

QUEUES LIKELY

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WEBSITE PREVIEW... ENJOY!

‘Get back to Joanna’s place!’ I shout, as our small group is forced to split in two. We had only a second to consider so very few options. It wasn’t enough time to make any real decision, let alone the right one. We had to divide up the evidence, that’s what we agreed in the lift on the way down. It was the only thing we really agreed upon.

As soon as I see him crawl out of that door, his injuries nowhere near as bad as I had hoped, I take her hand into mine and we run. She’s reluctant at first, perhaps unwilling to leave our friends behind, or perhaps she’s as stunned as I am by our touching. It’s the first time I have properly held any part of her, our bodies finally connecting through something that isn’t fuelled by my hormones and, as the panic surges through my body, I think it might just be our last small embrace.

I push us forward, but the pain deepens with every pounding step, and I know that my wound will not help our escape. She stops for a moment, so she can rip the shoes off her feet and I instantly wish that my injury could be fixed just as easily. It still gives me a second to catch my breath and look back, just long enough to see that he’s in pursuit, charging at us like a raging bull.

The others are behind us now; our friends who are already defeated, with their arms in the air as they are quickly surrounded by more enemies than we ever knew we had. I look at that poor boy, as he fights against two men both twice his size, and I vow that I will somehow make things right.

We run again, until we turn a corner, but it doesn’t help our escape. There’s nowhere to run and no place to hide. We bang on doors in desperation, hoping that someone will find the courage to offer us sanctuary so early in the morning.

Our cries go unanswered and, as he comes closer, I realise just how helpless we are. I grab her hand again and pull her close to me, hoping that I will somehow find a way to protect what now matters most. I look up at all the tall buildings, my tired mind hoping just one person will be leaning out of their window, at least willing to be a witness, if not a protector. I see no one, as I finally appreciate all the wrong choices that have led to these last twenty-four hours.

As he gets closer he slows down, and I know that he wants to turn those last few paces into my agonising wait for his revenge. I look him straight in the eyes and we both know that this will be our last fight. On some level I might even miss it, knowing that once I make my last stand then nothing will ever be the same.

He moves towards us quickly, probably aware that there isn’t much time. As soon as he’s close enough I punch him with all I’ve got but the force of the swing does nothing. I feel like I’ve just hit a brick wall, with his stored-up hatred seeming to tear its way back down my arm.

‘Is that the best you can do?’ he says, as his body stays on course. He hits me hard and I step back, already knowing that my body will tire before he gets bored of pounding me into the concrete.

I spit out some blood as I look over at her, and it takes only seconds for me to realise that my most single regret in this short life is that she has to be here now, suffering from my countless mistakes.

We look at each other but her face doesn’t show defeat or anger. She doesn’t look ready to give in as easily as me, but then she hasn’t suffered at the hand of this man for as long as I have. She turns her attention onto our mutual enemy, as she projects a long and fearless scream. Her shoes are held in each hand with the heels angled out, the designer tones and intricate styling lost as they are now fashioned into weapons. She runs at him and makes her attack but against his huge frame she doesn’t stand a chance, as his hands meet with her body, quickly forcing her to the floor.

A car pulls up and his accomplice gets out. His usually slick hair is messed up, which feels strangely satisfying. He limps towards us, one of his shoes stained with blood from a high heel that passed through leather and skin, leaving a scar that will last forever as a constant reminder of all the things he has done and what he is about to do. It’s not enough but at least we caused some damage before we ran.

He lifts her up from where she landed and throws her into the arms of the new arrival, leaving me alone to fight my eternal enemy. He simply laughs as I smack the air around him, and threatening words pour out of his mouth. When several punches to my head follow, I know that I’ve been beaten. My selfish drive and blind obsession have become my undoing and the damage he so obviously plans on causing will remind me of this moment forever.

