

THE CLEANER

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I don't have time for bullshit.

But *shit* is precisely what I'm dealing with right now.

Wiping excrement from bed frames is not normally part of my job description, but when I go undercover, I *really* get into the role.

And right now, I am Cindy Patatkin, the newest hire on the hotel's housekeeping staff.

Cindy is *not* my favorite identity. She has to wear a grey dress and white apron—always immaculately pressed, of course—and white, pleather “comfort” shoes that make me want to scream. I would give anything for my Manolos.

But that's the price of being the best in the business. My clients pay seven figures and up for each transaction because I pay meticulous attention to detail.

And right now, paying attention to detail requires me to scrub this crusted shit off of a bed post, gloves on, back bent, industrial-strength cleaner clogging up my sinuses. The bigger problem is that my right hip is starting to ache. I'm the fittest fifty-year-old you'll ever meet, but time is time and it takes its toll. There's no stopping that train.

It turns out I'm quite adept at cleaning, but I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. When I really think about it, my *actual* job is also, at its core, cleaning up other people's messes.

What I wouldn't give to find the shit-wipers who checked out of room 204 last night and put a bullet each through their skulls.

###

My target is at the reception desk, checking in. She's better looking in person than in her photos—a rarity.

I knew from her itinerary that she would arrive promptly at noon, and I made sure to take a cigarette break in time to catch a glimpse. Technically, hotel staff aren't supposed to smoke out front, but the manager likes me. He thinks a seventy-year-old housekeeper with a friendly smile and Golden Girls-style bouffant hair gives the hotel a more homey vibe, so he lets me “interface with the guests,” as he puts it, as much as possible.

My target taps a red-manicured index finger on the reception desk. *Impatient.*

A carry-on suitcase on wheels stands at the ready beside her. *Practical.*

She has her ID and credit card out and ready before the receptionist—Joey Rizzo, sweet kid—asks for them. *Efficient.*

I like her already.

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other and I scan down her body. A hundred and fifteen pounds, five-foot-four, erect posture and lean muscles indicative of low-impact body-weight exercise. Pilates, most likely. She looks like she enjoys a certain measure of pain.

###

We cross paths again at five o'clock.

I guess correctly that she would head for the bar as soon as the hotel's complimentary bar service started and I plant myself three doors down from her room and wait. I want her to get accustomed to my face. To trust me.

She smiles at me in the hallway as I push my cleaning supplies cart slowly past her, whistling an off-key tune and limping slightly on my right leg. The smile doesn't reach her eyes.

I *really* like her.

I turn back to watch her saunter to the elevator bank, her heels thrusting her hips out in a gentle swish-swish, swish-swish. She has changed out of the suit in which she arrived, into a figure-hugging red dress. I bet myself a thousand dollars that she doesn't go back to her room alone.

###

He's staying in room 813, three floors above.

A poor choice, in my opinion.

I catch a glimpse of them huddled over cocktails at the bar, his arm already draped over the back of her chair, her ice blue eyes glinting at him in the candlelight.

Their drinks are three-quarters full. I can take my time.

###

Her perfume lingers in her room. Chanel No. 5. I approve.

The suit she arrived in hangs in the closet. A makeup bag sits neatly on the bathroom shelf, her perfume, toothbrush, toothpaste, and hairbrush evenly-spaced beside it.

Her wedding ring is in a small drawstring jewelry bag at the bottom of her purse.

I can't blame her. From the few social media posts she has shared of her husband, the acrimony is palpable beneath their frozen smiles.

She brought no briefcase. Her laptop and a tablet are stowed in the safe, and I guess her four-digit code on the first try—birthdays are so obvious. Same with the four-digit passcode on her tablet.

I find what I'm looking for right in her inbox, where I expected it. The email is marked **PRIVILEGED AND CONFIDENTIAL** on the top, and a lengthy confidentiality notice runs across the bottom of the message. I smirk.

There it is, spelled out as clear as day: the clothing manufacturer her firm represents is unquestionably using child labor, and under abhorrent conditions. According to her own assessment, it's almost certain that the recent factory fire and the resultant deaths of one hundred and sixty children, all between the ages of seven and sixteen, is the company's fault. Public relations nightmare. Potential liability across multiple jurisdictions.

She is the lead attorney on the case, and it's no wonder. She has built a reputation for herself as the go-to partner for especially *uncomfortable* and *complex* situations.

Those were the words the senior partner at the firm used in describing her when I reached out to him by phone, posing as a potential client with a *very* uncomfortable and complex situation on my hands and in search of a lawyer who could save my ass.

