

Chapter Fourteen, Part Two
"Deus Ex Madison"

Monday, March 22, 2038
Eight Days Until Interview
9:24 A.M.

"The usual, Nina?"

Nina stared at Evangeline – somehow Emma's name had stuck to the coffeemaker.

"The usual" meant did she want her sugary, double-boba kiddie drink and the extra scoop of cellulite that came with it?

She thought about it for a second. "Reset my usual: Italian dark roast, eight ounces, unsweetened soymilk, stevia, normal boba."

That sounded a little more adult, and it might lead to fewer Twitter comments about her "curves" next time she hit the leg chair.

"Usual updated, dispensing boba."

"Thanks, Evangeline," Nina muttered as brown slop poured out of the machine.

"You wouldn't call her that if you knew the real Evangeline," Emma said as she strolled in.

"I didn't know there *was* a real Evangeline."

Emma looked different this morning. Her clothes were the same, her hair was the same, but there was a different swagger - something dark and sexy that wasn't normally there.

Then again, everyone looked dark and sexy this week. Everyone looked hotter than her. Everyone was competition.

Emma chuckled sardonically. "Yeah, sugar, there's a real one. Lived next door to her for the worst two years of my life."

Nina's drink had finished, and she took a sip - but not before Emma caught a whiff and gagged.

"Diner-girl has soy and stevia? Didn't peg you for a calorie counter. I'll have the usual, Evangeline."

"Oh, I'm not, I just," Nina stopped herself mid-sentence. Lying had never been her strong suit.

Emma's order dispensed into the cup, and she took a long, luxurious sip before adding her usual dash of cayenne. "I'm a cream and sugar girl myself. You can't maintain these curves on soymilk."

Emma sauntered off - definitely rolling her hips more than usual.

No - Nina must be imagining things. She shot back to her workstation, slammed herself into her chair, and resisted the urge to bang her head on her desk.

Seriously?

Nina was working on the biggest story of her life, and all she could think about was whether Emma freaking Poissonier looked better than than her in that *stupid* chair.

She tried to refocus and booted up her word processor - just now noticing that she'd splashed coffee onto the desk. She took a sip and soaked up the tiny puddle with a Post-It note. It tasted like garbage, bitter garbage.

Her outline for the papal interview was staring back at her from the wafer-thin computer screen. The first question was the one that was still giving her issues.

"In an age when so many people associate the church with abuse and corruption, what makes you think you can change that image?"

It was fair, and it was toned down.

Heck, Prissy's version had practically accused the man of being an embezzling child abuser, but there was still something wrong with it. It would just lead to a boilerplate Vatican answer that everyone had heard before. The real meat of the story wasn't in that.

“You look engrossed.”

Madison Rylander was standing behind her, looking over her shoulder.

Now Nina was questioning whether she was even awake. Even new-look Madison wouldn't deign to actually stop by.

“Oh, hey,” Nina sputtered, “just trying to finalize questions for the earth-shattering interview from hell.”

Madison bent toward the screen and took hold of Nina's mouse. “Let me see,”

This definitely had to be a dream.

Madison scrolled around the document, then returned to the top. “I see the problem. Your intro question isn't working for you.”

Normally that would have stung, but for once it felt like a validation. Nina threw up her hands.

“I know, but Priscilla wants an aggressive opener and I'm already taking some chances by not using some of her other questions.”

Madison exhaled through her nose, seemingly deep in thought. “Yeah, that's a very Prissy question – her style is to knock the guest off balance early.” She scrolled further down the list. “These all look familiar. You're alternating Prissy questions with Dan questions, aren't you?”

Nina rested her elbows on the desk in resignation. “It's that obvious?”

Madison shot her a side-eye. “It is when you've worked with them as long as I have.”

Nina nibbled on her lip in thought. “But that is the point, temper Priscilla's stingers with some real questions?”

“No.” Madison said, eyes still glued to the screen. “That's not the point at all. You have two entirely different interviews here, and both of them suck. Prissy's is designed to scare him; Dan's is trying to get dry biographical detail. There's no through line, no point of view.”

Madison finally took her eyes off the screen. “You don’t want to do either of those interviews, do you?”

Nina shrugged. “I mean, Dan’s questions are a lot fairer. I could use more of those.”

“You’re not listening,” Madison shot back. “What do *you* want to know about this Pope?”

