

**Chapter Twelve, Part Two**  
**“Crack the Cutie”**

**Wednesday, March 17, 2038**  
**Fourteen Days Until Interview**  
**10:02 A.M.**

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Dan’s voice clanged into Madison’s office.

Madison set down her nail file, noticing that she’d produced an unsightly pile of white acrylic dust on her desk.

She did not need this crap today.

“Dan,” she said, feeling her shoulders tense, “I have no clue what the hell you’re even talking about, so what do you think I did?”

Dan crossed his arms. “Nina is strutting around the office looking like something out of a 2010s HBO series.”

Madison failed to suppress a snort. “She did that to herself. I found out post-facto. And she’s wearing clothes, so definitely not HBO.”

Dan didn’t seem to like the joke. “She’s on *Nightcap*, Maddy. In what was supposed to be your slot.”

Madison threw up her hands. “Yes, she asked me for advice, okay? I gave it - bluntly. And yes, I got her on *Nightcap*. I vaguely recall someone once asking me to help her out – oh, right, that was you.”

She tried to turn back to her monitor, which was currently displaying a vintage version of *Angry Birds*.

Dan let out an exasperated sigh. “That’s not what I meant, and seeing as my entire operation is now wrapped up in this pope thing-”

“Whoa, whoa, time out,” Madison interjected, getting up from her chair. “*Your* operation? This isn’t about you or your operation. This is about *Nina* making *her* choices for *her* career on *her* terms. You want her to succeed? That’s success – and it’s a lot better than whatever stagnant garbage you’re trying to push on her.”

“My ‘stagnant garbage,’” he retorted, “has the third highest rating on cable, and I do it without cheap tricks.”

Madison felt her temperature rising, “One, that’s because you’re a man. Your entire role in TV isn’t to convince the audience you’re their girlfriend – so spare me. Two, I can remember when you had the *highest* rating on cable. You’ve been phoning it in for how long? Five years? Ten? It’s been at least that long since you grew that stupid mustache.”

“That’s rich coming from you,” Dan swung back without missing a beat. “When was the last time you worked one of those big, meaty corruption stories you used to love? Do you even remember who you are, or is identity loss a side-effect of long-term peroxide abuse?”

Madison took a few steps toward Dan, then asked in the calmest voice she could humanly muster.

“You remember that one time you said gender roles were a good thing because they gave women some rights men don’t have?”

That seem to actually confuse him. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“The argument was crap, but the example you used had some merit.”

She slapped him across the face.

“Nina’s a big girl, and Prissy is about to lose whatever marbles she has left. So shut up, get yourself a box of Raisinettes, and enjoy the show.”

Sinéad could feel her pulse speeding up as she approached the office. The shards of broken ceramic on the waiting room carpet were a pretty good indication of what was going on.

There was a reason that Sinéad always ordered cheap vases for this place – not that Prissy knew they were all from WalMart.

Unfortunately, what Priscilla did know was the sound of her secretary's shoes on the carpet.

“Sinéad!”

“Yes, Ms. Davis.” Sinéad entered the office, trying to sound like her boss wasn't having a total effing breakdown.

Priscilla was leaned back in her chair, blazer off, feet on her desk.

“Don't look at me like that,” she said, “You look like a scared rabbit.”

“Sorry, Ms. Davis.”

Priscilla waved her off, taking a long sip from a tumbler of ice water.

“Forget it. Where are we on the Constantinos file? We might need it.”

Sinéad had a feeling that would come up.

“Same as we were last week, ma'am. It's pretty thin. I mean, the brother used to be a stoner. Sister's off the grid, but that's about it. Family business is in the black, boring past love life. She's a girl scout.”

Priscilla thought for a few seconds. “Nobody's that clean. Put in a call to Patzen. We haven't shaken that tree for a while.”

Sinéad raised her eyebrows, “Patzen? For this?”

“You said the normal guys can't find the sister, right?”

“Right,” Sinéad stammered. “But don’t we only use him for the big stories? This is just tracking down an expat sister for an internal file.”

Priscilla took her feet off the desk, planted them on the floor, and rolled her shoulders.

“Sinéad, this *is* big. People like - what was the sister’s name?”

“Diana.”

“Right. People like Diana Constantinos are why we *have* Patzen. People we can’t find are generally people who don’t want to be found, and it’s generally useful to find them. Put in the call.”

“Yes, Ms. Davis. Anything else?”

“Just one thing.” Priscilla grabbed an empty folder and offering it to Sinéad.

“Open this one. Pull what we have of the Constantinos file for me - and grab the big nasty one while you’re at it. I have a feeling I may need that one too.”

Sinéad took the folder. “Yes, Ms. Davis.”

“Good.” Priscilla finally seemed to recover herself, “That’ll be all. And feel free to take an early lunch if you want. We all need to blow off a little steam.”

“Yes, Ms. Davis.”

Sinéad nodded and headed back to her desk, mouthing *what the eff*.

