

CHAPTER 3

Channel 4 TV

Juggling a handful of colorful dry-erase markers, Channel 4's assignment editor, Eric Reyna, stood in front of the whiteboard at the station's morning story meeting. Around the table, staff passed copies of the three pages of potential story ideas that Eric had compiled. Everyone sat on a rolling office chair—everyone except the new intern, Jenna Banks. She was balanced on a bright-blue exercise ball that she claimed helped strengthen her “core.”

Crime reporter Cassidy Shaw was already tired of the ball, and how Jenna bounced on it, and how her blonde cascade of hair rippled when she did, and how her tiny skirts rode up her slender thighs. But there was no point in complaining. She would just look old and bitter. It was a measure of the cruel reality of the news business that at thirty-three she might legitimately be considered old and bitter.

Eric ran his free hand through his thinning, gray hair as the reporters scanned the list. As the assignment editor, Eric was like the air traffic controller of the newsroom. He monitored scanners, managed news crews, and generated stories. And he ran the morning and afternoon story meetings that decided what aired at noon and what aired at night. He was a good ten years older than anyone in the room,

but since he was never on camera, Eric didn't need to worry about his potbelly or lack of charisma.

And while no one knew his face or asked for his autograph, Eric made it clear to Cassidy and the rest of the on-air staff that he saw himself as the true brains behind the pretty faces that spent time in front of the camera.

Led by Eric, the team quickly decided which stories to follow up on. A Portland couple accused of allowing underage drinking at their New Year's Eve party was due back in court. Some environmental activists had chained themselves to the fence at the headquarters of a company they claimed used cancer-causing chemicals to line their aluminum cans. And the station's political reporter, Jeff Caldwell, was chasing down a report of misconduct at city hall.

Once the day was planned out, Eric said, "Okay, people, during sweeps we'll be running some special programming."

February—as well as May, July, and November—was a sweeps month, when the Nielsen company measured the audience watching each television program. That information set the price advertisers paid for commercial time. The more people who watched the news, the more Channel 4 could charge for advertising for the next four months. During sweeps month, every news story had to be bigger, stronger, and just a little bit crazy.

Cassidy made her voice low and sonorous. "It killed Lucille Ball, Albert Einstein, and George C. Scott. And it's caused by something you probably have in your medicine cabinet. Is your life in danger? Tune in at six to find out more."

Everyone laughed. Everyone except Eric, who continued on as if she hadn't spoken. "Cassidy will have that special piece about domestic violence that will air right before Valentine's Day. I'm anticipating a lot of viewer reaction."

Everyone looked at Cassidy. She straightened up and smiled. Then Jenna had to spoil it all by patting her hand and saying, “You’re so brave,” in the exact same tone as she would use to compliment someone competing in the Special Olympics.

Eric continued, “In addition to Cassidy’s piece, we’ll be running a couple of investigative exposés. One will involve having someone pose as a streetwalker. We’ll set up a hotel room and surprise the johns for a little on-camera conversation.”

Cassidy pressed her lips together. No wonder Eric had singled out her piece. He was just trying to butter her up so she would be willing to go from serious to sleazy. It was bad enough that the station hadn’t made her coanchor, something they had hinted doing only a few weeks ago. Now they wanted her to put on some hot pants and a pair of vinyl boots and lean into creepy guys’ cars while they filmed her. Even if she would look pretty darn sexy, it was still demeaning. Well, she wasn’t that desperate. She would just tell them no. And then they would beg and plead, and maybe she would work some kind of deal. Get some extra vacation days, at a minimum.

“That’s so sleazy,” Cassidy said. “Do I really have to do it?”

Eric smirked as if he had been waiting for her. “No one’s asking you to, Cassidy. Jenna has already agreed to go undercover and do the reporting for that story. We want you to work on a different investigative piece. We’re going to send you to a spa in the Pearl District. We have reports that they’re using bad Botox.”

All Cassidy could manage was to sputter “Jenna!” Her disdain for the story evaporated. Jenna! Jenna! But she was the intern! She was only twenty-two years old! Okay, she was smart enough, but you had to pay your dues before you got airtime. Before you got a story served to you on a platter.

