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## Beginnings, Ending and the Path Between

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Beginnings, Ending and the Path Between

Daron Kappauff, B.A.

An Abstract presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing

## Abstract

This collection of flash fiction stories focuses on the idea that, if left unchecked, the world we live and work in can not only have dramatic effects on the way we live our lives, but also on our personality and type of person we may become. It also looks at how an individual's personal life often parallels their professional life. And lastly, it stands as a shining testament to the notion that reality is often stranger than fiction.

All of the characters and almost all of the situations and stories presented here are based true events. What little fiction there is to be found within this collection is only barely so; all the fictional elements depicted could easily have happened exactly as they are portrayed.

Beginnings, Ending and the Path Between

Daron Kappauff, B.A.

A Culminating Project presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing

2009

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## Introduction

Where does one begin to write about writing? It's a subject that's been discussed, dissected, and deliberated on for centuries, and by far greater writers than myself. That's not to say, however, that I haven't weighed in on the subject once or twice during the course of my collegiate career. Through the years, both as an undergraduate and graduate student, I've been asked to share my thoughts on why writers write, or more specifically, why I myself write. What I find interesting as I look back at those essays is that there isn't as strong a common thread between them as I thought there would be. Furthermore, as I reflect upon personal interactions and discussions I've had on the subject, the reason for this disparity becomes clear: I don't exactly know why I write. I know writing's been a pursuit of mine for a long time. And I know the pursuit has led me down some strange paths and through some questionable financial decisions. Yet it's a pursuit I'm compelled to maintain, to continue striving for. It's a quest I feel I'm powerless to abandon.

Writing is not a career you choose while sitting opposite a college advisor. You don't wake up one day and decide you're going to be a writer. Writing has to be a part of you; it keeps you up at night and wakes you in the early hours of morning. Writing is a way of life. It chooses you; you don't choose it. This is an important distinction to reflect upon and understand. The path of a writer is an arduous one; conscious decisions and speculations have to be made in regard to one's future. There's no clear or easy career path for a writer to take. There's no

guarantee that a degree or any number of publications will eventually lead to a well paying job or career. Yet writers write.

We write in the face of and with little regard to the reasoned arguments of others, and often against our own better judgment. But why do we do this? Why do we strive for a goal that is almost certainly unattainable? Why do we tell stories; share personal memories and opinions; find lost truths; point out flaws in societies, governments, and religions; and take stands for those who cannot stand for themselves? The answer, arguably, is self-evident in the question. But even beyond that, writers write because we can, because we're compelled to, because every molecule of our bodies commands us to. We write because writing is who we are, and for many of us, it's the only thing we know.

I once spent a year in a dark place: a depression I'd never experienced before, or even considered I could become subject to. Nevertheless, the darkness overtook me, and I was trapped in a cycle of pain and loneliness, powerless to stop myself from pushing away any and everyone who cared for me. At the time, I didn't even know I was depressed let alone how or why it had come over me, so battling the thing was a near impossibility. However, once I did understand what was going on and began taking steps to deal with the disease, it wasn't long before I was entirely rid of the darkness. Interestingly, in the end, when I came out the other side, it wasn't a therapist or drugs that led me through. It was writing; it was the simple act of sitting down at my computer and pumping out a story. And how could it not be? As I finished that story, the depression gave way, and as it did a kind of clarity overcame me: it was because of writing, or rather the



lack thereof, that I had become depressed. I hadn't written anything in a year, maybe longer. I had become so wrapped up in the daily grind of life that I had been completely ignoring a whole part of my being. It was like living with only half a heart while trying to maintain a normal, active life.

This is why I write. I write because words are just as vital to me as is oxygen; metaphors and allusions course through my veins like blood. I write because without writing I feel lost in a world I couldn't hope or want to comprehend. I write because the act of not writing seems just as crazy and debilitating as shooting myself in the leg. I write because I have stories to tell and fear the day that is no longer the case.

Describing and discussing what I write about, and what style and forms I work in, is a much easier task than dissecting the ins and outs of why I write. Longer fiction and poetry have long been my preferred modes of operation. I've been writing poetry for as long as I can remember, and my fiction has always been more ambitious than terse. Short stories, for some reason, have consistently given me trouble. In the past, any time I'd attempt to write a short story it would either continue expanding well past the boundaries of short story form, or it would fail to come together as a story at all. There was something about telling a complete story in so few pages that simply eluded me.

Armed with this knowledge, as well as the conviction to improve this skill, I entered my MFA program with a solid goal set in my sights. I challenged myself to write short story after short story with no regard for how well they turned out or

were received, but with the singular focus of telling a complete story in fifteen pages or less. In the end, I found some measure of success in my endeavor as my story "Objects in Space" was published in the inaugural edition of Untamed Ink. While the publication boosted my confidence in pursuing more short story ideas, the form in general still gave me pause.

As I progressed through my graduate program and continued developing my skill with short stories, I discovered a whole new subgenre of short story that intrigued me instantly. I had heard the term 'flash fiction' before, but I didn't know what it was or how and why it differed from a traditional short story. Once I got to know the style, I was amazed at how much story could be told with so few words, and with so little background information on the subject, topic, situation, or character being presented. And so, immediately after garnering enough information to be dangerous, I set out to try my hand at writing flash fiction.

I began my venture looking at a short story I had already completed but wasn't entirely happy with. "Ballad of the High-Rise Cable Man" was a story I had written during my first MFA creative writing class. While the class' reaction to the story was overwhelmingly positive, the development of the main character and the conclusion were not as well defined as they could or should have been. I continually found myself going back to this story, trying to find ways to revise and complete it. However, it wasn't until I decided to cut more than half of the story, and entirely rewrite the opening, that it finally came together. What was left in the wake of this massive revision was my first piece of flash fiction.

Nearly a year and a half after its first workshop, I brought "Ballad" in again to be reviewed and discussed by my peers. This time, though, it appeared as flash fiction. The response to the story's new form was a resounding approval. There were, of course, tweaks that still needed to be made, but the experiment had succeeded. And with its success, a whole new world opened up to me. Before I even made it home, that night after class, my mind was overrun with flash fiction story ideas. And more importantly, a plan for my thesis began to form.

With an interest in nearly every form of writing (poetry, short story, novel, and screen play), I found it extremely difficult to choose a medium to work with for my final, graduate, project. I had been entertaining notions of writing a full movie script, a collection of poetry, and even the better part of a novel. However, after seeing how well the new "Ballad of the High-Rise Cable Man" was received, not to mention how much I enjoyed working on it, the decision to continue working with flash fiction was all but inevitable.

Only one major issue arose as I began planning my thesis. How was I going to come up with and write twelve to twenty brand new stories in less than three months? Everyone else in the program I talked to was working on a project that incorporated pieces, in various stages of completion, that they had been working on previously. This meant, other than writing a few new pieces, the majority of their work would be editing. I on the other hand would be starting completely from scratch. Plus, I was planning on working with a style I was only relatively familiar with. Panic set in. Thankfully, inspiration followed quickly behind.



Reflecting on why "Ballad" had been successful and wondering how I could recapture that energy led me to try working with a subject I'd never thought about tackling before. "Ballad's" main character, Knauff, and plot points were entirely autobiographical. And it was because of this that the story was not only easy to write, but was also a key reason why it was so well received. People who read the story enjoyed Knauff's whacky, yet truthful, adventure. It only made sense to continue telling his story; I still had plenty of peculiar stories to tell. The last thing I needed was a link to bring them all together so they could tell an overarching story.

It didn't take long to find my connection. A good portion of the stories I had in mind were either work related or took place in a work environment. The hardest part after that was deciding which stories to tell and how to incorporate a 'bigger picture' story between them. Choosing which stories to include, it turned out, was the much easier task.

After completing the first draft of the thesis, consisting of eleven stories, it was apparent that I had more than enough material to present as a thesis project. However, Knauff's growth and motivation, as well as the collection's interconnected story, were significantly lacking. Evidently, portraying the character's reaction to odd business situations and showing how each of these circumstances shaped the person he was becoming wasn't enough to carry such a vast collection of stories. Back to the well I went.

For the second go through, I decided to bring two new elements to the table. The first was fiction. Even though I had done a decent enough job of

keeping the stories in the collection from sounding like 'but that's how it really happened' stories, there wasn't enough fiction worked in to make the characters and situations come to life. Adding a bunch of fictional aspects to a collection of stories that are largely autobiographically based, though, isn't all that easy. And I still question whether or not all of the elements I did add are even working for the collection, and if there aren't other ways I could go about fleshing this world out.

The second element I added during the revision was a series of disastrous relationships that parallel Knauff's unfortunate work experiences. I figured a life outside of work might go a long way in rounding out Knauff's character. And additionally, it gave me a new outlook on how I could end the collection. Because I'm not a fan of tying everything up in nice bow at the end, having two plots running in tandem gave me the ability to have closure as well as a questionable future at the collection's conclusion.