She opened the top drawer, which held an old cell phone with a cracked screen. She powered it on, then stared at it for a solid minute before dialing a number she really wished she didn’t know. It rang three times before it finally picked up and played a recording.

“Thank you for calling Teach for Peace, a UNICEF initiative. For information on our educational services, press or say ‘one.’ If you are a teacher or trainee, press or say ‘two.’

For media inquiries, press or say ‘three.’ For all other inquiries, press zero or stay on the line.”

Sinéad took a deep breath and punched in a code. Nine. Eight. Zero. One.

There was a brief lag before the phone rang once and then went straight to voicemail.

“John Patzen, leave a message.”

Sinéad steadied herself as it beeped, then left a message.

“You know who this is, and you know what we want. Call back.”

She hung up, turned off the phone, and threw it back in the drawer. The return message never came by that phone.

She placed the new folder into her messenger bag and headed out. Four flights of stairs got her down to the basement, where she took the underground walkway connecting the bowels of the arena to the parking garage under WWN Tower. That, in turn, led her to an aging elevator, which she rode down to the *very* bottom.

The machine thudded as it reached its destination, opening into a lobby with white concrete walls and “P4” painted in six-foot blue letters. Glass doors led out to the parking garage, but Sinéad headed for a more opaque door in the back of the room. She swiped her phone on a scanner, and the light on the pad changed from red to green as the lock disengaged.

She was in the janitorial staff’s secondary storage room.

In the back was one more door, this one requiring an actual key. Inside was one last room - a closet, really - illuminated by a single compact fluorescent bulb in the ceiling. It contained three banks of file cabinets, each three drawers high and four drawers wide. This was the room that *really* drove the news. No cameras, just reams of sensitive data stored using the only method that was totally unhackable – paper photocopies.

That was rule number one: Nothing in the files could be stored digitally.

Ever.

Sinéad set the new file on top of the cabinet and opened the drawer marked “Ci-Cz” and pulled out a folder, labelled in Priscilla’s neat handwriting.

*CONSTANTINOS, NINA*

Then she went to the “Rm-Rz” drawer and grabbed one of the thickest folders in the archive.

*RYLANDER, MADISON*

Finally, she pulled out the new file and stared at the pristine label before adding it to the archive.

*JAIN, VINYA*

---

As Nina settled into her strategically-placed chair, in her strategically-placed dress, she couldn’t help but marvel at the absurdity of this place. The news business was all about being live and up to the minute. On *Nightcap*, however, the game was *pretending to be live*.

Everything had to be pre-taped at four o’clock in the afternoon. Late enough in the news cycle to catch the main stories, early enough that the talent could go home and sleep.

Studio B, also the home of *WWN Live* and *Dragovich on Site*, was lit dimly. The news desk had been replaced with two cocktail tables and four barstools. If her watch hadn’t told her otherwise, Nina would have totally believed that it was eleven at night.

As with most female guests, she’d been placed on the far-right barstool so that her legs were clearly visible under the table.

Midnight cocktail hours weren’t part of Nina’s repertoire, and neither was make-believe. She already felt like she was pretending to be Diana, and that was hard enough without also pretending that she didn’t have a ton of work waiting back at her desk.

Somehow, all this fakeness was supposed to help one become a “big-time news reporter”?

Nina was only ten minutes early, but she was the only person on set, not counting the cameramen silently fiddling with their rigs. Where were Velasco and the other guests? Wasn't this a TV news program? Where was the hustle?

Then there was sound behind her, the clicking of heels - but Nina had been told she was the only woman on the show.

A voice came from behind her, low in pitch but distinctly feminine, with just a hint of an East Coast bite. Not quite Jersey, but not quite Philly either.

“So, you're the new wonder-kid.”

The barstool next to Nina squeaked as a tall woman pulled it out from the table and seated herself.

Everyone in the business knew that face. Fire-red hair, shaved close above one ear, with a full head of long, curly locks flipped over the other. The exposed ear was adorned with a glittery ear chain, connecting a piercing at the top of the ear to two more at the bottom. It was arguably the single most trademarked look in American media.

Fast-selling author, Maddow Distinguished Fellow in Counter-Extremism at the Samantha Power Center for Foreign Policy, and general goddess of the talking heads.

S. Flannery MacClennan.

Nina tried to summon a glib response, but what actually came out was, “You're...I mean...I read your books.”

“Just call me Flannery, okay? And contain the squee – it's unbecoming.”

Nina loosened up just enough to speak. “Good to meet you, Ms. MacClennan. I mean - Flannery. Sorry. They didn't tell me you'd be here.”

Flannery smiled with a light chuckle. Cool, confident - and almost sinister.

“A little birdy told me you’d be on, and I wanted to see pope-girl up close, so I pulled rank. Besides, you just gave me an excuse to show up in slacks for once.”

Nina looked Flannery up and down. She was indeed wearing black slacks, along with a pinstripe vest and a purple men’s shirt, complete with green quartz cuff links.