She has never lost a case at trial, the senior partner said. *And when she settles, it's always in the defendant's favor.*

Before I put away the tablet, I confirm her schedule for tomorrow: all-day deposition. I'll have plenty of time to prepare.

I stand for a full five minutes in the center of the room, eyes closed, running through my options. When it comes to me, it's absolutely perfect.

My eyes snap open.

She'll never see it coming.

###

She is at the breakfast buffet thirty minutes before it closes. Her hair is perfectly coiffed, her skin shines with an enviable post-coital glow, and her bag bulges with her laptop and tablet.

I take my time making my rounds.

No crusted shit today, thank the nonexistent god.

I do, however, find blood on the bathroom floor in room 708. Too much for a shaving mishap, too little for a serious injury. But blood, I can handle. Blood is what I do. I don't even mind the pain in my hip—there is something so soothing about watching the water in a cleaning bucket grow a deeper and deeper red.

In *her* room, I find three condom wrappers in the trash bin and two lip-stained glasses smelling strongly of whiskey. The pillows are stacked one on top of the other; he did not stay the night.

I start preparing. My plan requires near-perfect timing and a sprinkle of serendipity, which is rarely a good idea—you want to leave as little to chance as possible. But it feels *so right*.

###

I don't normally take work *pro bono*. Assassinations are difficult to arrange and harder still to pass off as accidents. It's rarely worth the effort without the seven-figure reward.

But I make an exception for her. I may have more than four dozen deaths on my hands, but she has hundreds. *Hundreds*.

The kids push me over the edge.

I still have the *Times* article that brought her to my attention three months ago taped to the wall of my off-the-grid “office” in upstate New York. I circled her face in red marker.

No one had to pay me to take *this* job.

###

When she returns, she is exhausted and strung out after a day of depositions.

Just as I expected.

We pass once more in the hallway on her way to the bar and her smile is just a little friendlier—she is glad to see a familiar face.

Just as I expected.

###

Her gait is unsteady as she weaves down the hallway from the elevator bank to her door.

She doesn't see me peeking around the corner at the end of the hall.

Neither does the hotel's cleverly concealed security camera, because just at that moment, the recessed hallway lights flicker once and go dark. Emergency lights immediately click on, casting a muted glow. I disabled the backup generator that normally comes on when the power cuts out, but the hotel has a secondary generator for the bare essentials—key cards, minimal lighting so no one trips and falls.

“Shit.” She fumbles with her key card several times.

“Can I help you, dear?” I amble up to her with my cleaning cart.

Her eyes are red with popped blood vessels when she turns to me, her reaction too slow, not startled enough, even in the semi-dark. At least four drinks, I guess.

“What? Oh, yes. I can't get in.” She points at the lights, then the door, and holds up her key card, swaying slightly and reaching to support herself against the doorframe.

“Oh my, I'm terribly sorry. Don't you worry, they'll have the power restored in no time. Here, let me help you in.”

I swipe a key card across the door—not mine, of course, but a spare card I authorized for her room when Joey Rizzo needed a bathroom break that afternoon and I oh-so-helpfully agreed to man the reception desk.

I take her elbow and lead her in. “Can I help you with anything else?”

“Mmmm.” She is already kicking off her heels and heading for the bathroom.

Right where I want her.

“Well, you have a good night, now.”

She waves a hand as she disappears behind the bathroom door.

I hover inside the room, listening.

###

Thirty seconds later, I hear a garbled, “What the fu—,” followed immediately by the sound of bare feet skidding on smooth tile, a scream, and a dull and heavy *thud*.

I push open the bathroom door just enough to squeeze in without having to shove her body out of the way.

She is a jumble of limbs on the floor. In the muted glow of the emergency lights, her hair is a blonde halo around her head. A pool of blood forms beneath her temple. At her feet is a smear of soapy water.

I snap on a pair of sterile gloves and take a glass from the bathroom counter. Fill it up with water. Press it into her limp hand and carefully mark her prints onto the smooth surface.

I shatter the glass on the tile and press her wrist against the jagged edge until blood trickles down the rim in a steady rivulet. I lay it down beside her.

She stirs. Moans. Her fingers twitch.

I gently lift her head and slam it back down on the tile.

She doesn't move again.

Before I leave, I gather up the twelve photos I had arranged on the bathroom shelf. Twelve burnt little bodies half buried in the charred remains of the factory.

###

“Are you ok, Cindy? You want to have a seat?” Joey Rizzo asks, one hand coming to rest on my shoulder.

We stand side by side in the lobby, watching as the emergency medical technicians wheel the stretcher out, a black body bag juddering slightly as the stretcher moves through the sliding doors.

I wipe at a nonexistent tear.

“No thank you, Joey dear. Someone has to clean up.”