Nina looked back at the screen. “He’s shy - the public face is a mask. I want to know what’s under it.”

Madison’s lips curled into a sly smile. “You want to get in his head - show off the real guy under the white robe.”

“Exactly. But I’ve got a lot Prissy questions to shove in.”

“You’re still missing it,” Madison shook her head. “The Dan questions are just as big of a problem.” She pointed at the first question. “Prissy’s an ideologue. She comes in with an agenda and tries to extract a confession.” She moved her finger down to the second question, asking what actions Eutychian had taken in his first month as pope. “Dan’s a war correspondent - he wants the most detailed play-by-play he can. Just the facts. Nothing deep.”

The pieces started clicking together in Nina’s brain. “Are you saying I need to dial back both of them?”

Madison nodded. “You’re a psychological interviewer. You don’t have an agenda, but you want more than the facts. You need to peel this guy’s emotions back like layers on an onion.”

Nina licked the inside of her teeth as she tried to process. “Okay, so how do I do that?”

Madison stood all the way up and stretched her back. “Easy,” she said. “Ax the Prissy and Dan garbage. Nina got this interview, add more Nina questions.”

She turned to walk off, leaving Nina staring wide eyed. Had Madison Rylander *really* just given her the trust-your-gut speech? That might be the most awesome thing that had ever happened to her.

“Madison?” She shouted after the receding figure.

“Yeah?” Madison turned back.

“Thank you.” Nina meant it, but then something else came out of her mouth that she didn’t expect. “But why? Helping me out isn’t your style.”

Madison’s eyes dropped. “I haven’t got a clue what my style is right now, if you haven’t noticed.” She looked genuinely sincere.

“Sorry,” Nina said, “I guess this place is starting to rub off on me. Someone tries to be nice, and I go looking for their angle.”

Madison broke into a laugh - a full, unguarded laugh. Nina had never seen that before, not even on TV. “That’s not WWN rubbing off,” she said, “You’re a reporter – we come with the B.S. detector built-in.”

Nina returned the laugh, but she saw something wistful dulling the edges of Madison’s smile.

“Trust me, there’s an angle.” Madison said. “I wanted to see what it would have been like to be the person who helps people. Just once.” Then she turned and walked away.

7:30 P.M.
Arlington, Virginia

If Patzen had wanted an inconspicuous place to meet, *Hard Times Chili* was not the spot. The chain was a DC-area icon, and even the Clarendon Boulevard location was always busy.

Busy, but unfortunately not busy enough to get lost in.

Sinéad was drumming her freshly-manicured fingernails on gray plastic table, still staring at her phone. For some reason she’d felt the compulsion to have acrylic nails put on - alternating lime and black fingers - if for no other reason than she thought they might make her more intimidating. Then she’d totally undermined that image by putting on a drab gray hoodie for fear that her normal wardrobe might make her stick out - which was stupid, seeing as this wasn’t a spy movie and nobody outside of WWN would have recognized her anyway.

She took another sip of her decaf coffee, which seemed like the only safe thing to ingest here. The rest of the menu was a veritable shrine to arterial blockage.

Patzen walked in carrying a shoulder bag. *He* looked like he belonged in a spy movie - and for good reason. He was balding, a bit on the short side, and wearing a permanent, world-weary scowl to match his ill-fitting sport coat. He made eye contact, walked briskly to Sinéad's booth, and sat down across from her.

Apparently, he wanted Sinéad to start the conversation - or was there supposed to be a conversation at all?

She could only manage one word.

“So?”

Patzen didn't reply, instead opening his folder and pulling out a manila envelope. Moving with deliberate annoyance, he undid the metal fastener and slid a packet of paper a few inches out of the top. He'd pulled it just far enough to reveal a photograph and a name.

It certainly looked like the woman in the old photographs Sinéad had seen, but older, and casting a scorching stare into the camera. More importantly, the name was there in big capital letters.

DIANA RODANTHI CONSTANTINOS

As quickly as Patzen had opened the envelope, it was closed again and back in his bag.

He folded his hands on the table. “Satisfied?”

Sinéad felt her hands twitching as her nerves started to fray. How the hell was she supposed to pull off the psycho-secretary act when she was this effing scared?

