

WORKING STIFFS

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Saturday

6:42 PM

Nestled uncomfortably between the perpetually clogged artery of the noisy highway and the fashionably deprived South Side, the Pro-Well Pharmaceuticals campus stood proudly as a beacon of hope in the sphincter of Pittsburgh. Though the parking lot surrounding the company's buildings was mostly gravel, the corporate headquarters was an immaculate memorial to redemption, four stories of pure American dreaming. From several yards away, Marshall Owens hubristically eyed his creation, the only baby that he would ever have. He watched it like a father, a doting one who micromanages his son's every move, who bribes the good girl from church to take his boy's eyes off the wild one with the eyebrow ring and multi-colored bracelets that brag of sexual encounters. The kind who would pull more strings than a puppeteer operating a marionette centipede to get the boy into a good school and would never let him spend a night in jail.

Marshall Owens looked at the beautiful blonde holding the microphone in front of him. Had things worked out a little differently, he thought, he could have had her. Though the TV news camera caught a face-to-face interview, Owens could see her eyes constantly flicker, moving back to the perfect, unscathed, unburned piece of corporate architecture behind him and blinking repeatedly as if that millisecond when her eyes were shut would help block out the vision of the scars and skin grafts that covered half of the Pro-Well CEO's face.

"It has been 15 years since Marshall Owens abandoned his parasitic so-called career as a meth dealer in Fayette County to

turn his talents with chemicals to good use,” Barbara Goodman said in that semi-nasal tone meant to be heard over a montage of exterior shots. “After working on prototypes for three years, Owens was finally given a grant to pursue his dream: to cure all that ails mankind.” She smiled and addressed the CEO, asking, “And how far have you gotten on that goal?”

“Well, Barbara,” Owens began, “it’s a difficult road. It seems that as soon as we make strides on bird flu, the pigs start getting us sick. It’s a perpetual cycle, but at Pro-Well Pharmaceuticals, we work tirelessly every day to find every possible solution to anything that kills, sickens, or just plain bothers mankind. Indeed, we’re fighting everything from cancer to female cleft chins.”

He had to maintain the image of charm, the charisma, not just so that beautiful blonde evening-news anchors would speak to him, but also so that they wouldn’t even think to ask what was hidden behind the factory’s walls.

“There you have it,” Goodman said, relieved as she turned towards the camera, “From the monument of strength that is Pro-Well Pharmaceuticals, I’m Barbara Goodman.”

The cameraman with the ripped black jeans and untrimmed goatee lowered the cumbersome news camera from his shoulder.

“So this segment will be on tomorrow night. I’m not sure exactly when, but sometime during our 6 p.m. evening newscast,” Goodman said. “I can let you know the exact time once I speak with my producer.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Owens stated, resorting to the endearing assumed personality trait of modesty. “I can never watch myself on TV.”

“Oh, you don’t need to be concerned,” she said hurriedly. “We made sure to keep you in the most flattering lighting to cov—” she caught herself, realizing that with all the training she’d undergone to learn how to talk to any subject on or off the record, she had never received instruction on political correctness when speaking with a burn victim who practically owned the city.

Owens smiled understandingly, another positive PR move. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I really should be getting back to work. Morton’s toe isn’t going to cure itself.”

He grinned again, a terrible, off-putting, vile grimace that usually evoked too much pity to be associated with evil. That’s just how someone with such severe facial burns smiles, his interlocutors convinced themselves, although joy had never looked so unnatural on anyone. Barbara smiled back at him, glancing above to the purple clouds surrounding the rapidly setting sun. She stuck out her hand to give him a hearty, professional shake, but he leaned down and kissed it. She trembled as what was left of his lips lightly touched her well-moisturized hand in the most uncomfortable way to learn that chivalry is not dead.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Owens,” Freddy Mendez said as he lowered the Channel 13 News camera from his shoulder.

“Any time,” Owens said, heading back to the Pro-Well factory, the smile erased from his scarred face.

He liked dealing with the press. Controlling the media, jumping in front of any story that may arise, that was part of the job, part of keeping himself out of jail. He reached the large metal door of the factory and quickly swiped the key card that he kept on a zip-cord attached to the belt loop of his Versace suit. As he entered the hallway that surrounded the clean production area, Harold was waiting for him, earpiece attached like he was a member of the Secret Service.

“Have they been fed?” Owens asked his loyal assistant.

“No, sir,” Harold said in the baritone of a thug who cultivated the low frequency to add yet another reason for the other inmates to stay away even when he dropped the soap. “But Sven did pick up their dinner.”

“From where?” Owens asked.