However hard my next punch is, it proves to be useless, as I feel his thick hands grab each side of my head, pushing us both deeper into an alleyway as my feet barely touch the floor. As his next blow knocks me to the floor I think back through my short career, to the sinister world that unfolded around me as I saw only that shiny ladder. The climb to the top was all that mattered for the entirety of those precious few years, and only now that I’ve hit rock bottom do I realise what a pointless waste it all was.

I don’t bother to try to get up and, as I taste the dirt that’s laced with my own blood, I wonder if he’s still hitting me. I feel nothing now, as I don’t just realise what I’ve lost, but I finally learn what I could have had. As the darkness finally takes hold and my mind falls quiet, I can only wonder why I didn’t figure it all out sooner.

**Three paylips, sixty-two long commutes, two hundred hours in
traffic, four tube delays and one apparently minor operation
earlier...**

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I'm standing at one end of a long table. The people I'm here to impress are sitting at the other end, with all the products I'm required and desperate to shift in immense volume spread out in front of me. Most of this gear remains untouched, the packaging still unopened, which is never a good sign when even your client can't even be bothered to take a look.

Our promising poster-stands are built up and strategically placed behind me, acting more as shadows than guides. They're covered with bold slogans and photos of happy families, healthy children and germ-free pets.

When I say it's a long table, you might get the impression of an antique oak affair, stretching to the other end of the room, with people sinking into oversized seats. But it's not. It's just several different tables joined together with a muddled assortment of chairs; simply functional – the best this NHS meeting room could ever justify.

I'm halfway through the pitch and the only person I can hear is my boss, Mitchell, who's sitting to my left. He offers the whole room the odd grunt and growl, giving us a full and frank insight into his thoughts. His heavy frame has enveloped the small plastic chair that's required to hold him; the long creaking noises from his regular shuffling becoming the backdrop to my well-rehearsed speech.

But it's the people opposite who worry me the most. They seem barely alive and scarcely interested in anything I have to say. They just want to know the lowest price, the shipping requirements and package sizes. There's no excitement for the product and no interest in me, and so I refuse to give these basic details until the end, until they have listened to what I have practiced all night.

The only person who seems vaguely interested in me is Joanna Richardson. She's sitting directly opposite me and in the middle of her harem of prematurely balding men, who only come to life to nod at her occasional comment. These are the kind of obscenely long-nosed and small-minded guys who almost squeal out in horror when they spot what they deem to be a significant hole in your cost-ratio analysis.

She sits there, leaning back in her chair, smiling curiously at me as I try to pin an age on her. That face has to be mid-fifties at the earliest, but she's still well maintained. Her salon-proud hair flows downwards, the creation of a designer with talent. Some of the curls settle calmly on her neck line, almost pointing the way to her plump tits that are pushing their way out of her dress. And this is what puzzles me – her face doesn't match her body.

I soon realise that Joanna has asked a question, which I've failed to answer. 'Packing formats, please?' she asks again, as she looks at me with raised eyebrows and her chair tilted to the side, offering me a very pleasant view of those bubble breasts.

'The formats come in our own bespoke sizes, larger than the standard but with all our own fixings.'

'Larger than standard?' she asks, and winks at me.

Mitchell mutters under his breath as I choose to ignore what I've just witnessed, putting it down to my tired ears hearing utterly the wrong thing. I continue to explain the benefits of our products above the competition. Not many people want to hear this corporate crap, so when the chance comes I start reciting everything from our glossy brochures that claim to sell the ultimate protection in this bacterial-riddled world.

The company I work for: The Global United Eradication Corporation, or G.U.E for short, has only one aim, and that is to coat every surface of the globe with our sticky, translucent product that promises to kill anything remotely bad. Cover your children with it, spray it on every surface and even bathe your dogs in it. We sell everything from hand sanitisers to worker protection kits, from nasal sprays to personal sickness tests. Our aim is to make your small world a sanitary one.

Today is our chance to get into three South London hospitals, helping us to fuel the ongoing quest of my company to disinfect the entire planet – to rid us of every known germ and deadly bug. And only then will we be safe to lead our apparently happy and risk-free lives. We'll also have immunity to virtually nothing and the next deadly virus that comes to say hello to mankind will probably end up wiping us off the planet.