Whether the inclusion of the fictional elements, and attempt at showing the parallelism between Knauff's work and home life, are working in the collection or not, I'm happy with the way these stories came together. There were plenty of times throughout this process when I felt lost or afraid I wouldn't be able to pull off such an unconventional thesis project. However, thanks to a great advisory staff, not to mention the slew of unusual incidents I had to fall back on for story ideas, the endeavor remained a labor of love rather than one of frustration, even during its most challenging moments.

As I look to the future, I'm reminded that writing is a fluid process, and even though I'm turning these stories in as a completed project and story, there's

still plenty of room to continue Knauff's journey. And of course, with the addition of more content comes the possibility of further revision and the opportunity to interconnect the individual stories and strengthen the collection as a whole. I'm not entirely sure what the future holds for Knauff, but I do know his adventure has only just begun.

## A Fly in the Eye of Love

Friday morning at the Sam's Club, I was supposed to meet Jim along the sidewall, halfway between Tire Sales and Electronics five minutes ago. I turn the corner of my last aisle and run/walk up the left side of the store. I see him as I make my approach. He's resting against a pillow-top mattress, eerily confident that we won't get caught.

"What the hell, Knauff?" Jim says as I reach him.

"Sorry, lazy ass customer wanted me to lug his tires all the way up to the tire shop." I say, looking around to make sure no one notices us.

"Which I'm guessing you didn't," he says, flashing his patented Cuban charm.

"Hell no. I told him where he could find a flatbed, loaded it up for him and sent him on his way."

Jim laughs and flexes his shoulders, springing him away from the mattress. His chest extends in the process, which he refrains from retracting as he walks toward the back of the store. "Let's head to receiving," he says. I'm reminded of a peacock.

"Receiving?" I ask and fall instep beside him.

Most days, Jim and I spend the majority of our shift walking back and forth between our two departments, pretending we're helping each other with some project no one actually gave us. We talk about Mandy, my soon to be fiancé, whichever girl he might be seeing at that particular moment, movies we've seen or are coming out, and sometimes even practice a new martial art move we



learned the week before; we both take private Kenpo lessons at Tracy's Karate, and we're always eager to try out new techniques on each other. We should probably be more careful about our *playtime*, but Sam's Clubs are huge; it's pretty easy to move about unseen.

We arrive at the receiving entrance and Jim directs me toward the corner where the pallets of caged tires are stacked twenty feet high. Receiving employees buzz by us on forklifts, somehow steering around us without really recognizing our presence.

"What's with the James Bond routine?" I ask as we move into the center of the rows of overstock tires.

"I just didn't want to be bothered by customers."

I nod. Customers are pretty annoying.

"So," he says hesitantly, looking back over his shoulder. "I went out with Jewelry Department Jamie last night."

"I heard," I say, finding a sturdy stack of tires to lean up against.

"Really?" he asks, turning quickly to face me again. "How did you know?"

"Dude, we work in retail. Word travels fast."

"Too true, too true."

"Well, give me some details, man. How did it go?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Just, okay? You went out with the one of the hottest girls in the store and it was only okay? Was it an actionless evening?"



“Oh, there was plenty of action,” he says and shakes his head.

“Then what’s the problem, are you afraid she won’t respect you anymore since you slept with her on the first date?”

“Funny. And no, something just seemed off.”

“With the sex?”

“No, dork. The sex was fine, really good actually. It’s hard to explain. Plus I think she’s interested in pursuing a relationship.”

“Yeah, girls are strange about that, especially after you sleep with them.”

“But that’s the problem, there’s just no way I can make anything work with her.”

“Why not?” I say a bit louder than planned and look around to see if anyone heard. “You’re both single,” I continue, nearly whispering, “she’s hot, and apparently pretty good in bed. What’s the problem?”

“I don’t know,” he says, beginning to pace back forth down the row of tires. “Something just feels wrong.”

“Whatever, man. It sounds like you just don’t want to commit.”

“That’s not it at all. I’d be totally in to her if not for...” Jim stops, looks at me, shakes his head, and lowers himself to sit Indian style on the ground. “You know how insects will only choose a mate if their instincts tell them that they’ll be a good match, that the genetics of the potential mate will combine with their own to create healthy offspring?”

“No, dude, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well, they do.”

“If you say so,” I say, more confused now than I was thirty seconds ago.

“Anyway, somewhere along the way last night...” Jim taps the side of his head a couple times with his index finger, “...my insect instinct went off.”

“But you slept with her anyway?”

“Well ... yeah. She’s hot.”

“And now she’s an insect with faulty genetics?”

“Exactly. You get it?”

“No.” I say, turning away, “I think you have some serious commitment issues, but it’s cool. You do your thing; I’m going get back to doing some pretend work.”

Jim and I meet up again at 12:00 p.m. by the time clock in the break room. We both clock out, and then slide out the Tire Service door so no one notices us taking our break together – God forbid if the Tire Sales and Electronics guys take their break together. I mean sure, the last time that happened at the North County store a guy walked out the front door with a forty-two-inch-plasma-T.V. But it’s North County, that sort of thing happens at least once a week; I’m sure the break thing was a coincidence. Besides, that’s why we have greeters at both the entrance and exit doors checking receipts. And it’s not like I’m going to chase after someone who stole something.

We’re just about at Jim’s stick-shift-power-steeringless Saturn, when Jamie and her Amazonian friend Jan show up out of nowhere, asking if they can go to lunch with us. I’m not too keen on the idea. The six-foot-two blond had

been stalking me for the last month, even though she knows I have a girlfriend – a girlfriend who works with us at the store.

“Please, please, please, Jim, take us with you,” Jaime says, clasping her hands together as if in prayer.

“I don’t know.”

“We won’t bother you guys, we promise, we won’t even make a peep.”

“Then why don’t you just go somewhere together? You don’t even know where we’re going.”

“Well, Jan’s car is in the shop, and the Mustang doesn’t have enough gas to get us anywhere, and we don’t have time to get gas and food. We’ll eat wherever.”

Jim glances at me. He’s looking for guidance. I flash him a look. He knows the look. It’s the look that says: one of these chicks is a crazed stalker, and the other is an insect, apparently, and I don’t want to have lunch with either of them.

“Fine.”

What?!?

“What?” Jan asks, looking at me, while Jaime skips over to Jim and wraps him in a teddy-bear hug.

“What, what?” I ask.

“Did you say something? It sounded like you murmured, or whined, or something.”

“Me? No.”

“Are you su...”

“I’m sure,” I say, and shoot Jim a very different look. This one I know he gets the meaning of. “I will say that I’d like to get going though. I’m hungry, and our thirty minutes are slipping away.”

Lunch goes by peacefully as advertised. Jim and I talk about our plans for the weekend, and try as much as possible to ignore whatever the two girls say to one another. They hardly talk to us anyway.

The drive back to the store is quiet. The girls sit silently in the backseat, while Jim and I exchange glances. We’re about three minutes out from the store when I sense movement out of the corner of my eye. A small fly, resting on the passenger side dashboard rubs his front legs together. Then, it shifts its attention toward the back of the car, pauses for a moment, and leaps into the air. The fly buzzes past my head, making a run for the passenger side window. It smashes into the window headfirst, loops around and makes a second attempt with the same result. The fly collides with the window over and over again, trying to escape.

“Wow,” Jamie says suddenly to no one in particular, “Jamie’s really full. Jamie doesn’t want to go back to work, Jamie thinks we should all go home and take a nap. What does everyone think of Jamie’s plan?”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” the Amazonian princess says in response.

I turn, and look over at Jim. He’s already looking at me with both eyebrows raised and his lips tightly pursed.

“Insects, huh?” I say.

“Yeah,” he responds, as we both turn and watch the fly try to smash his way through the front windshield.



## Guys Night In

Keith and I had decided to do guy's night right. We scored a couple two-and-a-half-pound steaks from a buddy at our Sam's Club's meat department – he *accidentally* mislabeled them at twelve ounces each – and picked up an action flick full of massive explosions, gratuitous profanity, and fake breasts. We had also decided to hold the event at my place, since both of my roommates were out for the night.

My roommate Bryce and I had shared a two-bedroom, ground floor apartment for the past year. However, when my friend Jake's parents split up last month we invited him to move in with us. Jake was relieved. The thought of having to live alone with either one his parents was making him physically convulse. And so, Bryce and I packed up our shit and walked it sixty yards across the parking lot to a third-story, two-bedroom loft apartment. I figured it would be a huge hassle deciding who lived where, but it was quickly decided that Jake would get the small bedroom since we were doing him the favor and inconveniencing ourselves. And then, to my surprise, Bryce volunteered to take the loft. This left me with the master bedroom, which came equipped with a ceiling fan, a large walk in closet and its own private bathroom.

Once upon a time, Brice had been a serious lady's man. He changed girls more often than I shaved. But he had left that life behind so he could concentrate on his last semester of college. I guess that's why he volunteered to live in the luxurious loft that came equipped with three walls, a downward view of the living room, no door, and no sense of privacy or sound filtration.

The opening credits of the movie finish rolling, and Keith and I each take a mouthful of food. However, the taste of the slow smoked, charcoal grilled beef doesn't even register before the front door opens and Brice strolls in with a girl I'd never seen before.

