

## Chapter Eight, Part Three “Contents Under Pressure”

**Wednesday, February 17, 2038**  
**Forty-One Days Until Interview**  
**1:42 P.M.**

Madison sat in her darkened office and took another glug from her old Taylor Swift coffee mug.

The office alone had over twenty-thousand dollars of signed Swift memorabilia, a haul that would have sent teenage-fangirl Madison into bliss-induced seizures. It wasn't a shrine so much as a trophy case. The place was a literal reminder that she had everything that kid had ever wanted, including Taylor's private cell number and a standing lunch date before any D.C. concert.

And none of that mattered when her head felt like it had taken a hit from a sledgehammer, bright lights hurt her eyes, and she didn't remember anything after eight P.M. last night. Being hung over at work had never really slowed her down, but blackout nights were different – and they were happening more often.

Her handbag vibrated. She really didn't want to be bothered until at least two in the afternoon - especially not after all the calls she'd made about Jacksonville Ripper case. Madison hated celebrity court cases, but not as much as she hated just plain sickos.

The bag buzzed again, and Madison decided (against her better judgment) to answer.

The caller I.D. showed Oakley's face, which was weird seeing as Madison had no immediate plans involving either make-up or tequila.

She rolled her eyes and answered. “Hey girl.”

Oakley sounded out of breath. “OMG, you've heard, right? Like, did you know? What do you think? Like, how did she-”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down.” Madison said, the sound reverberating through her already splitting head, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Nina!” Oakley exclaimed. “She scored an interview with the Pope!”

“Wait,” Madison said, the words cutting through her brain fog, ‘she did *what?*’

“Seriously, she got, like, the whole enchilada. Sit-down interview, VIP trip to Rome, it’s all over the TV. That girl is going to get so many clothes out of this.”

Madison shook her head. Interview of the century and freaking Oakley Trent was worried about the freaking clothes.

Oakley’s voice clanged. “I’m totally, like, having jealousy-induced anxiety - is that a thing?”

Madison’s headache stormed back. “It is now.”

---

**2:06 P.M.**

Somehow, Nina had become a fly on her own wall. Half of the WWN’s top brass had descended on Dan’s office to hash out who was in charge of the papal interview, and so far, Nina hadn’t said two words.

“Oh, hell no!” Dan shouted across his desk. “This was my tip, my editorial jurisdiction, my story. I had the name of Nina’s source before the conclave even started, I made the call to move forward, I call the shots.”

Priscilla had maintained her composure so far – barely.

“Well, considering we’re devoting three solid hours of primetime programming, two of which are *mine*, it’s now *my* story. Back off.”

NaQuan made a lame attempt at peacemaking. “This does not have to be an either-or proposition. I was going to suggest that a merged team for the actual

shooting. My shop has a three-man go-team for these sorts of things – but we need Aiden Healy as lead. He’s the only camera that Nina has a solid working relationship with, and that means I want him in the room.”

Nina tried to pipe in. “I’m not sure if that’s the best-”

“I’m not worried about the camera work,” Priscilla cut her off. “Send Healy, but we’re going to need serious WWN input on content.”

“Over my smoldering carcass,” Dan shot back.

Priscilla was slowly turning red. “Dan, this is by far our biggest story of the year. The public doesn’t see you as a separate entity, regardless of what your contract says, and our entire brand is hanging on this.”

“Screw your brand!” Dan hollered. “You’re not the only one with a reputation to protect, and I’d rather have my eyes gouged out than turn this into one of your unjournalistic hit jobs.”

“That can be arranged!” Priscilla thundered back, finally losing control. “I will see every question in advance, I will veto whatever question I choose, and I will add questions if necessary to ensure compliance with network ethical standards. There is no way in hell I’m letting you *lie* to *my* audience about this!”

“Guys!” Now Ty was trying to break it up, “There’s gotta be some way we can-”

“Can it, chowder breath!” Priscilla snapped, “Do I sound like I’m making a request?”

“Don’t talk to my staff like that,” Dan bellowed.