But who am I to question our mission? I look at the products spread across the table and then I think of my new BMW parked outside, and I realise that I'm doing alright out of this. I sometimes wonder if I will look back on these days and think that I've played some small part in the end of humanity; that it won't be the kick-ass super bug that kills us, but rather the fatal inability of the next generation to go play in the dirt.

I look over at Joanna as I watch her team pass notes down the line. I'm seeing the hierarchy in play but I'm not seeing someone who's casting a keen eye over the deal as much as she should be. She's the consultant – the middle woman – tasked with pulling in the numbers and doing the deal, but today she hasn't asked anything remotely challenging, instead having spent most of the presentation staring at my crotch.

A welcome question comes from the guy sitting next to her, but it catches me off guard as I stare into her eyes, which are still focused on my tackle and the only notes on her pad say: 'larger than standard.'

The room falls silent as everyone waits for me to answer. Only the sound of the struggling air-con offers me any comfort as my mind remains empty and Joanna simply smiles.

I suddenly feel a shadow cast over me as Mitchell stands up, towering above both me, his arm outstretched as a thick finger probes its way towards Joanna. 'Look, you all know these products are fucking good and I know the price is better than any of those other bastards will have given you, so let's not fuck about. We've said enough, so you've got twenty-four hours to decide, otherwise we all move on with our miserable lives.'

Without another word he storms out. The door slams behind him as I watch various document wallets close as people stand up to leave. Joanna winks at me and leads the charge out of the room, as I wonder if she has gone mental, or if I was never informed that this shrewd businesswoman is also a slightly unhinged sex pest.

I look down at my trousers, almost wondering if I have wet myself, or if there is some stain in the most unfortunate of places. I see nothing and decide that the reputation of this woman that had preceded her for many years, and that had built up such anxiety in my mind, was now in tatters.

I head outside to find Mitchell, just in time to see him throwing one fag to the floor and then lighting another. I walk over to him but as soon as he spots me he closes in. He soon dominates me, by height and bulk, with long slicked-back hair, his eyes forcing their way into mine. ‘That was a complete fuck up,’ he says, his eyes angry and his breath stale.

I try to speak, to justify my inaction and to assure him that I really was all over this, but it’s clear that he’s not interested, as he places a hand on my shoulder and tenses his grip. I look away and it somehow feels good, like the firm hold my dad used on me all those special times somewhere between my last school football game and my first proper job interview. His heavy breathing quickly reminds me that I’m not in school anymore, and that I’m entirely on my own, with only Mitchell’s dark eyes for comfort, making it clear that I’m not doing well.

‘You know that we need access to more hospitals and they have the big research facilities we want to get close to. I told you how important these are, didn’t I?’

‘Yes, Mitchell, I know that. It just didn’t go how I expected it to.’

‘It didn’t go how you expected it?’ he says and pokes my chest, pushing me backwards. ‘What did you expect from a sales pitch? A red carpet and a welcome blow job?’

I shake my head, seeing no point in arguing. ‘It’s just not what I expected from Joanna.’

His eyes narrow as a grin spreads across his face. ‘Let me tell you something about Joanna – she’s not as special as she thinks she is.’ He takes a long and painful puff from his cigarette before throwing it on the floor. ‘She’s slowly losing the plot and her reputation along with it.’

‘What?’ I ask, not seeing this. All I’ve heard about her tells me she is an industry professional at the top of her game, and today shows that she can rule a room and walk away untouched.

He moves closer, one foot resting on mine. ‘She’s vulnerable and weak, which means you need to strike hard. Do you understand me?’

I nod, not really knowing what he’s talking about, only wanting this conversation to end.

‘You seal that deal, Ryan,’ he says, his belly touching my chest, his husky voice ringing in my ears. ‘Are you hearing me? Whatever it takes, you seal that fucking deal.’

