

# Business Meeting

*Brandon Evans*

Nolan steered his rental into the parking space. The spot gave him a very clear view of the table inside the restaurant he was eventually going to be sitting at. He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and exhaled. He was trying to clear his mind for the business meeting at hand. It was always nerve wracking to meet a potential client. Nolan had to gauge each new person and see if they were worth the assistance the agency could give. Nolan killed the engine, in no hurry to get out of the car, but instead sipped his coffee. He checked his watch, which he double checked against the agency's home office, before he left for the airport. Nolan was twenty minutes early to the meeting. Being early was a habit that had served Nolan well many times. He found it was useful to be able to watch a potential client arrive. What they drove, who they might be with, and how punctual the client was told Nolan most of what he needed to know before ever speaking to them.

Nolan checked his watch again, and then compared it to the rental car's dash. The clock on the dash was slow by two minutes. He took another deep breath as he straightened his tie. Exhaling, he caught his own gaze in the rearview mirror. The pale blue eyes behind thin lenses broke away as he checked his hair. Not a single dark strand was out of place. Nolan wasn't particularly vain, but he did make sure he was presentable at all times. He wasn't a handsome man, nor was he ugly. His face was forgettable, and in his line of work, that was a benefit. It was never useful to be movie star good-looking or remarkably painful to look at if somebody was later trying to describe you. Having a memorable face never helped if the meetings went sour.

Nolan exhaled another breath and watched it fog the window of the rental. Sometimes things just went sour. He thought of his wife Lisa. After nearly a decade of marriage, he found himself trying to recall why he had loved her so much. This was a game that he often played when he had a moment to waste. Was it her golden locks? Oh yes, those helped. He thought of the way they framed the emerald earrings he bought her for their fifth wedding anniversary. Was it her athletic build? Her body most certainly attracted him, yes. Was it those delicious chocolate eyes that he got lost in when she spoke? Oh, was it her voice? The melodic way she sounded was so intoxicating to him, and he longed for the days when he would call her just to feel his heart sputter as she purred his name.

Partially, it was all of those things, and then the rest was made up of her personality. The way she laughed at things he said and thought were funny, and not just to try and seem interested, but she genuinely laughed. Nolan could tell, because the agency had taught him how to read body language. If somebody was faking a laugh, or a smile, all you had to do was look for wrinkles around their eyes. If you could see them, that meant it was a genuine laugh. Lisa always had smiled with her eyes, because Lisa was always genuine.

Nolan watched as his breath on the window beaded up in condensation, giving it the effect of sweating against the cool fall air. A droplet rolled down the inside, and he thought of Lisa again.

"How can you cut into something that is sweating?" she had asked him. At the time, Nolan was about to cut into a piece of pumpkin pie that had a tiny pool of condensation on the top. The pie had been the only thing he was looking forward to when he drove the two hours to his in-laws' house for Thanksgiving last year. It used to be this type of observational humor of hers that made him laugh, but for some reason, the only effect it had, was to completely ruin the moment. The thought of his pie breathing and sweating on the plate completely turned him off to the dessert. In one short question, Lisa had effectively ruined Thanksgiving for him. She performed this act of ruining things with a dishearteningly increased frequency over the past year. It had gotten so bad that when he left for this trip he hadn't even bothered to say bye. They had become so distant



and had barely held a conversation in the past month. Why would a few hundred miles of actual distance have mattered? It didn't, but that hadn't stopped him from thinking about her now.

Nolan was snapped back to the present by a set of headlights that streaked across his field of vision. The car pulled into the lot and took a spot nearest to the door of the restaurant. Nolan looked at the plates of the vehicle as he flipped open his tablet. He then opened the file that he had read, and reread, countless times during his flight. The plates on the car matched the ones the file told him to expect on the client's vehicle. He then noticed the make and model of the car, followed by the smaller details of color and state of repair the car was in. This particular car was a red BMW 320i sedan. It was last year's model but in pristine condition. The file read that the vehicle was the client's own daily driver, and that it was also leased. Red, flashy, but not purchased. Nolan checked his watch; the client was five minutes late. Nolan was already putting together an idea of how the meeting would go but silently cursed himself for letting his mind wander for so long on his own personal affairs.

