

THE NEWSMAKERS

LIS WIEHL
WITH SEBASTIAN STUART



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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Summary: "What if it turns out that the newsmakers are actually making the news happen? Television reporter Erica Sparks has just landed her dream job at Global News Network. Beautiful, talented, and ambitious, Erica grew up dirt poor, worked her way through Yale, and is carrying a terrible secret. She moves to Manhattan to join GNN, leaving Jenny, her adored 7-year-old daughter, in the custody of her ex-husband. Erica's producer at the network, Greg Underwood, is handsome and compelling. Scarred by her divorce, Erica is wary of romance, but there's no denying the mutual attraction. On one of her first assignments, Erica witnesses a horrific Staten Island ferry crash. Then she lands a coveted interview with presumptive presidential nominee Kay Barrish. During the interview Barrish collapses. Erica valiantly tries to save her with CPR. The footage rivets the world--GNN's ratings soar and Erica is now a household name. But she's troubled. What a strange coincidence that both events should happen on her watch. It's almost as if they were engineered. Is that possible? Erica's relentless pursuit of the truth puts her life and that of her daughter in danger. Her investigation leads her into the heart of darkness--where the future of our democracy is at stake"-- Provided by publisher.

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For Jacob and Dani. I love you to the moon and back.

—Mom

PROLOGUE

IT'S A CLEAR, HARD WINTER day, and blinding sunlight pours into the conference room, glinting off metal surfaces, triggering migraines, and making the room uncomfortably hot, stifling. But in these tall midtown towers, you can't turn down the heat. You're trapped.

Nylan Hastings is not happy. But he won't let them know it—the dozen executives and producers who are sitting around the large table. He doesn't do sweat. But they're failing him. Failure is another thing he doesn't do. He does success, excessive historic success.

But Global News Network is floundering, bleeding well over a million dollars a week, searching for a voice and an identity in a hypercompetitive market where every smartphone spews out the latest headlines in what has become a never-ending, unrelenting, assaultive news cycle.

Nylan scans the assembled faces. They're smart, competent men and women—an eager bunch of pathetic fools, toiling away on the middle rung of life's ladder. He pays these people well and it's time for them to deliver.

A week ago he called them all together and said, "I need a star. Someone I can mold and nurture and transform into the face of GNN."

Today he says simply, "Let's see what you've found."

The mood is tense as they open laptops and pull up videos. An

associate producer he hired away from CNN goes first—she presses a key, and her candidate’s greatest-hits reel plays on the room’s large screen. He’s a man in his late twenties, as handsome as a movie star but a cipher; he reads the news well and knows the power of his dark-eyed smile, but beyond that he has all the presence of negative space. Besides, Nylan doesn’t really want a man.

Then another reel plays, and now Nylan watches a serious young woman who’s attractive and seems to know her stuff and is quick on her feet, but she has no real appeal; there’s something schoolmarmish, almost condescending, in her tone. People don’t want to be lectured when they watch the news.

The pretty young woman in the third reel is so sunny Nylan wishes he had his dark glasses handy.

Then there’s another reel and another and another, and the brittle baking sun sets the stage for the parade of mediocrity—do these people really think looks and diversity and intensity are a substitute for raw talent, for that intangible quality that makes someone leap off the screen and into the mind and heart? And maybe even the soul? Speaking of mediocrities, Nylan makes a note to thin this pack; he asked for a star and these mongrels drop half-dead ducks at his feet. He feels himself getting angry, that hard, bitter rage that festers deep inside him, dormant but ever ready to flare to monstrous life. He loves his rage. It’s his best friend and has been since he was a little boy. A little boy in a big house. But he reins it in, modulates it as he’s so diligently trained himself to do.

“You’re disappointing me here,” he says. “All I see is adequacy. I don’t like being disappointed and I don’t like adequate. In anyone.”

He stands up abruptly, paces back and forth. He looks at the people around the table—fear shadows their faces. How Nylan loves their fear. It’s a tonic, a balm, a power surge. They’re all expendable. Everyone is, really. Except the man at the very top.

“You’re disappointing me,” he says again, his voice growing louder. “And you’re boring me. You’re giving me beauty queens and prom

kings. No soul, no guts, nothing that anyone with a B+ in communications from a third-rate safety school and the money for a nose job couldn't have."

He looks around the table and sees it in their eyes, that their fear has a new companion—shame. It excites him to see them bow their heads and avoid eye contact.

"I don't want to see another tape unless you're so sure of it you're willing to put your own job on the line. Otherwise you're wasting my time." Naturally, there's silence from the lambs. He waits another beat, lets them squirm.

"I didn't think so. This meeting is over." As he's walking toward the door, a male voice speaks up.

