

Trying

Brad

Despite it being three in the afternoon, the restaurant was packed. I saw all of the speed-dating participants through the window, and I hesitated.

Perhaps this isn't a good idea ...

I shook my head. I was being ridiculous. It was just a date, a lot of dates...like interviews.

That was it. I'd interviewed thousands of candidates for Knight Enterprises. Could today be so different?

Finding a good COO or assistant was just as difficult as finding a partner.

Only, it had been fifty years since I'd last interviewed to fill a position like that, since I'd looked for a significant other.

I knew that some people went through lovers like shoes. That had never been for me though. Call me old-fashioned, but I believed that there was one person out there for everyone.

I'd already had my one.

But then Angela's words from last night came floating back to me. Maybe she was right. Maybe I didn't need to find another one. Maybe I could find a -three- or a -four-.

After all, I'd had a handful of assistants before Ron, each with their own aptitudes and quirks, but I'd relied on each of them just the same.

"Are you here for the senior speed-dating event, sir?"

I turned to find a young woman poking her head out of the restaurant door and realized I must have appeared quite peculiar standing out here, peering through the window.

I took a deep breath. "I, ah, yes. I suppose I am."

"C'mon in then." She smiled brightly and held the door open for me. "We're about to get started."

Inside, she handed me a nametag and a permanent marker.

I quickly scribbled my first name on the sticker and then peeled off the back and stuck it to the lapel of my jacket.

"Great"—the young woman squinted at my nametag—"Brad. If you could take a seat, we will get things rolling."

I scanned the restaurant.

The tables were set up as singles, with two chairs. The seats were filled with men and women, most with varying shades of silver hair.

There was only one chair left open, opposite a plump lady with large mustard-colored glasses and a harshly angled bob.

The look was not the most professional, but she was put together with an artistic flare. Creativity was a trait that I'd found to be an asset in colleagues. Perhaps this wouldn't be as terrible as I suspected.

The woman threw her hand up and waved as she saw me approaching. "Hiya!"

"Hello, how do you do?" I took my seat across from her.

"Very well!" she chirped. "The name's Dorothy. My friends call me Dot."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dot. I'm Brad."

"Brad?" Her violet-painted lips fell open. "This must be fate. The hero of my last book was named Brad."

"You like to read?" I guessed.

"Oh no, I'm a writer," Dot said.

Well, that was a respectable profession. "Would I know any of your work?"

Dot smiled a slick smile and raised one of her drawn-on eyebrows. "Do you like western erotica?"

The next two interviews were as terrible as the first.

Each started well. The women looked polished enough and carried themselves well. But halfway through the "date," I would discover something unsavory.

If it wasn't writing porn, it was an unhealthy relationship with pet cats or a dislike of Spanish food.

There was no one here. The closest I had come was a -twenty-seven- at best. It had been silly to believe that any woman would ever be able to come close to the perfection of my Amelia.

I was trying to look interested as the latest woman told me about her recent trip to the Bahamas when something caught my attention.

I turned to find a band setting up in the far corner of the room and, with them, the singer from my retirement party.

Penny, Xavier had called her.

Just as at the yacht club I suddenly found myself standing, inexplicably gravitating toward her.

"Pardon me, one moment," I muttered to my date, without so much as a second glance over my shoulder.

I cut through the tables to the band. "Excuse me?"

"Yes?" Penny turned to face me. A smile lit up her face. "Oh, hello, Mr. Knight."

I felt my cheeks flush.

She remembers me.

"Please, call me Brad."

She had one arm on a mic stand and shifted her weight to pop one of her curvaceous hips to the side. "All right, Brad. How is retirement treating you?"

I swallowed thickly. "I'm sure you can see based on where we are."

Penny laughed. The sound was melodic, like spring breezes rippling through leaves.

"I think this place is lovely," she said.

"Not as lovely as your singing voice," I said.

Her cheeks darkened, and I felt my heart flutter like I was thirty years younger.

"Thank you," she said.

"What made you want to be a singer?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't really, it's just a part-time job. I just graduated from NYU actually."

"The arts?"

"Business, actually." She laughed at my surprised expression. "Who'd have thought it would be hard to find a job in finance in the Big Apple? Certainly not me."

"But you look like you belong on the stage," I said earnestly. "Why business?"

"I get that a lot actually" ... She turned her chin up, thoughtful. "To be honest I'd much rather be curled up at home, a cup of tea at my bedside and a good book in my hands. But hey ...gotta keep the lights on somehow."

"I'm suddenly feeling very grateful toward your electrical bill. How else would I be able to enjoy your voice?"

She laughed sweetly. "Um, thanks, I think?"

"It's just a shame that your audience isn't very attentive." I looked out at the strange collection of seniors, their quirks and kinks on full display.

"I think it's sweet," Penny said. "It's never too late to find that special someone." She sounded wistful, and I could see the faint trace of pain hidden in her eyes.

Her words made my stomach flip.

Maybe she's right ...

"They look like a fun group," she added, trying to lighten up the suddenly somber mood.

"I've been out of the game for a while, but last time I checked, there was nothing fun about playing cribbage and reading knitting patterns," I replied.