The client exited the car and looked around the parking lot quickly, before he hurried to the door of the restaurant. Nolan tracked the man with his eyes through the wide windows that wrapped the restaurant. He wanted to see if the man would follow the directions the agency gave him, to go straight to the table that had been reserved under the name 'John Smith'. The client stopped at the hostess stand and held a brief conversation with the girl. Nolan couldn't help but smirk as the man repeatedly flashed his car keys to the young girl. The girl pointed back to the corner table, but the client went to the bar of the restaurant. The keys flashed again as he held up two fingers. The bartender poured two tall drinks, straight up. Nolan scoffed as the client slammed one, before taking the other to the table and sitting in the seat that faced the wall.

"Well, at least he got that part right," Nolan whispered to nobody but himself. He then stepped out into the November night. Nolan smoothed his hands down his dark gray suit and took another deep breath, as he tucked his tablet in his jacket pocket. The crisp fall air refreshed his senses. It had been a night like this when Lisa had told him she loved him for the first time. Lisa. Again, she was in his mind, but now it was time for business. He needed to push her out and focus. Nolan took three quick and short inhalations. He blew them all out in one single breath as he tried to focus, and the cool air helped.

Nolan's eyes fixed on the client as he walked into the restaurant. He entered and made eye contact with Darcy, the hostess. She was deceptively young looking but was actually in her late twenties. She played her part as the teenage hostess well, bouncing with a bubbly smile. Her messy blonde ponytail bobbed from side to side, while her barely buttoned, white shirt hung over from her black yoga pants. She was skirting the uniform policy at the restaurant perfectly.

"Hello, welcome to Gambino's. Will you be dining alone tonight, sir?" Darcy gushed.

"Actually, I have a table reserved for a Mr. John Smith."

"The client has arrived," Darcy informed him. "Will you be requiring the briefcase tonight?" She was all business now.

"Unfortunately, that may be necessary. Thank you."

"You two are the only guests of the restaurant this evening," Darcy said while she reached under the podium and removed a small metal briefcase. Nolan accepted the case and smiled at her. She then pushed a button on the underside of the podium. The shades on the windows closed, and the lights dimmed throughout the restaurant. A soothing, classical music flowed from the overhead speakers. Darcy locked the door and turned the sign to say closed while he walked back to join his client. Nolan approached the end of the table and startled the man who was apparently lost in thought.

"Jesus, man" the client bumbled as he spilled some of his drink.

"My apologies, I didn't mean to startle you," Nolan offered.



“No, it’s okay, I’m expecting someone...” the man eyed Nolan carefully.

“May I sit then?”

“Only if you’re the John Smith I was told to wait for,” the client replied as he raised his hand to the empty seat across from him.

“Indeed, I am,” Nolan began as he took his seat. “I believe you are a Mr. Gareth. Is that correct?”

“Yup. That’s me. My friends call me Mike,” the client responded with the drink up to his lips. Unsteady hands shook the glass a little as it rattled back down onto the table.

“Mr. Gareth will be fine,” Nolan replied as he took the time to eye the man up. He was late forties easily, which he obviously tried to conceal. Dyed blonde hair was betrayed by the gray roots of his hair. The wrinkles on his face were deeply set in, an affliction that was only made more severe by a red tinted tan. His obnoxiously large, gold ring clinked on the empty glass. It matched a gaudy watch and a chain that hung on his bare chest. Nolan could see it through the bright pink, open collared polo the man wore. It was at least one size too small, no doubt he attempted to accentuate the fact that he worked out, if only a few times. He finished out the look with a pair of tan cargo shorts and leather flip flops. That was how Mr. Gareth chose to dress to a meeting of this importance. He would never make it as an agency man. Not only did he look ridiculous and scream midlife crisis, but the style choice was completely dysfunctional for the late November weather.

“Have you reviewed my case yet?” Mr. Gareth asked.