"Actually, Nylan, I have someone I think you'll be interested in."

He turns. The speaker is Greg Underwood. Greg is one of the smart ones, has some fresh ideas and a vibrancy that seems to pulse off of him in waves. Everyone else at the table tries to disguise their relief that Greg's head is on the chopping block and not theirs.

"I hope you're right. For both our sakes."

"She's working at a small New Hampshire station right now, but I don't think she'll be there for long. She's got real talent."

"Let's see her," Nylan says.

The tension around the table ratchets up as Greg presses a key and a young woman who looks a little north of thirty comes on-screen. As they watch her report from the news desk and then from the site of a deadly house fire and then interview the parents of a missing child at their modest home, the room goes quiet. She's blonde, very attractive, polished but not too polished, and she gives the news urgency and import; she draws the viewer in, makes that intangible connection that transcends thought and reason. Nylan stands very still and watches, rapt. There's something intriguing in her gaze, an intelligent, exquisite vulnerability. She's hiding something and almost getting away with it. A pained darkness lurking behind that bright blonde beauty.

"I've seen enough," he announces.

Greg looks at him with a firm expression—he's no cowering fool. He stops the presentation and closes his computer. Nylan goes to the window and looks down at the line of traffic snaking slowly up Sixth Avenue—the sun bouncing off the cars momentarily dazes him and he turns away. It's so nice to be above it all. And now, for the first time in weeks, he feels he's starting to ascend even higher. He turns back to the table, to the eager, anxious, tragic faces.

Greg speaks before he has a chance to. "What do you think, Nylan?"

Nylan makes eye contact with Greg, letting the rest of the nonentities blur in his peripheral vision.

"I want her," he says, and walks out of the room.

CHAPTER 1

ERICA SPARKS STRIDES DOWN NINTH Avenue on her way to the Global News Network headquarters on Sixth Avenue. It's her first day on her new job as a field reporter, her first job in New York City. And, if things go well, the first step toward scaling the heights of television news. She feels a little shiver of pinch-me excitement race up her spine. *Stay cool, one step at a time, one foot in front of the other.* Getting here was hard, but she's made it. Now she just has to stay on the beam. It's five thirty a.m., her call time is six, and she's just three blocks from the studio. Erica believes just being "on time" means you're already five minutes late.

She reaches West Fifty-First Street and heads east, and catches a glimpse of herself in a storefront window. The tailored coral suit looks just right. Her hair is hidden under a cap and her face is plain. She's going to leave hair and makeup to the pros. She got up at four, showered, had a cup of Irish breakfast tea and a banana, did her half hour of Tae Kwon Do exercises, and then scoured the Web looking for potential stories. She's not going to sit back and wait for the world to come to her; it doesn't work that way. The inquisitive bird gets the worm. The corporate rental she leased for six months is convenient if soulless, but

that's all right for now. She doesn't want anything fancy, no chicken counting, budget-budget, focus-focus.

It's mid-April, a mild morning. Around her the city is kicking to life, trucks rumbling down the pavement, early commuters rushing past, empty taxis cruising for fares, maintenance men hosing down sidewalks, food vendors pushing carts from their garages to take up their stations on the midtown streets. The neighborhood is a mix of shiny, new condo buildings, all glass and amenity-filled, and tenements, home to long-term New Yorkers and immigrant families of all stripes and colors. Erica loves the city's gorgeous mosaic, the crazy cacophony, the sense of endless possibility and promise.

Suddenly she hears yelling, a woman's voice, slurred and hysterical. Up ahead there's some kind of commotion. A police car pulls up, the doors fly open, and two cops leap out. Erica's reporter instincts kick in and she picks up her pace, remembering her maxim: always rush *toward* the sound of gunfire. When she gets close, she sees the wailing woman sprawled on the sidewalk, skinny and strung out, pale-skinned with skanky hair. A Hispanic man stands nearby, clean and bright-eyed, holding a little girl.

"The bastard won't let me in my own apartment," the woman screams at the cops.

"She's been out all night doing drugs and I don't know what else. I don't want her around my daughter," the man explains, soft-spoken and sure.

"She's my daughter too, you filthy creep!" the woman wails. She jumps up and races to the man, grabbing for the girl. The little girl starts crying, "Mommy, Mommy."

One of the cops pulls the wasted woman off the man. She turns and slaps the cop, hard. Out come the cuffs.

Erica watches. The little girl is crying, crying so hard. Domestic disturbance. Unfit mother. Unfit mother.

Suddenly Erica feels that terrible, raw hurt come crashing down and hears another little girl crying. *Mommy, Mommy, wake up, wake up!*

It's twelve o'clock, Mommy, please wake up! I'll miss kindergarten, Mommy. And Erica, curled on her side on the living room floor, does wake up. Her head feels like concrete being chipped at by a jackhammer, her mouth tastes like sand and dirt and shame.

