

Daniel couldn't stop glancing over at the young man sitting quietly in the back corner of the room. There was something about him, through the glasses and faces of other bar patrons, that stood out even if he didn't. He appeared biologically designed to blend into the background with the low-volume pop music and unremarkable bar stools. But still, Daniel couldn't stop looking over, seeing the young man sip his drink quietly, alone, anonymous in a sea of names.

The microphone's screech echoed off of every body in the place.

"Hey, hello everyone, thank you so much for coming out," a plump young woman with a taut t-shirt spoke. Most people stopped their conversations and pointed their attention forward.

"The book is launching tomorrow, and if it's anything like the response either here or like the previous novels, this one is sure to find its way into every home in America!" Cheers rang out and glasses raised. Daniel looked back toward the young wallflower. He slightly lifted his glass toward the woman.

"The man of the hour, Kenneth Banks, is... where is he?" She whipped her head around. "Kenneth, where are you?" Silence rang clear.

"He might be in the bathroom somewhere, we'll get a hello out of him yet. It's his party, after all." Scattered applause. Daniel looked back over. The young man was looking around, but otherwise stayed put.

"Everybody, the party's just getting started, so fill your glass and let's have some fun! And thank you again for making the journey for the release!" The applause picked up, and the conversation resumed. The young man sipped from his glass.

Daniel slowly, deliberately, made his way to the young man's table. He was maybe 25, a day or two's worth of stubble across his chin, shaggy hair dropped on top of his skull. He was checking his phone when Daniel reached him.

"Good party," he said. The young man didn't look up. Daniel squinted.

"You're not very good at parties, are you?" he asked. The young man looked up from his phone, curiously brushed his lip with his finger, then sighed with a tiny smile.

"Is it that obvious?" he said.

"You're sitting all alone," Daniel said. "And you're not talking to anybody, everything alright?"

The young man finished on his phone quickly then turned. "I just kinda do that," he said. "Habit, I guess." His chest bounced in a single chuckle.

"What brings you here then?" Daniel asked.

"Oh, I'm here for the book," he said. Then, as if a switch had flipped, the young man leaned forward, his hand blocking the side of his mouth. "Have you met the author yet?"

Daniel shrugged. "I guess he's here, maybe he's in the john or something."

The young man eyed him. "I heard the guy's a real asshole," he said.

Daniel pulled away, surprised. He bumped a woman behind him, and he turned to apologize, but she hadn't even noticed. "I... really?" he said.

"Who're you here with?" the young man asked.

"I'm with the Oregon Post, we reviewed the book and not we're covering the party."

The young man nodded, then tilted back the last drink of his glass.

"You're press?"

"Yeah."

“Did you like the book?” he asked.

“We gave it four-and-a-half stars out of five,” Daniel said. “Pretty good.”

The young man nodded again. Daniel was about to say something more, but the woman who had been announcing pushed her way to the table.

“Excuse me,” she said, first to the figure she bumped to reach the table, then to Daniel. “Sorry.” She turned to the young man.

“You’ve been HERE the whole time?” she asked him, the stern tone almost that of a worried mother.

“Just enjoying a glass and conversation,” he said.

“I call your name and you just ignored me! You do this every party we have like this!” She was furious. Daniel was stunned.

“Wait...” he interrupted. “Are you...”

“You need to come up and say SOMETHING to all the people that came out here for the book! I’m not doing this every time on my own!”

“It’s what I pay you for though, isn’t it?” the young man asked.

“Dammit Kenneth, I’m going back up there, and you’re taking the mic to say SOMETHING. Just say hi, thank you, and you can come back here and get sloppy drunk all you like. I’m not your guardian or anything, I’m just trying to do my job.” And with that she stormed away, making a beeline for the microphone for another announcement.

The young man finished his glass and turned to Daniel. “Told you I was an asshole,” he said. He started toward the stage, then turned back.

“Come on... don’t tell me you’re TOO surprised.”