"Hey, guys," Brice says as he enters, "this is Lisa. Lisa, this is my roommate Knauff, and his friend Keith."

Keith and I, still chewing, turn and nod at the gorgeous blond.

"Don't mind us, guys, Lisa wanted to see the place, so I'm just going show her around quick."

The two of them walk through the living room, behind the couch Keith and I are sitting on and up the stairs to Brice's room. The two of us shrug at one another and return our attention to the movie.

We settle in and take a second mouthful of food just as Brice's bedroom light goes off and the "click, click, click" of his noisy box fan being turned to "high" sounds. It's April, the apartment isn't warm, there's no need for a fan.

Keith turns toward me, eyes bulging and mouthing, "no?"

I'm at a total loss for words. I raise both eyebrows and shrug.

The box fan masks nothing. How can it? There's only about twenty feet and small wooden railing separating our couch from Brice's bed. We hear every slow, methodic squeak, which quickly changes to a hurried, frenzied screech, as well as every high-pitched moan – though, thankfully, their numbers are few. And then it's over, almost before it begins. The box fan clicks off. The sound of

rustling movement follows, and then Brice and Lisa reappear. They say goodbye and walk out of the apartment.

Keith is still mortified. The look on his face gives him away, and it doesn't change once, even as he watches the two of them pass us by. He turns back toward me and sets his plate down on the coffee table.

"Are you okay?" I ask, setting my own plate down.

"I'm anything but okay," he says, shaking his head. "Did that seriously just happen?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Was that his girlfriend?"

"I don't think so, that was my first time seeing her. He mentioned meeting some new girl he was interested in but who wasn't into relationships."

"Well, she definitely seemed friendly," Keith says, finally smiling.

"No doubt."

"Holy shit!" Keith says turning away.

"What?"

"Sorry," he says, resting his head on his fist and looking over toward me, "Delayed reaction. I still can't believe that just happened."

"I know. I really need to get my own place. No roommates."

"Next time ... we're having the cookout at my place. My parents aren't nearly so amorous."

I nod and smile.



“You should invite Brice’s friend though,” Keith says, picking his plate back up. “My steaks may not be on par with yours, but she seems pretty easy to please.”

## Thanksgiving Dinner

Two half-pound, plastic containers of coleslaw and potato salad, a year-old box of Stove Top Stuffing, a plate of deli-sliced turkey sandwiches, and a fridge full of Budweiser: Mason had prepared thanksgiving dinner himself.

Jim and I arrive at Mason's tenth story bachelor pad late. The party's mostly over, everyone's already eaten, and in fact the only people still present beside Mason himself are Holly and Angel, my ex: the redheaded stepdaughter of Satan himself. Mason and Angel had been friends before her and I started dating, and in fact, Mason was responsible for introducing us. But they don't talk so much lately, not since the two of us broke up. I'm definitely surprised to see her.

"Hey Jim, Knauff, glad you could make it," Mason says and leads us through the living room towards the kitchen. Holly and Angel sit on the living room floor in silence and watch us as we pass by. Jim and I both tell Mason that we'll help ourselves, wait for him to head back out to the living room, and then grab a beer each and drink them slow. We take enough time to make it seem like we are in fact eating.

After we finish drinking the first round of our Thanksgiving dinner, we each grab another beer and make our way into the living room. The girls are still sitting on the yellow shag carpet and Mason is across from them atop the ugliest couch the '70's had created. The thing is wrapped in a silver and yellow floral design and its base is resting woundedly on the floor – it makes me wonder whether Mason had gotten a discount for each of the missing legs or if it was a package deal. I grab the spot next to Mason on the couch, though I might as well

have been sitting on the floor with the girls, and Jim takes the couch's matching armchair, under the living room's solitary window.

I glance around the apartment, taking in the *college life* and notice Jim doing the same. The two of us have strayed from the college route, at least for the time being. Personally, I'd like to at least have some inclination as to what I want to do with my life before I start. Jim, I think, just isn't interested. Unfortunately, Mason's situation here isn't doing anything to sway either of us from our path.

The five of us sit in silence, looking from face to face, not really sure what to say to one another, all of us but Angel that is. Angel, instead, glares at me unblinkingly. It had been nearly a year since we had last seen each other. Apparently, a year wasn't nearly enough time.

"How are things at the Sam's Club, Jim?" Mason asks in an attempt to alleviate the tension in the room.

"Not ... bad," Jim responds, surprised at the suddenness of the question. "Actually, I just got a rai..."

"So, Mason, are you looking forward to this summer?" Angel asks, turning and cocking her head toward Mason, looking like a confused puppy.

Angel's the only child of a rich, unhappily married couple and had always been a whore for attention. I don't know why her behavior surprises me. Maybe the year apart had done a better job of purging her from my memory than I had thought.

“Actually, I am. Two big events happening within a week of each other,” Mason responds, shooting her a quick smile, and then turns back toward Jim, inviting him to finish his broken sentence.

“Two events?” Angel asks before a sound can escape Jim’s open mouth.

I catch Mason’s quick eye roll just before he turns back toward Angel; she either missed it, or ignores it. “Well, obviously, there’s graduation,” he says and pauses.

Angel gives a swift head shake and opens her eyes wide, waiting for the other half of his response.

“But the week before that,” Mason continues, “the new Star Wars movie opens.”

“Excuse me?” she replies with as much attitude as she can muster.

“What?” Mason asks, innocently.

“How in God’s name can you sit there and compare the day you graduate from college, with degrees in biology, philosophy and Greek no less, with the day a stupid movie comes out?” Angel’s nails dig into the carpet like she’s holding on for dear life: as if her anger had filled her up with helium, and if she let go, she’d float away.

“What’s wrong with that?” Mason responds, still peddling his innocent act. “It’s been fifteen years since the last one came out. I’m excited.”

Mason had always been an overachiever, and most people are impressed when they hear he’s studying for three bachelor’s degrees at the same time. While this is an impressive feat to be sure, a bit of tarnish shows once you know his



tuition is one-hundred percent reimbursed due to his mother's standing on the faculty, and that he only works in the summer when he doesn't have classes. It's rather easy to focus on school when you don't have things like tuition and a work schedule hanging over your head. I should know; I worked full time all through high school so I could help my parents afford it.

"You need to get your priorities straight," Angel seethes. "The day you graduate will be the single most important day of your life so far. I can't imagine trying to compare it to a movie opening." Although her argument is sound, it would carry more weight coming from someone who hadn't spent the last year of her post-graduation life working for daddy.

"You know what I can't imagine?" The onset of Jim's voice creates a back draft in the room. "Listening to another word come out of your mouth. Are you so shallow you can't envision someone having interests that don't reflect your own, or are you just so hollow that other people's happiness just pisses you off?"

"I don't have to listen to this," Angel screeches at Jim, who's sitting on the edge of his chair, ready to pounce, "especially not from some minimum wage warehouse worker."

Faster than I can imagine, Jim lunges at Angel, grabs her by the hair and drags her across the floor, back towards his chair. Angel screams, but the rest of us are in shock; reacting feels like an impossibility. With his left hand ensnared in Angel's hair, Jim reaches down with his right and flips the hideous chair out of his way. He then picks Angel up by the shoulders, looks her straight in the eyes, frowns, shakes his head once, and heaves her out the window.

Her screams fill my head. All eyes are on Jim as he stands in front of the window peering out triumphantly, reveling in his unquestionable victory.

The room is silent.

“I don’t have to listen to this,” Angel screeches at Jim, who’s sitting on the edge of his chair, ready to pounce. “We’re leaving.”

Angel quickly gathers up her things, Molly included, and storms out of the apartment. Mason chases after to see them out. Jim gets up and comes over to sit in Mason’s spot next to me on the couch.

“Sorry, man,” he says.

“For what?”

“For snapping like that. I’ve listened to her berate you and everyone else around her for the last five years and just couldn’t take it anymore. And since you aren’t seeing her anymore ... I don’t know, I guess I just didn’t have any reason to restrain myself.”

I don’t know either. I don’t know why I let her push me around for all those years, why I didn’t stand up for myself, or why I didn’t walk away sooner. And more importantly, I don’t know why she still gets to me, especially now that I’m free; happy; and totally in love with a girl who makes me feel good about myself rather than a piece of shit. But I tell Jim that “it’s cool” and that he shouldn’t worry about it. But it’s not cool. I played the same passive role here as I had for the entirety of our relationship. It should have been me who snapped at her. It should have been me I imagined throwing her through the window.

“I honestly don’t know how you didn’t snap before and how you put up with her shit for so long.”

“I don’t know either,” I say, smiling, and reimagining the scene of her demise, but with me standing victoriously in front of the window instead of Jim.

“Damn, you don’t know how mad she made me tonight,” Jim says, shaking his head. “It’s a good thing she left when she did, I was on the verge of dragging her ass across the room and throwing her out the window.”

I quickly look at Jim as he gets up from the couch and walks to the kitchen. He misses the look on my face.