Erica blinks and she's back on the sidewalk. She knows what she needs to do. She ducks into the nearest doorway and takes five deep breaths. Then she says, in a strong, low voice: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I can't change . . . and the courage to change the things I can."

She steps out of the doorway. The woman is being loaded into the police car. The little girl is clinging to her daddy's neck. As Erica approaches, the father gives her a rueful smile. He's a good man. The little girl looks at her with wide eyes, and Erica has an urge to gather her up in her arms and shower her with kisses. She smiles at the girl and continues on her way.

And now here she is in front of GNN's headquarters in the Time and Life Building on Sixth Avenue—right in the heart of America's media capital, just blocks from NBC, FOX, and CBS. Nylan Hastings, the network's founder, is sending an unmistakable message: watch out, big boys, there's a new kid in town. And Erica is about to start a fresh chapter in her life. The incident on the street has only strengthened her resolve. She's come this far—and now she wants to go all the way to the top.

Erica Sparks walks into the soaring lobby, passes through security, walks over to the elevator, and presses the button that reads Up.

CHAPTER 2

AS THE ELEVATOR SHOOTS SKYWARD, Erica feels her excitement rising with equal velocity. There's a poster of Nylan Hastings—charismatic, idiosyncratic, enigmatic—on one wall of the elevator. Below his picture is his one-sentence mission statement for the network: *To connect and unite humanity—and write a bold new history for our planet.* Erica, like the rest of the world, is fascinated by Hastings. She studies his boyishly handsome, artfully airbrushed face, half smile, and inscrutable blue eyes for a moment, thinking: *You and me, buddy.*

The elevator doors open on the tenth floor. Erica gets off and heads down to her office. Greg Underwood, her executive producer and designated mentor, gave her an orientation tour last week, so she knows the lay of the land. She smiles modestly and says a warm hello to the colleagues she passes. Her greetings are returned with quick nods and an occasional tight smile. The vibe is serious, heads-down, we're-all-here-to-work. But do things feel just a little *too* reserved—almost coiled, protective, suspicious? As if everyone is looking out for numero uno. It's such a contrast with the casual, freewheeling New England news stations she's used to. *Welcome to the big time, kiddo.* Erica feels ready. She's going to show them all what she's made of.

Her office is small with a large desk, a wall of shelving, and a spectacular view of the vents and pipes on the roof of the building next door. Fine for now—she remembers the Hollywood axiom: small office, big movie. Erica puts down her carryall, sits at her desk, and turns on the computer.

She reaches into her bag and takes out a well-worn deck of playing cards and tucks them into the top drawer, in easy reach. Nothing relaxes her like a few hands of old-fashioned, played-with-real-cards solitaire. No matter how stressed she is, if she can find the time and space for a few rounds, her blood pressure drops. There's something about the tactile feel of the cards and the finite parameters of the game that make her feel in control. And she never ever cheats.

Next Erica unloads her glittery armada of clip-on earrings. Back when every girl was getting her ears pierced, Erica declined. She suffered enough pain at home not to voluntarily inflict more. She spreads the costume jewelry—which she buys at flea markets and on eBay—on a side table. A neatnik she isn't. Then out come two framed pictures of Jenny, her smart, brave, funny eight-year-old. Jenny. Who paid such a terrible price for Erica's mistakes.



"We're going to make you a star," Greg Underwood told Erica at her first interview.

We'll see, she answered to herself. Global News Network is only a year and a half old, still finding its footing in the cable news network galaxy. But it's well capitalized and aggressive, with an uncanny knack for breaking stories before its rivals. Ratings are going up. Erica could be in on the ground floor of something big. She could become a star. She really could. And then . . . and then she could build a new life for herself and Jenny, and give her daughter all the advantages she never had. Which is what she wants more than anything in the world.

Erica turns to her computer screen and starts to scour the Web for

possible stories. As a field reporter, she's near the bottom of the food chain, and she expects Greg to appear at any minute with her first assignment. But she's not about to sit around waiting. She knows from experience that there are stories out there just waiting to be told. She races through the major news sites, then skips over to the celebrity gossip sites. Something catches her eye: Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge, is arriving in New York for a short visit timed to coincide with the opening of a Turner exhibition at the Frick Museum. Erica feels her blood race—the fastest route to fame is through the famous. If she can snare an interview with the duchess, it will be a major coup. Fluff? Maybe. A smart move? Definitely.

Erica picks up her phone and calls the Smart Room, the network's research nerve center, staffed 24/7 by lawyers, accountants, scientists, and researchers. Between them they can answer just about any question within minutes.

"This is Judith Wexler."