From the other end of the table, Jenna gave Cassidy an exaggerated

smile that showed every one of her shiny, white teeth. She coyly dipped her head toward one shrugging shoulder, miming an apology.

Right. Like Cassidy was dumb enough to think that Jenna hadn't known this was coming.

Halfway down the table, Cassidy heard Brad Buffet's soft snicker. Brad was the anchor, the once and future king. Cassidy had tried to depose him, or at least share power, and he had made it clear he would never forgive her betrayal.

Where was the fairness? A few weeks earlier, Cassidy had handed Channel 4 a story about a dead girl and a senator that pushed the ratings into the stratosphere overnight. Stations from all over the country had courted her. By now she could have been telling viewers the top story in San Francisco or Boston. Instead, she had stayed put in Portland, for the promise of coanchoring with Brad.

Sure, she got to fill the role a few times, but the promise turned out to be empty. The station manager instead told her, "We're bringing in a new gal to partner with Brad. Former Miss Connecticut. She tests very well."

"But you promised me, Jerry!" Cassidy had protested.

"We didn't promise. We said we would try it out." Jerry had sighed. "And we did give you a run in the anchor's chair, but the overnights didn't come back like we'd hoped. We gave it a shot, Cassidy, but I have to think of the good of the station. As a crime reporter, everyone loves you. But you just don't have the same impact in the anchor's chair."

And now, to add insult to injury, Jenna was getting the story that would showcase her gorgeous body. And Cassidy was stuck with the segment that would make viewers think of her as old.

When the meeting was over, Cassidy fled to the ladies' room. After making sure she was alone, she looked at herself in the mirror.

Despite the fact that she had finally started getting more sleep, in the unflattering fluorescent light her skin looked somehow sallow. Did her hair—which she spent several hundred dollars getting cut and colored every six weeks—appear more like straw? She drew her fingers down on either side of her lips. Could she be getting puppet lines? Next, she turned to the side and put her hand on her stomach. It was flat when she sucked it in—but not so much when she didn't.

It was at that moment that Jenna walked in, moving so fast that by the time Cassidy jerked her hand away from her belly, she could tell that Jenna had already seen it.

“Hey,” Cassidy said, giving her a false smile. She quickly moved to the door with her hand outstretched.

“Do you think I'm wrong to be taking the assignment?” Jenna asked. “Do you really think that it's degrading?”

Something inside Cassidy snapped. “It's bad enough that you're doing it, but don't pretend that it wasn't what you wanted all along!”

Jenna's eyes widened. “I didn't know anything about it until Eric asked me. I'm sorry if you think I'm not being some old-school feminist, but I personally think you can still be hot *and* be a journalist.”

“Of course you do,” Cassidy said. She had clearly underestimated Jenna, who had managed to call her ancient and ugly without actually using the words. Without saying any more, Cassidy pulled open the restroom door.

As she walked back down the hall, Eric looked up from the police scanner. The small, black box was used to monitor police, ambulance, fire, and public utilities transmissions.

“Hey, Cassidy, didn't you tell me once that you know Jim Fate?”

“Yeah. Casually.” She managed a shrug. “Why?”

“Because the scanner is saying there's been some kind of explosion

over at KNWS. It's not very clear. But it sounds like someone took him out."

Cassidy went absolutely still. *Jim? Dead?*

Then Brad spoke from behind her, making her jump. "I'm surprised nobody did something to that guy a long time ago. How many people has he ticked off over the years?"

Neither Eric nor Cassidy answered him. Instead Eric said, "Cassidy, I'm assigning this story to you, given your personal connection. I want you and Andy over at KNWS right now."

She managed to get the words out past her suddenly dry throat. "Sure. But tell Andy we'll take separate cars and I'll meet him there."

Eric's eyes narrowed. "I want you on this right away. I'm going to put it on a breaking news crawl. So don't dawdle, Cassidy. I want a finished package for the noon news. Maybe even sooner."

"And you'll get it. Don't worry."

Cassidy turned away. Her fingers were already in her purse, feeling for the key to Jim's condo.