

The Reporter

written by

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FADE IN:

INT. NEWSROOM - AFTERNOON

A few reporters are seen typing on their computers, or talking on the phone.

SUPERIMPOSE: "MASON CITY STAR NEWSROOM, 2004"

DANIEL SIMPSON, 45, with salt and pepper hair, one of the newspaper's editors, can be seen inside his office, ending a phone conversation.

DANIEL

(on the phone)

No, I think it's a good story, I just want to run it by Linda before we move forward with it.

(a beat)

I know, I'll have him with me in the conference room in five minutes.

(a beat)

Thanks, talk soon.

Daniel gets up from his desk, and calls out to the newsroom from his office door.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Peter! Conference room, you, me, five minutes.

PETER FITCH, 26 with hair perfectly coiffed turns around from his laptop to face Daniel, who is Peter's boss.

PETER

Is this about?--

DANIEL

Yes

PETER

(pleasant surprise)

Alright then

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Peter is already seated with a file folder in front of him when Daniel walks in with LINDA KURTZ, 51 with hair colored to hide the gray

DANIEL

Peter, I don't know if you've ever met Linda Kurtz. She's from our legal department. Linda, this is Peter Fitch, he sits on our City desk.

Peter stands and shakes hands with Linda.

Daniel shuts the conference room door, and the three sit down.

DANIEL

(to Peter)

Why don't you bring her up to speed.

PETER

Okay, well - I have reason to believe that the Mayor is having an affair.

A beat. Linda stares at Peter, then looks over to Daniel.  
"You brought me down here for this?"

DANIEL

(to Peter)

Go on

PETER

Everyone knows that the Mayor has a driver for official events, but when he's off the clock he leaves the office, rather inconspicuously in a Jeep. Well, I spotted that Jeep in someone else's driveway a few nights back, so I got curious.

LINDA

Please don't tell me you've been following the Mayor's movements for the past three weeks.

PETER

I didn't have to follow him for very long. I got a glimpse of him and his mistress mid-tryst a few nights later.

LINDA

Photos?

Peter slides a file folder across the table to Linda. She opens the folder. She raises her eyebrows, "wow."

PETER

You'll notice a very clear picture of the mistress a few photos down.

LINDA

Is that?

PETER

Ashley Deveroux, the CEO of Deveroux Construction, the firm that recently bid on, and won the \$975 million contract to renovate city hall. I filed a right to know request with the city, and found out that Deveroux's company's bid wasn't the lowest offered. Those documents are below the photos.

Linda leafs through the documents, skimming them.

LINDA

Well, these are just the bid documents, you're going to have to dig into the actual contract to see what Deveroux's company offered in their bid. Even if it's not the lowest price, it could still be considered the best value to the city.

PETER

But this is a smoke and fire situation. Even if it's the best value to city taxpayers, these photos provide the appearance of impropriety.

LINDA

(to Daniel)

And you're wondering if we can report this?

DANIEL

Once the news is out, the Mayor can ask all kinds of questions, and file all kinds of motions to find out how we got these pictures, and when he finds out that one of our reporters took the photos, he's going to ask what we were doing outside his mistress's house.

LINDA

Well, the Mayor's a scumbag--

DANIEL

I agree, but he can still make our lives hell for it.

LINDA

There's no way to report this story without destroying two people's lives. I don't really care about the Mayor and his mistress, but the collateral damage, the Mayor's wife, his kids--

PETER

Deveroux's married too.

LINDA

She have any kids?

PETER

I think she has a daughter. Not sure.

LINDA

Okay, so we'll be destroying three people's lives.

PETER

The public has a right to know how spending decisions are being made with their tax dollars. It would appear that the "full and open contract competition" is a lie in this case.

LINDA

Oh, you don't have to convince me. You're right, the public's right to know takes precedence here. Anyone in this town could pull up to the Mayor after his work day and see him in that Jeep, meaning that anyone could see the Jeep in the driveway of a house that isn't the Mayor's residence. That means that anyone could have snapped those photos and mailed them into us. But in this case, it just so happens that the person snapping the photos is a reporter for the city's newspaper.

(a beat)

Apparently the Mayor and his mistress don't understand the concept of being discrete.

DANIEL

So, we can run with this?

