

Deny, Delay, Defend
(aka Bootstraps)
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FADE IN ON:

INT. ANDREA'S RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Crystal chandeliers. China plates. This joint is so high class, you'd get a nosebleed from entering its VIP room.

At a table, CEO DOUG MULDER (50s) and LAWRENCE CATLIN (60s) share wine, over the crumbs of dessert.

DOUG
...so then I told him: 'Money talks. The problem is, with you the only word it cares to pronounce is goodbye!'

The two laugh, clink glasses. Lawrence eyes his.

LAWRENCE
Not bad.

DOUG
Not bad? That's a Screaming Eagle Sauvignon Blanc! Hold it gingerly... You know, like your prick.

LAWRENCE
If you're comparing this meal to a hand job, then buddy - you pick up the check!

Just outside: A desperate FACE peeks through the window.

ERIC STILLWELL (40s). Frizzy hair, shabby clothes. An Andrea's janitor uniform would be an upgrade.

At the table: A tuxedo clad WAITER arrives with the bill.

Eric ducks down to avoid detection. Though wisps of his hair still shows, waves in the night wind.

At the table: Lawrence reaches for the tab. Mulder intercepts, hands it back to the waiter with a gold card.

DOUG
It's on the expense account.

LAWRENCE
I have to pay for something!

DOUG
Save your pennies for those REITS I recommended. And Melinda's next art collection, of course!

The two down the wine. Screaming Eagle's soon no more.

EXT. ANDREA'S RESTAURANT - MOMENTS LATER

Eric recons through the window.

Doug and Lawrence rise from their meal.

Angling repeatedly for a clear view, Eric squints as they retrieve jackets and depart.

A GREETER opens the door. The bell chimes. Afraid of detection, Eric ducks behind a decorative bush.

Lawrence and Doug emerge, moving slow - they're stuffed.

Lawrence climbs into a LIMO. Doug lingers at the curb.

LAWRENCE

Where's your car?

DOUG

Not here. Obviously.

LAWRENCE

Downsizing, Doug? Tsk-task... a shame.

DOUG

No! I live ten blocks away.

LAWRENCE

(waves to his pal)

Need a ride? Hop in, I'll share. Just like Uber, but for people who matter.

The two share a laugh. Eric stares through his bush. Every word agitates him more.

Doug pats his stomach.

DOUG

Thanks, but pass. The night's beautiful. So is exercise. Sometimes. I'll walk.

LAWRENCE

(chuckles)

Suit yourself, BIG boy.

Lawrence signals to his DRIVER. The sleek machine slides from the curb. Doug yells after it.

DOUG

Call me tomorrow. After two. Sylvia's so obsessed with her Soul Cycle class, she's demanding I give it a spin. Get the pun?

The limo departs. Doug adjusts his belt, checks his watch. Then takes a step towards home.

Which is Eric's cue! Detangling from the bush, he approaches Doug - looks desperate. Doug leaps to a conclusion, quick.

DOUG

Sorry, but I don't "do" beggars. I just paid a hefty bill. All outta cash.

ERIC

No, you don't understand!

DOUG

Wait. Don't tell me. Your next line is so cliché. You wouldn't *normally* ask for anything. But through absolutely no fault of your own, you've fallen on - what's the phrase? Hard times.

Eric lunges forward. Doug stumbles back.

DOUG

Don't touch me!

He waves to the Waiter through Andrea's window.

DOUG

Shoo. Scoot. Or I'll call the police.

ERIC

I don't want your money! You're Doug Mulder, right?

DOUG

You know my name?

ERIC

Your nickname is "Money" Mulder, formally the CEO of Fiduciary Health Insurance of Omaha. And you just consolidated with Aegis Medical last month!

Doug looks Eric up and down, apprehension growing.

DOUG

You don't look like the type to read *Forbes*. Are you stalking me?

Are you a "claims adjuster" copy-cat?
Open that jacket. Where's your gun?!?

