

The Chicken Seat

Seven minutes and fourteen seconds, according to her Fitbit. He liked to keep her waiting; he liked to gnaw at her predicament like a vulture at an open wound.

She stifled a yawn, feeling her jaw crack and the weight of the bags under her eyes.

Seven minutes and twenty seconds.

He'd hung an oil painting of himself behind the marble desk: a leering simpleton caressing the American flag.

She imagined he pawed sex workers in the same oleaginous way.

She imagined the flag regretted the choices that had brought it to that moment, just as she regretted the calamitous decisions that had brought her here.

While he, of course, regretted nothing.

Exactly eight minutes after her arrival, he entered through a hinged panel in the wall. She watched him as he made his way across the room.

'Apologies,' he said, and squeezed her shoulder on his way past, making her collarbone creak. 'Government shit, you know how it is.' He took the envelope tucked under his armpit and placed it on the desk.

Engage him, she told herself. *Ask him how his wife is doing*. It occurred to her that he probably didn't know.

When he sat down she realised her chair was much lower than it had been two days ago; she was glad she'd worn the trouser suit, especially after the Foreign Secretary had told her to wear a skirt:

A short one, he'd said. *He'll be a lot more amenable if he can see your knees*.

POTUS smiled, making his eyes into narrow slits so the smile wouldn't reach them.

'Good to see you, Prime Minister.'

She smiled back, feeling the corners of her mouth quiver under the strain.

‘And thank you for coming back so quickly,’ he said, tapping the envelope. He'd written *DEAL* on it, in pencil.

‘You're most welcome, Mr President.’

‘I know, I know: you leave here with a deal, then I call you back to make changes. You fly home, I remember something else, you fly back again. Then some friends of mine remember crap they want, so back you fly again ... You must be dog tired. You *look* dog tired.’

‘I slept on the plane,’ the PM said evenly. The truth of it was she'd woken in a cold sweat from that awful dream – the one where he makes her do her ‘funny little dance’ in front of Congress. ‘What can I do for you, Mr President?’

He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. ‘How're the other trade negotiations coming along?’

‘They're going very well,’ she lied. ‘Extremely well in fact. We've successfully—’

‘So how many you got?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Trade deals. How many have you signed?’

‘Well, you can't expect me to—’

‘I heard a half dozen,’ POTUS said, digging at his side teeth with his little fingernail. ‘And one of those was for Liechtenstein.’

‘Well, I'm afraid you've heard wrong,’ and the PM smiled because it was one of those rare occasions when she could comfortably tell the truth: they'd signed *four* deals, not six, and Liechtenstein was holding out for a better offer.

‘I need some small alterations to our agreement,’ said POTUS, as though making a last-minute change to a fast food order. ‘It's not for me; it's for some friends of mine.’

‘Alterations.’ The PM clenched her stomach and tried to find the keys to her happy place. ‘You want to change the deal ... again.’

He grinned and nodded. ‘Well, it's not a deal until we sign it. Until then, it's a negotiation.’

She took a breath and a moment to scream inside her own head. ‘With all due respect, Mr President, I have given you everything. You wanted unwavering support for you right-wing agenda: you have it. Your friends in the energy industry wanted to crack our countryside in two: I agreed. You wanted permission to decimate our health service: I gave it you.’ Her eyes

began to sting. ‘We even agreed to take your ghastly chickens! What more can we possibly —!’

‘Hey, let’s not get our panties in a bunch here! Hear me out; this’ll be good for both of us.’

‘Really,’ she said, doubting it.

‘Do you know what makes a successful economy?’

The PM wasn’t inclined to admit that she didn’t: ‘Well, that’s quite a broad question. In my view, a successful economy is a balancing act between sound fiscal—’

‘Victims,’ said POTUS.

‘I beg your pardon.’

‘A successful economy needs victims, and a population afraid of becoming victims.’ He stood up, grunted, gently broke wind, then turned to the window with his hands clasped behind his back. ‘People are afraid of getting sick and going broke, so they take out Medical. Then we make sure they’re afraid of people who don’t have Medical, but are allowed to have guns. So the scared people buy their own guns. They’re more likely to shoot themselves or members of their family, but what the hell, right? When they do, their Medical goes up, people get poorer, turn to crime, get a bigger gun.

‘D’you see, Prime Minister; to keep the economy growing, we have to make sure that every true-blooded American is afraid of their neighbour and has access to a gun. And you know something? That should go for every true Brit.’

‘What?’ The PM had stopped listening at ‘gun’, and only tuned in again when she heard the word ‘Brit’.

‘Abolish your gun laws,’ POTUS said, ‘let our manufacturers sell to the UK, and you have yourself a deal.’

‘No,’ said the PM, ‘absolutely not.’

‘Aw come on! Thanks to you, the UK’s police force is completely discomboobilated—’

‘That’s not a real word.’

‘—Not to mention the clusterfuck you’ve made of the military. Are you gonna deny your people the right to defend themselves? I mean, looking out for yourself is what you Tonies—’

‘Tories.’

‘—are all about. Give people the freedom to take care of their own and you won’t even need a police force.’

The Prime Minister murmured ‘No’ while staring at the envelope. When she looked up, POTUS was back in his chair.

‘Ever heard of GUNMED?’ he asked.

‘I can’t say that I have,’ she replied.

‘Friends of mine; congressmen mainly, representing the joint interests of the Gun Lobby and the medical profession.’

‘The Gun Lobby and medical profession have ... joint interests.’

‘Sure.’ POTUS said, tearing away the top of the envelope. ‘They feed each other, and they need fresh meat, preferably from overseas.’

The Prime Minister swallowed. ‘So you want me to turn my country into a gun range.’

He winked at her, and her skin tried to crawl off her skeleton.

‘They are willing to invest billions, and I mean *billions*, in your country, Prime Minister, but only if there’s something to invest in.’

‘You mean victims and fear.’

‘Look, I gotta say it: you’re sinking fast. You’re out of the EU; you haven’t got a trade deal worth shit; your party’s torn itself apart, even after you threw your country and yourself under a train to save it ... You need a Plan B, and this is all there is.’ He smiled and held out the pen. ‘And of course, there’s the tax.’

‘The tax?’ she said, thinking, *I won't do it. It'll be carnage: a bloodbath from Stornaway to Lizard's Point. I won't do it.*

‘Oh yes, the tax,’ POTUS said. ‘You tax insurance don’t you? And everyone has to have that ...’

‘Then there’s the corporation tax ...,’ the PM said quietly, and jumped in her seat as though someone else had spoken. *No. I won't. I can't ...*

‘Well, maybe just a little to keep the killjoys happy. The folks my friends represent don’t like governments digging around in their pockets too much. No, the little people should pay for this; that’s the point.’

‘A ballistics tax then ... on gun ownership ...,’ the PM mused. *No. No. No.*

POTUS clapped his hands. ‘A ballistics tax! Hah! Damn, wish I’d thought of that!’

By the time the evening papers landed, she knew he would have.

‘Right now, you got nothing to show after three years as PM. This, at least, is ...
something; something to be remembered for. And that’s all any of us want, Prime Minister: to
be remembered.’

The Prime Minister looked wretchedly at her hands; she was already holding the pen.

‘Ain’tcha gonna read it first?’ POTUS asked.

She smiled and whispered ‘Yes’, as she wiped the tears from her eyes. ‘Yes, I suppose I’d
better had ...’

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