She’s staring at me from across the room as she pours the wine. They’re not small glasses and she’s not stopping at a respectable point, which sends me a clear message about how the next couple of hours will go.

I look around Joanna’s apartment – the living area is an open plan affair with soft lighting and easy tones on the walls. There’s obvious money here but it’s all a bit bland and outside of my assumed tastes of her

generation. There's nothing floral, bold or dark – just simple whites accessorised with the odd canvas print, sculpture or lost relic from her world travels. It's what I'd expect from a top floor apartment of a nondescript building in Hampstead but it's not what I'd expect from her. I had always assumed that when I finally met this woman her personality would live up to the exuberant reputation that's talked about by all. But now that I'm in her lair I feel a little disappointed.

I didn't expect there to be so much silence, either, but what her words fail to convey she gives away in her regular glances in my direction. She walks over to me, her heels tapping on the wooden floor. I notice that she's still in the same skirt and blouse combination from earlier, but with another button undone and all her jewellery removed.

'So, Ryan, how do you think you did today?' she asks, slowly handing me a glass, pulling it back slightly, making me work just a little harder.

I laugh and then attempt to describe how I thought things went, trying to capture the essence of what I thought was a pitiful presentation filled with her unexpected sexual innuendos. I try to assure her that it really wasn't my best as she leads me to the corner sofas that line up below a pair of large bay windows. The blinds are all closed, making it the darkest side of the room, lit only by candles with no open windows, no mercy of fresh air to cool me down.

She listens as we walk and talk, nodding at just the right time, her eyes seeming to know everything, surrounded by these dark shades of experience that tell me she's been here before and she quite liked it. She smiles as she sits me exactly where she wants, just on the edge of the fold in the sofa, putting herself within arms-reach.

I make myself comfortable, not really out of my depth being with a woman in a strange apartment. In any other moment this would actually be fun, as I take charge of personally guaranteeing her satisfaction. I've never had a bad evening with wine and a woman, but if I ever got bored I would normally make my excuses and find something better to do before the evening drew to a close.

I know that tonight is different to all those before, because I know that I cannot just leave whenever I want, not when I'm the plaything, left in this corner to roast in my own juices.

I open my mouth to continue my pitch, or my plea – I'm simply not sure, but a hand goes up before I can say anything.

'Let me give you some feedback, Ryan,' she says, her hand covering my mouth, immediately silencing me.

I nod and put one leg over the other, making sure I sit back on the sofa; calm and relaxed – my best not-really-bothered look.

'First of all, you have the confidence and the presence to pull things off. You turn up in my world with those chiselled looks and that tight-fitting tailored suit,' – she leans forward, eyeing me up and down – 'You're clearly good looking.'

‘Thank you,’ I say, ready to politely accept her flattery. But that hand quickly reappears, as a finger runs down my face and almost breaches my lips. She throws back more wine, the effects already starting to change the tone around us.

‘You’re cool and calm, backed up with sound knowledge. You know your stuff, but’ – she pauses to look at me, that grin arching from ear to ear – ‘You’re incredibly arrogant.’

I sit back as she continues to look me up and down.

‘I mean, come on, you know you have the looks,’ she says, squeezing my leg, a little closer to the goods than I would have wanted. ‘You’ve clearly been trained to recite all that corporate crap they fill your head with, but it means you’ve got nothing left for a real personality, darling.’

‘Really?’ I say, wondering how much this is actually worth my time, or my career.

‘I think it’s fair to say that you lack substance.’

We sit in mutual silence. I think about getting up and leaving, planning all the things I could be doing right now as I wonder how I have allowed her to quickly assume such power over me. She is right though – my looks get me whatever I want but I’m not going to sit here and justify it.

She soon laughs. ‘Sometimes you have to hear the realities of life, Ryan,’ she says, leaning close to me again and pinning her face near to mine. Up close I can see the detail that no amount of makeup could ever hide. The blusher is overdone; the obvious reapplication before I arrived does nothing but put another fake layer on top of her aging spirit.