“Downtown. The jail,” Harold replied as they walked down the hallway towards the clean-room entrance, in a perverse take on *The West Wing*.

“Another hooker?” Owens asked, stopping dead in his tracks.

“Yes, sir,” Harold said.

“I don’t care how much fun he likes to have with them beforehand. He has got to vary his locations or I’ll take him off delivery detail altogether,” Owens said furiously. “He’ll be in here babysitting if that’s how he’s going to behave.”

“I’ll let him know, sir,” Harold said, always welcoming an opportunity to reprimand his Nazi co-worker.

Owens started walking again, followed by Harold, who quickly shoved open the door to the employee locker room that was the final barrier between them and the production floor. Harold held the door open while Owens slipped into the room where Sven the protector of the white race and Michael the arsonist were waiting, holding the flailing arms of a thin young woman. Clad in a tight leather skirt, fishnet stockings and a top that more resembled a sports bra than a traditional shirt, the woman pulled and kicked and squirmed, but her efforts were overwhelmed by the strength of two recently released felons coming off of years of nothing to do but bench presses. Her feet slipping out of her pink patent leather stiletto pumps, she shook and screamed as black mascara tears rolled down her painted face.

Owens approached her, assuming the manner of the lean, reasonable gentleman who would never approve of the brutal treatment at the hands of these Neanderthal thugs who’d undoubtedly violated her during the abduction. As Owens came closer, she stopped screaming, her breaths now caught on top of one another, struggling for air. She shivered, making no effort to hide her fear as Barbara Goodman had so sweetly done. Owens smiled as he ran his hand over her greasy cheek. She shuddered.

“What are you going to do to me?” she asked between choked-back tears. “Are you going to—”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Owens cut her off. “Don’t look so scared. I wouldn’t dream of having sex with you.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, “Then what do you want from me?”

“Nothing,” Owens said. “If it was up to me, you’d never have been here.”

“Then can I go? Please let me go. I won’t tell no one,” she pleaded.

“Unfortunately, that is not up to me,” Owens replied. “See, there are others that want something from you.”

“What do they want?” she asked, unable to control the tears anymore.

“You,” Owens said.

He snapped his fingers, and the ex-cons pulled her around towards the doorway behind them. Harold quickly jumped in front of them and pushed open the door while Sven and Michael dragged the wailing, terrified prostitute who was attempting to plant her legs to the floor in futile resistance. She had shaken her wavy dark brown hair over her face during her pointless fight, but she managed to peer through her thick tresses at the factory workers. The machines were busy bottling, encapsulating and compressing, but their attendants were staring at her. They were all wearing hospital scrubs, and some even sported hairnets, but they were like no humans that she had ever seen before. Their skin was gray, their eyes blank portals of misty purple behind which all hope was lost, and many had developed grotesque lesions that made that man in the suit’s burn scars much less shocking. They were all looking at her with vacuous expressions but obvious excitement as they simultaneously attempted to break free of the chains that shackled their arms to their machines and their legs to the floor. When they tried to move closer to her, the terrified prostitute could hear their rotting, yellow teeth clacking, chomping as if they were trying to eat the air.

Michael and Sven pulled her farther into the plant, amidst the stainless steel machines and the corpses manning them. She screamed again, beginning to kick and twist, but to no avail.

“Help me!” she shouted. “Please, somebody, somebody help me!”

“It’s too late for you,” Owens whispered into her ear as he pulled back her dirty hair from behind. “Your parasitic existence, feeding off the system will finally be put to use feeding

someone else. You're all part of the food chain. See, these folks, they are above you, more useful. Their efforts here, they'll save the world."

The hooker screamed again, an aborted attempt at noise that was cut short by her own choked sobs.

"I've heard enough," Owens said as he shoved her shoulder blade and she lurched forward, falling to the floor.

She scrambled to try to stand up, but it was too late. The two zombies who were supposed to be bottling Owens's Be-Gone-Orrea had seized one of their rare opportunities for sustenance. They took advantage of the four feet of slack their chains afforded and jumped upon the young sex worker who could have so desperately used the pills they were packing. They bit the woman, ripping out large chunks of flesh with their decaying teeth. Had they still been able to think, they would have been surprised that their jaws, which were barely attached, had such strength that they could tear off her cheek in a single bite. They gnawed on her until the prostitute was merely a lump of bloody bones on the floor while the other zombies looked on with vapid expressions of envy.

The two corpses raised their heads, fresh blood dripping from their yellowed teeth, awaiting more—a dessert maybe.

Owens glanced down at the ravaged corpse on the white tiled floor and addressed Michael and Sven.

"Clean this mess up."

DIGITAL Hardcore