## A Ring, Weed, and Witnesses

"I don't think they're long for this world," I remember hearing a guest say as I stormed through Kristen's living room, on my way out the front door.

"Ouch, why's that?" Another partygoer said in response.

"I overheard Matt telling a friend of his that he had a plan."

"A plan?"

"That's all I heard..."

I slammed the screen door open, ignoring the guys in the living room, walked off the front porch, down the pathway, and stood in the center of the yard, looking up at the star-filled, spring night sky.

"Knauff, let's go," Jim said, motioning for me to get in the car.

I took one last sip from the beer I forgot I was holding, looked up at the sky again, and then flung the bottle out into the woods at the edge of Kristen's property line.

\* \* \*

Saturday morning at the Sam's Club, I love working weekends. The day begins like any other. I clock in and stroll out onto the floor, heading toward Tire Sales. I stop by Electronics, but Jim's busy helping a customer, so I keep on my way. Something's off though. Every co-worker I pass says hello, some of them ask how I'm doing. Half of these people don't even know my name, and a third of the others don't usually talk to me at all. Strange things are a foot. I don't like it.



Jim appears from around a corner seconds after I reach my department. I wonder if he saw me and blew off his customer.

“What’s up, man?” he asks on approach.

“Not much. I stopped by on my way over, but saw you were busy.”

“Nah,” he says and waves off the implication with his right hand. “The guy was looking to buy the cheapest computer we had. I told him the cheap ones were all crap, and that most of them are returned. Then I sold him that new three thousand dollar one we got in last week.”

I try not to smile and shake my head. “Are we getting paid on commission now?”

“No, I just think it’s funny.”

“Right,” I say, chuckling and moving toward the center row of tire racks.

Jim follows, and I begin telling him about the strange behavior of our co-workers. He says he hasn’t noticed anything odd, and that everyone’s been acting normal around him. He thinks I’m just hypersensitive, that I’m still on edge from the party the night before.

“I am still a little upset about it,” I say, punching a tire.

“Whatever, man. Fiancé or not, Mandy knows how you feel about drugs, even if it was just weed.”

“Yeah, but I left her there.”

“Technically, she stayed behind. You told her we were leaving, and she decided she’d rather continue getting high. Besides, the party was at her best friend’s house, it’s not like she was hurting for a place to sleep.”

“I guess.”

“Plus, maybe now she’ll think twice before toking it up. Cheer up, man.”

“No, you’re right, I’m fine. I just haven’t heard from her since we left, and everyone around here acting strangely just has me on edge.”

The hours tread on and I busy myself with work. My co-workers odd behavior carries on into the afternoon, but I’ve become accustomed to it. Besides, none of them seem to want an actual conversation, they just keep checking in on me, like they’re afraid I’m going to have a break down or something. This just makes it easier to ignore them. Around one o’clock though, the missing puzzle piece appears.

I’m in receiving, searching through mounds of tires that I need out on the floor, when I hear Mandy’s voice behind me.

“Hey,” I say as I turn, surprised to see her, “what are you doing here, aren’t you off today?”

She’s wearing street clothes: a tight-fitted shirt and jeans that show off her curves. “Yeah,” she says, failing to keep eye contact. “I just came down here to ... to clear this all up in person. To tell you straight out ... nothing happened.”

“Nothing happened? What are you talking about?”

“With Matt. That whatever everyone here’s been telling you didn’t happen. I didn’t mess around with him last night after you left.”

“Oh, right, you mean what everyone here *hasn’t* been telling me.”

“What?”

“What I mean is, while I appreciate you *clearing things up for me*, you telling me what happened is actually the first I’ve heard of it.”

“That’s just it,” she says, starting to sob, “nothing happened.”

“Right, you felt so guilty about *nothing happening* that you thought it necessary to come all the way down here to tell me about it instead of calling or waiting till I got off work?”

“Yes, I wanted you to know the truth.”

“Which is?”

“After you left, Matt and I went into Kristen’s room to smoke a bit more. We fell asleep not long after. But someone came in the room in the middle of the night and saw us. I heard them on the other side of the door saying they saw us making out. I figured someone would tell you all about it today.”

“Well someone’s definitely been talking about it; it seems I, or rather you have been the talk of the store today. However, no one’s saying anything to me. Everyone’s been walking on eggshells around me instead, obviously feeling sorry for me.”

Mandy’s eyes meet mine for split-second before they turn again towards the ground. She says nothing.

“I am glad you came down here though. It’s good to know your conscience is still intact ... even if your integrity isn’t. Did you at least take the ring off when you *slept* with him?”

She looks down at her left hand and covers the ring with the right. She says nothing, and begins crying unrestrained. When she looks back up at me, I'm not there; I'm walking away. I walk down the aisle and out the front door, alone.

## Unforeseen Consequences

“Hey,” I say, waving my hand above my head as I stand in the middle of the dark Sam’s Club parking lot. The man walking across the lot is a stranger. He changes his direction and moves toward me anyway.

“Hey, “I say again as the two of us come face to face. “Do you have a cell phone, can you call an ambulance?”

“An ambulance, why? Why can’t you call?”

“I don’t own a cell phone. Don’t believe in them. But that guy back there is in a pretty bad way. He’s probably going to need medical help.” I nod my head back slightly.

The man looks over my shoulder at the broken body lying to next the far corner of the store.

“What happened?” the man asks, still peering into the darkness.

“What? Oh, he tripped, fell, broke two ribs, his right arm, his nose, and possibly his ankle.”

“How do you know that?” he asks, looking at me again.

“Well, last week he was at this party and he tripped there too. Only that time his dick fell into the vagina of another man’s fiancé. He’s very accident prone.”

The man furrows his brow. “No I meant, how did you know the specifics and degree of his injuries?”

“Oh,” I say, raising my right eyebrow, preceding a smile. “Just a guess.”



## The Monster and the Damsel: A Story in Three Parts

The six-foot, three-hundred and fifty pound goliath unleashes a right hook intended to level me. He's frustrated, he's insulted; he's apparently forgotten he's in sparring class.

I try to calm him down; I tell him to breathe, but he's unresponsive. His clenched teeth and murderous stare, however, tell me that this is going to end violently.

Shouts ring out from the sidelines as he continues his attack. I slip his left jab, duck another right hook, and tag his floating rib with a crouched, straight right punch; the strike stings his ego more than his side. The other students are getting their money's worth this week; UFC tickets are much more expensive than a week of Kenpo classes.

The titan rubs his ribs with a gloved hand, huffs in my direction, and then charges with both arms outstretched like some crazed video game wrestler. I sidestep his assault, tapping him quickly on the head with a backfist as he passes, then turn to face him in the center of the room.

Both his hands slam into the wall, breaking his charge. He turns his head slightly, eyeing me from the corner of a socket, and takes a deep breath.

It's almost over.

"You're a dead man, Knauff," he growls, pushing off the wall, building momentum as he turns and hurling his body across the mat.

This second onslaught is focused, determined. I shift, slip, weave, duck, and dodge each salvo of the barrage, but he gets closer with each strike, each step propelling us closer and closer toward the far corner of the room.

I leap back, attempting to give myself some distance and look for an opening, but the molding along the base of the wall catches my foot as I land. There's no where left to go.

The monster smiles, his trap is sprung.

The haymaker he fires at me moves faster than is feasible for a creature of his size, yet, the crater he leaves in the wall proves its viability. The room is silent. I hop past his arm just as his fist impacts the right edge of the wall, and respond with a left hook to his temple. Thing about traps, they don't always work as intended and sometimes even backfire, ensnaring the hunter rather than the hunted.

The leviathan falls to the mat, unconscious. I look down and respectfully bow towards him. I then turn and bow to the rest of my students.

"And that," I announce, relaxing my stance "is why you always need to stay focused and in control."

The class remains silent; all eyes are on the behemoth lying on the floor, struggling with consciousness.

"So," I say, raising my hands into a fighting stance, "Who's next?"

\* \* \*

“Dude, you’re a horrible storyteller,” Jim says, shaking his head.

“What are you talking about? That story rocked,” I say and check the time clock. “It’s all about overcoming adversity.”

“No, it’s all about overcoming a student: emphasis on student.”

“Yeah, but building up how big and scary and strong he is builds tension.”

“But he’s still a student, and you’re still his instructor, of course you’re going to be able to take him down, I never thought otherwise. For that story to work, you need to spice it up, throw in a twist. Make it seem like he has the upper hand for most of the fight.”

“But that’s not how it...”

“It doesn’t matter, man. If you want this story to help you pick up chicks, you have to seem like the underdog. You have to fight your way to victory. The females love that sort of thing.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “I’m not telling you this so you can edit it for pickup-ability; I’m just telling you what happened in class Saturday.”

Jim takes a sip of his Coke and looks me right in the eye. “Well, man, want it or not that’s what I’m doing. We have to get you back in the saddle. It’s been almost six months since that bitch broke your heart. It’s time to find you a new woman.” Jim nods toward the time clock. “How much time do we have?”

I look at the clock again. “Fifteen minutes, and then our glorious lunch time is over.”

