

Chapter Ten, Part One

“Happy Never After”

Ten Years Earlier
Sunday, December 31, 2028
8:29 P.M.

Dan rushed in the front door of WWN Tower, after having pushed through the New Year’s Eve crowd in WWN Plaza.

He wasn’t supposed to be here. Technically, he had the night off after his flight back from Syria, but this was the only place he had a chance in hell of finding Madison. She hadn’t answered a text in two weeks, but she’d been all over the commercials for tonight’s special - *WWN New Years with Madison Rylander and Sarah Silverman*.

In contrast to the chaos outside, the newsroom was eerily quiet. One or two reporters were walking the floor, and there was a lot of light coming from the second-floor production control room, but the special was shooting on the roof.

Dan ran to Madison’s office, on the off chance she might be there.

No dice. The lights were on, and the desk was stacked with notes, but nobody was home, and the door was locked.

A noise came from somewhere above, and Dan looked up just in time to see Ally Talamantez storm into a stairwell on the third-floor balcony. She slammed the door behind her so hard that it echoed through the whole arena.

A few seconds later, Prissy emerged and looked down at him.

“Maddy’s not here,” she said, her voice bouncing off the walls, “and frankly, I don’t think you want to find her.”

“What?” Dan shouted back. The last thing he needed right now was Prissy’s cryptic nonsense, but she just gave a faint laugh and disappeared back into her office.

That was when Dan noticed a color-printout on Madison's desk - an article from *CableNet's* annual *Sexiest Names in News* feature. His mouth fell open as he read the headline:

#3 Madison Rylander

WWN's New It-Girl Graduates from Nerd to Knockout

It was the picture that grabbed him. He'd never seen that dress before, or that haircut.

Come to think of it, he'd also never seen so many beauty products in Madison's office. If it hadn't been for the nameplate, Dan would have guessed that Madison had changed workspaces.

To top it off, a new pea coat was draped across the back of the office chair – sparkling white, with a lush faux-fur collar. Nothing about this was Madison.

Dan unglued his eyes from the desk and headed for the elevators. Maybe he could get up to the set.

He didn't have to go that far. Instead, the elevator doors opened to reveal Madison.

At least he thought it was Madison. She was wearing the same white minidress from the *CableNet* profile, but her hair – which all of the commercials had shown in its usual auburn - had gone stark platinum blonde.

He tried to say something, but only managed sputtering gibberish.

She walked right by him. “Do I know you?”

He gave chase, words finally coming back to him. “What's going on?”

Madison reached her office without responding and threw on the pea coat.

“What is this?” Dan stammered, waving his hand wildly toward the desk, and her hair, and everything else.

Madison gave a deep, dramatic sigh. “Oh, come on. I changed the hair like three days ago. You didn’t notice?”

“What do you mean I didn’t notice? I was in Syria!”

Madison planted her hands on her desk, her blue eyes rendering to searing coals. “You know who did notice? Thirty-two hundred people on Twitter.”

“I’m sorry,” Dan said, throwing up his hands, “I didn’t have time to check your Twitter feed when we were rolling into Raqqa.”

“That’s funny,” Madison said, “because you and Flannery were tweeting up a storm from the back of that Humvee.”

Dan felt his face flush at yet another accusation. “How many times do I have to tell you that Flannery is a *friend*. And I generally don’t notice hair stories in war-zones, although maybe I should if you’re going to violate the UN Convention on Chemical Weapons!”

The adrenaline subsided and Dan realized that he was making a bad situation far worse. “Sorry,” he said, “I just...Why?”

Madison pulled a compact and lipstick case out of her coat pocket and started touching up her uncharacteristically red lips.

“Blonde tested well with the focus group,” she said between strokes.

“Focus group?” Dan spat, “Since when do you care about focus groups? It’s not you!”

Madison snapped the compact shut and gave a big, fanged smile. “Oh, it’s me, Mr. Dragovich. Just not the version of me that needed you to protect me from big bad Washington. And definitely not the one who thought you were the only person here that wanted me.”

