

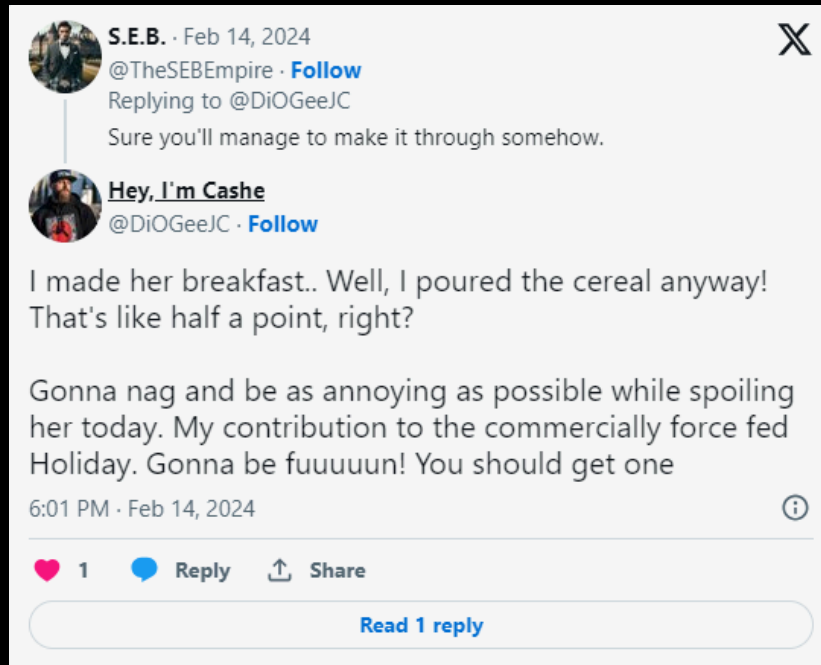
THE MORE THAN GAS CHANGE

February 14th - Loft. 84, Riverside, California

The wedding of Mr. Sean and the now Mrs. Eve Parker had been incredible. Joy, love and laughter abound, and for the odd moment here and there, Sebastian Everett-Byce had allowed himself to get lost in the occasion. The ceremony, the photographs and the speeches were all done and as the evening's entertainment kicked up into full flow, guests were on the dancefloor.

Seb, however, was not. Those guilty feet still had no rhythm.

Instead, he was looking at his phone for the thirty eighth time that day, and the tweeted reply he'd received hours earlier



You should get one...

"Fucking prick." grumbled Seb, locking his phone and dropping it with an audible clank onto the table.

"How you doing buddy?" asked Thad, his hand instinctively reaching out to squeeze Seb's shoulder as he sat down next to him.

"Exactly the same as I was when you asked me thirty-seven minutes ago." said Seb, with a half-smile. "Hunky-dory."

"Weird, but alright," said Thad. "Not that I believe you for a second. The Seb I know would be up on that dance floor "throwing shapes" which is a phrase I learned today."

"The Seb you know usually wouldn't have been up there alone," he replied calmly. "This is the first wedding I've been to since yours."

Thad wanted to reply, but held back. He knew the implication. The night in the Velvet Rabbit just over two years earlier had been unforgettable.

"It's just one day, buddy. Tomorrow it'll all be over, and you can go back to..." Thad began, but Seb cut him off.

"The apartment sold," he said. "Hand over the keys next week."

"Fuck..." said Thad. "Alright, so this makes more sense."

"I'm fine," lied Seb with an attempt a reassuring smile. He knew Thad wanted to argue, to drag him out of his seat over to the dancefloor, to make him do something, anything. But being the best best (male) friend there is, he also knew what Seb wanted most. "You should go and make sure Lauren isn't calling one of Sean's guests an idiot. If they're from Glasgow, they give no signs before they throw out a kiss."

"No-one is going to kiss my wife." said Thad. "... Probably."

"Glasgow kiss, Thad." said Seb, before miming a headbutt.

"Oh. Well fuck." said Thad, getting back up to his feet. "You going to be alright?"

"Better than ever." said Seb with another half-smile. Thad nodded, slapped his friend on the shoulder, before making his way back towards the dancefloor.