“Perfect. Now let me tell you what happened to me a couple weeks back.”



\* \* \*

I'm sitting on the couch in the lobby, talking with Brian's student, Pete. I'm just about to get up and go get myself a sandwich from Subway, when in walks the ... *most* ... gorgeous girl I've ever seen in our studio.

"Hi," I say, hopping up from the couch, "welcome to Tracy's Karate," and extend my hand.

"Hello," she says, shaking my hand.

"Can I help you with something today?"

"Yeah, I had an appointment with Brian, for a demonstration."

"Bri..."

"I'm Brian," I say, cutting Pete off and smiling at the girl. "Sorry, I had forgotten what time we'd discussed for your demo." I place one hand on the small of her back and direct her toward the stairs with the other. "Why don't we head to one of our private lesson rooms and get started. What's your name?"

"Okay," she says, smiling at me, "I'm Darla."

We head up the stairs, and I quickly look back and scowl at Pete. He gets my meaning. When we get upstairs, I spend a few minutes showing her the extreme basics of Kenpo; you know, the stuff we teach a six-year olds to make them feel like they're badasses. Anyway, after she *masters* those simple moves, I tell her she's a natural and that she should try something more complex. She gets all excited, so I figure it's time to make my move. I show her the simplest throw technique – I've got her totally pressed up against me – then I have her throw me

to the ground. I break the fall, of course, and pull her down with me as I roll so she ends up straddling me. Then...

\* \* \*

“What the hell is the point of this story, Jim?”

“What do you mean, what’s the point? I’m trying to give you some pointers on how to pick up chicks,” Jim says, sporting a genuine look of confusion.

“I thought you were giving me storytelling pointers with an *emphasis* on picking up chicks?” I say just as visibly confused.

“Wait ... what?”

“Nevermind,” I say and get up from my chair. I pat Jim on the shoulder as I walk by and punch my code into the time clock. “I’m going back to work.

“No, wait,” he says, twisting around to see me. “Tell me your story again. I totally had a point, I swear.”

I walk out of the break room and raise a hand dismissively. “Go back to your fantasy world, Jim, you’ve still got a few minutes.”

## Stalking Isn't a Habit it's a Way of Life

Eight hours of shopping. This is my life, my lie. I wander the aisles, feigning interest in the rows and rows of junk I encounter, all the while on the prowl, looking for the one, watching, waiting. I know she's here, she has to be.

Overhead, the music drones on, I've nearly memorized the rotation of songs and internal store advertisements. If hell had an express lane, Dante would surely have used a Wal-Mart rather than a castle in his description of limbo.

I stop by the café for a quick snack. The girl behind the counter recognizes me. She's seen me watching her. I've had my eye on her for awhile. I haven't moved on her yet because the time hasn't been right. Everything needs to be in place; the situation must be perfect before I act. But even though she knows, she's not scared; she doesn't act like it anyway. She treats me like I'm any other customer. She hands me my pretzel and soda and goes back to wiping down the tables in the dining area.

I begin another lap around the store. I observe women entering and exiting the dressing rooms, and children running up and down the toy aisles, but nothing catches my attention. Once I start my next lap though – it's probably my tenth of the day – I see her, or rather two hers, making their way through the women's clothing department. They're both cute, but there's something about the younger one, the blond, that sets me off.

I scramble out of the aisle, set my drink down at the feet of a pair of mannequins, and make my way into the department, quickly jumping into the middle of a rack of clothes. The girls don't notice; they're too busy chatting. I

peer out from between two dresses and watch. They move from rack to rack picking out tube tops, baby T's, and other small, low-cut apparel. The young one does anyway, the older one seems more interested in talking rather than shopping.

As they begin heading in my direction, I quietly make my way out of the rack, walk crouched past a few older women, who pretend not to notice me, and around the perimeter of the department, so I can get behind the girls and continue surveilling them undetected.

They look at and pick up a few more items on their way toward the front door. I only have a few seconds to catch up and block their escape. I bolt out from behind another rack of clothes, keeping an eye on the girls, while making sure no one's moving to get in my way. It's busy, most people just want to get in, get their crap, and get home. They're not interested in the twenty-two year old man stalking a pair of teenagers.

I burst out the door and grab the blond by the wrist, just as the two of them are preparing to step off the curb.

"What the fuck?" The blond shrieks, struggling to break free from my grip.

"Sorry, miss, but I need you to come with me," I say, maneuvering her back toward the door.

"She's not going anywhere with you, freak" the spunky, short-haired brunette says, flashing some attitude.

"Actually she is," I say, pulling aside my jacket and flashing some attitude of my own, along with a shiny set of handcuffs. "You can come too if you..."

“Stephie!” The young one yells as her partner tears across the parking lot.

“You need to get some better friends,” I say as I lead her back in the store, “as well as some stealth skills. I knew you were going to load your purse up the moment I saw you. And then, you went and did it right in the middle of the aisle?” I shake my head and direct her to walk in front of me.

We’re close, the distance between us almost personal. The clerks call it the ‘perp walk,’ and it’s the highlight of their day. I spare this one the cuffs, but the clerks all know. She’s with me, so they can’t help but know, can’t help but watch as we make our way back through the store, toward the office and into the holding room where I patiently sit her down, collect the merchandise from her purse and take her statement.



## Bureaucracy: The Devil's Playground

"Nice moves, Knauff," a voice announced from behind me.

"Excuse me," I said, turning to face the man behind me. He was a little older than me, with dark hair, and wearing jeans and a t-shirt. It wasn't one of the managers. I was slightly relieved.

"Sorry," he said, extending a hand, "I'm Chris. I work loss prevention for Sam's Club." I was suddenly less relieved.

"So, what's this about?" I asked after shaking his hand. My guard was up, way up.

"I stopped you because I saw you and Jim practicing some moves on the far side of aisle five."

Here we go, I thought, deny everything; give them nothing. "That wasn't what it looked like."

"No? Cause it looked like two guys who knew a thing or two about martial arts applying their trade on the sales floor."

"Well..."

"But the real question is, have you ever thought about working loss prevention?"

"What?"

"Loss prevention. You know, walking around the store in plain clothes, busting bad guys. You'd have to transfer over to the Wal-Mart side, but we could really use you."

\* \* \*

“Nice work, Knauff,” a familiar voice says from behind me.

“What’s that?” I say, turning to face, Steve, my boss as he enters the security office. He’s dressed in a nice black suit, he left the life behind some years ago.

“I said nice work, on your stop last week.”

“Oh, right, thanks,” I say, shaking his hand. “So, what brings you to my little kingdom today?”

“Actually,” he says, sitting down and motioning for me to do the same, “I came to give you a little pep talk.”

“A pep talk? You just said nice work.”

“I did, and it was a good bust. However, your numbers are down, way down.”

“Down from what? I’ve only been on my own at this store for month. What are you comparing my numbers to?”

“I’m comparing them to your training numbers.”

“My ...” I shake my head and take a deep breath before continuing. “It’s hardly fair to compare anything here to my training activity.”

“How do you figure that?”

“How do I figure?” I pause again, unable to deduce whether his naïveté is calculated or genuine. “You had me train at West Florissant.”

“So?”

“So ... that place gets ripped off more often than a prom queen’s panties. There’s not another store in the state where I’d be able to keep numbers like that. Besides, they’re smarter out here, or at least more cautious. They don’t stick shit in their pocket while six other people are shopping the same aisle. They hide in the stalls in the bathroom where they know they can’t be seen. How am I supposed to bust them if I can’t maintain eye contact? You know the laws better than me, is there some other way?”

“No, the laws are the same. If you lose eye contact with a suspect, even for a second, you can’t make the stop.”

“Then how ...”

“You’re just going to have to find a way. We’re paying you to get us people we can prosecute. I’ll lower your quota to three stops a week ... for now, but we’re going to revisit this conversation next month. Make me proud.”

Steve gets up, refrains from shaking my hand again, and walks out of the room, heading in the direction of the manager’s office. I remain seated, my head now resting uncomfortably in my hands. I didn’t even know I had a quota. I wonder what it was before he lowered it. Still, I’d be lucky to catch three people a month at this store, let alone a week.

An hour after Steve leaves I’m back on the floor, but my mind’s not on the job. I play the scene over and over again in my head as I make my rounds, getting angrier with each viewing. A quota? Seriously? For busting shoplifters? What am I, a traffic cop now?

The sound of rustling cellophane catches my attention, forcing me to stop. I listen. The crackle sounds again, and I place it an aisle or two ahead of me. I move to the end of the aisle where I figure the sound originated from and peek around the corner. There, standing in the middle of the toy aisle, was my prey, ripping open a pack of Pokémon cards. The boy couldn't have more than five years old.

I watch as the kid pulls the cards out of the wrapper and thumbs through them. Without a second thought, he tosses the cellophane on the shelf nearest him and stuffs the cards into his pocket. He never notices me. He never even looks around to see if anyone is watching him.

*We're paying you to get us people we can prosecute.*

I follow the boy as he makes his way haphazardly through a series of aisles. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was trying to lose me. But he never saw me. Right? No, he's five. He's not a criminal genius. He makes a left out of the stationary aisle and enters the main front walkway. He stops and begins to turn toward me. I hop out of the aisle and glance around the corner to watch him. He takes off running.

I quickly make my way down the aisle and check the shelves nearest to where he had stopped to make sure he hadn't dumped his ill-gotten gains. I turn the corner and see him racing toward the registers and the exit beyond.

"There you are, Tommy" I hear a soothing voice say as the boy comes to a sudden halt.

“Is it time to go home, mommy?” The boy asks as the woman picks him up.

“It is, as soon as mommy pays for her stuff.”

“Okay,” he says and kisses her on the cheek.

I take a deep breath and begin moving toward the two of them. I dig for the badge in my pocket, find it, and grip it tightly.

*We're paying you to get us people we can prosecute.*

I pull the badge out and keep it facing my side as I continue towards them. The woman turns and notices me walking in her direction. She smiles.

Fuck it.

I stick my hand back in my pocket as I walk by and smile at the woman and her son. I continue smiling as I walk past them, by the front registers, out the front door, and off the job.



## Reality Check

“So, tell me,” the call center manager says, “why you want this promotion, Mr. Knauff, and why you think you’re qualified for it.” He hunches forward in his desk, pretending at least to be interested in what I have to say.

“Well, sir, I’ve been here for almost a year, and have learned a lot about the cable business. I like my job, I can see myself staying here long term, and I’m very interested in moving up within the company. As for why I’m qualified for the position ... I think my record speaks for itself. I’m one of the best technical reps on the floor, and I’d say about seventy-five percent of the technical problem calls are transferred to me by other reps. Plus, as you know, it was my forethought in designing and teaching the DVD/Home-Entertainment-Center connections training class, this past winter, that saved us from running a ton of service calls, with the boom of DVD player sales at Christmas time.”

“That’s true,” the manager says, marking something down on a piece of paper, “corporate was impressed with the low number of truck rolls we had around the holidays.”

“And to be quite honest, I have some other ideas on how we can increase technical training for all reps so they wouldn’t have to send the problem calls to a technical specialist.”

“Which would go a long way in getting us in line with corporate’s one-call-solution mandate.”

“Exactly,” I say, suppressing a smile. “As a supervisor, I could easily design these programs and have time to teach them to the entire call center.”

“Very good, Mr. Knauff. I definitely like what I’m hearing, but I still have a couple interviews left before I make my decision. I’ll most likely make an announcement by the end of the week.”

I leave the manager’s office and walk back to my cube, feeling pretty good about myself. Once there, I sit down, put my headset on, and get my desk in order to return to work.

“You’re not going to get it,” Steve, my neighbor says over the half-wall separating our cubicle.

“Well thanks for the vote of confidence, Steve.”

“Don’t get me wrong, you deserve the promotion, no doubt. You’re just not going to get it.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because, dude, you’re white.”

“What does that matter?” I say, standing up to look over the wall at Steve.  
“The call center manager is white.”

“Exactly,” he says, returning my look.

\* \* \*

“So ... how did it go?” Dan, my brother, asks as we tears across the parking lot like we’re in a street race. I had gotten my little brother the job at Charter a few months back. It still feels weird working with him, but it’s nice to have someone to go to lunch with.

“Fine,” I say, gripping the ‘oh shit’ handle above my head and pressing a nonexistent brake pedal with my right foot each time he swerves us around a parked car.

“Fine?” he asks, looking over at me, while exiting the parking lot into oncoming traffic, “give me details, bro.”

“It went well. I’m pretty sure they know I’m the most qualified candidate, and with two positions and only three people in the running ... I’m not too worried.”

“Sweet! Who else are you up against?” Dan jerks the wheel to the left, sending the car into the turn lane. He then throws the transmission back into third gear, slams the accelerator to the floor, blows by an old woman doing thirty in a forty-five, and cuts back over into the driving lane.

“Did I miss something? Did our break get shortened?”

“No,” he says, shooting me a quizzical look.

I shake my head. “Anyway, it’s between Dwayne, Monisha and me.”

“Seriously? Dude, you’re a shoe-in. I haven’t been here all that long, but even I know Dwayne’s an idiot. He can barely operate his phone let alone walk customers through troubles call. And Monisha ... Monisha’s okay I guess. She does a decent enough job, but she doesn’t have as much experience as you, and I’ve heard her giving customers some serious attitude more than once.”

“I’m glad you’re confident.”

“Your not? I thought you said the interview went well.”

“It did. But Steve seems to think I won’t get it cause I’m white.”

“Steve? Steve who?” Dan asks as he swerves into the McDonald’s parking lot and comes to a dead stop at the first open parking spot, the farthest one away from the building and other cars.

‘The guy in the cube next to me,’ I say, grabbing the door handle, preparing to exit the car.

“You mean Steve, the conspiracy theory nut?” Dan asks, sitting perfectly still and looking straight at me. “The guy who thinks the Illuminati and Freemasons are at war with one another and are secretly in control of all the world’s governments and are using them in their clandestine crusade?”

“That’s the guy.”

“Yeah, there’s a guy with a strong grip on reality ... give me a break.”

\* \* \*

“Can I have everyone’s attention, please? Put your calls on hold for a minute,” the call center manager says, standing just outside his office door.

I don’t have a call so I set my phone to ‘unavailable’ and put the English Literature text book I had been reading down on my desk. I stand up and look from the manager across the room towards my brother’s cube, where he’s shooting me a big cheesy smile and ‘thumbs up.’ Next to me, Steve doesn’t look up, or even acknowledge the manager’s presence. He just keeps talking with his customer.



“I just want to take a second and introduce you all to your two new supervisors,” the manager continues. “So, let’s give a quick round of applause to Dwayne and Monisha. They’ll be starting their new positions on Monday.”

“What the fuck?” I say loud enough for my ten closest co-workers, including Dwayne and Monisha, to hear.

“I told you, man,” Steve says, covering the mic of his headset with his hand, while never looking away from his monitor.

I drop to my seat and stare at my desk. “This is bullshit.”

Steve says nothing in return. No one does. I’m sure, however, that everyone near me is looking in my direction. And I know my brother has disconnected his call by now and is on his way over to my cube. What I don’t know is how or why this happened. Was Steve right? Had I been passed over because of the color of my skin, or was this the universe’s way of balancing my karmic scales for walking out on my last job?

“Any idea if the dispatch center is hiring?” I ask my brother as he approaches my desk, stopping him from saying anything intended to cheer me up. I hate when people do that, it only ends up pissing me off even more.

“No idea,” he says, smiling. “I’ve heard they don’t have to deal with customers at all though.”

“Yeah,” I say, turning to look toward the nearest window and out into space. “That would be a nice perk.”



## Service Calls

Three Nextels sit, lined up across my desk, directly in front of my phone. On most occasions, when any one of them sounds, one of the others will follow. Other times, three of them will go off at the same time. And less rare than you might think, there are times when all four of them will ring at once. I'm expected to answer them, all of them.

I've been in the Dispatch Center for four months now and it never seems to get any better. Today's been particularly trying. On top of their regular routed jobs, I've had to assign two or three more jobs to each of the service techs in the field, pushing them at least an hour or two past quitting time. I've also already let the on-call techs know that with as many jobs as I still have in queue it's going to be a long night.

"What the hell, man?" One of the on-call techs says, his voice booming over the Nextel's speaker, loud enough for most of the dispatch center to hear.

"I don't know," I say, "customer service keeps scheduling these cable-out calls, but none of the addresses are close enough to each other to declare them as outages. If they were, I'd be more than happy to send the main line techs out to deal with them."

"That's just it," he says, as I thumb the volume button in attempt to lower his voice. "Not a single one of these *cable-out* calls you've sent me on tonight have been actual outs. They've all been problems the customer service rep should have troubleshoot with the customer over the phone."

“I hear you. And I wish there was something I could do. I’ve been trying to explain to them for months now that they should only be setting up after-hours-trouble-calls for *actual* cable outs, since we only have a couple techs on-call each night, but they don’t listen to me.”

“This is some bullshit. At this rate, I’m still going to be out here when my shift starts in the morning.”

“I’ll keep trying to get a hold of the ones I can ... see if I can’t troubleshoot with them, but, so far, the ones I have talked to don’t won’t to deal with anyone else over the phone. They just want someone at their homes to fix the problem.”

“Yeah...” the tech says, as I set the Nextel back down on my desk.

“Fun night,” Shawna says, peaking over the divider between our desks.

“Right,” I say, getting up to stretch my legs, “they must have all the tards working in the call center tonight. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this many bogus cable-out calls in one night before.”

“I’m sayin’, the techs are even getting annoyed with me. Not a single one of them has asked me what I’m wearing tonight.”

“Wow, that is bad,” I say, smiling. “Come to think of it ... none of them have asked me what you’re wearing tonight either.”

Shawna laughs, then asks if I’ll join her on her smoke break. I don’t smoke, but I go. We gather up our six collective Nextels, walk to the exit, swipe our security cards past the electronic pad, wait for the doors to unlock, and then exit the building – now I know what you’re thinking: that’s an awful lot of

security for a cable company building. Well, let me tell you, it isn't. Considering how many times the building's been evacuated because of a bomb threat, or because a customer has stated that they're coming up to the office with a gun, determined to shoot everyone inside, I don't know if I'd even feel secure if we had an armed guard positioned at every entrance.

"You know, I'm tempted to walk my happy-ass over to that call-center and start smacking heads together," I say as we cross the quad, moving toward a bench situated in the center of the break area.

"It wouldn't help," Shawna says, sitting down. "Either they wouldn't get what you were hitting them for, or you'd just kill the few remaining brain cells they have left."

"At least with the latter they wouldn't be able to set up any more phony trouble calls."

"True," she says and then takes a drag from her cigarette. "So, how are things with you and Cora?"

"Pretty good. She just got a job at Walgreens as an assistant manager."

"Nice, maybe you should look into that."

"It does pay really well, but you have to have a degree to even apply."

"You'll have it soon."

"That's true, but retail's not really my thing, I don't really want to go back to it."

"Too many bad memories?" Shawna flicks her cigarette into the parking lot, then takes out another and lights it.

“Something like that.”

“I guess having your fiancé cheat on you with a co-worker will do that.”

“Yeah,” I say, sitting down next to her on the bench, but refraining from making eye contact.

“I still can’t believe that you were engaged to one of my best friends and we never met until now.”

“It’s definitely a small world.”

“I’m just glad you’ve finally found a cool girl. You deserve a little happiness.”

I nod just as one of the Nextels hanging from my hip chirps twice, preceding a familiar voice. “Copy?”

“Go ahead,” I say, pressing the talk key.

“Hey, Knauff, it’s Rob. Just thought you’d want to know your phone’s been ringing since you went outside.”

“Thanks, bud,” I respond and reattach the phone to my waist. “Looks like break time’s over,” I say, looking at Shawna.

“Yeah ... I’ll be there in a minute.”

I give her a quick nod, and then shake my head as I trudge back to the building. When I arrive at my desk, the phone’s still ringing.

“This is Thomas Kincaid,” a voice says through the receiver, “Tech Supe for Area Two.”

“I know who you are, Mr. Kincaid,” I say, sitting down, “how can I help you?”



“You can help me by refraining from sending my techs out on anymore bullshit calls tonight.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“Sir, you know as well as I, that I don’t have any say in how many calls a tech gets when they’re on-call. If the call center sets it up as a cable-out, I have to dispatch it.”

“Well, maybe if you were doing your job there wouldn’t be so many.”

“I am doing my job, sir. My job is to dispatch these calls when they come in, no matter how many, no matter what time. However, I have been trying to contact each customer as the calls arrive, which I might add, isn’t actually my job, but most of them won’t even let me try troubleshooting with them. They’ve already talked to customer service and just want their cable fixed.”

“Don’t feed me that bull, you little punk.”

“There is no reason for you to talk to me like that,” I say, bounding to my feet. My calves hit the edge of my chair, sending it flying out of my cubical and across the aisle. The chair smashes into the desk across from mine, drawing the attention of the entire room down on me.

“I’ll talk to you however I please, you piece of shit. You just need to worry about getting my techs out of the field. If you send them on one more call tonight, I’ll have your job.”



“Understood, sir. I’ll refrain from dispatching anymore calls tonight as soon as you go fuck yourself,” I say and slam the phone down, disconnecting the call.

\* \* \*

“Did you really tell Kincaid to go ‘F’ himself?” My boss, Dave, asks from behind his desk.

“I did.”

“And you admit it freely?”

“At least three other people in the room heard me, so it would be pretty stupid of me to lie to you about it. But in all honesty, after being called a punk, a piece of shit, and having my job threatened for no other reason than actually doing my job, I found that it was about the nicest thing I had to say to him.”

“He didn’t mention any of that when he called this morning.”

“I’m sure he didn’t,” I say, shaking my head. “I’m sorry about losing my cool, but he had no right or reason to talk to me the way he did.”

“No ... no he didn’t.”

“So where do we go from here?”

“Kincaid wants me to fire you, and HR thinks I should at least write you up.”

“Well, I can guarantee you that both of those options are going to end with me turning in my badge and walking out of the building.”

“What do you suggest then?” He says, leaning back in his chair and smiling.

“I suggest you tell me to get back to my desk and have a nice day at work. And then see about getting Mr. Kincaid fired or written up.”

Dave laughs. “Get back to work, Knauff. No promises on the second part.”

I walk back to my desk and sit down. Shawna’s waiting with her head on her arms, which are crossed and resting across the top of our desk’s divider.

“So...” she says, watching me activate my phone and Nextels.

“Apparently, so nothing. We talked and everything’s cool.”

“You’re not in trouble?”

“Not today.”

“Wow, that’s crazy.”

I raise an eyebrow in her direction.

“Not that I wanted you to be in trouble. I just figured...”

“It’s cool,” I say, winking at her. “I’m seriously beginning to think I need a new job though.”

“You and me both,” she says, removing her head from my cubical, returning to work, “you and me both.”

## Ballad of the High-Rise Cable Man

“That’s right where ya wanna be, Knauff” the voice says from down below, nudging away the cold and reminding me of my situation and altitude.

Straddling a thirty-foot wood pole in the dead of winter is the last place I want to be. Yet, here I am, suspended six feet off the ground with only my hands and a single metal spike on each boot keeping me aloft.

“Yer lookin’ good,” the voice exclaims.

Bullshit. How can you look anything but ridiculous groping a dead, naked tree in mid air? I’m beginning to think it’s part of the equipment: gloves, climbing belt, uncomfortable leg harness – designed without the forethought that man would ever measure more than six feet tall – climbing boots, security strap, and humility. Add all this to a fear of heights and a single-digit wind chill whistling through this man made forest and you have the perfect recipe for Cable Repairman Kabobs – hope you like them rare.

The voice belongs to Billy-Bob, the rather large man barking orders at me from the ground. His name, however, really isn’t Billy-Bob, but that’s what I call him; that’s who he is. He’s the living embodiment of Billy-Bob’s everywhere. He’s the guy who still attends all his old high school’s football games, the guy who brags about his children at work all day only to ignore them when he goes home. He’s the guy who feels it’s his solemn duty to cull the ever growing and dangerous squirrel population with his .357 Magnum.

Also, he's the guy teaching this inane pole climbing class. A skill I was told I'd never need to learn when I took this job. A skill I apparently now needed in order to keep this job.

"Now fer the fun part," Billy-Bob says, oozing fake enthusiasm. "Strap yerself off to that pole, then climb up there about a foot, movin' halfway 'round, then stop and come down, makin' your way back to where ya are now."

Yeah, fun, like circumnavigating giant splinters constitutes having a good time in my world.

"There ya go," he bellows, as I ram my left climbing spike into the pole, nearly gouging my right ankle, and coming to rest roughly where I had started my loop. "You'll be sittin' pretty at eighteen feet in no time."

"Eighteen feet?"

"Yup, ya have to qualify at six, ten, and eighteen feet to pass this here class."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just use a ladder, instead?" I ask, trying to ignore my classmates moving up and down their poles like spider monkeys at the zoo.

"Naw, climbin's much easier."

"Well, it would be safer," I say, catching myself as the spike on my right boot hits the outside edge of the pole, sending shrapnel flying in all directions and leaving my leg dangling in the air.

"Are ya kidding me? There ain't a safer way to get up a pole then by climbin' 'er. Now get a move on toward that ten foot marker."

Yeah, safe, that's why the next thing I know, I'm somehow standing on the ground, still strapped to the giant toothpick, half dazed and staring at a series of serrated pock marks inches from my face. I guess a combination of the shredded-rubber-covered ground and the relative lack of elevation had kept my legs from buckling upon impact. And the security strap, which was still wrapped around the pole and attached to either side of my climbing belt, had kept me from falling on my ass.

"Let the man breathe," Billy-Bob says as my classmates pour over me like angry soccer fans, looking for blood, shredded clothing, and wood splinters, while, at the same time, trying to disengage my security strap to set me free.

Once I'm loose, Billy-Bob says something about getting back in the saddle, that you have to fall before you can walk, or some such moronic metaphor. He also shouts that he can't authorize my return to work until I make it to eighteen feet without falling, and that I need to quit walking away from him while he's talking to me. I respond with a simple hand gesture – one I'm sure he's familiar with – and walk to my car, leaving a trail of discarded climbing gear.



## Mouse Trap for Grown Ups

This shit is unreal.

I turn the corner of the last aisle and see her, crouched atop the photo counter with her pants and underwear around her ankles, peeing on the countertop. I'm at a total loss. What do you say to someone who has decided to take a leak in the middle of a Walgreens?

\* \* \*

"Seriously, what do you say to someone like that?"

"I don't know, sweetie," Cora says, "I'm sorry I..."

