

## Chapter Nine, Part One

### “Hypercompression”

*Special thanks to Daniel Ochoa Lopez for providing Spanish-language dialogue.*

**Ten Years Earlier**  
**Tuesday, November 7, 2028**  
**9:23 A.M.**

Madison sat down at her desk and massaged her head. No luck. It was still pounding from the hangover.

*That is the last time I say yes to that new makeup girl when she asks me to “go out,” she thought.*

Madison fished out a bottle of Advil gummies out of her purse and gulped down two of the annoyingly smiley bears. *The new makeup girl*, she scolded herself. She’d gone partying with someone and now she couldn’t even remember their name. It was an O something. Okie? Orkney?.

Toby would have ripped Madison a new one if she’d seen this. Probably something like, “Girl, how many times have I told you that kind of ‘friend’ was trouble.”

Then again, Toby knew all about trouble, otherwise the woman would be Editor-in-Chief today and Prissy would still be an afterthought.

Madison booted up her computer and worked her way through the byzantine security protocol that Prissy had installed.

Username: RylanderM

Password: TSwift1989!

Division...

She clicked the dropdown box and let her cursor hover over “Political” for a second before selecting “News” and punching the mouse so hard that the desk shook.

Honestly, she should be thankful. Now that she wasn't in Political, she was getting way more airtime. Prissy was practically *gushing* over her performance - and she was getting a *ton* of attention from advertising, makeup, and apparel.

There were Madison-centric commercial spots, Madison billboards, Madison's face on the sides of city busses. Plus, she was *good* at this gig. She was already building a reputation for mastering the details of the court cases she'd covered, and Prissy was floating the idea of calling her "America's ace legal correspondent."

The audience loved troubled celebrities almost as much as they loved serial killers, and Madison got to do both. Still, she was never getting anywhere near that chair at the White House press room again, and that didn't feel like a promotion.

The Advil started to kick in as she heard a knock on the glass door of her office.

"Howdy stranger," came Dan's voice.

"Hey!" Madison said with as much chippiness as she could, spinning her chair to face him. "I thought you weren't back until noon!"

"The Marines yanked me and Flannery out a few hours early. Apparently 'stabilized' means something different than 'safe' in Syria."

"Well, I'm just glad you're home." Normally, she would have jumped on him the minute he showed up, but her head was still swimming. "One of these days we need to just run off to a cabin somewhere and have a week where nobody's shooting at either of us."

"I'm in," Dan laughed. "Somebody shooting at you lately?"

"Metaphorically," Madison said, "This Selena Gomez custody battle feels like a weapon of mass infuriation."

"Or mass boredom." Dan dropped his voice, "Honestly, you really should be looking at other networks if she doesn't stop dumping this crap on you. I can put in a good word anywhere."

"I know, I know," Madison replied, "I'm thinking about it - but honestly, my career is going gangbusters, and it doesn't suck as bad as I thought it would."

“But it still sucks,” Dan retorted. “Speaking of which, are you okay? You look a little out of it.”

Madison leaned back in her chair. “This is why you don’t leave me all alone while you gallivant off to Syria. I let the new makeup girl talk me into going out for margaritas school night – and she wanted shots after.”

Madison saw Dan’s eyebrow’s raise. “Well, take care of yourself. Old Man Tequila is a cruel master.”

Of course, what he meant was, *“I thought you were better than that.”*

She sighed. “Yup, not doing that again. Oh, and for what it’s worth my brother asked if you like football. He wants to know whether to put it on for Thanksgiving. Apparently, you’re the biggest celebrity that’s ever visited his part of Delaware.”

Dan’s face dropped suddenly. “Look, Maddy, I wanted to talk to you about that. I got wind on the way back that they’re thinking about launching the final push against Boko Haram the day after Thanksgiving. It sucks, but you know if that happens, the Army is already reaching out about sending me as an embed.”

Madison felt a rush of blood to her head – which was even worse on account of the hangover. “Can’t you go in a little late? You don’t have a boss anymore, Mr. Anti-Prissy Contract.”

“My boss is the RXN corporate board,” he said, “and they like the strategy of always being the first guy in. The Army goes when they go, and the brass wants me to take Flannery the second the offensive starts.”

Madison rolled her eyes. “Right, because it’s just not a war story without the freaking Dan and Flan show.”

“It’s my job,” Dan fired back, “I want to be at Thanksgiving as bad as you, but you know I can’t miss something like this.”

“Why not?” Madison shot back, “It’s my family. My parents are flying out from Ohio, they’re already freaked out about your age, and if you flake, *that’s* a disaster! But heaven forbid, I get in the way of yet another war-zone adventure with lovely and talented S. Flannery MacClennan.”

“Flannery? What?” Dan shook his head. “Maddy – she’s going because she’s an expert on violent extremism. We book her for these stories because she’s *the best*. That’s it. I’m doing everything I can to get to Thanksgiving, I just wanted to let you know there was a chance that this goes out of my hands.”

“Nothing is out of your hands, Dan!” Madison blurted. “You have total independence. Say no to someone other than me for once!”

