

Chapter Ten, Part Two
“Necessary Evils”

Monday, March 8, 2038
Twenty-Three Days Until Interview
9:29 P.M.

Sinéad finished inflating the air mattress on the living room floor and flopped down on it to test the firmness. It felt a little too good and she closed her eyes.

“Suitably rest-inducing?” her mother chuckled.

Sinéad smiled and nodded without opening her eyes.

“Good,” Dr. Tiff Szerbiak chuckled, “Now get up so I can rest my old-lady back. I’ve was driving all day, remember?”

Sinéad pushed herself back to her feet and gave her mother a hug, “Good to see you, Mom. Thanks for coming down.”

Tiff, who’d just gone on Spring Break, had surprised Sinéad at the office earlier in the day. She’d booked a hotel, but one thing had led to another and the reservations had since been cancelled.

“Any time. Although I must say, it doesn’t look like you need help cleaning after all.”

Sinéad laughed, “I had to learn sometime.”

“You can clean my room, Dr. S.” Emma emerged from the kitchen in a red sweatshirt with a mug of hot chocolate, chomping on one of Tiff’s ‘famous’ white-chocolate-chip cookies. “Seriously, Sinéad, your mom rocks.”

Both Szerbiaks snickered as Emma disappeared into her room.

“She seems like a sweet kid,” Tiff said.

“She’s a morning show host,” Sinéad said, “She’s trained in ‘sweet’ - I don’t think 29 counts as a kid.”

“It does in my world,” Tiff responded. “And I’m in private so I can say that without flogging myself for the multi-layered adultist bias inherent in that statement.”

Sinéad cracked up and leaned into her mother, “Only you, Mom.”

Tiff gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Sinéady, you have no idea how much good it does me to see you at peace. I’ve waited a lot of years for that.”

“What?” Sinéad prodded. “You don’t prefer me in the hospital after stringing out study drugs?”

Tiff rolled her eyes. “Don’t remind me. If it was possible to make my hair any grayer-”

“I know, I know, I don’t miss those days either, most of the time.”

Tiff raised an eyebrow. “Most of the time?”

“Okay, all the time.” Sinéad protested, “I mean, I like sleeping, I like being able to turn my brain off.” She stopped to think. “Although, the last two weeks with all the stuff around the pope interview, I caught myself thinking that I could use a few pills. I had to practice bassoon for like two hours to clear my head.”

Tiff nodded. “Sounds about right. And you made it through.”

“Yeah,” Sinéad said. “I guess Priscilla’s just been a little off-the-wall lately.”

That seemed to perk up Tiff. “Is she all right? Seriously, something seems off about her, and I’ve known her for twenty years.”

Sinéad hugged a pillow. “She’s just worried that our reporter’s going to go off-message. She wants Pope Eutchyian fried to a crackly crunch, and Nina just wants to bake him to a light golden brown. And the behind-the-scenes stuff she wants is ...”

She tensed, realizing she was closing in on sensitive information. “It’s hard.”

Unfortunately, her mom knew her way too well.

“Sinéady.” Tiff straightened her glasses. “You’re shaking. What’s going on with Priscilla?”

“It’s nothing,” Sinéad steadied herself. “She just doesn’t want to compromise on the truth. She’s radical, and she’ll break rules if it helps the cause.”

“Radical?” Tiff scoffed. “*I’m* radical. I don’t see Priscilla at the UN ranting about the impact of gender on climate change. That doesn’t mean I’m allowed to scare the crap out my assistant, and I certainly don’t tell people to talk about everything I do as ‘the cause.’ That’s not radical, it’s millenarian.”

Sinéad rolled her eyes and buried her face in a pillow. “Great, so now you think I’ve joined a cult.”

“I didn’t say that,” Tiff yanked away Sinéad’s pillow. “Hell, I recommended you for this job. I’m just saying that there’s a difference between fighting the system and going moonbat.”

The two sat in silence as both tried to find something to say. It was Sinéad who found something first.

“I think you’re right,” she said, “I got myself off the pills, but I’m worried I got into something just as bad.”

Tiff shook her head and gave Sinéad another hug. “You’re nowhere near that. Look at you. You’ve got an apartment, a roommate who seems to love you, and a very fat window dragon.” She pointed out the window, where a sleeping Dumby was getting a manicure from a team of hobbits.

“Dumby is not fat!” Sinéad cracked a smile, “Remember my Modor-window phase.”

“Scared the living snot out me,” Tiff chuckled. “But really, Sinéady, you look like you’re doing amazing. You just have a boss situation.”

Sinéad laid her head back. “I’m not sure you’d call it that if you knew what was going on. Sometimes I wonder if it’s the gullibility genes coming out again.”

Tiff sat upright. “You know I hate it when you joke like that, Sinéad.”

