

Chapter Eight, Part Two
“Any Publicity is Good Publicity”

Wednesday, February 17, 2038

Twenty Days Since Conclave

11:30 A.M.

Aiden folded up the last collapsible camera and forced it into a backpack. He'd been around the industry just long enough that it still felt weird to do that. He missed “real” cameras, the kind that actually required effort to lift. Now, all of the actual recording equipment fit in a little black box the size of his palm, and the rest was just a carbon fiber frame.

He tossed the pack onto a stack of five - an entire professional studio that could fit in the trunk of a car.

With the packing complete for tonight's shoot, he surveyed the office suite to make sure they hadn't missed anything - not that there was anything to miss at WWN Impact, LLC.

Technically, this suite on the second floor of the old arena was a separate company from the rest of the building, under the total control of Dan Dragovich. That had been Dan's way of insulating the place when Prissy took over. It worked, but Aiden had always wished they'd at least left Prissy in charge of the cleaning. The lack of organization - and the re-purposing of the waiting room as a camera-storage area - left little doubt as to who was in charge.

The glass doors overlooked the main newsroom floor below, and since getting back from Rome, it had become apparent that Nina's workspace was right below him in full view.

She'd been rushing around and looking nervous all morning, which meant Aiden kept seeing her even when he didn't want to.

Damn open-plan office layout.

His thoughts were interrupted by Ty Crianças' Bostonian whine. "So," his boss started, "My turn to buy lunch. What's everyone thinkin' today? Burgers? Tacos? Please tell me we're not doin' that girly izakaya again."

"Huh, what?" Aiden said, trying to refocus his attention.

Ty gave him a stink-eye, and Aiden watched as his supervisor's eyes shot out the door.

"Sure," Ty said. "We can do Greek. You want fries?"

"What the hell?" Aiden shot back. Ty had been giving him random crap about Nina ever since they got on the plane home. "Will you give it a rest?"

"Not until you stop moping around my office like a frikkin' idiot every time you see her!" Ty headed for the door. "You're distracted. You're moody. Dude, romance makes me physically sick and even *I* think you should ask her out! Seriously, dude, talk to her! Be fruitful! Multiply! Just whatever gets your head back in the game."

Aiden shook his head. "Look, how many times do I have to tell you? She's a co-worker."

"Right," Ty turned back and threw up his hands. "And you don't screw with co-workers, so instead you screw brainless bimbos wherever we're on assignment. At least that Nina can form a complete sentence."

Aiden rolled his eyes as hard as he could. "Ty, I don't need to justify my sex life to—"

"Funny, you brag about it enough when it's going well."

Aiden gritted his teeth. "The last thing I need *on earth* is a girlfriend, and I *definitely* don't need one at the office."

"Oh, so you *have* been thinking about this."

“Ty,” Aiden said as calmly as he could. “We’re not-”

Ty cut him off, “When the last time you had an actual woman in your life?”

“I,” Aiden stopped to think. “I - that’s none of your damn business!”

“It’s my damn business because I’m your *friend*,” Ty retorted, “and also because right now, you’re taking out your hormonal angst on *me*, and it *sucks*.”

Aiden threw up his hands. “Whatever. She’s probably getting fired anyway from what I hear.”

“Good, then you could ask her out without violating your ridiculous ethics.” Ty turned to leave. “And for what it’s worth you now have me craving *literal* Gyros. You want fries?”

Aiden shook his head. “Sure, and a Dr. Pepper.”

Ty exited through the massive glass door, leaving Aiden alone.

“Sometimes I really want to kill that man,” he said to himself.

Then a door creaked open behind him.

“That was enlightening,” Dan deadpanned

Aiden struggled to come up with a response. “Oh crap - sorry, I didn’t know you were-.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dan said with a shake of his head, “I would have stopped you if I wasn’t trying so hard not to laugh. And Nina’s not going anywhere at this network except up – fast.” He looked at his smartwatch. “You’ll see in about half an hour.”

Aiden blinked, noticing that Dan had that big-story glint in his eye.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Nothing of interest to you,” Dan said, flashing a grin, “especially since you clearly have so little interest in young Miss Constantinos.”

“Oh, come on,” Aiden said. “Don’t give me that.”

Dan chuckled, then responded as if he hadn’t heard a word. “Ty’s right. You’re being an idiot.”

Then he slammed the door shut.

11:59 A.M.

Nina entered Priscilla’s suite to find Sinéad glaring over the top of her thick glasses. If that girl was trying to look severe, she could have chosen a better frame color than day-glow green.

Sinéad’s eyes darted to the clock on the wall, then back at Nina. “My, my. Look who’s early for their performance review.”

Nina gulped and replied as chipperly as she could.

“I’d never want to be late for Ms. Davis.”

Sinéad started typing something. “Of course. Feel free to show yourself in.”

It seemed like a bit of an odd gesture, seeing as Sinéad was usually such an insistent gatekeeper, but orders were orders. Nina approached the door and reached for the knob, but then she heard a metallic thud.

Sinéad had produced a stainless-steel Kleenex box and set it down on the desk. Nina couldn’t help but shoot her a glare – which Sinéad met with a single raised eyebrow.

Nina walked into the office as confidently as she could – which wasn't all that confidently. It was obvious that this meeting was not meant to go well, but Nina did have something that might turn things around.

Priscilla was waiting behind her desk, reading through a file folder, and did not get up to greet her.

