

Chapter Thirteen, Part Three
“Shame If Anything Should Happen”

“THE KIM FILE”
CABLENET.COM
3/28/2038

Morning-Girl Poissonier Not So Sunny in Maiden “Leg Chair”

Appearance

By Paige Kim

Ramping up to her debut as co-host of WWN’s FirstLight Weekend, longtime reporter Emma Poissonier expanded her personal brand by making her debut in WWN Nightcap’s infamous “Greg Gutfeld Memorial Leg Chair.” After the red-hot NightCap debut of overnight-sensation Nina Constantinos, I found myself wondering why Poissonier – a four-year WWN veteran – had not previously subjected herself to WWN’s mortifying-yet-compelling rite of passage.

Now I know.

Throughout the program, Poissonier seemed repeatedly caught off guard by the rat-a-tat pace and repeated innuendos from Mike Velasco and his all-male panel. At one point, she was caught totally speechless when panelist Andy Samberg noted that the “leg chair was living up to its name,” and she spent half the program distractingly tugging at her red cocktail dress.

Pulling it down won’t make it longer, honey.

This column has filled hard drives critiquing the misogynist cringe-fest that is NightCap, but no rational person would say that the guests aren’t aware of the game. Hell, I have to be paid to hate-watch the program, and even I get it. If you don’t like self-objectification, don’t go on. Poissonier may be WWN’s queen of cute, but if she wants to break out of that brand, she needs to get more comfortable in her own skin.

Or maybe just avoid the whole circus in the future. I would.

Friday, March 19, 2038
Twelve Days Until Interview
9:00 A.M.

Emma resisted the urge to blurt obscenities and instead resorted to her mother's trademark use of non-sequiturs, in this case, "Tabasco Sauce!"

Who the hell did Paige Kim think she was?

She slammed her laptop shut. "Not comfortable in my own skin...you clearly never met me in high school."

Hell, in high school, "Emma-Jo" had never met a crop top she didn't like. She remembered being that version of herself - she'd *liked* being that version of herself. She was still the same girl.

Right?

Pictures of that girl were plastered all over the office. The cheerleading was the one part of her past worth remembering, even if it still stung that she never made captain.

That always seemed to be the rub. She'd always been *one* of the best, but never *the* best. Being *vice*-captain of the high-school cheer squad meant a scholarship to UL-Lafayette when Libby Breaux got to go to LSU. The *vice*-Captain of ULL's squad didn't get the quarterback. No, she'd landed the star linebacker who liked to hit things.

She'd bounced back from all that, spent four damn years positioning herself as WWN's rising star – and what did she get? Second place behind Nina damn-fool Constantinos.

Nina was even cheer-squad material. If anything, she was more like the annoying yearbook photographer.

Emma had hung a full-body mirror on the side wall of the office; and she took a good, long look. High-waisted white khakis. Yet another wide-lapelled men's disco shirt. Pretty. Professional. Attractive, but not intimidating.

Maybe that was the problem.

Maybe it was time to remind everyone here just who they were messing with.

3:10 P.M.

Sinéad straightened her desk ornaments - again.

Priscilla had already commented that she'd been fidgety all morning, and Sinéad didn't want that to happen again. The entire point of this job was to be the ice-woman, the gatekeeper, the bad cop to Priscilla's slightly-less-bad cop.

The whole thing hinged on Sinéad convincing the reporting staff that she was a borderline sociopath - and she really did not want to risk that image by crying in the office.

Her phone vibrated, and she almost jumped. The screen said, "PRIVATE NUMBER."

It wasn't Skyler's number but maybe she had a second line. Sinéad swiped the "answer" button.

"Hello?"

"It's Patzen. Let's get this over with."

Sinéad inhaled sharply. This was the one thing that scared her *more* than a call from Skyler. "How did you get my personal cell?"

“Stop asking stupid questions,” Patzen growled, “My connections told me who you’re looking for – and spying on your own people’s siblings is low even for you.”

Patzen always said freaky stuff like that, which is why she hated calling him. She tried to respond as evenly as she could. “So, you know where Diana Constantinos is then?”

“Of course, I know.” Patzen’s voice crackled. “And don’t say that out loud.”

“Excellent.” Sinéad said, trying to sound unperturbed, “When can we expect the courier?”

She could hear Patzen breathing, like he was holding the phone right next to his mouth. “Oh, no. Not this one. You get me an in-person meeting with your boss ASAP. And by ASAP I mean tomorrow night, 7:45 P.M., at Hard Times Chili in Clarendon. Got it?”

Sinéad felt her pulse quickening but feigned an exasperated sigh. “You know I can’t do that. You interact with us via courier and through me.”