Silence surrounds us as I drink my wine, paralysed by my raging thoughts. I need this deal and I can’t even begin to tell myself how much my world relies on making this happen. It doesn’t matter how hard I have worked to prepare for today, or how much I tried during that thirty minutes of hell. All that matters now is that Joanna can put a pretty big nail in my coffin.

It’s moments like these when I realise world has become too complicated, with so many things that now chain me down. My rented flat, my leased car and all the other things owned by someone else; whole life is on loan and Joanna silently threatens to close them all down as reality finally knocks at my door.

Despite this fear, something surges inside me, telling me that I can find a way out of this. My charm can work its magic, even in Joanna’s world of brutal feedback. I get up and collect the bottle of wine from the fridge, pouring the remaining liquid into her glass before she can stop me. I smile, leaning closer to her as I force the glass into her hand and then gently towards her mouth. ‘Joanna, I think you know our offer is a good one. We can get the infrastructure set up quicker than anyone else –’

She puts another silencing hand up, this time using it to push me away. ‘We’ve done all of this and I know that your product works. Christ, there’s more alcohol in it than a bottle of vodka.’

‘Then why am I here?’ I ask.

She quickly frowns. ‘He said you knew? That you understood?’

I shake my head, not understanding anything today has thrown at me.

She runs a finger down my chest, the act of pure intimacy breaking down all barriers between business and client. ‘Sealing this deal means doing something more,’ she says, her eyes wide from the wine. ‘Mitchell promised me a good fuck.’

I take a deep breath and look around her flat, my mind lost to the simplicity of the transaction agreed between our potential client and my boss. It’s not the act of sleeping with a woman double my age that bothers me. I have my standards but I’m honest enough to admit I’ll sleep with any woman, and the thought of the pleasure I’ll give the powerful Joanna feels like a game worth playing.

But this doesn’t seem like a deal I can win through a subtle dominance of her emotions – teasing her aging desperation to the point where she doesn’t know if I will bid her goodnight or take her to the bedroom and fuck her brains out. It’s the brutal movement of the boundaries that worries me. I’m the team leader responsible for sales of our corporate products throughout London; the guy in charge of cracking the capital, and I know this comes from a mix of hard work and some arrogance, rather than just pure skill. I admit that I slept around a lot on my way towards the top, but I didn’t sleep my way to get there, and now it seems that is all I’m good for. The competition has clearly got better so Mitchell had nothing else to throw at Joanna, except for my cock, so that’s exactly what he did.

‘You were aware of this, Ryan, weren’t you? It’s part of the non-verbal agreement.’

I say nothing, when all I want to do is push her away. I want to tell her that I’d be the best shag she ever had, but it would only ever be on my terms, at a moment of my choosing. She looks at me as my face mirrors this journey of emotions I’m going through. It isn’t even the morality of what is being held over me, not even the fear of what Mitchell will do to me if I fail to deliver. It is the very simple fact that this woman who has always seemed so powerful now looks so pathetic.

I finally nod, never having agreed to this but somehow knowing my affiliation with Mitchell would eventually bring me to a moment like this.

She lets out a small scream. ‘Good! I’m glad you’re on board with this,’ she says, patting my knee. ‘It’s not the norm, as you can imagine. But I’m really not getting any younger.’

I nod again, wondering how my promising career could have sunk so low in just seven years. I decide that it’s time to focus on her breasts, but nothing moves in my trousers as I flash forward a couple of hours to see myself scrubbing every inch of my body in the shower. I think about how the anger at what I’m being forced to do will soon be replaced by that dirty feeling, as I prepare to break a personal code I didn’t ever see the need to create.