“Hello Nina,” she said, carefully placing the folder in a desk drawer. “Won't you sit down?”

Honestly, Nina didn't much feel like sitting with all the adrenaline coursing through her veins, but she dutifully slipped into one of Priscilla's hard plastic seats.

“Thanks,” she said, awkwardly trying to fill the silence.

Priscilla picked up another folder and started talking without making eye contact.

“Normally we wait 90 days on performance reviews, Nina, but I think we got a very detailed look at your skills in Rome. I mean, you were an integral part of the team and we got quite an extensive catalogue of your...*work*.” She wrapped her tongue around the last word as if she expected Nina to see it as ironic.

“Here's the thing, Nina, you're excellent at TV. You're great at interviews, you're the energizer bunny – but this is a *news* network. We practice journalism, not hucksterism – and that's the rub with you. Do you follow?”

“No, ma'am,” Nina replied, “I'm not sure I do.”

Priscilla sighed and took off her glasses, throwing them on the desk in frustration.

“And that's the problem. Other outlets might not care whether people are getting the whole truth, but we do. Based on everything you filed in Rome, a viewer could be left with the idea that the pilgrims in that square were mostly sane, rational people engaging in harmless religious practice. That's what you put on TV.”

“Right,” Nina responded, trying to follow the logic, “because that's what they are.”

Priscilla straightened up in her chair and raised her voice a touch. “No, Nina, that’s just demonstrably false. The facts – the real facts – are that those people are disturbed cultists who believe dangerous things that hurt people. You let them promote those ideas as if they weren’t harmful, and you smiled. Therefore, you lied, and you might have hurt people. Now, are we clear?”

Nina sat back in her chair. She’d never heard someone parse journalism quite like that, and it went against most of what she thought she knew about her job – but it also seemed like Priscilla genuinely believed that Nina had committed some sort of ethical lapse.

“Ms. Davis,” she said, trying to stay calm, “I just reported what was in front of me. I let the story tell itself.”

Priscilla started massaging her temple. “Yes, I know, Nina – that’s the issue. I didn’t call you in here to argue, so don’t make this harder than is.”

“I understand,” Nina said, reaching into her purse, “I think we have some important disagreements, but I also think you should hear this.” She placed her phone softly on the desk, with the voicemail cued up on speakerphone, then she pressed *Play*.

A male voice came out of the device. “Hi, Nina, this is Fletch Adams - I mean - oh never mind. Anyway, I just wanted to follow up on our conversation, and confirm that I can still do a sit-down interview with you. Hopefully, you’ll forgive my wearing a silly white hat instead of a red one. We’ve found an opening on March 30th at five P.M. Rome time. I wish I could offer you a better range of options, but they’re scheduling me pretty tight and the press shop wants this out of the way. We have the press release all ready to go out, so let us know as soon as you can. Thank, and...um...talk to you soon. Cheers.”

Nina looked up at Priscilla, who seemed to be gritting her teeth quite tightly.

“And when,” Priscilla snarled, “were you going to tell me that you’re on a first-name basis with the *Pope*?”

Nina took a breath. “As soon as I knew I had something solid. I bumped into him randomly before the conclave, but things changed a bit after he–”

“You what?” Priscilla interrupted, “How the hell-”

Then she seemed to realize what was going on and straightened. “Right, escapade with Dan. Let me guess, he was snooping around looking for cardinals and invited you in?”

“Right,” Nina gave a tentative nod. “I thought it was a good opportunity.”

Priscilla sat silently and closed her eyes. Nina could see her pupils darting back and forth behind her eyelids, but couldn’t make out what was going on. After a few seconds, Priscilla opened up and put on a big - and obviously fake - smile.

“In this case, I’ll allow for it. You have a few more tricks up your sleeve than I thought, and I think we can work with you yet. Great job.” Then she hopped up and headed for the door, hollering “Sinéad!”

Nina exhaled, but her heart rate was going nuts. She wasn’t getting fired, *and* she’d just gotten approval for the biggest story of her life. That by itself seemed like enough stress for one day.

Priscilla, meanwhile, was already out of the office. Nina decided that following was probably the best move.

“Sinéad,” Priscilla said again as Nina entered the lobby. “Whatever you’re doing, it’s on hold. I need you to get Nina the best wardrobe stylist we can get on short notice - Gwen, if you can get her by tomorrow - and we need a high-end hair appointment, STAT. Call in every favor we have at Cloak Room Looks.”

Sinéad’s mouth fell open. “But I thought you said you were gonna...”

Priscilla shushed her aggressively. “Just do it. Now!”

She turned back to Nina. The veins on Priscilla’s forehead looked like they were about to burst, but the smile was still pasted on. “You get on the phone to Rome now. I want to see that press release from them within the hour if possible.”

Her eyes were searing into Nina's skull, but her mouth kept going. "You're going to be a star Madison...I mean... Nina. Sorry – brain moving too fast. But I'm serious. This is massive."

Without waiting for a response, Priscila took off out the door.

Nina just stared after her and for a second. She had actually pulled it off – and she was too confused and disoriented to even know how to feel about it. Granted, there was one thing she needed to do.

Nina walked back to Sinéad, who was still sitting there agog, and batted the metal tissue box off her desk. It made a loud crash as it hit the floor, and Nina turned to walk out.

But then she heard a tiny snort and turned to see Sinéad smirking and clearly trying not to laugh.

"Constantinos," Sinéad said, "I will kill you myself if you ever repeat this, but that was effing awesome."