“Indeed I have,” Nolan said, pulling out the tablet. “It appears you are at risk of losing most of your assets.”

“Yeah, the bitch is gonna take me to the damned cleaners if she gets her way,” Mr. Gareth spat.

“It certainly looks like she would have an excellent case against you in court.”

“You don’t think I know that? Christ, that’s the reason I came to you guys!” Gareth fumed.

As his words flew out, a glob of spit accompanied them and landed on Nolan’s tablet. Nolan instinctively sat up straighter and removed his glasses. He locked eyes with Mr. Gareth.

“Mr. Gareth, I understand that you are upset. I will not, however, tolerate you raising your voice to me. I would advise you to think carefully before you speak, and remember, to keep your voice down. If you would like me to continue considering your case, you will kindly take your napkin and wipe your saliva off of my tablet screen. You will do this slowly, with no sudden movements, but you will do it now,” Nolan instructed.

Mr. Gareth held his gaze for a moment, before slowly reaching for his napkin.

“Thank you, now if we could get back to the matter at hand, you’ll notice that on the tablet which you are holding is the police report for a domestic disturbance at your residence. Accompanying it is the subsequent restraining order that your wife filed against you.”

“I don’t need a review. I was there, man,” Gareth blurted.

“She had some private dick tail me around. He got pictures of me with a hooker. She wasn’t dirty or nuthin’, but one of those classy, expensive ones. You know the type of girl that wouldn’t look twice at us. Couple of my buddies pitched together and bought her for my birthday. Definitely worth it if you ask me. Anyway, the asshole got some photos of it and gave ‘em to my wife. She gave me a set of damn copies. I brought ‘em with. I dunno, thought they might help.”

Gareth put both hands up, and Nolan nodded. Then he reached inside his cargo shorts and produced a thick, dirty envelope that was roughly 6” x 9”. He dropped it on the table between them. Nolan made no movement to pick them up, but instead, reached for the slim metal briefcase that was on the floor next to his feet. He placed the briefcase on the table and ran his hands across its smooth, cool surface. He found the latches and popped them open. Nolan eased the top up but kept the contents out of view of the eager eyes of Mr. Gareth. He then used his own napkin to wrap up the pictures and transfer them into his briefcase. Finally, he closed the briefcase and replaced it



on the floor.

“Don’t you even want to look at ‘em?” Gareth asked.

“Mr. Gareth, I see no benefit to our meeting from me viewing pictures of you engaging in sexual intercourse,” Nolan responded. “I do see benefit in asking you a few questions. Firstly, has your wife contacted a divorce attorney?”

“Yeah, I got served the papers at my job,” Gareth scoffed.

“So your coworkers saw this?”

“Hell, my boss even saw it. Made me the joke of the office,” Mr. Gareth seethed.

“Why the infidelity?” Nolan asked. Secretly, he was surprised that he felt compelled to ask a personal question. His feelings had seeped into his work, and that was simply unacceptable.

“I was horny,” Mike Gareth shrugged. “What? You never slept around on your old lady? You might as well have. I bet she has slept around on you.”

Nolan felt his neck go hot. He would never betray Lisa’s trust like that, and he was certain that she would never...This meeting was going sideways on him, and he needed to regain control. He had allowed the client to upset him, and that was never good for business. Nolan swallowed his emotions.

“Are you able to pay for the services you’re requesting? Up front, right now?” Nolan asked.

“Well, I mean, I thought you guys understood that you’d be taken care of once I get the insurance check. I’m good for it. You’d get your money,” he scrambled. His ring clinked against his empty glass again.

Nolan raised his hand to the bartender, and she promptly came to the table.

“What can I get you sir?” she asked attentively.

“I will have water, but he’ll have a...” Nolan paused.

It took a moment for Mr. Gareth to stop groping the bartender with his gaze.

“Um, yeah, go ahead and get me another tall whiskey, straight up.”

“Right away, sir,” she responded as she headed back to the bar.