He watched for a little while longer. He watched as Lauren danced with Sean and Thad with Eve. Vin stood nearby, just off the floor with a drink in his hand, Vhodka trying to call him to the dance floor for the eighteenth time, as she had done with Seb. Ricky and his multitude of plus ones all laughing and dancing together. He watched the other "small gathering" of guests enjoying one another's company.

Pushing back his chair, he climbed to his feet, pulling his jacket from the back of the seat. Reaching out, he pulled a fresh bottle of champagne from a nearby ice bucket.

He glanced over at Sean and Thad who seemed to have both noticed him at the same time. Sean moved to walk towards him, but Thad pressed a hand against his chest. Seb raised the bottle to his friends who raised their glasses back to him.

And as he made his exit, he cast one last look at the group of revellers he was leaving behind.

"Happy Valentine's day." he said quietly.



This is a night I've long waited for, Mark.

There was a time, where I had hoped to make my way, one by one, through the entirety of CCPE. Afterall, I'd always been something of an outsider within the lets-not-call-it-a-stable. I wasn't there for the gang fights or the cheap shots that men like Mac Bane and Peter Vaughn were so willing to hand out during those heady days. I left that so-called LLC, because for the life of me I couldn't see what benefit there was to staying.

And I think you may have felt the same.

Afterall, time and again it was you and I that stood out. Through CCPE Vs The World and the one offs, it was you and I who shone the brightest and yet men like Vaughn and Bane and Miller were lauded as the true greats by those who sought to sell their own perspective. But the truth? Its that you and I who were doing truly great things. Afterall, as we stood victorious at CCPE Vs The World, you were the reigning XWF Universal Champion and I was in the midst of the greatest Championship reign in professional wrestling today.

Over five hundred days, without defeat as the UGWC Chaos Champion.

And yet, to anyone who paid less than the requisite attention it was neither you nor I who were the franchise players within CCPE. No, that fell upon those who followed blindly with their hands out, waiting for scraps from daddy, whilst we forged our own paths in this business so often in spite of to whom we were attached. A pair of roses, betwixt an immense number of pricks.

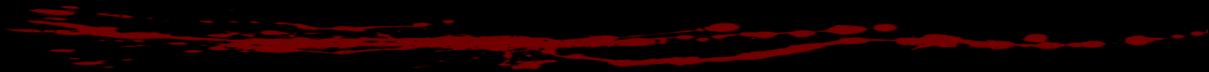
Though I suspect roses stretches the metaphor a little far.

The point remains though, Mark - you were one of the few I actually admired within CCPE by the time I walked away. My only true friends had long since left, and honourable men I'd once looked up to had been tainted by the decay that spread. I'm not surprised that once I took my leave, the final death rattles began to spread until finally others started to see the light. Yes, I had once hoped to work my way through CCPE, but my ultimate goal was never the namesake, but the real crown jewel.

The real long game was you.

But as so often happens with those who fight in packs, the willingness to face me one on one seemed to dwindle. First Chris Page himself turned tail and ran despite my provocations, and then Bam Miller himself disappeared into the ether leaving me to face the one and only Jonathan Bacchus. I'll admit - beating The Rascal King was much more satisfactory than cutting the tail off a rat, but still... My hopes of facing all that stood underneath that banner faded on that day.

And so came XWF.



February 20th - New York City, New York

It was strange to see this apartment so very empty when Seb had once expected it to always be filled with life. He never believed that this would be the last place he'd ever live, but he had thought it would always be a place to call home when visiting New York. And to think, he'd spent less than twelve hours here in the last three months.

Had it really been that long?

He remembered the last time it had been so empty - moving day. Belongings everywhere but not a single piece of furniture. It had been fun - the word "camping" had been suggested, much to his amusement. He'd pointed out how this was far too cosy and comfortable to ever be considered camping. And so... Glamping was the word settled upon.

He slowly wandered the apartment, his mind drifting back to all the memories and secrets that these walls could tell. Had it really been so bad? So terrible? He could only remember the good, but perhaps that had been the problem. Perhaps he'd been blind to the truth, and utterly delusional to the reality. Because it can't have all been happy memories. That wasn't possible.

If it were, the apartment wouldn't be so empty.

