

Chapter Fifteen, Part Two

“Take No Prisoners”

Tuesday, March 23, 2038
Seven Days Until Interview
8:01 P.M.

Sinéad rushed into *Hard Times* with her courier bag. She'd purposefully worn more businesslike clothes this time - the black blouse with hot pink pinstripes - but let her hair down so she looked less like herself.

Priscilla was waiting in a booth, wearing a gray windbreaker with a red ball cap - and chowing down on a plate of chili tater tots.

So, she did eat.

The whole charade seemed ridiculous. Priscilla and Sinéad were office-rats - they played spy games though proxies and files. Normally, that felt pretty legit, but it was becoming painfully obvious that only Patzen knew how to do this for real.

“I thought I said eight o'clock,” Priscilla said without looking at her.

Sinéad checked her watch. Three freaking minutes late.

“Sorry, I got held up.”

That was true, if “held up” meant texting with Skyler - who still didn't have a last name - to set up a breakfast meeting.

Most of the next fourteen minutes passed in near silence. Although, at around the nine-minute mark, Sinéad felt the need to at least try conversation.

“So, are we really cutting him loose? He's our best source.”

Priscilla shrugged. “He's not our *only* source, and he gets crankier every time. I'm happy to be done with him.”

They went back to not talking until, right on time, Patzen entered carrying the same bag as yesterday. He plopped himself down and, instead of conversing, beckoned a waitress with his hand.

Priscilla placed her elbows on the table. “Well, hello to you to, John.”

“What’s up, you evil harpy?” Patzen rolled his eyes. “Now if you don’t mind, I’m ordering dinner.”

The waitress arrived, and Patzen smiled his huge, insincere grin.

“I’ll have the Chili Bubba – cheese, sour cream, extra onions.”

“As usual,” the waitress chirped.

Patzen turned back to Priscilla. “For future reference, that’s how *civilized* people conduct business.”

Priscilla didn’t take the bait. “So, you have it?” She asked flatly.

Patzen pulled the manila envelope out of his bag raising his eyebrows as he held it up.

“And you have yours?”

Priscilla took the courier bag from Sinéad and pulled out two file folders, both marked “PATZEN, JOHN”

She slapped them on the table, then pulled out a small cardboard box, which Sinéad knew to contain a loose hard drive full of photos.

“Both copies, plus your hard-drive. It’s all there.”

Patzen flipped through the folders, then checked inside the box.

“Not bad,” he snickered. “I’m sure you have more copies, but at least you brought the originals.”

“You said you wanted everything,” Priscilla snapped, “That’s everything. You know I don’t keep digital records, and I don’t joke. I said we’re done, so we’re done.”

He shook his head. “You keep forgetting I’m better at this than you. If you gave me everything, you’re a moron.”

“Believe what you want.” Priscilla stared straight into his eyes, “But I’m a woman of my word. Now I want that file.”

Patzen chuckled, with more menace than usual. “I don’t have to believe anything. I disabled my phone line three hours ago and filed my two-weeks’ notice this morning. You’ll never find me again.”

He stared at his envelope, then pursed his lips and dropped it on the table. “When you see what’s inside, you’ll understand the price. If you do anything stupid with it, we will come for you, and that’s not even my call. And I prefer to eat alone, so…” He cocked his head toward the door, “scram, both of you.”

Sinéad practically jumped out of her seat, but Priscilla didn’t move, instead opening the envelope and silently rifling through the contents. Her features stayed mostly locked in place, but Sinéad did see her eyebrows shoot up a few times.

She replaced the contents of the file, shoved it in the courier bag, and handed it to Sinéad.

“Impressive,” she said, “I certainly understand the hard bargain. Have a nice life, Mr. Patzen.” Priscilla slid out of the booth, grabbed Sinéad by the elbow, and walked to the door as quickly as her legs would go.

Sinéad looked back through the window. As much as she hated Patzen, there was something heart-warming about watching him savor his plate of chili and cornbread. Freedom must taste good.

Priscilla seemed to notice that she’d stopped and tapped her on the arm. “Come on. We’ve got a lot of work to do tonight.”

Sinéad balked. “Tonight? I thought we were done.”

“We were,” Priscilla half-barked as she started walking down the street.

Sinéad followed, mostly out of confusion. It looked like Priscilla was watching every person who passed her on the sidewalk. Finally, when it seemed like there was no one close, she stopped and spoke in a low, deliberate voice.

“Shoot his whole file. Now. I want CNN calling for his head by sunrise.”

Sinéad stopped. “But we just gave him his file.”

Priscilla snapped. “Do I look like an idiot to you?”

“So, we do have a copy?”

No response.

“But - we just told him we we’re letting him off.”

Priscilla raised a hand to shush her, but Sinéad noticed that her finger seemed to be shaking. “I said we were done with him, and after what’s in that file, we are making sure that he is *done*.”

Wednesday, March 24, 2038

Six Days Until Interview

5:58 A.M.