Eric fumbles with his jacket, flashes Doug an eyeful of his ratty polo shirt. Doug winces at the tackiness but relaxes; there's no weapon underneath.

ERIC
See? I'm harmless.

DOUG
Perhaps. But that shirt's a felony.

ERIC
All I ask is a few minutes of your time.

DOUG
Do you know how *much* I make a hour?

ERIC
Please. Let's talk.

DOUG
About what - your horrid fashion sense?

ERIC
No. A client. One of yours.

DOUG
Fiduciary has millions of happy customers. I don't have their names memorized!

Eric's voice softens.

ERIC
It's about my daughter. Erica Stillwell.
She's very sick. About to die.

Doug's eyes widen. He inches away from Eric.

DOUG
I'm sorry. That sounds... unfortunate.
Let's pray her doctors fix her up right.

ERIC
I don't need your prayers. And they can't! Fiduciary denied her treatment.
She needs help now!

DOUG
Sir, rest assured I sympathize. But addressing disputes is customer service's jurisdiction. Call them in the morning.

Or try our online service tonight. I haven't uh, "surfed" it myself. But my IT guys tell me it's quite good!

ERIC
(snarls)
For Denying, Delaying and Defending?
That's the game you monsters play!

Swinging 180, Doug walks away from Eric at a fast clip.

EXT. ROLLING SIDE WALK BEHIND DOUG

Matching pace with Doug, Eric trails him down the street.

Storefronts roll by. One block. Two. The CEO's anger and pace escalates as he walks.

DOUG
Stop following me!

ERIC
I need you to listen. Not brush me off.
Is that so wrong?

DOUG
Harassment? That's not just wrong. It's illegal, sir!

ERIC
What SHOULD be illegal is how Fiduciary Health exploits its customers! Erica's been paying premiums to you for years. But now that she needs you, she gets denied. That's more than a conflict of interest... it's downright fraud.

DOUG
Fraud?!?! Your daughter bought a service, under very clearly defined terms.

ERIC
None of those terms mentioned taking Erica's money, then leaving her to die!

DOUG
Did she read the contract carefully? If she didn't find our product sufficient for her needs, she surely had access to higher, better tiers. And was free to shop around to our competitors!

ERIC

"Access"? That's bullshit and you know it. I have "access" to a Lamborghini. But I can't afford one...

DOUG

(snorts)

I can. Bought one last year. It's a shame you didn't save your money. 'Ginis are a sweet ride. And don't play word games with me, Mister. TECHNICALLY, your daughter has access. We all do.

Eric circles Doug as the two walk. This way, he can't be ignored. But not close enough they collide.

DOUG

Sir, your actions border on menacing.

ERIC

But I'm not touching you. So, TECHNICALLY it's not menacing. Right?

He falls back alongside. Now four blocks have slid by.

Doug groans, briefly touches his chest - near the heart.

DOUG

(to himself)

Geezus, speed walking's a bitch. That Soul Cycle class would knock me out!

ERIC

What's "a bitch" is you denying my daughter life saving care, while price gouging for profit. How much did that fancy-dancy meal cost you, Mr. CEO? Lemme guess. \$100 a head, \$200 bucks?

DOUG

(laughs)

Please! With the Screaming Eagle...

ERIC

What?

DOUG

The wine. Since you're no connoisseur, let me fill you in. That was six grand. Not including tip!

Eric gags.

ERIC
You're kidding!

DOUG
Hey. I have a right to the finer things
in life. I work hard for all I've earned.

He shoots the evil eye at Eric.

DOUG
Speaking of. If daughter what's-her-name-

ERIC
"Erica". I'm Eric. My wife and I agreed
to name the baby after me. But since she
was... uh, well, a she... we improvised.

DOUG
Touching story. Anyway, if Erica's
coverage has gaps, why don't you pitch in
for the extra, Mr. Name-Sake Dad?

ERIC
I can't! I'm an Uber driver. I can barely
break even as-is!

DOUG
Didn't bother to get an education? That's
just so sad. And no surprise.

