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Crown Royal

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CROWN ROYAL

MANDY SCHMITT

“If I would have met you instead of my wife, I would have never gotten divorced.” I continued to wash the same already clean shot glass, hoping to look busy enough to not be talked to. “She’s a real bitch, my ex-wife. Cheated on me, ya know?”

Acknowledging that my attempted suitor was seemingly unfazed by being ignored, I looked up from the sink. Big guy. Blonde ponytail. He smelled like cigarettes mixed with Crown Royal. He looked to be in his 40’s, but the smoker’s wrinkles around his mouth and sallow color to his skin proved that time and harmful habits hadn’t been kind to him. The name on the card he used to pay for his double Crown on the rocks read Paul Isman – finally, a face for the name. Everybody knew everybody in Stanford, but Paul had become somewhat of a joke after local EMTs were dispatched to his trailer. He had burned himself while drunkenly trying to make French fries.

“That sucks,” I said, trying to avoid giving him anything remotely considered encouraging.

“Yeah,” he continued, “What can ya do though? I wouldn’t expect someone like you to understand, guys probably worship the ground you walk on. If they don’t, they’re stupid. I would treat you better than you thought possible.” The way his eyes lingered a little too long made me feel dirty. I looked back down into the sink, fearing he might notice the anxious look on my face.

The bar I worked at, The Waterhole, was your average small-town, country bar, or so I assumed. With the exception of work, I avoided bars like that at all costs. The patrons were nice enough unless you were a woman, non-white, or non-Christian, but this was true of Stanford in general. People were quick to judge and even quicker to spread an interesting rumor. And as the only bar in a 30-mile radius, The Waterhole’s patrons were a mishmash of locals and travelers.

My fellow bartenders were much older than me and had learned long ago that staying quiet and looking pretty was the best way to make tips. Being young and liberal, I felt I had the right to not feel threatened while trying to do my job, and in the beginning, I tried to call men out on their sexism. This mentality was scoffed at, and I was often told that it was “cute” that I was “so sassy.” I once told a man who wouldn’t stop harassing me that I’d rather choke on my spit and die than ever touch him. He responded by saying that he “liked his girls fiery.” Eventually, I gave up on my pursuit for the greater good of womankind and settled into the “pretty but quiet” routine of my coworkers. Staying quiet was a foreign concept, but the money was very reinforcing, in every sense of the word.

I already knew the story of Paul and the “cheating bitch of an ex-wife,” because she was my coworker. And even if I hadn’t worked with her, I would have still heard the story, because nothing is secret in a small town. The way Paul recounted the events surrounding the tumultuous love triangle was much different than the way I had heard it from Molly, and something about Paul’s vehement claims of adultery made me doubt he was being truthful. Prior to meeting Paul, I couldn’t believe that Molly could do anything malicious, let alone cheat on her husband; upon meeting Paul, I started to understand if maybe the idea crossed her mind. Molly was my favorite coworker. Her hair curled in neat ringlets and bounced whenever she moved. She was always excited to see you, and not the feigned “we-work-together-so-I’m-nice-to-prevent-conflict” kind of excitement either. Molly never missed a day of work and was someone who would always cover a shift if the need ever arose.

Paul prattled on about the affair, repeating that Molly was nothing “but a cheating bitch” several times. Once during the “conversation” I mentioned to Paul that I had heard the story a little differently. For the first time that night, he looked away from me and said, “Molly has always been good at convincing people that she isn’t a bitch.” After four double Crowns, hours of bashing Molly, and no other customers, Paul announced that he had other things he needed to do. “I should make this day productive,” It was already 10 p.m., “But do you like rodeos? Because the Great Falls’ rodeo is in town and one of my buddy rides. He could get you tickets if you wanted.” Excitement and something resembling lust flitted across his face. “Rodeos are cruel to the animals.” “Well if you change your mind, you can just call me. My number is seven – aren’t you gonna write this down?” “I have a good memory.” Paul’s eyebrows furrowed, but he continued to give me his number. I felt a little guilty for lying, but did he actually think that this encounter had ended in a way that would result in a date? Paul headed for the door after leaving a five-dollar tip

and wink. The dirty feeling returned.