“That wasn’t a request,” Patzen fired back. “I’m not handing this off to some incompetent noob, which includes you - *kid*. I can hear you shaking.”

The normal calm monotone was almost out of reach, but Sinéad tried anyway.

“I’ve already discussed this matter with Priscilla. You go through me. Period.”

“I don’t give two craps what she told you.”

Sinéad cut him off, “Well then I’m sure the world would love to know what really happened to that Nigerian village back in ‘26. We’ve always thought it would make a great one-hour special.”

The line went silent.

Sinéad was never sure which part of this job sickened her more – constantly holding Patzen’s demons over his head, or the fact that Priscilla had ever started protecting him in the in the first place.

Patzen let ought another growly sigh. “You win. But no couriers. *You* meet me tomorrow - same place.”

“Look,” Sinéad began, but Patzen would have none of it.

“Like I said. Not a request.”

This time the line went totally dead.

Sinéad stared at the phone for a second before setting it back down on the desk and gingerly shoving it away from herself, as if that would do anything.

She grabbed a Post-It note and scribbled the details before she forgot them.

Hard Times Chili, Clarendon Metro Stop, 7:45 P.M.

Priscilla was not going to like this.

Sinéad shoved the note in the breast pocket of her jacket and put the phone back in place on the desk. She needed to be steady when Madison Rylander arrived here for her 3:15 with Priscilla. For some reason, Priscilla seemed on edge about that meeting, and Sinéad needed to be at the top of her game.

She fixed her eyes on the suite’s doorway, prepping the glare for whatever came in.

And did something ever come in.

If Sinéad hadn’t seen so many old files, she might not have recognized the presence that arrived. The normal white minidress had been traded for a tight pair of gray slacks and a black blouse. More jarring, the platinum hair had gone deep, dark red.

It was Madison Rylander all right, but it was Madison Rylander from ten years ago.

Madison laughed when she saw the look on Sinéad's face. "Shut your mouth. You've never seen a dye-job before?"

So, this was what withdrawals felt like. Madison had been focusing on work all morning to keep her mind off it, but sitting here in Prissy's waiting room, it felt like there was a gremlin taking a jackhammer to the inside of her skull. That, and it took everything she had to contain the shakes in front of Sinéad.

She'd already pumped enough Advil-gums for a small horse, and she'd been chain-chewing Nicorette gum. Quitting drinking and smoking at the same time was probably one of the stupidest moves in the history of civilization, but the upside was that she could have as much gum as she wanted indoors.

Still, she was feeling like herself for the first time in a very long time, which was probably why she'd been summoned up here.

The old hair alone was probably enough to give Prissy nightmares.

"You can go in now." Sinéad said after sixty seconds that seemed like an hour. Madison walked to the office door and focused hard on turning the knob without any evidence of how she felt.

Prissy, as always, did not get out of her chair to greet her, and Madison slid into a seat.

"You wanted to see me?" Madison asked the figure seated behind the glass desk.

Prissy looked her up and down, making a silent appraisal.

"So, the little birdies were right about the new look. You seem a bit shaky. Everything all right?"

“I’m fine,” Madison said, “just a little-”

“I was being facetious,” Prissy interjected. “I know what detox jitters look like. Anyway, I noticed you put in a request to cover the Eberhardt trial in North Dakota, the Congresswoman’s son.”

“I did,” Madison responded dryly, “It’s a big trial with a follow-the-money angle, and I’m your legal correspondent.”

That was true, it was a court case, but she’d also filed the request precisely *because* it would annoy Prissy.

“What you are,” Priscilla retorted, “Is my ringer for big murder cases and celebrities. This is a political case.”

Madison sighed like she was a fed-up 25-year-old. “It’s a small-town money-laundering case. They stole canola subsidies and laundered the cash out of an artisanal goat dairy to funnel it into a campaign account. It’s juicy, it’s scandalous, and on top of that it’s hilarious. I want it. Besides, I’ve never been to North Dakota.”

“You’re not missing anything,” Prissy still hadn’t looked away from her screen. “Also, I don’t care. It’s political and you know our deal.”

Madison was coming dangerously close to losing her temper. “Priss, Melinda Eberhardt is exactly the type of conservative radical that you love seeing locked up.”

“Not by you.” Prissy picked her glasses up off the table, put them on, and finally turned to Madison.

“Let me be clear, Ms. Rylander. Your decision to amputate your conscience via alcohol is not a method that I would approve of, but I could live with it if it kept you productive and off stories where your bad judgement could cause real damage to people. As happy as I am to see you dabbling in sobriety, don’t assume that means you can re-engage your fanaticism.”

Madison shook her head in disbelief. “Seriously. You won’t even let me do goats in North Dakota because it’s political? Do you even hear yourself?”