"Judith, hi. It's Erica Sparks, newly hired field reporter."

"You're not wasting any time. What can we do for you?"

"I need any information you can find on the Duchess of Cambridge's visit to the city."

"We're on it."

Erica hangs up just as Greg Underwood appears in the doorway. He's in his early forties—a decade older than Erica—tall and off-kilter handsome, with green eyes, skin tawny from years of sun, and a shock of black hair that looks like it rarely connects with a comb. There's something haunted in his eyes, as if he's battle scarred, but at the same time an ironic smile plays at the corners of his mouth. There's a raw physicality about him, and he looks lean and fit in jeans and a gray work shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He smiles at Erica, and when he does, a little spark comes into his eyes.

"Good morning, Erica. And welcome."

"I'm happy to be here."

"I've got a story for you. E. coli was discovered in one of the city's

reservoirs up in Putnam County, about an hour north of town. The city is expected to order a boil alert for parts of Upper Manhattan and the Bronx. I want you to go up there and cover it. Frame it as a story with national implications—how do we protect our water supplies?”

Erica does the math: E. coli or the duchess? No-brainer. “That sounds like an interesting and important story. But may I suggest something else?”

“I love suggestions.”

“The Duchess of Cambridge is coming to town and I’ve been granted a short interview.”

“You’ve been on the job for half an hour and you’ve landed an interview with the future Queen of England?”

“A plucky reporter gathers no moss.”

“Where is this happening?”

“I’m just waiting for confirmation of that.” Her phone rings.

“Erica, it’s Judith. The duchess is arriving this morning. Lunch today under a tent at Battery Park, hosted by the Anglo-American Alliance. She’s touring the Turner exhibition in the afternoon, and then there’s a formal dinner dance at the Frick. Press contact is Reginald Beckwith.”

Erica jots down Beckwith’s number. Then she hangs up and tells Greg, “Battery Park, this afternoon. What do you think?”

Greg rubs his jaw and whistles in appreciation. “Run with it. I’ll find somebody else to send up to the reservoir.”

“Thank you. I want to do a little bit of research on Turner and on Battery Park, think about the strongest visuals, and figure out the best way to frame the story. I think I’ll go with how the duchess has revived the royal brand. Of course I won’t call her a brand to her face.”

“She’s right up there with Coke and Disney,” Greg says with that ironic smile. “When you’ve nailed things down, come see me. I’ll get your pod together.”

When he’s gone, Erica googles Kate Middleton as she dials Beckwith. She explains to him that, coincidentally, she’s been working

on a piece about the duchess and how she's become the shining star of the Royal Family. Erica lays it on thick—but not too thick—throwing in a few facts about the duchess's background and interests (as she reads them off the screen). Could she please get five minutes of face time this afternoon at Battery Park?

Beckwith demurs, in a crisp British accent: the duchess is already doing CNN and NBC, and she doesn't like to spread herself thin. "Can't you use some pool footage?"

Erica adds a note of urgency to her voice. "Mr. Beckwith, Global News Network is the most exciting thing to happen to news in thirty years. Our founder, Nylan Hastings, has an exciting vision of a synergistic network that seamlessly spans broadcast and social media. The duchess will receive a depth of positive coverage that the other networks simply can't deliver." There's a pause on the line. Erica softens her voice, warm and sincere. "I would deeply appreciate anything you can do for me."

There's another pause before Beckwith sighs with a mixture of exasperation and appreciation. "I can never resist the charms of American reporters. The duchess will give you five minutes. Be at the luncheon tent at noon."

"Many thanks, sir. Cool Britannia."

Beckwith laughs. "Oh, you are good."

Erica hangs up, stands up, crosses her office, and closes the door. Then she does a little jig.

CHAPTER 3

CARRYING HER NOTES, ERICA HEADS down the hall to hair and makeup. She already feels supported by Greg. What a pro he is. And what a fascinating man—where does that war-weary, knowing edge come from? And he's strikingly attractive. She quickly pushes that thought away. Romance is simply not on her radar. This first year (at least) is all about work. And the vodka-soaked wounds of her failed marriage are still healing.

Not that she's counting, but she's been sober for one year, eleven months, and eleven days. She was working as the nighttime coanchor on a Boston station and probably drinking a little too much when she discovered Dirk's affair. He said he wanted a divorce—and everything just spun out of control. She went from two glasses of wine a night to three cocktails to four cocktails to an all-vodka diet. Dirk moved out and took Jenny with him. Erica spent a month crashing around her empty house, drinking, cursing the world, and crying for her daughter. Then the station fired her for on-air intoxication. That pushed her right to the bottom and she did the unimaginable—and ended up in the hospital, under arrest. The judge gave her a choice of rehab or