Penny's dark eyes twinkled. "What is your idea of fun, then?"

My reply came quickly. There was no stopping it. "I could show you, if you like."

Penny's eyebrows shot up, and my breath caught in my chest.

I'd been too forward.

What was I thinking?

She was less than half my age.

I brought my hand up to the back of my neck, trying to find the words to apologize.

Before I could, Penny said, "I'd like that a lot."

It was my turn to be surprised. "Really?"

Penny blinked, and it looked like her brain was catching up to her mouth. She turned bright red as she waved at the musical equipment behind her.

"I, uh, finish at nine," she stammered. "If you feel like sticking around, maybe we could grab a drink ...?"

"G-great. I will." I jammed a thumb over my shoulder. "Better get back."

She smiled at me, and suddenly I felt like I'd grown wings and could fly. "Okay. Talk to you later, Brad."

Angela

"Holy crow!" I said under my breath as I shouldered my way through the door of Dustin's cafe.

"No kidding!" Em replied from behind me.

The place was packed, every table full, the line trailing all the way to the door.

I'd never seen it so busy.

"Our table is taken," Em pouted.

"There," I said, pointing toward a slouchy sofa against the far wall, where a couple was pulling on their coats. "I think they are leaving. Why don't you go save the table and I'll wait in line to order?"

Em nodded and split off into the crowd.

I'd been excited to meet up with my friends for our weekly catch-up this morning.

It looked like Dustin would be too busy to join though.

He was behind the counter with Ben, the two of them in a strange dance as they fluttered between the cash register and the espresso machine.

Finally, Dustin caught my eye and waved me up to the register. "Hey, Angela!"

I hesitated, unsure if I should leave my place in line. It wouldn't be fair if I got special service just because Dustin was my friend.

"I'll bring your drinks over," Dustin called, leaving me no choice.

I felt a few pairs of eyes follow me as I moved to join Em on the couch.

It seemed word of my secret coffee joint was out.

"So," Em said as I plopped down beside her, "how are things going with you and Xavier? Did you have the talk?"

I looked around the busy room. There were too many people nearby who could overhear private conversations.

"Everything's great!" I lied. "How about you and Lucas?"

I hoped she'd understand why I brushed off the question. That she wouldn't push for more.

Luckily, though often a concern, Em opened up easier than a book. "I don't know what to do, Angie."

"About what?"

"Lucas and I have been trying to get pregnant," she revealed.

"That's amazing." I said. "I'm so happy for you!"

And I was. I couldn't think of anything better than having a little niece or nephew running around. But I could feel the sinking feeling that began to grow in my stomach.

Em and I had always been on the same page. We'd been in the same class all through middle school and high school, had gone to college at the same time, and gotten our first jobs within weeks of each other.

Now, it felt like a gulf had opened between us. Em was talking about having children. I was still a virgin.

When had I fallen so far behind?

Em shook her head, and tears brimmed in her eyes. "No, it's not. We've been trying since our honeymoon, and it's just not happening. I've tried everything. I stopped drinking caffeine. I put my feet up on the wall after we have sex. I'm tracking my ovulation. None of it is working."

I pulled my friend into a hug. "Hey, hey. Everything will be fine."

"What if it's not? What if there is something wrong with me, or Lucas, and we can't have children?" Em sniffed.

"There are other options," I said. "But you're getting too far ahead of yourself here, Em. It's only been a few weeks. You can't rush this kind of thing. It will happen in its own time."

Em nodded weakly. "You're right. I'm being silly."

"I have something that might cheer you up," I said. "I need to hire you."

"Hire me?"

I nodded. "I might be planning a big event in a few weeks, and I'm going to need centerpieces. I couldn't think of anyone else I'd rather have make the arrangements."

"An event?" Em said.

"Yes. I got my first client," I explained. "She works at Animas. I'm organizing a dinner for them this week, and if that goes well, they've asked me to organize their annual fundraiser."

It was Em's turn to pull me into a hug. "That's fantastic news!"

Dustin arrived with our lattes then. He placed the mugs on the table and collapsed onto the couch between us. "So, what have I missed?"

"Don't worry about us!" Em shoved his arm. "You've got enough on your plate. This place is packed!"

Dustin wiped his brow. "I know. I've already sold three pieces today."

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I quickly fished it out as my friends continued to chitchat.

Didi

Everything is looking great for the dinner!

Didi

I'm really impressed!!!

I smiled at the messages.

So far, planning the dinner had been a breeze. Everything was set to go. And more importantly, Didi seemed excited about my work.

If things continued like this, there was no doubt in my mind that I would get to plan the auction as well.

Angela

I'm so glad to hear that!

Didi

There are just a couple last-minute changes

Didi

Another guest just replied to the invite

Didi

So we will need another seat at the table

Didi

She's also vegan and allergic to soy

Didi

The director also changed his flight and won't land until 7 now

Didi

So the meal needs to be pushed back an hour

My heart sank in my chest as message after message appeared on the screen. There was less than twenty-four hours until the dinner.

How could I possibly finish all this in time?