“Sorry to interrupt, Dan,” came Prissy’s voice from the office door, “but can I borrow my reporter for a minute? I need Maddy in my office.”

“Sure, Priss,” Madison jumped up from her desk with the biggest fake smile she could muster. For once, she was grateful to see Prissy of all people. “Just make it work,” she told Dan on the way out.

Prissy led her upstairs into what Madison still thought of as Jim Brinkman’s office.

“Have a seat, Maddy.” Prissy said, pointing Madison to one of her uncomfortable modernist chairs. “Can I get you anything? Water? Orange Juice?”

Madison held up a hand, “No, thanks.”

Prissy seated herself and made a futile attempt at small talk. “Sorry to interrupt...whatever that was. Men, right?”

Prissy knew as much about men as she knew about quantum physics, judging by her smoldering crater of a love life, but Madison decided to let it slide.

“Anyway,” Prissy continued, “I called you in here to talk about the Gomez story. You’re doing great digging dirt, and we want you out in L.A. for the verdict on Wednesday - with a fly-out on Monday. Think you can do that?”

“Sure, why not.” Madison shrugged her shoulders. Dan did this sort of thing often enough. Why not her.

“Good,” Prissy smiled. “I think you’ve found your wheelhouse, and we want to promote the hell out of it. Obviously, we’ll get you the lead on the evening news, but I want the morning show too, maybe some YouTube content if we can afford the bandwidth.”

*Right, Madison thought, I'm awesome as long as I stay away from your precious political beat.*

“You got it, Priss,” Madison said, “Just tell me what flight I’m on and I’ll be there.”

“Fantastic,” Prissy started madly typing notes into her computer – but then she stopped and cleared her throat. “That’s actually not the only reason I called you in.” she said – with what sounded like sheepishness. “Nothing bad, trust me, just...I normally don’t look at this sort of data, but we’ve been doing some focus groups with Marketing. It turns out you’re...how should I say this... TV *is* a visual medium, right? And it turns out that you’re our most popular personality with white men between twenty-five and fifty – if you get my drift. We think we can capitalize on that.”

The words ripped through Madison’s brain like a shockwave. Really? The entire idea was absurd. “You can’t *possibly* be serious,” she said, almost as a reflex.

“Scouts honor,” Prissy held up three fingers. “Trust me, I was surprised at some of the data we collect, too. Apparently, people think I’m too stern and need to cut my hair. You, apparently, are the smart-but-hot girl that everyone wants to date.”

This couldn’t be real.

Madison was a reporter-reporter, not an anchor-babe. Hell, she wore slacks on air for crying out loud. How the hell was she supposed to respond to being told she was *that* kind of asset.

“If you say so,” she tried to re-orient. “I’d prefer to stay focused on my work.”

Priscilla gave one of her trademark tight smiles. “Which is why we hired you. I’m just saying that we have some opportunities to follow the data. Some wardrobe shifts, styling, etc. Get more eyes on the programming.”

*More eyes?* Madison wasn’t sure she wanted more eyes. She gulped and reached for something to say, but nothing came out. Prissy, meanwhile, kept talking.

“And, to talk brass tacks, I had lunch with Kim Barnes from *CableNet.com* yesterday. She said there’s about a 75% chance that you’re going to be one of their five nominees for ‘Sexiest Name in News’ this year – whether I say anything about it or not.”

Madison felt her eyebrows shoot up. “Really?”

“Really,” Prissy said matter-of-factly, “You’d be the first WWN reporter on the list since...” Her voice trailed off.

Madison steadied herself in her chair and took a breath. “Since Toby.”

The words hung in the air like the echo of a gunshot. Nobody had said that name in this building in two years, and the actual vocalization seemed to throw Prissy off guard.

“Since what happened,” Prissy said, steadying herself, “Since then, we’ve not actively tried to get anyone on the list, but we do know *how* to get someone on the list – if you’re interested, that is.”

Madison took a deep breath and pushed back her chair. “Right. That’s...nice...but I do serious work. I don’t want to undermine that.”

“Of course not.” Prissy said with a dismissive wave, “You’re one of the best we’ve got. Just do me a favor and think about it, okay? I don’t want to leave value on the table.”

Madison noticed that Prissy’s hand had dropped to the stack of paper files on her desk, caressing the top folder. It was labelled, “RYLANDER, MADISON.”

It felt a bit creepy knowing it was full of reports on her supposed sex appeal.

Granted, it also felt...kind of good. And it wasn’t like she didn’t love a nice dress.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

After a quick handshake, Madison wanted nothing more than to be alone in her office, but not before sneaking a look at her reflection in the glass doors of Priscilla’s suite. Sexiest Name in News? Her?

Honestly, thinking about it felt gross – and empowering? Or both?

She made her way down the stairs, emerging on the first floor right as the new makeup artist sauntered in. Oakley, that was her name – and somehow she looked rested and ready for the day. After that much tequila?

“Hey, Mad-woman!” Oakley said, “Lookin’ hot today! Honey, where did you get that blouse. I mean, if I had your figure....Oh well. Anyway – girls night on Friday, you should come!”

Madison forced a smile, “That might be fun.”