He took a deep steadying breath as he looked to the wall between the kitchen and the office, that small space and the song Eat Your Young

played in his mind. He smiled before he remembered the smell of burning blankets.

"Oof..." he said quietly.

He turned to where the couches had once been, their shadow lingering on the pristine carpets. His fingers absently moved along the tattoos on his arm, remembering his explanations for each.

"You make me feel like the one..." he said quietly. Blind. Delusional.

But then what was new?

He ran his fingers over the ledge that had onced housed two pineapples, and a multitude of toys. He turned his hand over, and waited for the little feet to move onto his hand, to feel the little roll over, and then the spikes against his palm, but they never came.

He looked up to the space on the wall where the TV had been - and he could see hours and hours of Star Wars, Harry Potter, House of the Dragon... Over and over, often on repeat. And inexplicably, the voice of General Grievous seemed to come through him.

"For everything you gain, you lose something else." he said.

He looked towards the stairs that led up to the bedroom - the one room he'd put off so far. He slowly climbed the steps that he'd climbed a thousand times, but they felt steeper than they'd ever felt before. He turned the handle, stepping inside and immediately glanced to his right into the bathroom. The mirror, as clean and clear as it had ever been.

But in his mind it began to steam, and as it did, he saw the word written in the condensation.

"Forever..." he said as the mist faded and the word slipped away.

He suddenly felt the weight in his hand. He looked down and saw the small tin of paint and the brush that he held there - had he carried this the whole time? He walked towards the wall where the bed had once been and he sat down facing the wall, legs crossed as he had that very first night. No bed, just pillows. Like everything was right with the world.

He looked at the white wall, and took a deep, steadying breath.

"A sharpie. Because it will last forever." Seb said to himself. For a few moments he stared at the heart that that was drawn there, with the letters S & S written inside. The secret that only two knew of, that had lay hidden behind the bed that had once felt like the happiest place on earth.

He wasn't sure how long he'd sat there, staring at the small drawing before he started to pry open the tin. He dipped the brush into the paint, and then ran it back and forth across the wall. A few moments later, the paint was drying, as if there were no secrets hidden beneath.

How quickly forever can be forgotten.

He sealed the tin, and left it to one side for the new owners, and climbed to his feet. He didn't stop again, not to look at the rooms, not to listen for memories. He let his feet take him. Back down those steep stairs, and to the front door. He pulled it open, the keys in his pocket.

He stopped one last time and glanced back.

"Thank you. And goodbye." he said, before pulling closed the door on the only place he'd ever lived that had truly felt like home.

Perhaps that was why he'd only stayed in hotels and on friends couches since the last night he'd stayed in this place.

Maybe nowhere else would feel like home again, no matter what he told himself.

It was here, sat with his back against the door, the realtor had found Sebastian Everett-Bryce some time later. Seb had passed the keys over, and then asked if he could have a few final moments alone.

Her obliging was a kindness.

And Seb tried with everything he could to hold on to the warmth of the memories of the place he'd once thought would last forever.

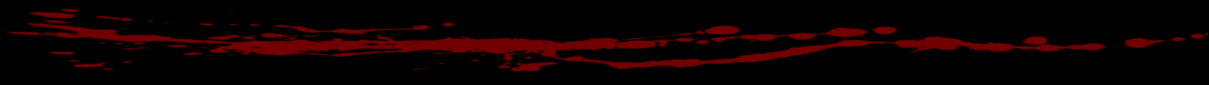
But the world grew cold around him. As the memories were already slipping away.

As he climbed to his feet, he couldn't help but wonder if this was yet another on the long and never-ending list of mistakes he'd made this last year.

Professionally all was right with the world.

But personally, things couldn't feel more wrong.

And the world grew colder still.



How we're the same isn't important though, Mark. Its how we're different - because it's our differences that bring us to where we are today. You, the XWF stalwart - eleven championships to your name and multiple 24/7 briefcases... A man so well-respected that his face adorns banners company wide. A man of such history, even the fans that boo him out of arenas do so with a kind of love that few are able to receive from the baying masses. You, Mark Flynn, are an unquestionable legend here in the XWF.

Which begs the question, with men like you here already, why is it that this company needed to bring in men like me?