“I know,” Sinéad said, squeezing her eyes shut tight. “I just feel like I can’t get away from it. I’ve always been around smart people, and I always end up a step behind and taking the fall.” She pounded her head on the couch. “It’s like I can’t get away from the fact that I don’t belong here. I belong somewhere in a trailer park with whoever forgot the condom.”

“That’s enough!” Tiff finally snapped, “People would kill to have your birth mother’s brain.”

The two stared into each other’s eyes, and a look of shock and guilt crept across Tiff’s face.

“You always said you didn’t know who she was.” Sinéad said.

“I said it was a closed adoption,” her mother corrected softly, “that’s different.”

Sinéad’s lips were quivering. “What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Tiff took a deep, deep breath. “Because she didn’t want you to know. Didn’t want you to have to deal with it. She wanted a closed adoption and... Especially after...No, I can’t...”

“You can’t what, Mom?” Sinéad blurted, “Who was she?”

Tiff took another long breath, letting it out before talking.

“She was a grad student working on her Master’s thesis in International Relations,” she said, “I was the secondary supervisor on the project – they introduced me to her because she was doing this thing on the Islamic State and human trafficking. She was so gung-ho about the security angles, but there were so many gendered implications that they wanted someone from Women’s Studies to balance her out. The primary supervisor was a professor of Military History who...shall we say...took advantage of her trust. She wanted to keep you, but her parents threatened to terminate financial support if she didn’t have an abortion – nasty people, both professors, wanted a rock-star academic for a daughter. Anyway, I helped her hide the pregnancy, kept her thesis on track, and then we arranged the adoption so that nothing could be legally traced back to her. I was supposed to tell you after you finished college, but then things... thing got complicated.”

Sinéad's face was heating up, and she was hearing blood thump through her head. "Complicated? Mom, what the hell is 'complicated?'"

Wednesday, March 10, 2038
Twenty-One Days Until Interview
9:37 A.M.

Emma jabbed her thumb onto the print-pad of the break room coffee machine - for the third time this morning.

"One more week, girl," she said to herself.

If there was one thing about her new show that excited her more than being an anchor, it was that she could get back to a normal sleep schedule on weekdays.

The Kuerig AutoBoba 2400 responded with its characteristic dryness. "Print not recognized. Please try again."

Emma punched her finger even harder, which only seemed to agitate the machine.

"Error. Print reader not responding. Please state order verbally."

Emma sighed and brushed her sandy-blond ringlets out of her face. "Italian Dark Roast, Ten ounces, Cream, Two Sugars."

"Would you like Boba Pearls?"

"Did I ask for Boba Pearls?"

"Not recognized. Would you like-"

"Emma!" came a voice from outside, one of her producers was apparently on break, "You know you have to be on set in ten minutes, right?"

"Yeah," She yelled back, "I'll be right-"

“Order accepted, dispensing Boba.” The coffee machine began dumping a gloppy mixture of tapioca pearls and coffee into her ULL Ragin’ Cajuns mug.

“Dammit, Evangeline!” she shouted at the machine. She addressed all talking appliances as her next-door neighbor at her post-college trailer park. They were equally obtuse and had about the same effect on her nerves. At least the coffee maker had never called her a hussy or asked about a bruise when she knew damn well where it came from. Still, it had a talent for twisting her words.

“Enjoy your boba drink,” the machine said in a smug monotone.

“Go back to your trailer, Evangeline,” Emma mumbled under her breath, “you holy rolling piece of-”

“Uh,” there was a voice behind her. Emma whirled around to see Nina Constantinos standing innocently in the doorway with an empty Star Trek mug.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt anything with you and...um...Evangeline.”

Emma forced a laugh and patted the machine like a dog. “Oh no, Evangeline and I were just talking about what I mean by ‘no boba pearls.’”

“I know how that goes,” Nina said with her own fake chuckle, placing her mug in the machine. “Blonde Roast, Eight Ounces. Cream, sugar, Extra Boba.”

Nina was still wearing that same gray pantsuit from her first day, but Emma thought this couldn’t possibly be the same girl. Ever since the pope thing broke, it was like someone had jabbed syringe of confidence into the girl’s derriere. Nina had been starstruck just to be here, but now she thought she could treat Emma like they were on the same level. Who did this Yankee upstart think she was?

Mind racing, Emma scolded herself. Luckily, she was able to screw her brain down quick. Pageant training.

“So,” she asked Nina calmly, “how does it feel to be ‘WWN’s brightest young star?’”

Nina blushed a little. “Well, I wouldn’t say that.”

“I didn’t say it.” Emma grabbed the shaker of Cayenne Pepper she kept in the cabinet. “*CableNet.com* did. So, you know it’s true.”