She unpinned the article from the wall and held it up in Dan’s face. “You know what I learned while you were off playing soldier with Flannery? People want me. Viewers *want* me. I’ve got an entire network full of people who know what I’m

capable of, and unlike you, most of them read my tweets. Now if you'll excuse me, I don't want to keep Sarah Silverman waiting."

That was when it happened. Ally came flying out of the stairwell and ran straight for Madison, waving a paper folder.

"You *knew!*" she shouted, stopping just short of Madison and holding the folder in her face, "*Que chingados?!*"

Madison's calm façade evaporated into something between concern and terror.

"Ally," she said slowly, "What are you talking about?"

Ally's face curled in disgust and she waved the folder right in front of Madison's nose. "No. You do not get to give me that. You did this, didn't you? You told her what I was working on!"

Madison reached out and put a firm hand on Ally's shoulder. "Ally, I'm your friend, tell me what's going on."

"You're not my friend!" Ally's tears had started to flow down her red cheeks, "You're not even the same person!" That was when she lunged at Madison and started beating her over the head with the folder, "*Pinche vieja te la ganaste ahora si, hija de tu chingada madre!*"*

"Ally!" Dan cut in, grabbing her shoulders and pulling her off Madison. "Stop it!" He held onto her, but she kept struggling and trying to hit Madison.

"*Maldita zorra mal amiga! Cobarde asquerosa ven acá desgraciada!*"†

"Ally!" Dan practically shouted at her, "You need to calm down." That finally seemed to still her, and he let go, feeling his own hands start to tremble. He could

* Rough translation of Ally's rant: "You fricking whore, you earned it this time you son of a b***!" All Spanish-language dialogue provided by Daniel Ochoa Lopez.

† "Damned fake-friend b***! You disgusting coward, come here you wench!"

understand why Madison was mad at him, but what would be so bad to cause a rift with *Ally*?

Madison was breathing heavily and staring on in abject horror, her eye makeup running from tears and smeared by the outburst. She seemed to recover enough of herself to try one more time. “Ally. What. Happened?”

Ally laughed sardonically. “Oh no. See, that would be breaking the nondisclosure agreement I just signed along with my resignation. But you knew that when you set me up, didn’t you?”

Madison’s jaw dropped. “Oh my god. Ally, I am so, so sorry. I-”

“No!” Ally cut her off, “You don’t get to do that. You didn’t even try to get the story to air, did you? You were too busy with your makeover.”

“Ally,” Madison tried again, “Seriously, if there’s anything I can-”

“Stay away from me,” Ally shot back, “That’s what you can do. I can’t believe I ever looked up to you. God, just...*ve nomás!*”

“Ally!” Madison started, but Ally was already walking away.

“I gotta go clean out my desk,” Ally said, raising a middle finger.

“Ally!” Madison shouted to no response, “Stop this! Tell me what I can do to help.” That last bit stopped Ally, who wheeled around and started marching back.

“I don’t want your help,” she fumed, “and I don’t want your friendship. You want to look out for yourself first? Fine. So can I.” She stopped short of Madison.

Instead, Ally turned to Dan, grabbed him by the back of the head and locked lips. It took him a second to figure out what the hell was happening, by which time Ally had both of her hands wrapped around him and was pulling him in. He did his best to resist, but she let go slowly, and it did not feel bad.

Dan tried to find something to do with his limbs, then took a step back, head spinning.

Ally had shifted her attention to Madison. “You thought *Flannery* wanted him? Please. I wanted to do that a long time ago, but not to my friend.” Then to Dan. “You can do better than her. Text me.”

Then she stormed off, leaving both Dan and Madison speechless.

Dan felt his hands starting to go numb as he turned back to Madison, who was wearing a look of utter shock and disgust.

Dan tried to talk first, “Um...look...that wasn’t-”

Madison held up a hand. “Don’t.”

She shook her head, as if trying to re-orient, then looked back up. The bare traces of a tear were forming, but her eyes hardened to blue steel. “I have a show to shoot, and I need new makeup.” She started heading back to the elevators.

Dan chased her all the way there. “Maddy, look, I don’t know what’s going on, but I-”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll go chase Ally,” Madison said as she got in the elevator. “She’s impressionable, naïve, and feeling helpless. Sounds like just your type.”

And the doors clicked shut.