Paul had been my only customer for over two hours, so after he left I locked the door behind him. I began my closing-time routine. I set the stools with permanent butt prints on the bar, sprayed everything with an excessive amount of bleach, and took a shot of vodka – my shifter. While I was counting my tips – \$25 for 6 hours of work – the bar phone rang. “The Waterhole, bar and restaurant, how may I help you?” I said, praying that the call wasn’t for something that would dirty my now-clean kitchen. “Hey, it’s Paul. So when do you get off shift?” I took the phone away from my ear and looked at the caller ID number. Sure enough, the number started with a seven. “Hi Paul, I’m just now closing up. Did you forget something here?” “No, I just want you to come over after you’re done. I live in the trailer park by the highway, and I live alone...without neighbors, if you know what I mean.” Once again I took the phone away from my ear to look at the number. Started with a seven, not a prank call. “I’m tired, Paul.” I hit the end button on the phone and placed it back in its cradle. I hurriedly grabbed my purse and coat, turned off the lights, and left the bar, worried that Paul would come back to make his proposition in person. As I was locking the deadbolt, I heard the bar phone ring from inside and was relieved that I didn’t work the next day.

“Molly has been here since noon, I think she’s waiting for you,” Rhonda, the morning shift bartender, said to me as I clocked in. “For me? Why would she be waiting for me?” Rhonda’s expression was serious, “Paul told everyone.” “Told everyone what?” “Told everyone about how you said you’d go out with him, but then stood him up.” The blood left my face and my stomach clenched as I avoided Rhonda’s accusing stare. “I never said that I’d go out with him. He’s old enough to be my dad.” “Oh, well that’s not what he said, and I’m pretty sure that’s why Molly is here. Like I said, she’s been drinking since noon.” Rhonda clocked out, but took a seat at the bar; she had never passed up a moment to be involved in drama. Rhonda epitomized every resident of Stanford. She had been the victim of vicious rumors, but that didn’t stop her from spreading the ones that weren’t about her. I steeled myself, and in my head, I knew exactly what I was going to say. I had to be sympathetic, yet truthful. I needed Molly to know that I never agreed to any of the claims Paul was making, that I wouldn’t do that to her. Molly was sitting at the bar, near the register. I walked over to her and noticed several shot glasses in front of her. “Listen, Molly,” I began. Molly looked up at me, and I saw something in her eyes I had never seen there before – a frenzied, drunk rage. Molly looked at me, eyes glassy with the drunk of Crown Royal, and grabbed me by the front of my dress. No one had ever put their hands on me like that before. I stared at Molly,

unsure on how to proceed, because my pre-scripted conversation didn't go anything like this. "I'm sorry," I ended up blurting out. Molly began sobbing, saying things like "You're just so young," and "Paul would never choose me over you." She looked defeated. The pain of the divorce was evident in her eyes, although I never understood why she thought that Paul being gone was a loss. I guessed that maybe there was some truth to the cliché saying about how you can't help whom you love. But it was also rumored that everything they owned was in Paul's name, so Molly was left with very little after he forced her out of his trailer. I guessed that maybe that had more to do with it than love. "Molly I need you to know that whatever Paul is saying about me isn't true. I wouldn't do that to you." I said. "I wanted to believe that Paul wouldn't do that. I didn't want to blame him," Molly said through tears. I tried to swallow the rising lump in my throat, but I couldn't deny the guilty feeling in the pit of stomach any longer. I had chosen to stay pretty and quiet, in the hopes of making a few more tips. I had ignored my beliefs and feelings for money, and it hadn't hurt just me.

I never saw Paul again, except for once at the local gas station. He cornered me in the back by the bathrooms, the smell of cigarettes and Crown stronger than I remembered. I desperately wanted to get away – my eyes watered, I held my breath, I was trapped – but I stood taller and looked into Paul's eyes. "I really want you to come over," he slurred at me, as he reached out, trying to touch my hair. I instinctively slapped his hand away; every cell in my body shuddered at the thought of him touching me. He looked surprised but said, "That's okay I like it rough," and advanced toward me. In that moment I saw Paul as every guy that had ever called me their babe without knowing me; he was every guy that had stared at my ass when they thought I wasn't looking or that had described all the things they would do to my body while I was trying to work. "Never, and I mean never, talk to me again," I said as I pushed passed him. "Oh, another thing, leave Molly alone too."