“Well, it does feel pretty good,” Nina smirked as Emma stirred a dash of the pepper into her mug. Then she stopped, “Wait a minute, did you just put Cayenne in your coffee?”

Before Emma could respond, yet another voice came out of the doorway.

“There you are, Constantinos, I’ve been looking for you.”

It was Sinéad, and she was doing the whole fake-psycho-face thing. Emma had never understood how she pulled it off without laughing.

Nina seemed flustered, and the nervous newbie from a few weeks ago came back out. “What can I do for you, Sinéad?”

“Ms. Davis found your list of proposed interview questions...interesting. You will be in her office in five minutes. Understood?”

“Sure, I-” Nina was struggling for words, “I’ll be right up.”

Sinéad rolled her eyes, gave an exaggerated sigh, and walked away. Emma heard Nina exhale.

“Okay,” Nina said, “Maybe the new star thing isn’t so fun after all.”

Emma allowed herself a cynical chuckle as Nina walked toward the door. “Have fun.”

Then she remembered something. “Oh, Nina.”

Nina wheeled on her heels like a scared rabbit. “Yes?”

Emma held up her mug. “Just ‘cause you asked,” she said in her best southern belle, “I ain’t never had much use for sweet things unless they had a little burn to ‘em.”

Nina heard the door click shut behind her, and for once, she almost wished Sinéad were in the room. Prissy's office was austere to begin with, but right now it was so silent that she could have heard a paper clip drop in the next room. The usually-blistering light had been muted by closed blinds, and Priscilla was seated at her desk – steepling her hands.

Priscilla didn't move to greet Nina – or move at all – so Nina quietly pulled out one of the chairs.

“I did not indicate permission to sit,” Priscilla said through gritted teeth, not looking up.

Nina took her hand off the chair and stepped back.

Priscilla took a few more seconds before speaking again, and still did not make eye contact. “You are aware that I'm giving you free-reign on this papal interview, correct?”

Nina felt her arms stiffen but nodded as hard as she could. “Yes, ma'am.”

Priscilla rose to her feet, shifting her gaze from the window to the floor. “And you are aware that I am giving you this on faith, after you submitted a scoop which prevented me from terminating you. Am I missing anything?”

“No, ma'am.”

“And how do you expect I would feel about your handling of this process so far?”

“I,” Nina hesitated, “I've done my best to handle all of this as even-handedly and professionally as I can.”

Priscilla nodded. “Even-handed, right. Even handed between myself and whom?”

Nina searched her brain for something to say. “I didn't think of it that way. I meant even-handed in general.”

Priscilla nodded again, moving away from her desk and toward Nina. “Yes. You seem to like this idea of balance. That's what the news is about. Right? Not taking sides.”

Nina started clenching her toes inside her heels, if only because it prevented visible twitching. “That’s right.”

Priscilla stopped. “Yes. And in a perfect world you’d be right. But we live in this world.”

Then she finally looked up, her hazel eyes practically one fire, “In this world, people lie.”

She took another step closer, “People like Dan Dragovich lie. And balancing lies with the truth makes you a liar. Are you a liar, Ms. Constantinos?”

“With respect, ma’am,” Nina said as sternly as she could manage, “I don’t think I am.”

Priscilla kept closing the distance between them, “But if Dan Dragovich tells you to be nice to a snake-charming witch doctor in a white dress, you’ll balance that against the millions of people hurt by said cult leader - all so he and his friends can continue with their gold-plated Vatican orgies. So, if that doesn’t make you a liar, what does it make you?”

Nina backed away, feeling like she needed to vomit, but she was running out of space in the office. “I’m not sure what you mean, ma’am.”

Priscilla placed an icy hand on Nina’s shoulder, “I’ll tell you what it makes you, Nina. It makes you someone who’ll sell herself for a buck. It makes you an attention-grubbing little whore.”

Priscilla’s grip got firmer and moved to the back of Nina’s neck. Then, Nina suddenly found herself pressed face-first against the wall of the office.

“Now,” Priscilla said, “I would have preferred you behave like a journalist, but if you insist on prostitution, then rest assured you’re going to be *my* whore.”

Nina tried to push back, but Priscilla just pressed her harder against the wall. Nina breath quickened in fear, but she couldn’t command her limbs to move.

“You do not meet with Dan Dragovich,” Priscilla said directly into Nina’s ear, her minted breath coursing down Nina’s face. “You do not include questions from Dan Dragovich. You do not speak to Dan Dragovich unless you are screaming obscenities at him, and the same goes for his staff. Take one step out of line, and rest assured that I have enough

connections to force you into *actual* prostitution. When I'm done with you, not even your daddy's diner will take you back."

Priscilla shoved Nina into the wall one last time, then let go and shoved her away.

"Now get out of my office," she fumed. "You disgust me."