Something about her gave Nina an odd sense of déjà vu. Something in the smile - or rather the teeth. Probably just that Nina had seen her hundreds of times on TV.

Nina took a deep breath and tried to stay calm. “Well, this is my first time *not* wearing slacks on air, so we’re even.”

Flannery picked up one of the water glasses and took a long sip. “My first time here I cut my leg shaving. Bad. They had to reverse the table to hide the slash.”

“Wow,” Nina said, “that’s intense.”

Flannery set down her glass. “Look, kid, I called in because you’re a first timer – and you’re already famous, so people are watching. If there’s two of us, I can show you the ropes. I play the worldly girl. You play my clueless little sister who never gets the double entendres until it’s too late. Gasp in shock, laugh nervously, then crack up at the follow-on joke. We used to call it the ‘crack the cutie’ gag. Think you can swing it?”

Nina shrugged. “Doesn’t seem all that hard.”

“That’s what she said.”

Nina felt herself blush and Flannery chuckled.

“It’s an old Toby Carsten trick. You probably don’t remember her, but she taught us all to do it back in the day. Me. Madison. All of us.”

Nina took a deep breath. “My sister idolized her, actually. Her and Prissy. I remember the blow-up like it was yesterday.”

Flannery’s look turned serious. “That makes two of us, then. She was the best at this sort of thing. Did it with class, too – even at the end.”



That started an awkward silence, broken only by Mike Velasco's voice booming across the set.

"We're already late, muchachos! And where the hell is Schwartzman? Is he in the building yet?"

"He's backstage waiting," one of the producers yelled.

Velasco responded with a dramatic eye roll. "Well, get him the hell out here!"

Velasco stomped offstage, apparently to retrieve the other guest. Nina used the brief moment of quiet to say what had suddenly hit her.

"You don't train new girls like Carsten did," she said to Flannery. "There hasn't been more than one woman on *Nightcap* as long as I can remember." The question wasn't asked – but the "why" hung in the air.

Something in Flannery's eyes shifted, and the friendly façade disappeared. Nina found herself caught in the pure, steely gaze of a woman who'd stared down some of the worst war criminals on Earth.

"We both know that you're not just any new girl. Sit still, look pretty, and follow my lead."

---

**OFFICIAL WVN TRANSCRIPT**  
**NIGHTCAP WITH MIKE VELASCO**  
**03/17/2038**

**MIKE VELASCO:** Good evening, everyone and welcome to *Nightcap*, where no topic is off limits except my recent prescriptions. Our first panelist tonight - call a doctor in the event of invective lasting more than four hours - conservative commentator Ari Schwartzman. Next, a woman with the cajones to ask for a normal chair on this damn show - best-selling author and Distinguished Fellow at the Samantha Power Center, S. Flannery MacClennan. And finally, making her debut in the Greg Gutfeld Memorial leg-chair. Aw, hell, I can't be mean to someone this nice. WVN's own Nina Constantinos.

Tonight, among other things, we have the pope to talk about, the never ending fiber-optic debate, Ben's recent battle with kidney stones -

**ARI SCHWARTZMAN:** That was not a laughing matter.

**VELASCO:** Not for you. But most importantly, I think this may be the first time in five years we've had two ladies on this program.

**SCHWARTZMAN:** Write it down. This is a big moment for equality. If the girls take over Mike's man cave, next they'll be tearing down the dogs-playing-poker painting in your greenroom and the world will end.

**VELASCO:** Not the dogs!

**SCHWARTZMAN:** Do it, ladies. It's hideous.

**S. FLANNERY MacCLENNAN:** Mike just invited us because he wanted to get his chops busted by two sexy women at once - that's not parity, that's fantasizing.

(Camera pans to **NINA CONSTANTINOS**, open mouthed in shock.)

**CONSTANTINOS:** I'm not even gonna try to touch that.

**MacCLENNAN:** His girlfriend says the same thing every night.

(Laughter breaks out, **CONSTANTINOS** falls over on desk laughing.)

---

"The hell?!" Madison dropped her vape-pen and shouted at the screen.

Vintage "Crack the Cutie" gag – perfectly executed. She grabbed her bendy-phone off the table and fired off an unusually coherent text.

***Madison says: Wtf are you trying to pull?***

She waited a few seconds, starring at the phone until she saw a moving pencil icon and the caption “Back Gammon is typing...”

Then the words materialized.

***Back:** I haven't the slightest clue what you're talking about.*

Madison considered throwing the phone at the wall but thought better of it.

***Madison says:** Flan doesn't just show up on NightCap like that, Toby! You don't get to play Jiminy Cricket with me and then leak behind my back.*

The phone didn't respond immediately, which probably meant that “Back Gammon” was fuming about having her real name in Madison's text records. The sound of the TV flooded back into Madison's skull, Flannery and Nina busting on Velasco like flirty college girls. Then the phone beeped. It was a photo of a Backgammon board with no text.

There was always a little piece of Madison that wanted to throw the phone at the wall at times like these, and this time she did it for real.