I've watched you carefully on your travels. Your Cannabis Cup win, your victories at the Denzel Porter Invitational, even teamed with you on the Charity Cruise. You made a name for yourself outside of the XWF, and yet somehow you flew underneath the radar. Afterall, you... Mark Flynn... XWF Universal Champion lived by your moniker as King of the Midcard at the second annual DPI, defeating Tatiana Jolee, on the same night that I stole the show in the Main Event.

When I beat Shawn Warstein.

Because you may be a legend here, Mark, but we both can see where the future is headed. I've been here less than a month, and I'm already poised to win the Universal Championship. How long did it take for you to climb that ladder? Nine years? Here I stand, a multiple-time World Champion across more than one promotion and I'm just taking the company you've called home for so long in the palm of my hand.

Yet another to add to my vast and growing Empire.

Because this is what I do, Mark. You talk like you're the best in this business, but I live it. I am THE Best in the Business and as of yet, there's not a single person who's been able to prove otherwise. I've taken my share of losses, but this past two years, I've dominated every single company that I've been a part of, and even those I haven't? Well... I put their Champions in my pocket and it was game over. You better hope you catch me on a bad day, because on my best? Even the great Mark Flynn doesn't have what it takes to beat Sebastian Everett-Bryce.

That's why I was the first name announced for the First Blood Battle Royal.

That's why I was the first name called when XWF was looking to expand its horizons.

That is why when the XWF was looking to the future, they called The Best In The Business.

This is why, sooner rather than later, your home becomes my home.

I look forward to testing myself against you, Mark. It will be my honour.

But victory will be my pleasure.

See you Saturday, friend.



February 21st - New York City, New York

Not wanting to spend any more time than he had to in New York, Seb had flown back to London almost immediately to face the life of a Corporate Officer. Granted, he hadn't exactly spent all that much time **as** a Corporate Officer, but at least the his appearance in London would keep the shareholders happy. And so, while he was in town, Seb would do the only thing that made **him** happy.

He climbed the steps towards the pale green door, a bottle of wine in one hand, and a bag with untold gifts in the other - the rest of his merchandise from the other companies he worked for. He tapped on the

door, and stepped back. As the door opened, he looked up with a smile.

"Hello the..." he began, but Kinsey stood before him with red puffy eyes and tears running down her cheeks. "What is it? What's happened?"

"What are you doing here, Seb?" Kinsey asked.

"I've come to see you - I've been away for a couple of weeks and I've missed..." he paused for a second. "Seriously, what's wrong?"

It was testament to their history that Seb immediately began to rack his brains to remember what stupid thing he'd said or done or tweeted that might have her so upset.

"It's nothing, just... Family stuff..." she said. "Look, can we do something another time? I'm not quite in the best of moods..."

Seb stepped towards her.

"Hey, Kinsey, this is me you're talking to. I know you're not okay, and I'm not leaving you alone like this." he said. "We don't have to talk, we don't have to do anything. I'll just... sit in the corner nice and quiet and play Candy Crush or something. But I'll be here... In case you need me."

"Seb..." she said, and for a moment he thought she was going to argue but she pushed against him, her head against his chest. His hands were full, but he did his best to return her hug. She finally spoke again. "Come in."

She pulled away from him and he stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He followed her through the house into the living room - on the coffee table was a half-drunk bottle of Pinot Noir and a picture album. Seb tried to think what could have happened - a family thing. Had someone died?

"Is everyone okay?" Seb asked.

"What?" Kinsey asked, as she dropped into her seat. "Oh, yeah, no. It's nothing like that - everyone is fine. Except me."

She let out a mournful chuckle and the tears started again.

"You don't have to tell me..." Seb said, as he placed his bottle and the large bag to one side.

"They're trying to take full custody of Benjamin." she said, before she bit her lip. "They're trying to take my son away from me."

"Who is?" Seb asked, quite naively.

"George. Or at least, his father." Kinsey said. "I can't fight them on this - they have too much, and even if I do and I win... My parents could lose everything, Seb."

"Better that than to lose your son, surely?" Seb said. He realised too late that, perhaps, he wasn't supposed to be offering advice.

"That's what they said, but... They'll pull me apart, Seb. Everything. Every mistake I've made, every bad choice. And they'll make sure Benji hears it too." said Kinsey.

