

Chapter Eleven, Part One "Blank Space"

Nine Years Earlier
Wednesday, August 22, 2029

Madison flagged down the bartender at *Zod's*. "Hey, José, can I get another one of these?"

José stopped and gave her one of those concerned looks she was starting to get used to. Seriously, how pathetic do you have to look for the *bartender* to express reservations?

"You sure, Maddy? That's your third scotch, right?"

"Second," Madison corrected him, "and isn't it your job to enable me?"

He shook his head and reached for a bottle.

"But not mine," came another voice, this one with a South Jersey edge. "José, can you get me a Death Ray – and for the love all that is holy cut her off?"

Madison glowered at the figure who'd slid into the next seat at the bar - impeccable with her pinstripe vest and ear-chain. As always, the flaming red hair was perfectly in place, shaved over one temple with curls cascading down the other cheek.

"Why, if it isn't the great S. Flannery MacClennan, deigning to grace us mortals with her presence. Don't you have a book signing or something?"

Flannery set her purse on the bar – an embroidered number she'd brought back from Syria. "You know, I used to take the 'you're so famous' crap from you, but there's literally a thirty-foot photo of your face in Times Square right now. It's creepy as hell in-person."

"Really," Madison took a breath and clenched a fist under the bar. "Do you just sit around and think up one-liners to torture people with?"

"I write books for a living, so yes."

Flannery was interrupted by a clink of glass as José set down Madison's whiskey.

“Sorry Flan,” he said, “she paid.”

Flannery rolled her eyes hard, grabbed Madison’s glass, and downed it in one gulp.

“What the hell?” Madison spat.

“Funny.” Flannery set the empty glass on the bar. “That’s what I’ve been thinking about everything you’ve done in the last year.”

Madison felt like lunging at her, but instead just asked, “What do you *want*? We haven’t talked in months.”

Flannery drummed her acrylic nails on the bar. “I *want* to have a drink with my friend Maddy, like I used to, but apparently that’s not in the cards.”

“Friends?” Madison laughed. “Is that what you call that?”

Flannery swiveled on her stool to look Madison dead in the eye. “Seriously, what is wrong with you lately? I know you’ve had a tough ride with Prissy and Dan and whatever, but can you get over yourself for two seconds?”

“Right, and you had nothing to do with any of it.”

“What?” Flannery’s lip curled in disgust. “What are you *talking* about?”

Madison batted her eyelashes and summoned her best mock-Jersey accent. “Why yes, Dan, I’d love to show you around Syria. Sure, Dan, we’ll do Nigeria together. Hey, Dan, let’s do some serious reporting in Mali where we don’t have to deal with that annoying child you’re dating.” She tried to go back to her drink, realized it was gone, and made a fruitless effort to flag down José.

“You’re kidding, right?” Flannery said. “I’ve been doing war-zone trips with Dan since long before you were in the picture.”

“And you did a ton more of them *after* I was in the picture.”

“Because I’m his *friend*,” Flannery retorted, “Oh - and because I happen to be a subject matter expert on violent extremism. It’s, like, my *job*.”

Madison tried again to reach for her non-existent drink and, failing that, resorted to twirling the empty glass.

“Either way, you were a lot more interesting than I was. And honestly, fine, take him. I’ve already got one dad to guilt-trip me. Having two sucked.”

Flannery shook her head. “Not my type - and he never wanted me anyway. When I met him, he only wanted Prissy, and now he only wants you. Last trip I told him he was crazy for not proposing to you.”

“That’s why you came in here?” Madison almost laughed, “to tell me that Dan still wants me? I’m not oblivious, I just have some self-respect now.”

“Could have fooled me.”

Madison exhaled loudly and shot Flannery a silent glare.

“And I came in here,” Flannery continued, “because *you’re* my friend, and I thought maybe you’d want to talk to someone other than your new drunken bimbo pals.”

Madison drummed her fingers on the bar. “So now I’m a drunken bimbo.”

“You’ll never be a bimbo,” Flannery retorted, “No matter how hard you try. I just wanted to tell you I miss you, and I’m here if you ever want to talk.”

“Flan,” Madison said firmly, “We’re not friends. We never have been. We hung out because we both ran with Toby and Dan, okay? Toby’s gone. Dan and I are done. The glory days are over, and I don’t really want to talk about how everything hurts with America’s favorite bestselling author.”

Flannery’s green eyes softened, like she’d felt a point of contact, but then something hardened them back into stone.

“Maddy, do you remember how you and Toby always liked to talk about school? College this, high-school that, remember?”

Madison sighed. “Your point?”

Flannery's eyes drilled into Madison's skull. "Maddy, what was I doing during my senior year of college?"

Madison reluctantly searched her memory banks, then shrugged. "I don't know."

"How about high school? Was I a theater kid? Softball? Model U.N.?"

Madison felt herself involuntarily pound the bar in frustration. "I told you I don't know, okay?"

"No, you don't!" Flannery seethed. "Neither did Toby - for a reason. You haven't got a clue, so don't you *dare* talk to me about how much everything hurts."

José finally returned with Flannery's usual – a house specialty that always gave off an unearthly purple glow – but Flannery just stared daggers at it. "You know," she said after a few seconds, "I used to think you were the chosen one. I mean, WWN was going to hell, Brinkman died, Prissy rolled in, Toby..." Flannery shook her head, "Everything else was going to hell, but WWN still had Maddy Rylander, and nothing could knock that chick off her game. But I guess I was wrong." She slid her drink over to Madison and got up from the bar. "Just another porcelain news-doll who cracked when it got hard. Drink up."