

# THE LAST DAYS OF JOANNA BROADHURST

FRIDAY, MARCH 16

The weekend began with an auspicious and well-timed thud when Russell McAllister (of New Concepts Advertising – formerly McAllister, Dunleavy, Van Cleave and Ott, until Dunleavy, Van Cleave and Ott left to start a Japanese-Norwegian catering service; but that's another story) carefully placed the immaculate rear of his artistically faded \$135 ice-washed designer denims on the near corner of Joanna Broadhurst's desk, lit his 1000-candlepower boyishly charming grin, and announced, "The Volocek account is waving little red distress flags as it goes down the toilet."

Joanna, who had long ago learned to see the viper behind Russell McAllister's boyishly charming grins, shrugged with a heart that sank as fast as the account. "Russell," she said carefully, "that's precisely where it belongs."

Russell shook his head. "Jo, you don't really mean that. I know you don't."

Joanna sighed. "You can take compost and make it look like top sirloin, but no matter how nicely you garnish it, it still tastes like something the puppy left on the floor over night."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that the Proteus II is a pile of pigeon droppings, fit to be driven only to the nearest dump."

"You're mixing your species."

"And my metaphors, no doubt. Look, Russell, every automotive reviewer in the country considers the Proteus II a running gag. When it runs!"

"Which is why we were hired. To restyle its image."

"Russell! The car is junk! How do you 'restyle' junk?"

"Ah, that's the kind of challenge that makes this more than a job, it's an adventure!" He stood. "And the adventure continues tonight."

"Russell! I've got Matt coming over! He's cooking me dinner!"

"I can give you the number of a nice little Japanese-Norwegian catering service. Get your team together before they leave. I need a new concept by Monday. First thing. *Eric!*" He tossed his grin to the other side of the room and followed it over.

Joanna spent about seven seconds being stunned, then seized the desk phone. "Denny? Grab the team. We're pulling a late-nighter. Orders from God." Then she grabbed her cell. When the voicemail picked up she said, "Matt, it's me. Russell wants the Volocek team to stay over tonight. Let yourself in and keep it warm. I don't know when I'll get in, but I'll make it up to you. Don't bother texting or returning the call; we'll be incommunicado. See you later. Love!"

When she left the office, it was nearly 11:30, and they hadn't settled on anything. Her apartment was dark and the kitchen untouched; she was too tired to text.

SATURDAY, MARCH 17

She spent the day in the office with the Volocek team, wrenching out a campaign that wouldn't do too much damage to their ethics and credibility. The highlight of the day came at about three in the afternoon when, slightly crazed by a creativity overload and too much caffeine, they all tried to think of other uses for the Proteus II. The suggestions ranged from a planter for the Ford Museum in Detroit to a target for the White Sands missile range. Her personal favorite was to stuff them with pairs of Russell McAllister's designer denims, load them in cargo planes, and drop them on Syria.

She tried several times to text Matt, then tried actually calling him. After the fourth time she tired of hanging up on his voicemail. Consequently, she didn't know he'd changed his outgoing message until nearly seven, after the team had finally put together a campaign that left them at least a little self-respect. She was hoping to patch things up with a St. Patrick's Day night on the town. She had composed and jotted down a conciliatory speech during their last exhaustion break and was mentally rehearsing it, so she almost didn't notice his new greeting. Almost.

"Hello, this is Matt DelBianco," murmured the silky baritone that had won its owner dozens of lucrative radio and television voice-overs and brought him into her life. "Leave me a message and I'll get back to you. Unless you're Joanna Broadhurst. Then you needn't bother because frankly, Jo, I'm tired of it all. I'm tired of being put on hold every time Russell wants you to jump through hoops for him. You're a beautiful woman and dynamite in bed, but I need and deserve a little more than that. Goodbye and good luck, Jo. Everyone else, here's the beep."

Joanna was so shocked that Matt could be so classless that she hung up without a word. Then she almost called back to tell him what to do with himself, but that would give him too much –

"Got any plans tonight?"

"Huh?" She blinked, momentarily disoriented.

"Are you going anywhere tonight?" Denny repeated.

"Uh –" She flushed, fumbled for words. "Uh, no, no, I guess not."

"You all right?"

"Uh – yeah. Fine. What did you have in mind?"

"Just a few green beers. We're all going out and thought you and Matt might want to come along. Unless you guys have other plans?"

"That slime-bag is history."

"Great! I mean, I'm sorry. I mean – does this mean I have a chance?"

"Sure." She rose, gathered her coat, her purse, and her composure, and brushed her fingers lightly across his cheek. "Just as soon as *Motor Trend* names the Proteus II 'Car of the Year'." She headed for the door.

"Hey, as long as there's hope!" Denny called out, and then hurried to catch up with her.

## SUNDAY, MARCH 18

Joanna woke with a groan, and then spent a few minutes with her eyes closed, restructuring the previous night. It had gotten somewhat misty after the fourth or fifth beer, but she did remember running into Russell McAllister, who had switched ancestry from Scottish to Irish for the evening. She also remembered, a couple of beers later, that Russell had shown the bartender how to make a – what was it? – an Emerald Isle, a clear, delightfully green, subtly potent mixture of his own creation. He bought them – what? – two, three rounds? – and then she remembered thinking how incredibly attractive he really was and how surprised she was later that he actually wore clothes that hid his lean, muscular –

She froze, turned her head carefully, and opened her eyes. The sunlight on the sheets sent pain stabbing through her head, but she hardly noticed, so relieved was she to find herself alone. He had apparently let himself out afterward. Unless he was lurking elsewhere in the apartment.

She swung her feet over the side of the bed, and a wave of nausea sent her stumbling into the bathroom. She had done more drinking than eating since yesterday's lunch, so very little came up. When she was done and had rinsed her mouth, she stared at herself in the mirror. She had been drunk to sickness before, but this felt somehow – different. She carefully walked back to her bedroom, opened the nightstand drawer, and (with some hesitancy), withdrew a home pregnancy test she had bought New Year's Day in a moment of false panic.

While she waited for the results, Joanna made certain that Russell had, indeed, left, and then gagged down three acetaminophens in the futile hope of subduing the firestorm behind her eyeballs. By the time she was reasonably certain the capsules were going to stay down, the test was finished. She stared at the unmistakable brown ring and felt a momentary fear that Russell was an overachiever outside the office as well. She shook her head (an action she paid for with tears). She must still be a little drunk. It was obviously Matt's. She put six CD's of contemplative guitar and piano music on the changer and went back to bed.