ERIC
I did. A Masters in architecture! But
when '08 hit, contract jobs dried up.
With this economy - so have my rides.

Doug swings towards Eric - makes eye contact with him the
first time throughout this night.

DOUG
Listen, that all sounds quite tragic. But
it's not my job, Fate's or Fiduciary's to
gift people like you free ponies. In the
end, the only one responsible for you is
YOU. Don't whine. Strategize. Think smart
and plan. Sink or swim!

Suddenly, Doug drops STRAIGHT DOWN. As if off a cliff?

Or rather, into a pothole.

Eric screeches to a halt and stares down - into a twenty
foot muddy pit!

INT. POTHOLE

Dazed, Doug slumps against a grimy wall.

Tied at one end to an ORANGE CONE on the sidewalk, yellow CAUTION TAPE floats in the air, above his head.

INTERCUT BETWEEN SIDEWALK AND POT HOLE

A street sign by the hole reads: WARNING. Plumbing Repair underway.

In the hole: A PIPE gushes water into the pothole. Doug must've ripped it loose, in his fall.

The CEO staggers to his feet.

DOUG

What the fuck? Did you push me?

ERIC

I didn't touch you. You fell in yourself!

DOUG

You distracted me. I didn't see it coming.

ERIC

You came to IT. And you didn't have to listen. You chose to, your own free will!

Doug glares, wipes mud from his clothes.

DOUG

My suit's ruined!

He eyes the water pipe. It doesn't stop. Already, he's ankle deep. None of this looks good.

DOUG

Well, don't gawk like I'm some freak show. This is serious. Help me out!

(beat)

If you care as much about life and humanity as your noble speech tonight implies, that's precisely what you'll do.

Eric rolls his eyes.

ERIC

Fine.

Lacking anything better, Eric lowers the yellow tape towards Doug. It flops, limp.

Doug grabs it like a lifeline, tries to climb. The tape snaps under his weight. Dumps Doug back into mud.

DOUG

Oof!

The water's now waist height. Doug stares up at Eric.

DOUG

Speaking of thinking smart: Call 911!

ERIC

But - life doesn't owe anyone a free pony. In the end, the only one responsible for you is... you.

DOUG

Meaning?

ERIC

I'm sure you have a phone. The latest model, too. Why don't YOU call?

DOUG

Oh yeah. Good point.

Doug finds his cell. The water's fried the circuits!

DOUG

I can't. It's dead! I'll be, too, if you don't pull me out of this god-damned hole!

The water's rising. Doug frowns. Then smiles.

DOUG

Listen: Quid pro quo. You call 911, and I'll make certain little Ellen's -

ERIC

That's Erica. She's 20. Not little, but she hasn't lived her life yet!

DOUG

I promise. Erica's treatment will be paid for. Each and every precious dime. You've got my word as a member of Fiduciary's Board.

Doug reaches a hand toward Eric to shake. Metaphorically: the men are too far away to touch.

DOUG

Is it a deal?

ERIC

I guess.

Eric starts to dial - until his phone RINGS. He answers:

ERIC

Hello?

His face falls. Silently, he hangs up. Doug yells to him:

DOUG

Who was that?

ERIC

The hospital. Erica's... gone. Thanks to the delay in treatment, she went into cardiac arrest.

(sobs)

And I wasn't there for my baby! No, I was here, begging you for... well, nothing that matters anymore!

Eric turns from the hole. A panicked Doug waves.

DOUG

Wait!

ERIC

Why?

The water's up to Doug's chest now. It won't be long before he drowns.

DOUG

Because life matters?

ERIC

(snarls)

Not to you. Sink or swim, I don't care. I hope that \$6K meal you had was worth it. Because it's your last.

Eric kicks the cone into the hole. It splashes Doug, bobs next to the CEO's freaked-out face.

A dejected Eric walks away. Doug stares at the cone - the last thing he'll ever see.

DOUG

Help?

(to himself)

Fuck.

FINAL FADE OUT: