

## Complimentary

Like so many next mornings he contemplated the previous night's mistakes. A lump under the covers moved and a hand snatched the sheet. The man wrenched the sheet back and wrapped it around his waist as he forced himself onto wobbly legs.

"Baby, it's cold," the lump said. Then it burrowed under the blanket and was quiet.

A sliver of light peaked through the seam in the blackout shade to guide him through the spinning hotel room until his feet found the cold marble of the bathroom floor. He let the sheet fall so that the only thing he was wearing was his wedding ring. A misfired stream of piss sprayed the tile. He dragged the sheet through it with his foot. The poor maid. Was there a grosser job than Las Vegas maid?

He sat on the toilet seat, elbows on knees, head in hands. The ringing of slot machines still jostled inside his skull. He hadn't even wanted to come here. It was just a small conference, and he had already hit his sales target for the year. Hell, his numbers could carry him through the first quarter of next year. He could've passed a lie-detector test when he told his wife he had planned to cover the trade show booth, take his top client to an early dinner, and call it a night.

He hadn't set out to cheat. Never did. Booze was as good a scapegoat as any, and it was his trusty go to. Saturate his brain with alcohol and it was sure to conjure up some stupid ideas. A wave of nausea struck, and he willed the bile back to his stomach. The moment passed and he staggered back to the bed where traces of cigar smoke and Lysol spray lingered like ghosts.

She was sitting upright, her back propped against a pillow and a sheet pulled to her chin. "Hey Sleepyhead," she said.

Complimentary

Why did she still have to be there? Only time healed the guilt, and her presence was a cog in the clock's gears. He regarded her in the dim light. Her long blonde hair and full lips triggered memories of the night before, and he retreated under the covers.

"I had fun last night, Frank" she said.

The details were hazy, but he knew he had enjoyed it too. "Yeah, it was good."

"You were funny," she said. "Do you even remember anything?"

Sure. Boring conference, shaking hands with clients, dinner with Tom, a few hands of blackjack. A few more hands, more drinks and so on. He remembered *her* of course. Brittany? Bethany? Formfitting white dress, not much more than an ace bandage covering her midriff. Way out of his league. She was a professional. The kind that charges for it.

"I remember you taking advantage of me," he said.

She elbowed him. "Sure, I forced your unwitting penis into my scheming vagina."

He laughed and immediately felt guilty. Why were they trading jokes like old lovers and sharing the bed well into the next day? He needed to piece the night together and then send her on her way. "Did we use protection?"

She turned to him. "Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"You paid extra to go bareback. You said using a condom was like riding a tricycle with training wheels."

"What? That doesn't even make sense."

"That's what you said. A tricycle with – "

"Yeah, I heard you," he said. His stomach was churning. "Are you clean?"

"STDs, you mean?" She shrugged. "I get tested every two months."

Complimentary

"When was the *last* time you were tested?"

"Two months ago."

"How many guys have you slept with since then?"

"One."

"Bullshit."

"It's true. You're the only one I *slept* with. You paid extra for that too." She shrugged as if to say, *hey I only work here, don't blame me*, then she added, "If you want to know how many guys I've *banged*, that would be different."

She rose from the bed and opened the shade. As his eyes became accustomed to the light, he got a better glimpse of his bedmate. If there was a stereotype for a prostitute, she wasn't it. A trace of makeup, natural lashes, natural tits, a few tiny freckles across the bridge of her nose. She had a cute bounce to her step that reminded him of a puppy.

"You look so – young." He had almost said *innocent*, but the substituted word wasn't any better.

She smiled and fell back to the bed.

"I'm such an idiot," he said. "I'm the only guy on the planet who pays a hooker extra money for a cuddle and the clap."

"You'd be surprised," she said. If she was offended, she didn't show it. "If it makes you feel better, I'm not a hooker. Not for long anyway."

"Oh?"

"I'm a dancer."

"Tap? Ballroom?"

Complimentary

"You're funny," she said. "I've pretty much put myself through college working as an exotic dancer. I only do the sex thing on weekends. My friend hooked me up a few months ago."

"Nice friend."

"Said the guy who cheated on his wife with a hooker."

"Dancer," he said. "What do I owe you, anyway?"

"Fifteen hundred."

"Christ. I'm not sure I even have it."

"You have it." She reached into the drawer of the end table, pulled out a stack of black chips, and let them fall to the bed. "You won. At the tables, I mean. I pulled you away while you were ahead."

"Thanks for not stealing them after I passed out."

"Why would I steal them, silly? I'm not a thief." She wagged her bare ass to the wet bar and poured two waters. "You need to hydrate."

He had been trying to muster some animosity or at least detachment toward the girl, but he found himself feeling glad at her company. "What's your name again?"

"Brianna."

"Is that your real name?"

"Does it matter?"

"I guess not," he said. He grimaced as the water went down. Then he went back to the bathroom and dry heaved until his guts almost tore through his old hernia incision.

When he returned, she was wearing last night's dress and sitting on a chair reading with her long legs propped on the table. Wide-rimmed bifocals concealed her face more than the dress did her body.

Complimentary

“Nice glasses. I didn’t realize you were half-blind.”

“I shacked up with *you*, didn’t I?”

“Good point.” He flopped on the couch and almost knocked over a glass. He plucked it from the end table and scowled at its contents. Cigarette butts bobbed in the flat brown liquid. The reek of whiskey almost made him hurl, and he slid it to the other end of the table. He reached over to set his water glass in its place.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Trying not to vomit,” he said.

“That’s disrespectful, you know?”

“Huh?”

“You’re not supposed to put anything on top of a Bible.”

Frank noticed it for the first time. Sure enough, the words Holy Bible were stamped on the leatherbound surface of the object that had served as his coaster since the night before.

Brianna stormed over. “Nice job, asshole. It’s full of condescension.”

“Condensation, you mean?”

“Whatever. Maybe it’s crying because of all the shit it’s witnessed.” She dabbed the cover with the hem of her dress and put it in the drawer. Then she sat at the opposite end of the couch with her arms crossed.

He started to scoot toward her then stopped. What did he care if a hooker disapproved of where he placed his drink? “Don’t you think a Bible in a hotel room is cliché? We’re in Vegas not church. It’s pretty ridiculous if you ask me.”

“I didn’t ask you,” she said. “I think Vegas is a perfect place for a Bible. It’s like a flower growing through a crack in the concrete.”

Complimentary

“Poetic.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But don’t you think that after all the drinking, gambling, drugs, and sex, someone might want to reach out for a little inspiration on how to live their life better?”

Frank stared at his feet.

“I mean, you’re married right? Kids?”

He nodded without looking at her.

“Life isn’t always what you expect. Not what I expected, anyway,” she said. “I grew up going to Sunday school. A good Christian girl if you can believe it.”

Obviously, she hadn’t spent her childhood with her legs spread. What was she, early twenties? It wouldn’t have been that long ago. “What happened?”

“Lots of bad shit,” she said. “Made me question if there was a God why he didn’t do anything to stop it. Anyway, I left.”

“Ran away?”

“Not like a runaway living on the streets, if that’s what you mean,” she said. “I finished high school and left home when I turned eighteen. Got an apartment. I’m almost done with college and no debt.”

“I’m sorry I put my drink on the Bible,” Frank said. He meant it too. Probably meant it as a metaphor for all the other stuff he was sorry for.

“Thank you,” she said. She flipped sideways so that her bare legs stretched across his own. “I’ve seen worse.”

“Oh? Worse than my causing the Bible to be condescending?”

She punched him in the arm. “I said condensation, you oaf. I’m not stupid. And yeah, worse. I had a friend who used to tear pages out for rolling papers.”

Complimentary

“That’s pretty bad.”

“We’re not friends anymore. Mm, that feels good.”

Frank looked up. He hadn’t even realized he was massaging her feet. I’m such a bastard, he thought. “What’s up with your feet, anyway?”

“I told you, I’m a dancer.”

“I thought you meant stripper.”

“That too. But I did ballet most of my life. Ballet shoes destroy feet. Why don’t you try shoving a rectangular foot into a triangular shoe?” She waved her other foot in his face. “Do this one.”