“Well,” she said, steeling herself as much as she could. “I don't have it in my hands yet, and the cloak-and-dagger act is trying my patience. So, no. Not satisfied.”

Patzen patted the bag. “When I said I wasn't giving it to anyone but your boss, I wasn't kidding. This one's going to cost you.”

“Mr. Patzen,” Sinéad placed a newly painted nail against her temple, trying to keep her voice from matching her speeding heart rate, “we don’t pay you. You give us what we want, or we end you. That’s how this works.”

“You think I don’t know that?” he said, barely above a whisper. “This one might be worth more than anything you can do to me. Might. You go tell her you’ve seen it, and to come get it herself. The price is that I never hear from you again. Got it?”

Sinéad leveled her gaze at him. If she didn’t leave with that file, Patzen wasn’t the only one in trouble. She opened her mouth to retort, but he cut her off.

“I eat here a lot.” he said, “I’ll expect Davis for dinner tomorrow.”

“Mr. Patzen,” Sinéad snapped, fear of Priscilla rising in her chest. “That’s not the deal.”

Patzen was already getting up. “You’re not making the deal this ti-”

He was interrupted by a loud vibrating on the table. Sinéad’s phone had sprung to life, displaying the words:

Call from: Skyler - Mom?

Sinéad’s train of thought derailed. Her eyes went to Patzen, then the phone, then back at the phone. She couldn’t answer, but she sure as hell couldn’t let it go to voicemail.

That would be a doozy to explain. *Hey mom, yeah, we haven’t talked since I was a baby, but I had to finish a shady meeting with an illegal source.*

Focus, she mentally scolded herself. As important as the call was, she needed to seal this thing *now*.

She placed the still-buzzing phone in the pocket of her hoodie. “As you know, Mr. Patzen-”

“Take your call.” Patzen barked. “We’re done here.”

He turned and headed for the door as the phone buzzed for the fourth time. Sinéad took a deep breath and answered it.

“Hello?”

The only response was two beeps and a “missed call” notification. She’d been a millisecond too late.

She called back, but it went straight to voicemail.

7:55 P.M.

“You ready to go yet? I’m starved.”

Nina tried to ignore the fact that Vinya was hovering over her shoulder. “I guess so.”

Truth was she’d been staring blankly at the screen for the last two hours anyway. She’d hit a wall with the Pope questions, so she might as well hit a bar with Vinya. It wasn’t like she was doing much else.

She powered off the computer and hauled herself to her feet. As usual, she noticed that she was far from the only one working late. A solid third of the newsroom desks were occupied. Five or six reporters were loitering at each end of the room, where the primetime programming was blaring out of the two jumbotrons. The big desk in the back of the building was darkened. Priscilla’s evening news had been off the air for an hour, and right now, the channel was finishing up its 7:00 punditry showcase, *The Round Table*.

“Look,” one of the talking heads blared out of the speakers, “I don’t see why we’re still even talking about this fiber-optic funding issue. It’s been ten years, and the sky has yet to fall. We’ve moved on. Drop it. Cope.”

Nina slung her purse over her shoulder. “I can’t listen to this anymore.”

Vinya snickered. “Us normal people don’t listen to it in the first place.”

“V,” Nina said, “You are the last person on Earth I would call normal.”

“Fair,” Vinya mused.

They walked halfway to the door in silence - which was definitely not *their* normal. “Everything okay?” Vinya finally asked.

Nina shook her head. “Just banging my head on interview questions. Thought I had them all lined out and then Madison came by and made me re-think them.”

Vinya stopped walking. “Stopped by? Are we talking about the same Madison?”

Nina nodded. “Weird, right? Anyway, she said I needed more of my own questions. You know, follow my instincts, be psychological, get in his head. Great idea, but I haven’t got a clue how to do that.”

They’d reached the end of the room, and the sound from the jumbotron was vibrating through Nina’s bones. Right as they were about to leave, the clock hit 8:00 and the theme for *On Site with Dan Dragovich* rumbled through her chest.

“Another day, another congressional squabble over internet funding.” Came a female voice.

That was wrong.

Nina looked up to see Madison, not Dan, in the *On Site* anchor chair - staring into the camera like a laser beam. “Trust me, it’ll be the same story tomorrow. So tonight, we’re taking time for a human-interest story. In for Dan Dragovich, I’m Madison Rylander, and I’m an alcoholic.”