

Chapter Thirteen, Part One
“The Room Where It Happened”

Eighteen Years Earlier
Monday, July 13, 2020
11:34 P.M.

Original WWN Offices
Arlington, VA

Life observation #7,542: DC may be a rat-race, but it is OUR rat-race.

Toby nervously rubbed another blob of sanitizer into her hands as she watched Prissy make yet another desperate phone call. Toby was exhausted from four months walking the streets of a ghost-town to host the late-morning news, but this was the first time Prissy had been back in the office in months. Toby had seen the pent-up energy back at their apartment, but now it was all coming out.

“Yeah, I get it,” Prissy yelled into her iPhone, voice muffled by her mask. “You don’t know. Nobody knows, you...you know anyone who might know?...Mary-Clare, of course *I* know someone who might know, I know *you!*...I know it’s the middle of a pandemic! So?...Sure, let me know if you hear anything. Bye.”

Prissy hurled the phone against the cushion of her office chair. It bounced off and landed on the floor.

Toby raised an eyebrow. “That sounded like it went well.”

The Republican Vice-Presidential nominee was supposedly going to be announced in the morning, and they were no closer to a name than they’d been five hours ago.

Prissy sank into the chair, “That was the last of my GOP contacts, which are garbage to begin with. The New York networks are going to scoop us. Again.”

“So?” Toby said, “They scoop us on all the big stuff. This isn’t our game.”

Two-year-old WVN wasn't a match for the TV networks when it came to getting big news first. Instead, the subscription-only online channel leveraged their D.C. location to pick up political developments before New York or Atlanta got wind of them. Prissy was great at that stuff, which is why Brinkman trusted a 28-year-old as his chief political correspondent, but now she was on the warpath trying to score a big win.

Unfortunately, in an election year, the stories weren't all in DC.

Prissy got up and walked to the window. The 11th floor suite in an Arlington skyscraper overlooked the Potomac River, and beyond it the Washington Monument and Capitol Building.

"That's the point," Prissy fumed, "It should be our game. We headquartered this channel out of DC so that we could be closer to politics than New York. That's our comparative advantage. If we can't at least try to squeeze out the name of Rick Scott's veep nominee, then what exactly are we doing here? We're the freaking Capitol Hill channel and we've got nothing!"

She slammed her hand against the glass of the window, which Toby had thankfully seen her do enough times that she knew it wouldn't break.

"Girl," Toby said, "someone is eventually going to get a lead on this story, and it's a jump ball. You don't build a network on jump balls; you build a network on—"

"Stories no one else can get. I know, Brinkman's told us a thousand times."

"Good, now settle down and remember it's one scoop – which we're not expecting to win anyway – and besides, DC is dead. People are locked in their houses, Priss – including the campaigns."

Prissy planted her head softly against the glass. "Thanks. I know I'm a pain, but I just want one win. One solid win."

She'd been like this the whole pandemic, both at work and back at the apartment, and seeing her take it out on herself made Toby want to cry. Lately, she'd started wondering if helping Brinkman poach Prissy from *Politico* had been the right

thing. The girl was an amazing talent, but she was also under an amazing amount of pressure.

Toby racked her brain for something to do. They weren't getting anywhere by staring out the window, and without something to work on, Prissy's emotions would just keep spiraling.

Then something hit her. "Priss, we're going at this all wrong."

Prissy looked up. "What do you mean? Who else do we call?"

Toby let out a sly smile. "That's the point. We don't *call* anyone. We're not good because we have more high-level contacts than CNN, we're good because we know this town better - it's our turf. You're the Hill rat, tell me what should be going on Capitol Hill on the night before a veep announcement?"

"During a pandemic?" Prissy bit her lip. She seemed intrigued, but not sold. "Not much," she said. "The announcement is at Scott HQ, and that's in Tampa." She thought for a few more seconds, then tapped a fingernail against the glass, roughly in the direction of the Capitol. "The Republican National Committee went virtual, there won't be any activity there." She moved her finger down the Washington Mall, "The White House is Dem, that'll be quiet." Then she slid her nail back up the mall, to a point just South of the Capitol dome, and tapped hard. "Congress has a lot of staff still at their desks."