Nolan remained quiet while they both watched her. Mr. Gareth had proved incapable of focusing if a female was involved. So, he waited, and while he did, Lisa crept her way back into his mind. She was bartending when they first met, and she could still put this younger bartender to shame. He allowed himself the moment to recall Lisa’s body, both then and now. He was finally interrupted when this bartender returned. She delivered the drinks with a quick smile, explained that they were on the house, and then left the men to their business. Nolan drank his water trying to wash Lisa out of his mind. He put up a finger when Gareth tried to speak. He turned off the tablet and slid it inside his suit jacket trying to maintain an air of professionalism. Then he finished his water.

“Enjoy your drink, Mr. Gareth,” he resumed. “Hopefully, it will take the sting off a bit.”

“What sting?” Gareth asked right before he guzzled the liquid.

“I’ve decided that the agency won’t be able to help you with your case.”

“What the Fu—” Gareth stopped mid word and recomposed himself. “What do you mean you’ve decided that you can’t help?” His red complexion was nearly glowing now. Nolan could tell he was barely keeping his rage under control, which was expected, but not particularly threatening. Beneath his suit Nolan was also very fit. His strength was functional and practiced, unlike the potential client who boiled across from him.

“Why have me drive all the way up here to jerk me around and then tell me that you’re not going to do shit for me?” Gareth growled.

“I see you are foregoing my warning from earlier about your voice. Regardless, the agency does not require me to explain my decision to any potential client. For you, though, I shall make an exception. Your wife has made very public your divorce. You admit yourself that your coworkers are aware of your marital woes, and you already have legal documentation that highlights physical



abuse— by you— against your wife. The incident was significant enough to warrant a judge to grant her a restraining order against you. Those are the obvious factors that led to my decision.”

“So you are saying your ‘agency’ can’t pull it off,” Gareth hissed.

“On the contrary, the agency and I are more than capable of solving the problem that your wife represents for you. However, I have known you for a short period of time, and I can already tell you that you do not follow basic instructions. If you did, you would’ve arrived to this meeting on time, you would have proceeded directly to the table, and you most certainly would not have driven your personal vehicle here. All of these things were plainly instructed to you by the agency when they set up this meeting, and yet, you failed to meet the minimum expectations. Not to mention the fact that you are a terrible planner. You didn’t even think to bring a change of clothes for the weather this evening, and you couldn’t help but drink in excess as soon as you arrived. All things considered, you would be nothing but a liability if the police were to question you about your wife’s disappearance.”

Mr. Gareth sat staring at the empty glass that his hand clenched around.

“Even if we could ignore all of these previous problems,” Nolan continued. “The largest and most pertinent issue is that you simply cannot pay for our services. We are not the Make-a-Wish Foundation, Mr. Gareth. We only solve problems for clients who can afford us.”

Nolan rose from the table, smoothed out his suit after buttoning it, and picked up the briefcase.

“Mr. Gareth, I thank you for your time. I will be leaving you now and wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors. I will escort you to the bar where you may have another drink on the house. You will remain there for fifteen minutes after I have left, and then you may go. This instruction you will follow. Do you understand?”

“Go to Hell,” Gareth snapped.

Nolan accompanied the disgruntled man to the bar.

“If you want my advice, I would suggest that you cut your losses and give her the divorce.”

He then walked towards the door to leave. Darcy was quietly waiting for him with a keen eye. She then shifted her gaze to Gareth at the bar.

“Don’t worry. All bark, barely any bite. You ladies will be able to handle him with ease,” Nolan reassured her as he handed her back the metal case. “Turns out I didn’t need this after all.”

“Much appreciated, Mr. Smith, but you will need to take this back.” Darcy smiled handing him the envelope of pictures. “You aren’t allowed to leave anything a client has given you in the case. You know the rules.”

“Would you mind holding that until I return from the men’s room?” Nolan asked. He hadn’t noticed that the coffee and water had run their course until this moment.

“I’m afraid I must insist you take them, sir.”

Nolan made no protests. He grabbed the envelope and stuffed it quickly in the already occupied jacket pocket. He hurried to the urinal in the men’s room. He had just started to relieve himself when the envelope slipped out of his suit jacket and toppled to the floor. It split open when it bounced off the urinal, and its contents spread across the slick tiles. He glanced at the photos, a kaleidoscope of depravity fanned out underneath him. Again, Lisa came to mind as he recalled how she used to touch him.