It did not sound fun at all, actually – not right now.

“Cool, text me,” Oakley said as she walked off.

Madison rolled her eyes and headed back to her desk – and reality.

Reality presented in the form of Ally Talamantez and her ever-present turquoise jewelry, sprawled in Madison’s swivel-chair and making herself at home as per usual.

“*Otra vez, Maddy,*” she blurted, “She’s doing the *chingaderas* again with the manipulation and the double-talk. Like, *con ella nunca se puede. Quiero hasta matarla!*”

“Calm down,” Madison set her purse on the desk with a thud. “I’m assume this is about Prissy?”

The entire idea of having a protégé still scared the crap out of Madison. It was disturbing how fast Ally was becoming mini-Maddy, right down to the trendy circuit-board blouses and the compulsive need to needle authority. Was that really the best template for a career?

“Of course, it’s Prissy!” Ally fumed, “It’s the hypercompression story again. All she wants are stories about how hypercomp could result in catastrophic data loss! This tech could fricking *end* the data crisis! Make files super-small, they go through cables easier. No more rationing, everyone’s crazy internet bill goes down! And we’re supposed to get people scared of it?”

Madison sat down on the desk and looked Ally in the eyes.

“Ally, Prissy’s intense. I told you that your first day here, and you’re on the tech beat, which is big right now. Just keep the story together and you’ll be fine.”

Ally sat up in her chair, eyes wide. “That’s the point, Madison, I can’t! She keeps asking me to write bullcrap that’s the exact opposite of the story. I’m not going to lie on camera!”

That was the one big difference between the two of them. Ally had the type of temper that made her scream things that Madison merely *thought*.

“Look,” Madison said, “I’ve seen your stuff, and they haven’t perfected the tech yet. She’s not asking you to say anything untrue, just to highlight certain facts.”

“Not you too,” Ally huffed. “Have you seen Dan’s suite? They just bought five cases of *physical hard drives* to store video because we can’t afford to pipe the archives to the data center. Do you know how many rural households cancelled internet service last month? The high-speed internet is *dying*, Maddy! And you want me to help torpedo the tech that could get it back online?”

Madison let out a long breath. “I know, I winced hearing myself say it.” She took a second to collect herself and closed her eyes. “I used to say take this type of thing direct to Brinkman – but he’s gone.” She bit her lip, trying to think of something – anything – to calm Ally down. She only found one thing, and she liked the sound of it even less than the first solution.

“If you really think it’s important, get your facts together and I’ll pitch it to Dan. His contract lets him use WVN reporters without oversight from Prissy, but you’d be playing with fire. She could still crack down on you.”

Ally’s eyes nearly bugged out. “Seriously? You’d do that.”

“I’m your *friend*,” Madison said. “If anything matters to you that much then yes, okay, I’ll help you. Just know that there could be serious consequences. I went to war with Prissy when she was my section editor. You’re going after her as Editor-in-Chief.”

This was the point where a younger Madison would have given the whole idea a hard second thought. Ally, on the other hand, didn’t even blink. “Fine. Let’s do it.”

Madison felt the words pulse through her like a literal shockwave. She was tempted to attempt another round of are-you-sures, but she knew Ally Talamantez. The girl had no back-down once she got on an idea.

“All right, then,” Madison exhaled, “I don’t know if even I can get Dan’s attention as long as this Boko Haram thing is going on, but I can probably get him when he gets back, which is probably going to be around the New Year. Until then, I’d say string Prissy along, file stories on the *legit* risks of hypercomp for a few weeks, and research the snot out of the *real* story. Can you hold it together that long?”



Ally gave a hard eye-roll. “For a few weeks? Yes.”

“And you’re absolutely *sure* that you’re willing to risk your career for this?” Madison said in a last attempt at caution, “Because that’s what you’re doing.”

Ally stopped fidgeting, closed her eyes, and nodded. At least she was taking it seriously, but that almost made it scarier when she opened her eyes. “If it comes to that, yes. I’ll go back to local news if it means I can get this story out the right way, in detail. It could help a lot of people.”

“Okay then. Hold tight and I’ll see if we can get a strategy together.” Madison cracked a small smile. “Now get out of my office.”

“Fine.” Ally dragged herself to her feet. “I’ll go write some watered-down anti-hypercomp garbage to feed Prissy.” She got as far as the office door before turning back. “What is her thing with this story anyway? Nothing about it is political.”

Madison slouched into her chair. “Hell, if I know. This one is pointless even by Prissy standards.”

“Prissy doesn’t do pointless,” Ally said with a shocking firmness. “Something about hypercompression is in her way, and she wants it dead. That’s why I think I have to do this.”

“Or she’s just crazy,” Madison shrugged.

Ally just shook her head and walked off, leaving Madison staring at her computer. She tried to pull up her Selena Gomez story, but there was no way she could focus on that between Dan, Prissy, Ally and whatever else was going on. Nothing was in her control anymore. There was no logical next step.

Or maybe there was. Nobody with any power around here played by the normal rules of journalism, so why should she?

She pulled up *CableNet.com* and found last year’s *Sexiest Names in News* feature.