"That's a start." Toby returned to her laptop and pulled up Instagram.

Prissy peered over her shoulder. "What are you doing?"

Toby started typing furiously. "If there's any weirdness around Capitol Hill, you know that some dumb young staffer is snapping pictures – even on lockdown."

"Yeah, but wouldn't the other networks catch that?"

"Only if they know what they're looking for. The veep probably isn't here in town, even if it's someone in Congress, but we might be able to see who's buzzing in and out. Let the big networks break the name, we break the action in the meantime, grab any secondary stories out from under them."

Prissy pulled up a chair, “I like the way you think.”

Toby took some wild hashtag guesses in the search box. She started with #RNC, then added #DCLife. That one had been getting some play on the DC trending topics. No hits.

“I’m switching to Twitter.”

Prissy scooted closer, blatantly violating COVID protocols. “I was wondering why you didn’t start there.”

Toby tried the same two hashtags from her first search.

And there it was.

“We got something,” she said, clicking on the tweet. It was from someone using the handle @BowTieGent15.

*#RNC crazy busy tonight. Lots of ppl running in & out - black SUVs. #DCLife
#Illuminati*

- 8:30 PM

“So, there is someone at the GOP national committee.” Prissy said, “That’s incredibly weird. Click through to the profile. See if he got pics.”

Toby clicked on the profile picture to pull up BowTieGent15’s page. The caption described him as “Congressional Staffer. #TrueConservative. Smartest Guy You Know.” The banner photo showed him in a seersucker jacket, chugging a Stella Artois.

Prissy choked on a laugh. “Has his boss seen his profile picture?”

Toby scrolled down past the first two tweets. He had indeed taken photos, he just hadn’t hashtagged them. One was of two black SUV’s sitting outside the Republican National Committee. The second showed a group of five people leaving the building and had been captioned, “Damn, nobody I recognize.”

Toby shrugged. “Well at least we can retweet that.”

Prissy didn't respond, and Toby looked back to see her squinting hard at the screen. Without saying anything, she held up her iPhone and looked back and forth between the device and Toby's monitor. “We need to call Brinkman,” she blurted, “now.”

“For what? A bunch of random suits.”

“No,” Prissy said, “for her.”

She jabbed her finger into Toby's screen, pointing to a woman wearing a dark overcoat and a satin floral-print mask – her black hair cut with one prominent streak of white. Prissy dropped her phone on the desk, revealing a picture of the same woman attached to a Wikipedia article.

Toby's eyes widened. “You're kidding me. For veep?”

“Nobody on Earth will guess that.” Prissy grabbed the desk phone and dialed the social media editor's private cell.

“We need to issue a tweet from the official WWN account right now. No, don't vet, tweet – I don't care what time it is! You ready...Okay...Tweet ‘Democratic Hawai'i Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard spotted leaving RNC headquarters earlier this evening.’...yes, a Democrat. I'll retweet the photo from my account, and you can retweet me. Thanks.”

Prissy slammed the phone back on its receiver, leaned back, and exhaled. “I can't believe it...did we just...”

“Maybe,” Toby picked the desk phone back up. “You call Brinkman, your story. I'll start calling Dem sources.” She was already scrolling through the list of campaign contacts on her own phone, but Prissy seemed to have something else on her mind.

“We got that just by stalking a twenty-something nobody on Twitter,” she said to the air.

“I know, weird, right,” Toby tried to hide her annoyance that Prissy wasn’t kicking into journalistic overdrive. “Now start dialing, we need to pounce on this - hard.”

Prissy kept calmly staring at the screen. “I’ll start calling. But what if we made this...bigger?”

“Bigger?” Toby spat. “Girl, if this is what it looks like, this is the biggest story either one of us are ever going to break.”

Prissy was unmoved. “Not the story, the method. What do you think it would take to follow every DC staffer on social media? And interns. Find all of them and build a database.”

Toby rolled her eyes and shook her head. “What I think is that you need to call Brinkman. Now.”