"Why this? All of a sudden?" Seb asked. "It makes no sense?"

"I have no idea." said Kinsey, before she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, she looked even more sad somehow. "That's a lie... I know why."

She paused and looked up at him.

"It's because of you." she said, tearfully.

"Me?" said Seb, in shock. "Why me?"

"You and I... spending time together. They don't like it, I suppose. So they want to try and hurt me." said Kinsey. "They think this will make me stop."

"Right." said Seb, pushing up from his seat. "Right, well, okay. Easy fix."

"What?" said Kinsey.

"I'll fly back to America. I can meet with Grant remotely - I can stay away. That way they don't have to worry about me. You can tell them that we're not seeing each other anymore and..." Seb began, but Kinsey let out a muffled yell.

"Oh my god, Sebastian!" she said. "Why do you always do this?"

"Do what?" he asked.

"Everytime there's a problem and someone suggests you're at the heart of it you pick up and run away." Kinsey said, her pain giving way to frustration now.

"I'm *TRYING* to help!" said Seb.

"No, you're trying to be a martyr." Kinsey snapped. "You think that just by cutting yourself out like you're some kind of disease that it will fix everything and you have no concept of just how painful the hole is that you leave behind."

"I swear, I don't know what you're..." Seb began again, but Kinsey was on a roll.

"Is that what happened with you and your ex? You blamed yourself and ran away instead of trying to fix it?" she asked.

"We don't need to talk about that." said Seb, trying to maintain his own composure. "But I have no idea what you're trying to suggest."

Kinsey let out a strangled yell of frustration.

"I know why you stopped contacting me after I got married, Seb." said Kinsey. Seb paused, like a deer in the headlights.

"... What do you mean?" he asked.

"Four years ago, I wanted to call you. You'd won a couple of titles in America and you were doing really well, and I wanted to tell you I was proud of you. So I asked Grant for your number. George saw the message and went crazy. Asked me how I could still want to be in contact with someone who had ignored me for years." she said, biting her lip. "Someone who didn't even want to fight for me."

"Kins..." Seb said.

"He said he'd come to see you, and told you that if our marriage was ever going to work, I needed to forget the past. And without a moment's hesitation, you agreed to stop contacting me." she said, the anger fading and the sadness returning.

"I did hesitate." Seb said. "I swear, I almost told him to go fuck himself, but then... He was your husband. I didn't want to be a problem. I didn't know what else to do... I never know what else to do when it's me."

"You think you take the burden on yourself. You swap the guilt for pain, and you think you're somehow saving the rest of us from something, but you have no idea the pain you leave behind." she said. "I missed my friend so much, Seb. That never went away."

"What else could I have done?" he said. Not entirely sure he was only talking about Kinsey. "What else can I do?"

"Stay. And help me to find a way through this that doesn't mean I get to keep my son but have to say goodbye to you again." she said. "George's father doesn't know you - but he hates your grandfather and your father. Jealousy. And the fact that Bastian refused to work with him years ago."

"And you think I can do something about that?" said Seb.

"Maybe." said Kinsey, picking up her wine glass. "You can be quite charming when you want to be."

Seb let out a chuckle and shook his head.

"Alright... Let me... See what I can do." he said calmly. He climbed to his feet and pulled out his phone. He quickly dialled a number and pressed the phone to his ear. "Anabel - it's me. I need you to set up a meeting... Oh what? You don't just know this time? Are you losing your touch? ... Right, yes, sorry. Won't happen again... George Morland-Heath."

Seb tilted his head as he looked at Kinsey's hopeful face.

"... Senior." He added. "Thank you, Anabel. Have a good night."

Seb disconnected the call.

"Will you stay? For a while at least?" Kinsey asked. "I need a distraction from all of this."

"I will," said Seb. "But I'll let you drink the wine."

"Couches and beds." Kinsey said with a half-smile. "How very dangerous."

"Quite." said Seb, as he pulled off his jacket, and dropped into the seat next to his friend. "Now let's be the first two people in history to watch Netflix and actually chill."

"Oh god, no-one says that anymore." said Kinsey. "Even if I did want to have sex, that in itself would have put me off."

"... Right then." said Seb. "Well... You pick the movie."

THE END