

Just a Moment and a Drink

I just needed a moment and a drink. I sat on the barstool and flagged the bartender. I'd been there before; he knew what to pour. I wrapped my hands around the glass, and I pulled a long, slow sip. It went down easy and smooth. I breathed in and relaxed my shoulders, closed my eyes, and blocked out the din of the restaurant. This was my private time.

Maybe I should have been home with my wife eating dinner or watching the game with friends. Maybe, but I wasn't. I was sitting at a bar in a small town twenty-five miles from home, cupping my drink, and breathing in the lingering smell of fried food.

I hadn't had a full night's sleep in almost a year. My days were spent rebuilding an office and running a business; my nights were spent saving the world—not literally saving the world, but protecting the ones I loved from fires or robberies or bad men with guns. Going home after work meant going to sleep, and going to sleep meant nightmares. So I stalled, sat at a bar, and ordered a drink.

The bar was centered just inside the front door. On a slow day, a half-dozen people will spread around the heavily shellacked rectangular structure while diners eat at the tables to the left and right. Today was a slow, dark, drizzly day. I sat and drank and blocked out the hushed sounds of patrons. Or maybe I blocked out the memories. I ordered my second drink, glad for a barkeep who knew how to mind his business. A man set his phone on the bar next to me and smiled. "Hey, you're Scott Headley, right?"

He stood about six feet, dressed in a parka with some logo on it. He held his hand out for me to shake. I wasn't on my best behavior. I nodded.

"Scott, I've just got to ask you about what happened."

I've been asked this question ten thousand times.

“My wife and I, we’re clients at the Lake Wales office. My wife, she was really shaken up. After the incident, she couldn’t stop talking about how sweet and nice those women were.

You’ve just got to tell me.”

“I’m sorry, it’s not something I talk about.” I smiled, or tried to smile, and shook my head.

“Please, Scott, it would mean the world to me. I know my wife has been so concerned.”

“You know . . .” I paused. I didn’t recall his name.

“Jake—Jake and Brenda Johnson.”

“Jake, I’m sorry,” I mumbled in a soft, polite tone. “I just came here for a drink and a moment.”

“Just a few minutes, Scott.”

“Jake.” I didn’t continue my thought. I raised the glass up to my lips and pulled another sip.

“Sure, sure, you have your moment.”

I sighed, audibly relieved. Jake Johnson retreated to a table on the other side of the bar where he could discuss the weather or the kids or local politics with his female companion.

Lake Wales is a small rural town in Central Florida. Surrounded by lakes and farms, it is home to an orange juicing plant, about fourteen thousand people, and my small field office. I own and manage an insurance company. My employees are handpicked by me. Most start at the bottom and work their way up. A year ago, two of my shining stars died because of a fire that started in my office.

Ever since then, I've fought to keep everybody I know safe. I closed my eyes and blocked the memory. I drained the last sip of my glass and gently set it on the bar, listening to the sound of the ice as it rattled against the tumbler.

"Scott." Jake Johnson appeared at my side.

Startled, I looked up.

"Scott, you've had your moment. You've got to tell me what happened."

Why not, I thought, the alcohol limited my sensibilities. "Okay, are you sitting with your wife?" I pointed to his table.

He nodded.

"Great, just let me settle up, and I'll meet you over there."

A few minutes later, I pulled out the chair between them. Brenda smiled at me, her face fresh and open—no cares in the world. But I expected she would be the one who needed a drink and a moment shortly.