“You sure you don’t need us to give you a ride home?” Nina asked, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

Madison shook her head, pulling a borrowed hoodie over her t-shirt and jeans, “Thanks for letting me crash on the couch though. It’s been ten years since I did an all-night story like that.”

Nina smiled. “I’m just sorry you had to do it in this dump.”

“I’ve filed from worse places,” Madison said. “Besides, the WWN Fairlington Bureau does some damn good work.”

Nina looked back at the crumbling house and rolled her eyes. “The Fairlington Bureau?”

“Sure,” Madison said, “You got anything better to call it?”

A car horn honked

“Hey Nina, you coming?”

It was Vinya’s turn to drive to work.

Nina turned back to Madison. “On second thought, you’re probably safer Ubering. That Mini is a death trap.”

8:15 A.M.

Sinéad swept back her ponytail and tied it with the same elastic band she’d worn yesterday. Her eyes felt heavy from lack of sleep, and her reflection in her computer screen looked like utter effing crap. She was wearing the wrinkled “emergency blouse” she kept in her desk, and her hair was still wet from the showering in the office gym. That, and her back was still angry from the two hours of sleep on the waiting room sofa.

On the plus side – if one could call it that – the all-nighter had been a definitive “success”. Of course, that required using Priscilla’s definition of the term.

The screen embedded in the back wall of the room, which *always* ran WWN content, was this morning tuned to another network. A bleach-blonde drone of an anchor was...well...droning on about the network’s “big exclusive.”

It was always funny how they never reported where all their juicy exclusives originated.

“And back to our late breaking story,” The anchor-babe said for at least the fifth time this hour. “We’ve received exclusive information that could re-cast the story of America’s ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Nigeria a decade ago.”

Sinéad took a long swig from her almost empty RedBull, “That’s it, stupid. Bury the lead. Brilliant.”

“Documents leaked last night indicate that Department of Defense may have covered up a massacre of Nigerian civilians by an Army Ranger unit who thought they were attacking an ISIS-Nigeria command post. The raid, based on faulty intelligence, was ordered by this man – then-Colonel John Patzen.”

Patzen’s image flashed across the screen – an older shot of him in uniform, and with hair.

“The records show that Patzen colluded with connections in the Defense Intelligence Agency to forge a report calling the incident, quote, a successful attack on ISIS with zero civilian casualties. Less than a month later, he was quietly discharged from the military and disappeared from all government records. In fact, our investigators have concluded that for the last twelve years, John Patzen has not officially existed. So, where is John Patzen, and what else is the government hiding about U.S. involvement in Nigeria? Our experts weigh in after the break.”

Sinéad clicked the screen off. Even if it was her own work, and even if Patzen was guilty as sin, something about this one felt wrong.

She’d dumped dozens of files before, and every last one of them had been horrible people. Patzen was no exception, probably the worst of the bunch. Still, this was the first time she’d hit someone she’d actually met, and the first time she’d dumped a file connected to a WWN reporter. Sure, she knew the reporter files existed, but it wasn’t like they used them – right?

Reality snapped back into view when Priscilla entered the room looking fresh as a daisy. Either she’d found time to run home and freshen up or, more likely, she had far more experience dressing in the office gym.

Or maybe she just rejuvenated by sucking the life out of her victims – there was always that possibility.

“Any word from Patzen?” she asked. “I figured he’d be calling to yell by now.”

Sinéad stifled a yawn. “Nothing yet.” She’d never figured Patzen for the yelling type. He was more of the send-a-sniper type.

“Well,” Priscilla rolled her shoulders. “We’ve made trouble for him, and that what counts. If he doesn’t land in prison, he’ll be too busy running to bother with us.”

Sinéad nodded and tried again to rub the sleep out of her eyes, which caused Priscilla to raise an eyebrow.

“Are you *sure* you’re all right?” Priscilla’s eyes seemed to soften – “seemed” being the key word because her face moved but her pupils didn’t budge. “That was a long night, and it you haven’t been yourself the last few days, so if there’s anything I can do–”

Priscilla was cut off by Sinéad’s phone buzzing loudly against the desk. Thank heaven it was face down. Sinéad swiftly removed the phone from the desk and hit the power button. “Sorry, Ma’am.”

Priscilla put a hand on Sinéad’s shoulder.

“Sinéad,” she said with what sounded like real concern. “I don’t know what’s up, but you can take a call in the office – besides, it might have been Patzen.” Priscilla thought a second. “Look, go home, veg out. You’ve earned some sleep and there’s nothing urgent. If Patzen calls, let me know, but I think I can hold down my own office. Might even go take a nap myself.”

Sinéad shook her head. Something about leaving in the middle of this mess didn’t feel right. “I’ll be fine once the RedBull kicks in. I really want to get my morning rounds done.”

Priscilla’s eyes shot to the can on the desk. “I thought you didn’t drink caffeine.”

Sinéad forced a smile. “Not usually, but I’m also not a total masochist.”