He gently cradled it and pressed his thumbs into her arch. “A Bible-thumping ballerina. I never would’ve pegged you for that.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” she said.

Indeed, they could. The fogginess in his head was starting to subside, and he was seeing her through clearer eyes. She could’ve passed for one of the junior sales reps on his team. Attractive, smart, ambitious. “What if you stopped now?”

“To be fair I haven’t Bible-thumped or pirouetted in quite some time.”

“I’m mean the – you know – sex for money thing. You said you were going to stop soon. What if you just called it quits? Like today.”

“I don’t know, Frank. What if you stop cheating on your wife starting today?”

“Huh? Did I offend you? I mean, don’t you think it’s a little dangerous –”

“Let’s be honest. You don’t care about me or my safety. Sure, you’ll ask for my number and try for some ass on your next business trip. Wouldn’t it be great for your ego if I gave it up because I wanted you and not because you paid me? And less chance of me infecting you. Am I right?”

Complimentary

He didn't answer.

"When I stop doing this and settle down," she said, "I want to be with someone who is the exact opposite of you. Someone who worships me and loves me and wouldn't even think about sticking his dick in another woman."

Her words seemed to carry a finality like she was about to demand payment for services rendered and storm out of the room. But she hadn't pulled away, and he hadn't stopped caressing her feet. Silence hung in the air. His guilt had metastasized from a small knot in his stomach to the rest of his body, and he longed for the familiarity of his wife. But damn if he didn't want to embrace the woman in front of him, kiss her lips, make love to her.

Instead he said, "do you think it's a sin to take a Bible without paying for it?"

"What? Like stealing it?"

"You know. The hotel room Bible. What is the etiquette? Is it complimentary like the shampoo and lotion, or does it stay with the room?"

Her muscles relaxed as he worked his way to her calves.

"I suppose it depends on the motive," she said.

"Meaning?"

"If they took it because they wanted a lifetime supply of rolling papers, then that would be a sin."

"True."

"What if they took it because they're trying to do better, be better?" she said. "Like they're drowning, and they didn't realize it until they opened the book. And they instinctively knew it was their lifeline. Then I would say it's complimentary."

"Makes sense." He gave her leg a final squeeze. "I need some ice."



Complimentary

“Want me to grab some at the ice machine?”

“No, I got it. The walk’ll do me some good.”

“Okay. I’ll be right here when you get back.”

He threw on some shorts and grabbed the ice bucket. The ice machine was on the opposite end of the floor. He soon found that an out of order sign was taped to it. He tried the button and the innards hummed, but nothing dropped into his bucket.

The elevator took him down a floor. As he exited, he realized he’d left Brianna in the room with his watch, phone, laptop, and stack of blackjack chips. He debated whether to run back, but in a weird way, he trusted her. And she did say she wasn't a thief. Was he less worried about his belongings and more worried that she, herself, would be gone?

A few minutes later, he filled the bucket, hurried back to the elevator, and pushed the button. Anxious fingers drummed on the wall as he waited. Should he ask for her number? It would be shameful. Hell, she had predicted it.

When he returned to the room, she was no longer sitting on the couch. Nor was she in the bedroom or the bathroom. Gone.

The urge to sprint through the door and hunt for her in the casino lobby had spiked his adrenaline and suppressed the hangover. Instead, he took a calming breath and mechanically swept through the room. As far as he could tell all his belongings were there. The stack of chips was smaller, and he’d bet the rest that she’d taken no more than the exact amount owed.

A strange sense of loss settled in as he packed his suitcase. He tried to summon the erotic memories of the night before, but they wouldn’t come. What had imprinted on his brain was the image of Brianna in her glasses reading a book. He cherished it and then let it fade like a goodbye as he coaxed back thoughts of his wife.

Complimentary

He scooped up the half full shampoo and lotion bottles with the faded hotel logo on them and stuffed them into his toiletry bag.

Just as he was about to leave, a thought struck. There was one more thing he needed. He propped the door open with his suitcase, walked to the end table, and opened the drawer.

Empty. The Bible was gone.

He smiled as he considered the woman who took it, and he knew it was complimentary.