Nolan glared at the photos a little closer. The woman looked like...no, that didn’t make sense. He closed his pants as he bent down to the visual stains beneath him. The woman in the pictures, Mike’s prostitute, she looked like Lisa. Nolan snatched one up for a close inspection. This can’t be her. He looked for a picture that showed her left shoulder. If he could find one of the woman’s left shoulder, then he would know for sure. He grabbed at one, and then another one to see the blonde’s face contorted in pangs of ecstasy. Nolan brushed his hand across them all as he slid to the floor. He let the filth soil him. He fought the sobs that threatened to escape his mouth. Just





one...that one! He found the photo and snatched it up to see the truth, and the truth was that it wasn't Lisa in the sordid photos. It was just a prostitute that slightly resembled her on a mere glance. Upon closer inspection it clearly wasn't his wife.

Something in him compelled him to reach for his cell phone. He pulled it out and dialed his wife. He pressed the phone to his ear and heard his own breath in the receiver. The phone rang and rang before finally picking up.

"Hello," Lisa's familiar voice came over the speaker.

"Hey, Lisa, it's me. I know things have been kind of weird with us lately. I'm sorry, I should've said good bye this morning... Anyway, when I get back from this sales meeting in Detroit, I really want to talk to you. I even want to go with you back to your parent's house next week for Thanksgiving. You know how much I love your mom's pumpkin pie. I know you're probably busy, but I want you to know you've been on my mind this whole trip, especially now." Nolan spilled into the phone.

"Honey, what are you talking about? I'm trying to give the kids a bath before I put them to bed. Can I call you back?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. Don't worry about it. I will call you once I get back on the road. Tell the kids I love them. I love you too. Now that I think about it, I need to clean up something myself. I will talk to you soon," Nolan answered. Then he hung up the phone.

He leaned back against the stall and took another deep breath. He exhaled slowly, and this time, focused on the man in the photos. The disgusting man, Mike, who Nolan had disliked from the beginning, but now hated with a passion he had never known before, was just outside the bathroom. Suddenly, he was on his feet and smoothed out his dark gray suit. He washed his hands in the sink before adjusting his glasses. He had gone into business mode. There was a job at hand, and he intended to do it well. Nolan left the bathroom and reached directly under the hostess stand for the briefcase that he knew would be waiting. He clutched it and began to pop the case open on top of the stand. Darcy stared at him in confusion.

"You can go ahead and leave now. I've changed my mind. I will be resolving his case right here, tonight," he declared while pulling out a knife and a .45 caliber pistol from the foam lined case. He then removed a suppressor and screwed it onto the barrel of the pistol. At the bar, Mike was oblivious.

"Give me another damn shot before I tell everybody about your little operation you've got going on here!"

"I've got a shot for you," Nolan announced as he grabbed the back of the stool and whirled Mike around to face him. He put the suppressed end of the gun deep in the crotch of the cargo shorts and squeezed the trigger twice. Mike's eyes went wide as he shrieked in pain. Nolan hooked his foot under a rung on the barstool and kicked up. The bleeding man tumbled to the floor. Nolan eyed the bartender and motioned with his head towards the door. She calmly folded her towel and laid it on the bar. She then collected her purse and joined Darcy.

"I'll have them send a cleaning crew in a few hours," she said before shutting the door behind her.

Nolan had his weight on top of Mike's chest and pressed the gun hard against his head.

"Upon reviewing your case, I have reconsidered. I am going to take care of your problem. All of your problems, and as a bonus, your wife will get your life insurance policy," Nolan reassured him as he pressed the gun deeper into Mike's scalp. Nolan had his knee in Mike's throat, making it difficult for him to breathe, let alone respond. His head was swelling with the effort, and sweat poured down around the gun. Nolan tilted his head in thought and brought the knife to the bead of sweat.

"This is how you cut into something that is sweating," Nolan said to nobody but himself.

