

So Close, So Far

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I glared at my phone screen as a swell of rage surged through me.

My wife was causing problems for me.

Again.

I don't need this shit.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket and tried to relax. I needed a cool head to close this business deal.

I'll deal with my damn wife later.

I was at the Hatchback, a quaint bar in the financial district, where men who spent all day handling business came to unwind. It wasn't my scene—no place that offered foie gras tacos was—but Graden had suggested it, so here I was.

After the dinner we'd had with our wives, I was pretty confident the deal was about to go through. He'd asked to meet up for happy hour tonight, and I had a feeling I'd be going home a much happier man than I'd been when I woke up this morning.

The dinner had put me in a good mood, sure. Nothing made me feel as good as winning at my job did, and this—this one was bound to be my biggest win yet.

It was almost 7 p.m., and the bar was packed with more Hugo Boss and Giorgio Armani than there was in a suit shop. Men ranging from twenty-five to sixty-five mingled with each other, hands full of whiskey or beer.

I think the entire space had three women in it, and two of them were bartending. You would've thought it was a gay bar in the West Village if you hadn't known better, but all the men in here certainly knew better.

Not that they were outright homophobic, of course—that was bad for business. They liked women. They just needed somewhere to drink and talk like men.

"Hey, there he is. Knight!" I turned to find Graden making his way over to me, another man in tow. I stood up to shake hands.

"How's it going?" I asked, smiling warmly at Graden. I was all about first impressions, but I knew that the follow-up was just as important. Ask any women I'd slept with more than once. I was good at the follow-up.

"Good, good," Graden responded, clapping me on the back. "Thanks for meeting us. This is Mickey. He's my go-to guy. An advisor, shall we say."

"Hey, Mickey," I said, shaking his hand.

This is what I'm talking about, I thought. The man had brought his business advisor. He was definitely more than interested; he was ready to talk. I couldn't wait to see the look on Dad's face.

"What are you gentlemen drinking?" I asked, waving over the bartender at the same time. She was cute, in a college-girl-from-Kansas kind of way.

"I'll take a Glenfiddich," Mickey said.

"Make it two," Graden added.

"Three Glenfiddich, neat, please," I said to the bartender, tossing her a smile. I only added a 'please' when the girl taking my order was someone I'd sleep with. And this girl, with her dimples and her southern accent, was someone I'd absolutely take home.

"Why don't you guys go find a table in the back, and I'll bring the drinks over?" I said to the men, and they nodded, walking off to find an empty space.

"Here you are," the bartender said, handing me the drinks. I gave her my card. "Start a tab, Mr. Knight?" She blinked at me innocently.

"Sure," I told her. "I can see myself being here for a while." I gave her the look, the one that ensured she knew I was interested in more than the drinks.

"I'd like that," she responded, and let out a giggle.

I took the drinks back to where Mickey and Graden had secured a table. It was so packed in here, I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd written a check to get it. Graden again slapped my back as I sat down.

"Thanks, Xavier."

"Anytime, boss," I said.

"So, let's get down to it. Mickey here wants to hear your pitch, so lay it out."

I looked right at Mickey. He seemed innocuous enough. His curly hair was graying a bit at the edges, and his crows feet were definitely visible, but his suit was Italian, and his watch was a limited-edition Rolex.

So the man had clearly made a good call at one time or another.

"Okay, Mickey. Here's the deal. Graden's hotel is clearly worthwhile property. The location alone sees projections upwards of double what other corners in the same neighborhood would give us. And it's had a good run. A stellar fuckin' run, excuse my language, gentlemen."

They both let out a laugh.

"But there's a time and a place to walk out. And I know your perspective on this," I said, looking at Graden, "is you want out now. You want out, but you want to look over your shoulder and see legacy.

"That's what I'm offering you, Graden. The chance to see a rebranding, to see a successful property become even more successful, but also the chance to see the years you put into it...recognized. Honored. Your footprint will always be there if it's a Knight hotel. That much I can promise you."

I looked from man to man, trying to gauge the reaction. I thought I'd killed it, personally, but both of them were taking time to digest. Right when I was about to say something else, to fill the silence that was slowly becoming deafening, Graden clapped his hands together.

Once, then twice. Then three times.

"That," he said, "was beautiful."

I looked at Mickey, trying to glean whatever his thoughts were, but his eyes just had the same glazed-over, deep-thought look to them.

"What's the timeline?" he asked, finally looking at me.

"We'd be looking to start aesthetic construction in six weeks, tops," I started. "Lobby, spa, and fitness center to begin. We're aiming to have a new rooftop restaurant up and running by March. We're targeting business professionals who want the downtown edge, so we're going to need to differentiate from midtown as best we can."

Mickey followed my words, nodding every couple of sentences. I thought I had him. So I continued.

"I'm thinking Mandarin Oriental meets the NoMo. We want the elegance of an established five-star property, but we want it to feel fresh," I said, about to keep talking when Graden held his hand up and interrupted.

"Wait a minute," he said, reading something on his phone. "Sorry to interrupt, but ...what a small world ...," he muttered. Then he looked at me. "Guess who my wife ran into today."

"Who?" I asked, hoping he couldn't hear the impatience in my voice.

"Your wife! Jessica said she saw her shopping with ...a man ...at La Sur, that hat shop."

He said it casually enough, but the tone change when he said 'a man' was evident. He was judging me, wondering about my wife and my relationship. Wondering who the man was.

I instantly thought of the texts Jessica sent me earlier.

God-fucking-damn it.

I couldn't have him second-guessing whether he could trust me, not now.

I needed to be relatable.

I needed to be readable, and understandable, and reliable.

"A small world!" I all but shouted, this time clapping him on the shoulder. "Those hats, gotta love 'em." When Graden looked at me, a polite smile on his lips, something had shifted in his eyes. I could see the doubt taking over.

Fuck. Rage was flowing through my veins like a raft down a lazy river. I was pissed. I downed my whiskey. My wife was out there embarrassing me, interfering with business. That was unacceptable.

I didn't give a shit about who she was with privately when eyes weren't around to see her. I did what I wanted, and she could do what she wanted.

But in public?

We were the fucking picture of love and loyalty. We bled marriage, day in and day out. How could she have been so stupid?

I wanted to get out of the bar immediately and tear into her, let her know just how goddamn idiotic she'd been. Warn her about being anywhere in public again with that guy, or any other guy that wasn't me.

No, fuck that. She'd never see that guy again, public or private. It was the least she could do, since she was running around town swiping the black card on fancy hats.

One more glance at Mickey and I knew the productivity of the night was over. Once I left, the men were gonna talk through whether they could work with a man who couldn't keep the reins on his wife.

A man who either didn't know what his wife was up to, or didn't care.

Hell, I thought, let them have the conversation now. I opened an email on my phone, pretending to read it and react.

"Gentlemen," I interrupted, "I'd love to sit here with you all night, but a colleague needs my help. I'm sorry to cut this one short." They both stood when I did, nodding at me.

"We'll be in touch," Graden said, the camaraderie in his voice gone.

"Perfect," I said. "Goodnight."

I was so angry that I walked full speed ahead out of the bar, completely forgetting about my card and the southern bartender with the dimples.

It wasn't until Marco was cruising up the West Side Highway that I remembered both and felt even more fury enter my bloodstream.

She fucked with my business.

She fucked with my sex life.

She was going to have to learn her place.