“I will talk to your goons however the hell I want. And I will handle *my* story, however I -”

“Let me be very clear about something,” Dan interrupted, getting to his feet. “This interview is under my contractual jurisdiction, on *my* show. We will ask fair, uncensored questions of the supreme pontiff of the Catholic Church.”

“Oh no,” Priscilla said, “If you want to, you’re going to have to find someone else’s airwaves, because on this channel, we-”

“That’s it,” Dan snapped. “Out, all of you!”

“Or what?” Priscilla shot back. “This is my building, in which you are a tenant. I will stand here crapping on your incompetent operation as long as I please, you fascist piece of-”

“I said leave!” Dan pounded his fists on his desk. “And trust me, I’ve long since memorized what I can legally tell security to do to you in my space!”

“Fine,” Priscilla said as she walked out. “But this is going to be worked out.”

“Yup,” Dan said with a fake smile, “preferably with the RXN board of directors in the room. Have a nice day, Priss.”

“All right. NaQuan, Nina, let’s go.”

“Actually,” Dan cut in, “I’d like a word with Nina privately if you don’t mind.”

Priscilla flashed a momentary glare. “Coming, Nina?”

---

“In this picture taken just two months ago, she’s reporting from the opening of a local izakaya in Appleton, Wisconsin - but in less than a week, she’s sitting down for a one-on-one with the Pope. So, who is Nina Constantinos, and what’s behind her meteoric rise from main street to St. Peter’s Square?”

Aiden grabbed the remote off the waiting room desk and shut off CNN. Dan kept the TV tuned to other networks to tune out the office drama, but today the office drama *was* the news. How the hell had Nina – of all people - scored an interview with the freaking Pope?

Apparently, Dan had something do with it – hence all the screaming in his office.

The door to the back office flew open and Priscilla stormed out, followed by a confused NaQuan. After a second, a white-faced Ty emerged - making sure they were gone before hurling himself into one of the black rolling chairs.

“Dude,” Ty said, “If the Army didn’t give me PTSD, this will. I’ve never seen either of them that wicked angry. They want you as the primary camera, by the way.”

Aiden hadn’t expected that. “Me?” he stammered. “I hate Rome and I don’t do sit-downs.”

“You’ve worked with Nina before,” Ty said, settling deeper into his chair, “the kid’s in way over her head and you’re the one familiar thing we can give her.”

“Right,” Aiden clenched his fist. “Did I mention how badly that went the first time?”

“Oh, now we’re to the self-hating stage,” Ty wisecracked. “You know you really need to just need to cut the crap and ask her-”

Ty was interrupted by the sound of the back door creaking open. Nina walked slowly into the room, looking dazed and disoriented. Ty put on his rarely-used business face and tried to fill the silence.

“Look,” he said, “sorry about all that, but we’ll make the production end work smoothly. NaQuan and me know how to clean up a Priss-and-Dan mess. You’re gonna be fine, and Aiden’s going to make sure everything runs flawless, right?”

Ty shot a look at Aiden indicating that he wanted a quick affirmation.

Aiden tried to formulate something. “Right. Yeah. Umm... We’ll be...um...”

Ty gave him a hard eye roll, and Aiden saw Nina’s eyes drop.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said with a dismissive wave. “I deal with whatever they give me.”

“Oh, no.” Ty snapped. “There will be no taking care of yourself here.” He turned to Aiden, “You will receive the most professional service my shop can humanly provide. Now I just need doofus over here to pull his head out of his butt, ask you out, and then maybe we can all go back to doing our frikkin’ jobs!”

Aiden felt his face go numb. Had Ty really just done that?

Of course he had. The man had no control of his mouth under normal circumstances, and now he was in take-the-hill crisis mode.

Aiden turned to Nina, who squinting hard and letting her mouth hang open. It was like a facial blue-screen-of-death.

“I’m not even going to try to deal with this right now.” She threw up her hands and headed for the door. “Just email me when you work out the details.”

Then she stopped in the doorway for a good ten seconds. Then she turned and pointed at Aiden, her nose scrunched in thought. “Next Thursday. Pick me up at seven thirty. Now, I’m going to hide in the stairwell and scream.”

Then she walked out.

Aiden turned his head slowly toward Ty. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Ty shrugged, “It worked, didn’t it?”

---

Nina burst into the back stairwell, sprinting up a few flights of stairs before stopping at the third floor and smacking the concrete wall for no reason. The sting on her hand brought her just far enough back into reality that she allowed herself to calm down and sit on the cold cement.

She had expected to get here and scream bloody murder, but now she felt herself convulsing with laughter. It wasn’t that anything was funny, there were just too many different emotions at one time

There was the story, the screaming match, the almost getting fired - and did she really just ask herself out on a date with *Aiden Healy*? How the heck had that even come up?

She hadn't even considered the idea before. He was okay when he wasn't being doing his hard-nosed I-hate-the-world act, but he wasn't exactly her type.

Not that she knew what her type even was right now.

But Ty mentioned it in the heat of the moment, she thought about it, and thinking about it felt...good. Dangerous, but good. Like, getting on a roller coaster good. Still, her brain was so scrambled right now that she wasn't sure if that had been her brain talking or just the adrenaline.

As she calmed down, she tried to think about it again. Was she even attracted to Aiden? Really?

If she were in Appleton, he'd never pass muster with her Mom - but Kayleigh would love him. She'd have to text the sister-in-law later to get her head straight.

Then the thought hit her. This was not a Nina move. It was a Diana move.

Nina was supposed to be the good one, the one that didn't make impulsive decisions, the child that somehow made it through without the compulsive need to be bad.

This was being bad.

And that felt...good.

Really good.

---

**9:25 P.M.**

Madison unlocked the door to her 28<sup>th</sup>-floor Arlington penthouse and was welcomed home by the huge windows looking over the Potomac and Georgetown. If there was one thing she loved about this place, it was seeing the lights of the city at night. That and it had a clear view of the planes descending over the river into Obama-Reagan National – that had always made her smile.

She slipped out of her peacoat and threw it over the back of a postmodernist chaise lounge. Then she threw her mail on the glass coffee table and tried to sink into the purple couch. Unfortunately, the furniture was here to look chic, and nothing ever sank into it.

Other than the color purple, the decor shifted based on whatever the stylists said was “in.” Right now meant “mid-century modern” – an early 1960s time warp featuring oddly shaped chairs and huge lava lamp with dancing blobs of violet goo. It looked like a bad James Bond flick – although the lamp was fun after a few drams of Scotch.

Rifling through the mail, she pulled out the two celebrity gossip publications and placed them neatly on the coffee table. The untouched copies from last week then went straight into the trash compacter.

Then there were her other subscriptions: *The Economist*, *Mother Jones*, *The New Republic*, *Monocle*, *National Review*, and *The Atlantic*. Those were the “candy” that she had to hide - she’d read most of them cover-to-cover tonight.

She headed for the back of the palatial apartment and shoved open the door that she told most people was a broom closet. Actually, it was a well-appointed study with a musty old desk and a comfy leather chair. The back wall was full of oak bookshelves packed with dusty political histories.

Those didn’t get much reading anymore. They were serious-reporter books and it had been made very clear to her that she was *not* a serious reporter. Still, she kept up with the relevant publications, and reserved one night per week where she was sober enough to actually read them.

But who was she kidding?



By one in the morning, she'd almost finished the last one. A good solid evening doing real reporter things. Of course, that was when reality hit home.

This wasn't her real life. Her job was to be the blonde who covered celebrity court cases.

Ally...no...*Nina* was the one doing real work. Why did she keep making that slip? Maybe it was just that they both had short black hair.

Either way, she wasn't going to make that mistake again. Nobody needed Madison Rylander as a mentor. Not again.

She closed the issue of *Monocle*, set it neatly on the desk, then reached for the bottle of Ardbeg 10 that lived in the bottom drawer of her desk.