

Chapter Eleven, Part Three
“Wow”

Saturday, March 13, 2038
Eighteen Days Until Interview
12:13 A.M.

The shingles on the crest of the roof were starting to aggravate Nina's backside through her jeans. She made a mental note that she should bring a cushion next time she came up here. The difficulty of doing this on a sloped roof had never really crossed her mind before now. She had to keep resisting the urge to set down her third bottle of hard lemonade. She'd made that mistake with the second one, and it rolled off the roof and shattered on the front porch.

On top of that, she was feeling the need to steady herself against the brick chimney.

"Note to self," she said to no-one, "getting drunk on the roof only works if you have a flat roof."

The sound of crunching glass echoed up from the front steps, followed by Vinya's voice. "The hell?"

So, the roommate was home.

"Sorry, V!" Nina hollered, "That's mine."

"Nina? Are you on the roof?"

"Yup."

There was a long pause.

"How?"

Nina chuckled and shouted back. "I unscrewed the skylight in the bathroom and ran a ladder out."

Keychips rattled and Nina heard the front door open.

"You know," Vinya said, "I love that I'm not the crazy roomie for once."

"No, you still are. Just not tonight."

The front door slammed shut, and Nina took another swig. There were only one or two mouthfuls left, and she swished the bottle around in her hand, debating how quickly to down the rest. Instead, she just leaned against the chimney and thought about nodding off.

Now there was a scenario that couldn't possibly end well.

She was snapped out of her trance by the sound of the ladder rattling in the skylight. Vinya emerged onto the roof, having traded her stilettos for fluffy socks and her camo for an oversized hoodie that read "California Institute of the Arts" in glowing pink letters. She made her way gingerly across the shingles and sat down.

"You know this is taking the roof obsession to the next level, right?"

Nina ignored the question. "Do you ever not glow?"

"Nope," Vinya responded flatly, "especially since Rat now wants me to guest-DJ at his boss' underground Glow-Scene...wait a minute, are you drunk?"

Nina downed the last of the lemonade and sent the bottle rolling down toward the front porch, where it shattered. "I mean, I haven't fallen off the roof yet."

Vinya rolled her eyes. "How many of those have you had?"

"Three."

"How many can you usually handle?"

"Two." Nina said, starting to giggle.

Vinya shook her head. "So, what you're saying is that if I don't help you inside, you're going to fall off and die."

"Maybe." Nina barely managed to stop giggling.

Vinya sighed. "So, you're drunk off your butt and going to extreme measures to satisfy your roof fetish. What's up? Still Prissy?"

“No,” Nina shook her head. “I don’t know. Just thinking. I had that talk with Madison this week.”

“Ugh,” Vinya blurted. “I hope this wasn’t her idea for coping.”

Nina blew a drooping lock of hair out of her eyes and chuckled. “Heck no. I wouldn’t drink like her if you paid me. She just said some things - I don’t know - it’s weird.”

“No, sitting on your roof at one in the morning is weird.” Vinya said. “Tell me.”

Now it was Nina’s turn for the eye-roll. Friday had been slow, so she’d been mulling it over all day, and she wasn’t in a mood to talk anymore.

Actually, she just wanted to *stop* thinking about what Madison had told her, but Vinya was near-impossible to hide anything from. “She just said that I need to learn to play the game.”

“The game?” Vinya asked. “You’re playing the news game just fine last time I checked.”

Nina shook her head again. “No. You know, like, being sexy on air to build the brand. That sort of thing.”

“That’s crap,” Vinya spat. “I don’t do even do that, and my boss used to work at *Vogue*.”

Nina thought about taking another drink before realizing the bottle was gone. “It’s not *total* crap. Madison nailed me. I mean, we’re TV reporters. It’s not like we don’t want attention.”

Vinya’s face scrunched. “Not like that, we don’t.”

“I kinda do,” Nina said, staring out into the night. “I want the camera. I want power, and I’m already sick of being typecast as the innocent girl from Appleton.”

“That’s Madison talking,” Vinya said firmly. “Knock the pope interview out of the park. That’s a brand. Nobody likes being piece of meat. Hell, I have glow-hair to make sure dudes stare at my *face*.”

Nina snorted. “At least you have something worth staring at. Some of us have to rely on personality,” She looked down at herself. “Not like I have much chance of making a sex symbol out of this.”

“Whoa, whoa, time out,” Vinya interjected. “Now you’re talking even more crap. Who says you’re not sexy?”

Nina gave her a side-eye. “I thought you were on the ‘Madison is full of it’ wagon.”

“I am, but there’s nothing wrong with you. Hell, if Madison is an authority on anything, it’s selling sex, and even she suggested you try.”

“What she suggested,” Nina corrected, “was that I should show more leg because I don’t have enough cleavage.”

Vinya crinkled her nose. “Yeah, well neither does she. When was the last time you saw her in a plunging neckline?” She looked Nina over, “But she’s right, you do have nice legs.”

“Really, you too now? What is the obsession with my legs? I’m a reporter not a model.”

