half-hour, and the last thing she needed was dripping mascara.

She blew past the front desk and almost kicked the elevator out of frustration, but that was when a bright voice came from behind her. “Hey, are you - you’re Madison Rylander!”

Madison turned. It was a black-haired woman wearing dangly turquoise earrings and a western-style bolo tie. About Madison’s age, maybe a bit younger. Her suit was brand new, but low-end and a bit too tight. Definitely not from around here

“Guilty as charged.” Madison flashed her best TV-star smile, hoping like hell that she didn’t look like she felt.

The woman shoved the tablet she was carrying into an old-school leather briefcase and straightened her jacket. “Sorry, I don’t mean to fangirl on you. I just – I’m the new rural tech correspondent for WWN Business Network, but now they’re saying tech’s moving into the news division. So, I was supposed to start tomorrow but now I have a meeting with Priscilla Davis today and I don’t know who my boss is and...sorry...I’m a bit spazzed.”

That actually made Madison chuckle a bit. First day jitters, just like she'd had two years ago, but worse. This girl was starting off with Prissy in the middle of a crisis.

Madison tried her best for a smirk that said, *I'm a big-shot reporter, welcome to the club* – a Toby Carsten smirk. “You’ll be fine,” she said, “I was a mess my first day too.”

“Thanks,” the woman said, “This is just a long way from McAllen.”

“A bit.” Madison admitted, sizing up the new recruit. Young, green, and fresh out of the local-news trenches – and McAllen? That was a small market Texas town on the border with Mexico. Nothing like DC.

This chick was clearly being lined up for a first-class Pristol-whippng. She needed more than just the Toby smirk. She needed *Toby*, and Toby was long gone.

Madison swallowed the lump in her throat. “You said you have a meeting with Prissy Davis in ten minutes?”

The woman nodded hard, clearly trying to control the adrenaline.

“Good.” Madison fished a business card out of her back pocket and handed it over, “You’re also having drinks with Maddy Rylander after work. 7:30 at Zod’s across the street, my cell number’s on the card.”

This kid was going to need a friend more than Madison needed a cry.

The woman took the card excitedly. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” Madison gave her a wink, “Welcome to the club, McAllen. You got a name?”

“Ally,” the woman said, offering her hand. “Ally Talamantez.”