LINDA

There's risk of blowback, but I think if we ask the right questions, yes, we can run with it. Peter's right, the photos are the smoke that leads to the fire. It will take time, but file the appropriate right to know requests on the contract. Talk to reps from the companies who lost out on the deal, investigate the entire situation. There are a lot of dots we'll need to connect before we can report that the relationship led to Deveroux's company being awarded the contract.

A beat. The weight of what's about to happen sets in.

DANIEL

(to Linda)

Thank you

LINDA

Don't thank me yet. Thank me when this is out, the Mayor is forced to resign, and the solicitation is put out for re-bid.

The three of them stand up and the meeting ends.

INT. NEWSROOM - A LITTLE BIT LATER

Daniel walks out of his office, bag slung over his shoulder, ready to leave. He heads towards Peter who is on the phone.

PETER

(to phone)

Hi, my name is Peter Fitch, and I'm a reporter with the Mason City Star, this message is for Mitchell Henry. Mitchell, I understand that your company recently lost out on a bid to renovate City Hall.

Daniel lays a slip of paper on Peter's desk and leaves

PETER (CONT'D)

I had a few questions for you, so if you wouldn't mind calling me back at 340-555-6714, or emailing me at pfitch@masoncitystar.com, I'd appreciate it. Once again, this is Peter Fitch from the Mason City Star. Thanks.

Peter hangs up the phone, and picks up Daniel's note.

INSERT - DANIEL'S NOTE

"586 Grant Blvd Mason City 15767 - meet me in 15 minutes" is written in Daniel's handwriting

BACK TO SCENE

Peter puts the note in his pocket, grabs his jacket from the back of his chair and leaves the newsroom.

INT. QUIET BAR - MOMENTS LATER

The bar has low ceilings, and few patrons. The kind of place that you have to know about, and perfect for a good conversation.

Peter arrives, and spots Daniel sitting at a booth in the back corner of the bar. He walks over and sits across from Daniel.

PETER

I didn't even know there was a bar in this building.

DANIEL

I found it a few years ago, and its one of the few peaceful bars in the city, where you can actually hear yourself think.

A BARTENDER approaches Peter.

BARTENDER

What can I get for you?

PETER

I'll take an MGD

The bartender nods and leaves.

PETER (CONT'D)

(to Daniel)

So why the secret meeting?

DANIEL

I want you to know that I support you running with this story about the Mayor and the renovation contract.

PETER

And?

The bartender returns with Peter's beer. Peter nods his thanks.

DANIEL

You told me when I interviewed you that you eventually want to move up to the investigative desk. That's still your plan, correct?



PETER

Yes, of course

DANIEL

If you uncover what we all think is there, this story is going to put you there, you know that, right?

PETER

That's what I'm hoping.

DANIEL

Peter, you're a good writer, and a good journalist, but Linda was right when she said that we'll be destroying lives with this story.

(a beat)

It's certainly a story that needs to be told, but you need to understand that just because the public needs to know doesn't mean that you are immune from the...scorn that comes from being the guy that uncovers people's secrets. I'm not talking about the Mayor or his mistress in this situation, I'm talking about what Linda called the collateral damage. We don't know what kind of marriage the Mayor or his mistress have. Sometimes people already know what they don't want to admit, and when you bring it out into the open for everyone to see, the people involved, even jilted husbands and wives, can be mad that you did it.

PETER

I can handle the anger, it comes with the territory--

DANIEL

You say that now, but you need to think about your career as an investigative journalist. You will be the subject of frustration and anger from anyone with whom you come into contact.

A beat.

PETER

What are you saying?

DANIEL

I just don't want you to get burned out.

(a beat)

I don't want what happened to me, to happen to you.

PETER

Dan, you know I always fact check my work.

DANIEL

First of all, that's hurtful, and secondly, you don't know the truth about what happened.

Peter furrows his brow "what do you mean?"

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Not many people know this, but I left Spotlight in Boston on my own. Everyone thinks I got ushered out because I didn't fact check one of my larger stories, but I had my facts straight. The Globe settled the suit, and I quietly resigned. My editor did not want me to leave at all.

PETER

Why would you do that?

DANIEL

Like I said, I got burned out. Being a reporter that the public hates is draining. You get tired of being the subject of people's anger, and sometimes their lawsuits.