Prissy didn’t respond, instead sliding a file folder across the desk. The label read:

RYLANDER, MADISON

Prissy removed her finger from the folder. “I’m not having this debate with you. Have a look.”

Madison opened the folder, finding it full of photos her social life over the last decade. There were a few of her younger self stumbling out of bars, looking vacant-eyed. A more recent one showed her vomiting into a fountain in Los Angeles. It just kept going, a greatest hits of Madison Rylander’s drunken exploits – half of which she didn’t even remember and some of which were R-rated.

“I’m sure the tabloids will love those,” Prissy said. “Or maybe I should go straight to CNN. You are quite the high-functioning alcoholic, but if it came out just how drunk you’ve been over the last few years – well – that could be a career hit. I’m thinking at least a few months in rehab, followed by – well, nothing really. You are getting a bit old for the whole news-babe schtick, and this should be enough to shatter any journalistic credibility you have left. I don’t know how we could keep you on WWN and preserve our integrity after something like that.”

Madison stared for a few seconds. She’d had more than her share of heated arguments with Prissy. She’d been demeaned, insulted, and repeatedly blamed for every societal ill that Prissy thought Pamela Sparks could have fixed if Madison hadn’t put her in prison. Still, she never thought that even Prissy Davis would stoop to this kind of extortion.

Then she remembered. She *had* seen that file before. More than once. It had been on the desk in a couple of big meetings over the years, whenever Prissy had some big ask. And how many young reporters had disappeared without a trace when they ran afoul of Prissy?

Madison dropped the folder and tried not to retch. She wasn’t sure whether to be more disgusted at herself for what was in the photos, or for the fact that she’d been compliant enough to keep the folder hidden so long. How had...

Ally.

The realization hit Madison like a truck.

Ally had been carrying a folder the night she left – she'd beaten Madison over the head with it.

Madison's started shivering, and it wasn't just the withdrawals.

Prissy's voice sliced through the silence. "So, can I assume that you've suddenly lost interest in artisanal goat laundering?"

Madison felt herself starting to hyperventilate. Prissy's question barely registered, and the gears in her brain started spinning out of control.

"You can't do that," she blurted. "This is insane."

"You are far from the first person to tell me that." Prissy leaned over the desk and rested her chin on her two fists, clearly savoring the moment. "Yet, I'm the one sitting behind this desk and you're the one staring into oblivion. So, Maddy," she held up a photo of half-dressed Madison flipping off a camera, "are we finally going to let the world see the real you?"

Madison grabbed the photo out of Prissy's hand and slammed the folder shut. "You've made your point." She pushed out her chair and stormed toward the door.

"That's not an answer," Prissy prodded. "Are you off the goat story?"

Madison didn't bother looking back as she left the office. "Yes, ma'am."

She practically ran down the stairs to the first floor, emotions catching up as she went. By the time she reached the bottom, she was sobbing so hard that she had to lean against the wall to steady herself.

She dried the tears, smearing mascara in the process, then opened the stairwell door and sprinted to her office. She'd ordered a new leather chair from building

services, and she was very much looking forward to sinking into it - but when she got to her space, something else had been delivered. A white gift box, a little over a foot high, tied with purple ribbon.

Madison approached it with confusion, unsure who exactly would be sending her something. It wasn't like she had any recent flings to worry about.

She undid the bow and carefully lifted the lid, revealing a dark green bottle. She lifted it out to reveal the label.

Arbeg Flood
2025 Committee Release.

It was a \$600 bottle of Scotch from her favorite distillery. The best one they'd made. She'd been trying to get a hold of that release for years.

Madison set it down as if it were on fire, but noticed that there was a note card in the box. She picked it up.

Nobody really expects you to stay on the wagon, might as well fall off in style.

-P

That was when it all clicked. Drying out and changing clothes wouldn't be enough to get her life back. Not while that file was in play.

In all honesty, Prissy was right. Who was she kidding, playing dress-up like this?

Almost unconsciously, she peeled the foil off the bottle's cork, then found the corkscrew she kept in her desk. She sniffed the bottle, and the scent of alcohol wrapped Madison in a warm, calming hug. She could feel it soothing her shaking hands and coursing through her frazzled nerves. That, and the smell of brine and smoke was smoother than any Scotch she'd ever nosed. This bottle was *worth* \$600.

And then something surprising happened. She put the cork back in. The smell dissipated, and suddenly she was shaking again – but she knew exactly what had to happen.

She walked to the break room, uncorked the bottle, and dumped the whiskey she'd dreamed about down the sink.

Drying out wasn't going to make that file go away – but Prissy had miscalculated on one crucial point.