Vinya laughed. “Now *that’s* Nina talking. You don’t have to sex it up, but I won’t sit here and tell you that you *can’t*. Hot is a state of mind. Aiden thinks you’re hot.”

“Aiden thinks anything in a dress is hot.” Nina shot back, “He likes me because I’m chatty.”

“Bullcrap,” Vinya said. “He’s a dude.”

Nina felt a smirk come on. “I guess that’s true.” Then the gears in her head started turning in some odd directions.

“V,” she said, allowing a smirk to grow. “What if I said I *did* want to...make some personal branding changes.” She made the best puppy dog eyes she could. “Who could possibly help a poor innocent like me? I mean I’m a fashion-illiterate, and I don’t know how I’d handle all that shopping alone.”

Tuesday, March 16, 2038
Fifteen Days Until Interview
8:55 P.M.

Madison was having a relatively sober evening for a Wednesday. 10:30 P.M. and only four drinks. That sort of restraint deserved a reward. Where was that bottle of aged tequila? Eh - screw it. The couch was too comfortable, as were her pure silk pajamas.

Pure. Silk.

That was supposed to feel good, right?

The cavernous apartment seemed too quiet tonight. She wasn't quite plastered enough to get drawn in by the massive lava lamp on the table, but she also wasn't sober enough to sit through the new episode of *StormLight Archive* - even if she did pay the extra hundred bucks a month for streaming-capable internet.

She looked at the ceiling. It wasn't quite spinning, but it was close. Definitely not sober enough for *StormLight*. But she needed *noise*.

She grabbed the remote off the table and fumbled for the radio button. Nope. Hand-eye coordination was gone.

"Google," she yelled at the radio, hoping to hell it was powered on. "Shuffle playlist: Old Favorites."

The radio beeped in response and started blaring Taylor Swift - which had been the point - but for some idiot reason it settled on "Shake It Off."

No matter how good that song sounded, it always made things worse when she was dizzy and half lit.

"Really, Google?" She yelled back at it without moving from the couch.

The music stopped and the voice intoned, "Command not recognized." Then it resumed jackhammering her eardrums.

"Google, end music!"

That did it.

Now it was quiet again.

Dammit.

“Google: Television on. WWN.”

The news sucked, but it was familiar, and it wasn’t silence. Plus, there was only five minutes until *WWN Nightcap* came on. The one show she actually liked.

Then she heard the rubbery bounce of her bendy-phone vibrating on the glass coffee table. She reached to grab it, knocking over the tumbler she’d just finished and spilling ice cubes.

“Crap,” she muttered to herself.

The screen displayed a notification:

2 Texts From: Nina Constantinos

Really? What part of “after hours” did that chick not understand? Just for good measure, Madison took out her frustration by bending the phone back and forth as hard as she could. Finally, she swiped the screen and started reading:

***Nina says:** Madison - sorry it's late and I hope you don't get this until morning. If you're up, (1/2)*

“Well, I am now,” Madison interrupted her own reading.

(2/2) I was thinking about what you said the other day, about playing the game. Let's say I was interested. Where do I start?

Madison gawked. What the hell was she supposed to do with that?

She swiped that screen and dashed off a typo-laced addition to her running conversation with “Back Gammon.”

***Madison says:** Nevr tell me 2 give advice agaiin, Ithink I created a monster. Now I have 2 to help her be me. No t a good idea.*

She pressed “send” and stared. About a minute later, the phone vibrated.

Back says:** Are you s-faced right now?*

Madison rolled her eyes.

Madison: *I sswear 2 drunk I'm nnot god.*

Back: *Not funny.*

Madison: *Sriously - What do I tell her ?*

Another long pause. Then a response.

Back: *She wants to play the game. Help her play the game.*

Madison: *game suks. Example A: Rylander, Maadison./*

Back: *Have you ever heard the phrase "all things in moderation?"*

Madison: *doesn't wrk like t hat. U either do it or u don;t.*

Back: **eye-roll emoji* Have you tried lately?*

Madison cursed herself for needing an artificial conscience.

Madison says: *k. u win. Thnx*

Back says: *Any time ;-)*

Madison debated sending back a middle finger emoji but thought better of it. This was going to suck.

She swiped back to the conversation with Nina and typed very slowly.

Madison: *Define "interested."*

A few moments passed, then another text with a picture attached.

Nina: *How's this?*

"Wow," Madison mouthed to herself. The girl was nothing if not serious.

Then she was distracted by the TV – the opening guitar riff of *WWN Nightcap with Mike Velasco*.

“Good evening, everyone,” came Velasco’s acerbic baritone, “This is *WWN Nightcap*. On our panel tonight, the man leading the charge in the Social Security hearings - Congressman Monty Obregon of New Mexico! Next, the man who used to be Captain Kirk and now comes to us when he wants free publicity, Chris Pine! And finally, in the Greg Gutfeld Memorial Leg Chair, one of the world’s foremost authorities on extremism, terrorism, and other isms - and still looking damn good for 46 - it’s the lovely and talented S. Flannery MacClennan!”

The flashbulbs went off in Madison’s head. She texted Nina back.