PETER

But you won a Pulitzer with the Boston Globe.

DANIEL

I did, and it's collecting a nice layer of dust at home. It didn't sustain me the way I thought it would, and in the end, I left because I'd felt I'd become one of the very things that people hate about the media.

PETER

I don't understand what you mean.

DANIEL

There are two reasons people hate reporters. The first is they're biased, and it doesn't matter if its conservative or liberal bias, people hate you no matter what. The second reason people hate reporters is because people don't believe we care about the communities we serve.

(a beat)

The story I wrote that led to my resignation was a scandal, just like the one you're on right now. It was about a U.S. Congressman who was found having an affair with the CEO of an engineering firm. That firm had bid on several contracts with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and in the course of my investigation, I found that the Army Corps had been skirting federal contracting procedures, at the behest of this congressman, so that his mistress's company could win the work.

PETER

So it was essentially the same situation we have here, but on a larger scale.

DANIEL

Correct. When the story broke, it was the congressman's wife who sued the Globe. The woman had been humiliated by a philandering husband, and she was livid that I had the audacity to investigate and uncover it.

(a beat)

When I came to the Star, I wanted a simpler paper. Smaller footprint, with good communities to serve. And when I hired you, I saw a reporter who cared about the community.

PETER

I still care, Dan.

DANIEL

I'm not suggesting that you've changed, but the mentality of a good reporter is that they're always looking for the next story. And they want their next story to be bigger than the last, so they can get the promotion, or the Pulitzer, or be a contributor for CNN.

(a beat)

I know how much your career means to you. I see it all the time. Whenever you break a big story, you always have our production team put it on a plaque for your desk. But none of those stories emblazoned on a plaque remotely touch the best work you've ever done for me.

PETER

Which story do you think is my best?

DANIEL

That's easy, the one that helped Annette Jenkins find her son Billy.

PETER

(smiling)

That was a good one.

DANIEL

I have to be honest with you, Peter, I'm surprised, and a bit disappointed that you didn't turn that story into one of the plaques on your cubicle wall. I see that she's sent you a Christmas card every year since the story ran.

PETER

She does.

DANIEL

Do you ever call her, just to check in and see how they're doing?

PETER

Well, she's married, wouldn't you think that was a little odd, if I was her husband and some male reporter just randomly called her to chat.

DANIEL

Not if that reporter had helped find my son.

A beat

DANIEL (CONT'D)

My point is that you're not only a good reporter, you're also a good person, Peter. So run with this story about the Mayor and his mistress, but understand that when you get to the investigative desk, in large part, you're going to be responsible for destroying people's lives. Sure, the scumbags at the center of the story deserve it, but don't forget about the innocent people around those scumbags. The wives, husbands, children who will be destroyed by the scandal coming to light. You are too good of a person to enjoy doing that.

Daniel scoots out of the booth.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

The beer's on me. Just think about what I said. And call Annette.

Daniel walks up to the bar, signals the bartender with a couple of bills and places them on the bar. He then leaves.

INT. PETER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Peter is at his laptop, typing away as he speaks on the phone.

PETER

(into phone)

So just so I understand this correctly, you're saying that your company was offering a higher quality marble for the floors, at a lower price.

(a beat)

Wait, ALL of the materials were a higher grade...for a cheaper price? How could you make that work, did you just buy everything wholesale?

(a beat)

That's incredible. Okay, is this a good number to reach you if I have any follow up questions?

(a beat)

Great, I'm sure I'll be calling you back soon.

(a beat)

Great, have a good night.

Peter hangs up, and types quickly as he works to get his notes on to the page. When finished, he runs his hands through his hair, and looks at his watch. He then looks through his email contacts.

INSERT - COMPUTER SCREEN

Annette Jenkins's contact card is on the screen.

BACK TO SCENE

Peter types in Annette Jenkins's phone number, then stands, walks over to his fridge, opens the door and pulls out a beer. He sits on his couch.

INSERT - CELL PHONE

Peter presses the send key.

BACK TO SCENE

Peter presses the phone to his ear.

PETER (CONT'D)

(into phone)

Hello, is this Annette Jenkins?  
Hi Annette, this is Peter Fitch,  
from the...yes.

(a smile crosses  
Peter's face)

I'm doing well, how are you?

FADE TO BLACK

The end.