That at least got a small laugh from Prissy. “Suit yourself, but I was going to force you to go home at noon anyway. That remains the plan – clear?”

Sinéad responded with an exaggerated salute, hoping the humor would get Priscilla to lay off.

“Good,” Priscilla smiled, disappearing into the back office.

Sinéad exhaled, leaned back in her chair, and booted up her phone.

The call had been from exactly who she thought it was from.

1:59 P.M.

Emma checked herself in the window-glass outside Priscilla’s office. She wasn’t entirely sure why she’d been summoned up here, but she hoped it would be good.

She was definitely dressed for the camera right now, which made her wonder if she was boss-appropriate. Disco-blouse as always – this one bright orange with embroidered red fleur-des-lis on the super-wide lapels. She’d paired it with high-waisted corduroy slacks and a faux-alligator belt.

Emma never wanted to get accused of playing it conservative ever again.

Sinéad was gone – which didn’t seem right. That girl and her desk were like Johnny and June or rice and gravy. If you saw one without the other, something was wrong.

Priscilla emerged from the back office immediately, almost as if she heard Emma’s boots on the carpet.

“Emma!” she smiled “Come on in.”

Now that felt weird. Since when did Priscilla Davis deign to greet her own guests?

“Good to see you ma’am,” Emma said, “What can I do for you?”

Priscilla indicated that Emma should enter the back office, and Emma complied, seating herself in one of the plastic chairs in front of the desk.

“I just called you up here,” Priscilla began, taking a seat behind the desk, “to let you know that we’re going to be upping the ad time for your program. I like the prep work I’ve seen, and as we move up to the launch, I want to make it bigger. New taglines. Ads on weekdays. You know, ‘the hottest new thing on weekends,’ that sort of thing. I’ve looked at the numbers, and I think we can probably make a play for number one in that slot, at least for cable. I mean, we won’t beat *Good Morning America*, but with you running the show, I’m pretty sure we can beat *Fox and Friends Weekend*. Actually, if I can be so bold, I think we can stomp them.”

Priscilla let a wry smile creep across her face, and Emma let out a laugh.

“Well, I’m certainly happy to try, Ma’am.”

Priscilla pointed at her footwear and said, “That’s what those boots are for, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Emma said.

“Well, good.” Priscilla cracked her knuckles, “I’ll let you get back to work, but keep it up.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Emma felt energy pulsing through her as she got out of the chair, “I’ll do my best to live up to it.”

Prissy nodded, and Emma practically glided to the door, high on the jolt of praise. Then it happened.

“Oh, Emma.” She heard before she reached the door.

Emma turned back, “Yes, ma’am?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Prissy said slowly, “Is everything all right with Sinéad? She seems a bit...distracted lately.”

Emma stopped where she stood. That was the last thing she'd expected to hear. "I mean," she sputtered, "I think she's a little stressed but nothing serious. You know her. Total workaholic."

Priscilla chuckled. "Aren't we all?" She paused again before continuing. "Look, Sinéad handles a lot of very sensitive, private data for the network. I rely heavily on her complete honesty. Do you understand?"

"I think so." Emma said. She could feel her stomach forming knots. Nothing about this felt good.

Priscilla exhaled. "I hope you do understand, Emma, because if Sinéad is having any sort of crisis, it could affect her work, and her work touches the whole network." Priscilla closed her eyes and placed her middle finger against her temple, massaging it slowly. She seemed to do that a lot. "You are her best friend, are you not?"

"I—"

"Rhetorical, Ms. Poissonier." Priscilla cut her off, "Sinéad is my assistant, I know the answer. What I don't know is why she's acting strangely. I also know that if anyone can find out, it's you."

Emma tried to talk past the rising nausea. "Ms. Davis, I—"

"If you know of anything wrong with Sinéad, you owe it to yourself to tell me, and if not, it would be in your best interest to find out. Am I clear?"

The tips of Emma's fingers started going numb, and she felt the blood draining from her face. How could she respond to that? She'd never considered herself a saint, but she also wasn't the type of no-good trash who ratted on her friends.

She took a deep, long breath.

"Ma'am, Sinéad's my best friend. I genuinely have not noticed anything up with her, but I don't think it would be appropriate for me to push her about it."

Priscilla pursed her lips and sat up straighter – if that was even possible. Then she offered one of those forced smiles that no-one ever believed.

“I understand. We should all be lucky enough to have friends who can support us unconditionally.”

An awkward silence settled over the room, with Priscilla keeping her gaze on Emma, and Emma trying to figure out how to extract herself.

“Thank you, ma’am,” she said, turning to go a second time.

This time, she made it all the way out the door before the shoe dropped.

“Ms. Poissonier.”

Emma felt something welling in her throat and trying not to let her voice quake. “Yes, ma’am?”

“We might have to hold off on that advertising for a few weeks,” Prissy said. “After all, we might need that time to promote Nina’s interview.”