Madison says: You watch “Nightcap,” right?

Nina says: Sometimes, why?

Wednesday, March 17, 2038
Fourteen Days Until Interview
9:32 A.M.

Emma set the second-to-last box down in her new office. Not cubicle, mind you, office. Four walls, a locking door, and it was all hers.

That meant it was time to get the memorabilia boxes out of storage.

The only drawback was that *FirstLight Weekend’s* two measly offices were in the same dingy suite as the balding frat boys who ran *WWN Nightcap*.

Oh well - she had a crap time slot and a low budget, but she was still going live in two weeks as the co-host of a major network morning show. Now, all she had to do was unpack her desk ornaments and the old cheerleading pictures.

The final box arrived, along with Sinéad, who set the open-topped Rubbermaid down hard enough to send a “ULL Ragin’ Cajuns” pennant tumbling onto the floor. “I had no idea how much college stuff you have,” said Sinéad. “Have you ever considered downsizing?”

“Not really,” Emma replied, “I like being surrounded by-”

“Superfluous miscellany? I noticed.”

Emma picked up the pennant off the floor and gave it a nostalgic pat. “Yeah, well the miss-a-whats-it ain’t gonna unpack itself. Gimme some of them thumbtacks.”

That was when Mike Velasco sauntered into the suite’s common area, stopping at a large whiteboard where he kept a grid of planned guests for the week’s *Nightcap* tapings. He picked up an eraser, found column marked “Leg Chair,” located the box for tonight’s show and erased the name “Madison Rylander.” Then, in neat cursive, he replaced it with “Nina Constantinos.”

Emma raised an eyebrow, she hadn’t figured Nina for a *Nightcap* type.

Sinéad’s watch let out a loud ringtone - Mozart’s “Magic Flute” aria.

“Eff,” Sinéad fished her phone out of the breast pocket of her blazer. “It’s Priscilla. I’m late for morning rounds. Sorry, I gotta get this.”

She swiped the screen, “Hello?”

Emma could hear Priscilla’s voice screaming all the way across the room – including at least three garbled f-bombs.

Sinéad’s eyes darted back and forth, and it even looked like her hands were shaking. The tirade stopped and the phone beeped off before Sinéad had time to say anything. She was three shades paler than normal - which Emma hadn’t even thought was possible.

“I gotta go find Nina,” Sinéad blurted, bolting out of the suite.

Emma gave chase, “Hey, what in the name of-”

Sinéad stopped cold just outside the door. “Never mind. Found her.”

Then Emma figured out what Priscilla had been yelling about. Nina Constantinos was heading straight at them, toting a *PaoPao* latte and a chic teal handbag - but that was just the beginning. New earrings - silver hoops. New shoes - seafoam stilettos. Even the hair was new - the good-girl pixie-bob had been replaced with a jagged cut with a streak of turquoise in the bangs.

And that dress!

Nina – Wis-CON-sin girl – was wearing a 1960s-style minidress with diagonal stipes in aqua and black, flared sleeves with slits up the cuffs, and hemline that was barely on the right side of “professionally acceptable.”

“Good morning, Sinéad,” Nina grinned as she breezed into the suite. “Hey Emma. Your new office is back here, right? Looks like some nice digs.”

“It’s not bad,” Emma said, noting that Sinéad had been rendered mute by the teal-drenched spectacle that was Nina.

The spectacle peeked into the office, “Love it. Good luck this Saturday, by the way.”

Emma wasn’t sure exactly how to respond, but thankfully she didn’t have to. Velasco re-emerged from his office and offered Nina a firm handshake, “Nina! Good to finally get a chance to work with you! Love the hair by the way.”

“Thanks,” Nina beamed. “I just wanted to stop by and make sure I knew how the taping schedule went.”

Velasco ushered Nina into his office, “Right, right. We’ve got the team here now, so we’ll just show you how we...”

The door clicked shut, and Emma finally exhaled. “Am I a bad person if I don’t like America’s sweetheart, and don’t know why?”

“Depends,” Sinéad replied. “Am I a bad person if my mom’s a lesbian gender-studies professor and this is the first time I’ve ever questioned my heterosexuality?”

Emma shook her head in disbelief – at everything.

Sinéad picked up the slack. “Anyway, I gotta go – Priscilla’s going to have an aneurysm over this.” She bounded out of the office, leaving Emma slack-jawed.

Staring at Velasco’s whiteboard full of women was making her blood start to boil. The entire idea of it was ridiculous, and a bit degrading, but Nina had just used Velasco and his stupid chair to get literal leg up in the rising-star competition.

Emma walked to the board and grabbed a red marker – because everything else was in black. She found next Wednesday’s slot under the “Leg Chair” column. In her best cursive, she filled the slot:

Emma Poissonier?

Two could play this game, and Emma *had* been a cheerleader after all. Nina seemed like the type of kid who used to get shoved in lockers a lot, so it was only right that she got put in her place here at WWN High.

Emma clicked a button on her watch and raised it to her lips. “Google, add item to my to-do list: Buy dress – risqué.”