She lurches towards to me, straddling herself over my knees as I lean backwards. She quickly pushes my back into the sofa, as my hands instinctively hold her in position. She leans closer to me. ‘Global Germ Scrubbers, or whatever you guys call yourselves these days, are already the cheapest,’ she whispers as she freely kisses my ear and cheeks. ‘Getting my signature is based entirely on your performance tonight.’ She smiles and then rips open my shirt, her eyes wild as she grabs at my pecs and then my stomach, as if I’m hers to own.

I try to force her away from me as subtly as I can, to somehow hold back the desire that seems to be swelling within her. Her shoulders are tense, her mouth gaped open, as she continues to poke at me like I'm some sort of toy, her hands pulling my shirt further away and then trying to squeeze around my biceps. I tense my arm, giving her everything to feel good about whilst desperately throwing myself into the moment.

'I haven't been screwed by a thirty-year-old for twenty years and I can't remember the last time I saw a six pack,' she says, as her hands claw at my stomach. She stares into my eyes, making demands that should have stayed in the depths of her cruel imagination. 'Whether you will enjoy this or not, you need to put on a suitable performance, because life is all an act,' she says, as a hand reaches into my trousers. 'And so, a quick fuck simply won't do.'

As I lie on Joanna's breasts I feel relaxed. My head gently rests on them, my neck taking the strain. It's a classic picture of two lovers, soon time for me to return the favour and have her snuggle up on my chest as she teases the hairs on my stomach. I feel much less violated than I expected and more content that I've felt in a long time.

I'm not sure if it's the expensive bed, the calm lighting or the sound of her heart beating, but something made this very different to my usual sexual experiences. I run a finger up and down her body, tracing the curves and marks of a world of experience, thinking about how the sex was better than I could ever have expected. She didn't play dead like many of the other girls, their heads always propped up with a cushion, expecting me to do all the work. She dominated and demanded, forcing me to raise my game, pushing me to do more, constantly stretching my boundaries.

I smile and kiss her on the forehead, pulling some of the covers over me, ready to cuddle and sleep for a while. But the duvet doesn't move as she holds it firmly around her, offering me only the shake of her head.

'You need to get rid of that,' she says, looking down to the condom still wrapped around my cock.

I laugh at her creased face, accepting that she probably hasn't seen one of these in a long time, and my usual trick of subtly removing it under the duvet would be lost on her.

'Properly, in the toilet' she says, pushing me away from the bed.

I do as I'm told and head for the bathroom, getting rid of the goods and doing the standard check of my hair and teeth. I rinse my mouth with water, thinking about how much I need to impress her. When I remember just how much I have to lose I make the effort to find some mouthwash.

When I walk back into the bedroom I see that she has wrapped the duvet firmly around her, cocooned within several layers of safety. 'You need to go. My husband will be home soon.'

'Your husband?' I ask, my new, tender feelings replaced with anger at her betrayal to what I thought was our special moment. I had always wondered if Joanna was married but the moment she had me entirely

naked and pinned to the coffee table, its contents thrown over the floor, my naive assumption was that she was another perpetually-single career woman.

‘You’ve got to be kidding,’ I say and stare at her for a few seconds, standing naked in the middle of her bedroom. She says nothing in return as I finally start to retrace my steps to find my clothes. She soon gets up to help, wrapping her body tightly with a sheet. As she finds my socks, she throws them on the bed and then runs into the hallway to bring back my shoes.

‘What about the deal?’ I ask, as I try to button up my shirt that no longer has buttons, seeing absolutely no remorse in her eyes for that lustful moment. ‘Do we have a deal?’ I ask, as I play with my suit in an attempt to cover up my chest, already thinking about the last tube being long gone.

She says nothing. I consider asking her to call me a cab to get from Hampstead to Canary Wharf but I see no interest in her eyes. I don’t see regret either, but more of a contempt that seems to be aimed entirely at me, like I’m something dirty that needs to be removed from her life as quickly as possible.

‘You’ve used me,’ I say, as if it’s some sort of revelation, as if she isn’t already fully aware that this is something she had planned from the moment the sun rose this morning.

‘You can let yourself out,’ she says, before walking into the bathroom and slamming the door shut.