



The Silk Noose

By

T.J. Beach

Natasha Giles strode into the marketing department. “Which one’s Joanne Wollinski?” She asked.

Joanne went cold.

Her idol. The only female President at Townsend International. A Cornell University PhD, twice nominated for Telstra Businesswoman of the Year asked for Joanne by name. Could she possibly have seen the proposal?

Joanne slipped her filthy coffee mug into her drawer and quickly straightened her desk. “Err, that’s me.” She raised her hand.

Dr Giles pointed to the conference room. “You. Me. Now.”

Joanne smoothed her skirt, and jumped to obey, took two paces, grimaced and spun back to grab her notebook. She caught a glimpse of her reflection and cursed under her breath, wishing she’d blow-dried her hair and added some extra makeup instead of making a second breakfast coffee.

Dr Giles took the seat at the head of the table and tapped a perfectly manicured crimson nail on the chair nearest her.

Joanne hurried over, folding her hands into her lap to cover her chewed cuticles.

“Joanne.” Dr Giles looked her up and down, frowning. “I need people around me who can go the extra yard. People who’ve got the drive that’s almost non-existent in Townsend International. If those people are women, all the better. Is it you?”

“Err, I think so. I ..”.

“Don’t think so. Know so. Your proposal for the Townsend Premium launch is cute, catchy, bang on point — exactly what we need to crack the US market.”

“But it was rejected, Dr Giles —“

“Call me Natasha.”

“Natasha.” Joanne blushed from head to foot. Saying the name sent a shiver up her spine, let alone being close enough to be enveloped by the charisma of the most powerful woman in Australian business. “My proposal didn’t even make the pre-review cut in the international campaign committee.”

“Committees.” Natasha spat the word. “Where great ideas go to be crushed by the tired, frightened minds of Butler’s cronies. They wouldn’t recognise quality if it bit them on the ass. I need your help, Joanne.”

“Me? Yikes!” Oh God, she just said ‘yikes’ in front of Dr Natasha Giles. Way to blow the biggest chance of her life.

“Are you up for it?” Natasha asked.

“Yes. Yes.”

“Good. The US campaign is going down like the Titanic. I’m going to replace the agency’s crap with your material.”

Joanne stammered. “But ... but ... the global approval committee doesn’t sit again until —“

“I’m not waiting for Butler’s bureaucracy. Do it at seven p.m. tonight. For breakfast in New York.”

“Me? But I can’t —“

Natasha slid a card across the table. “Yes, you can. Those are the codes.”

Joanne stared at the card, unwilling to touch it. “Natasha, using those codes would break half a dozen company regulations.”

“Do you think we break through the glass ceiling by waiting for a man to lend us a hammer? I’d do it myself, but the executive’s flying out in two hours for a weekend retreat on the Gold Coast, and I can’t do the technical stuff anyway. You can, right?”

“Yes, but —”

“I’ve got to go. Do it. I’m relying on you.”

Joanne reeled out of the conference room, staggered to her chair and sat down with a thump. If it weren’t for the lingering aroma of Natasha’s flowery cologne, she wouldn’t have believed what just happened.

Neil loomed over the cubicle divider, running his fingers through his floppy brown hair.

“She wants to use my campaign,” Joanne said.

“Of course she does. It’s brilliant. You’re not going to do it, are you?” Neil asked. “I heard it all. She’s using you.”

“But Natasha’s a company president. This is a huge opportunity.”

“To get sacked! Don’t you see? You make all the changes after hours, in secret, while Dr Teflon Giles is safely at pre-dinner drinks. She’s covering her ass. If it works, she claims all the credit, and you’ll be her creature because she knows you used the private codes. If it doesn’t, you go under the nearest bus. It’s the silk noose.” Neil wiggled his fingers around his neck. “All flattery and promises until ...” He made a fist and yanked.

On Monday morning, Joanne called up the U.S. corporate website with trembling fingers.

It was still there. The gifs she created called American youth to splash their cash on the Townsend International prestige line.

Neil shuffled around behind her. He sighed. "I hope to hell it's working, Jo."

The shudders spread to her whole body. What had she done? Hacked the corporate website in the dead of night to put up her own rejected work. She'd be lucky to be fired. She might end up in jail.

Bernie, the Marketing Manager, answered his phone, spluttered, jumped to his feet and yelled to the team. "He's coming! Townsend himself with Giles and Butler!"

Before the shock had subsided, the Chief Executive swooped into the office with Natasha and her arch-rival Butler hot on Townsend's heels.

"Who's responsible for this!" Townsend roared. He held up a printout of the main image of Joanne's campaign. "Someone loaded this to the US site without authority."

Joanne dropped her head into her hands. Neil squeezed her shoulder.

"I want to know who did it ... because sales are up seventy-five per cent. It's genius. Who was it?"

Natasha pushed around Townsend, beaming.

Neil nudged Joanne. "Here it comes."

"Joanne Wollinski did all the work," Natasha said. "I asked her, but Joanne deserves all the credit. Stand up, Jo."

Joanne jammed her elbow into Neil's stomach and smirked at him as she went to be introduced to the CEO.

When it was done, Townsend and Butler left, but Natasha lingered. She called for silence. "I want you all to know that brilliant performance is rewarded in Townsend International. Joanne is going places. I'll make sure of it. You all have the same chance. Joanne? I hope you won't be embarrassed, but I saw something in the hotel shop that I just had to buy for you. It's perfect, and I was certain we'd have something to celebrate."

Natasha reached into her bag and drew out an expensive scarf, satin swirls of gold and orange. She slid it around Joanne's neck, her lips close to Joanne's ear as she whispered, "You're on my team now," and pulled the scarf tight.

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