"And last week ..." I say, holding the phone to my ear and pacing back and forth through the living room. "Did I tell you about the craziness from last week? Some lady apparently couldn't wait for my clerk to unlock the bathroom for her, so she climbed up on top of the drinking fountain, dropped her pants and took a shit right there. The drinking fountain, for Christ's sake."

"That's disgusting."

"Yeah. And guess who they wanted to clean it up? I'm an assistant manager, not a fucking janitor."

"So what did you do?"

"I made a couple clerks clean it up, of course. I'll mop up blood, piss and vomit, but I draw the line at shit detail."

“I’m so sorry, hun. If I’d known they’d stick you out there, I wouldn’t have ever suggested you send them your resume.”

“I know, it’s not your fault. Besides, if a five-foot, one hundred pound Asian girl can handle this godforsaken city, I’m sure I can.”

“Yeah, but I was only there for a month, you’ve been out there for nearly a year.”

“Don’t remind me ... I just hope they transfer me soon. Preferably before my next overnight shift”

\* \* \*

Overnights in a South Saint Louis drug store aren’t fun. The weirdoes come out in force. Thieves, beggars, crack heads, and prostitutes, those are my customers in the wee hours of the morning; a macabre parade keeping me company until the sun comes up.

On this particular overnight adventure, we’re having the store’s floors waxed, which means my clerks and I get to play “cowboy” for the majority of the night – and no, not the Hollywood type of cowboy who shoots people for squinting at him, but rather the more historical one, the actual cow-wrangling type; only we’ll be corralling people.

The floor guys show up at 2:00 a.m., and quickly go over their plan with me. Because we have one-way entrance and exit doors, and a barricade separating the two to prevent thieves from making quick entry and exit runs, they tell me

they'll close down one side and wax that half of the store. Once that side's dry, they'll close down the other side and wax the other half. This way, we'll have one register and one working door the entire time. It also means that I'll need to have one clerk at the front of the store the entire night to let people in and out, which also means I'll only have one clerk helping me guard the already waxed aisles.

It never ceases to amaze me that people will come in, be told that half the store is closed due to the floors being waxed, but will get upset regardless because they can't get a bottle of soda at 3:00 a.m.

"Why don't you do this when you're closed," they inevitably say.

"Well, ma'am," I always throw in the ma'am or sir to keep myself from saying *moron* in its place. "Seeing as how this is a 24-hour store, that would be impossible. I apologize for the inconvenience, but that's why we do this in the middle of the night and tell you upfront when you come in, to try keep the inconvenience to a minimum."

Most of the time this will work, and the customer will walk off muttering to his or herself. But sometimes the impertinent ones have to be physically restrained from walking on the fresh wax. This is as much for their own safety as it is to spare the store from paying the floor crew a second time to re-wax.

Tonight though, we've been spared of any such occurrences. The night goes by slowly, we have minimal traffic, and the floor guys get their job done rather quickly. Around two-thirty though, an inconspicuous man comes around the corner on his way out and notices my clerk and I near the register. My clerk begins moving toward the entrance door to let him out. The exit door is locked, at

this point, and the entrance door won't automatically open from the inside. The man, however, must think the clerk is moving to stop him because he takes off running toward the door.

I'm not sure which surprises him more, or which is funnier, the fact that the door won't open or that the security gates continue sounding as he stands between them, looking around like a rat caught in a maze.

"Sir?" I say and motion with my finger for him to approach me.

"Um ... yes?" he asks, still visibly confused about why he can't get away.

"Why don't you give me back my merchandise and then you can go." I'd much rather call the police and have him arrested, but it usually takes them a couple hours to arrive and I don't have the time or the resources to keep the guy restrained until then. God I miss having handcuffs.

"Sorry," he says as he walks over and pulls a box of condoms out from the inside of his coat.

The condoms aren't even in my hands for a second before he takes off running again, heading straight back toward the same door that wouldn't let him out before. The alarm sounds again, and the door fails to open a second time. The man paws at the door, but there's still no response.

I walk around the counter, heading toward him, shaking my head and motioning again with my finger for him to approach. He steps toward me with his head down and pulls a box of diet pills out of an exterior coat pocket.

"Sorry," he says again.

"Is that everything?" I ask, taking the pills from him.



“Yes sir,” he says still looking at his shoes.

“Okay then,” I say and walk over toward the door. The thief doesn’t move. He stands, eyeing me with his head still lowered, waiting for me to open the door. “Why don’t we make sure,” I say, taking a step away from the door, and motioning for him to step between the alarm panels.

The crook huffs and walks with his head down toward the door. As soon as he enters the security gate, the alarm sounds.

“Oh for fuck’s sake. Will you just give me everything you’ve got? You’re not leaving until you do.”

“Sor...

“And don’t give me that sorry bullshit. Just give me my stuff so I can throw your dumbass out.”

The criminal genius reaches into the various pockets in his coat and pulls out another box of condoms, an air freshener, a small bottle of dish soap, a can of dog food, two bottles of baby food, a box of band aids, and a pack of gum. I motion for him to step out of the gate, set the items on the ground, and then to step back into the gate.

“And if that alarms goes off again, I swear to God...” I say through a clenched jaw, looking the man straight in the eyes.

He steps into the gate for the fourth time. The alarm is silent.

“It’s about time,” I say, reaching up and pressing the overtly, obvious *open* button situated at eye level on the doorframe. “Now get the hell out of here.”



The door slides open, and the man bolts out of the store, into the city night. I deactivate the door, pick up the abandoned merchandise, sitting on the floor, and begin walking toward the back of the store.

“That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen,” my clerk says from behind me.

“Well stick around,” I say over my shoulder, “the night’s still young.”

## Skid Marks

“...man on the couch?”

The words and a knocking sound rattle through my mind over and over again. When the lights suddenly come on I realize that the sounds aren't in my head at all. I sit up and try to make out the blurry shape of the person standing in my bedroom doorway. It's too tall to be my brother, Dan, so I'm guessing it's our other roommate, Nick.

“What?” I ask, rubbing my eyes. “What time is it?”

“It's four in the morning,” Nick says, “and I asked, why there's shit all over the living room floor and a naked man on the couch?”

“What?”

\* \* \*

“Man, Knauff, I can't believe how nice your new place is,” Jake said, looking back in through the open doorway of the balcony. “Much better than our old place.”

“Yeah,” I said, raising my beer, “all the rooms have a door and four walls. Really helps cut down on those thirty second *box fan* incidents.”

“I'll drink to that,” Keith replied, raising his beer to meet mine.

“And I'll drink to Jim,” Paul said stumbling over every other word and his own feet. “To his new life in North Carolina with his wife and twins.”

“To Jim,” we all responded, clinking our beers together.

“Do you think he’s going to be okay?” Jim asked, looking down at Paul passed out on the couch.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine,” I said, walking Jim to the front door. “He just needs to sleep it off. I’ll leave a light on in the kitchen for him. You, on the other hand, need to get home and get some sleep for your road trip tomorrow.”

“Thanks for the party, man,” he said, wrapping me in a handshake-hug. “And, I’m sorry again to hear about you and Cora. I thought you two were going to make it.”

“It’s cool, and thanks, but I’m okay. It just turned out that we make better friends than anything else. You just make sure you keep in touch. It seems like everyone’s moving away these days.”

“I guess that means we’re growing up,” Jim said, glancing quickly down at Paul again, then nodded and walked out the front door.

\* \* \*

Nick and I make our way through the apartment and into the living room. Paul is still passed out on the couch where I left him, only now he’s half covered with a bath towel and naked underneath.

“What the hell?” I say, shaking my head.

“And that’s not the worst of it,” Nick says, pointing towards the dining room.

In the center of the dining room, halfway between the couch and the kitchen, sits a small pile of human feces, half covering a white sock. There's another small pile a few feet further, just outside the kitchen door, and another inside the kitchen, on the linoleum under the sink. There's also another sock lying on the kitchen floor, and a shirt dangling off of the counter top. Both of them have visible shit stains.

"Wha..."

"Yeah," Nick says.

"I don't get it," I say walking out of the kitchen. "One, how did he get shit on his shirt? Two, why was he more worried about taking off his shirt than his pants? And three, why did he go to the kitchen at all?"

"You got me, but that wasn't his final destination," Nick says, motioning toward the main bathroom.

"For the love of..." I say, sigh, and shake my head.

The bathroom looks like a hazardous waste zone. There's shit on the floor, the sink, the counter cabinet, and the bathtub. The only place there isn't any is on or in the toilet. There's also a pair of pants and underwear piled in one corner, entirely covered in shit.

"He missed the toilet entirely?"

Nick nods his response.

I spend the next five minutes trying to rouse Paul. I'm curious as to what exactly happened, and more importantly, I want him to help us clean his mess up. Nick, in the meantime, gathers up all the soiled clothes from around the apartment

and throws them in the bathtub. Once he's done, I give up on my attempt to wake the passed out philistine and help Nick with the cleaning.

Nick and I scour the apartment for the next hour and a half, looking for shit stains, piles and tracks. We scrub every surface until our gloves wear holes in them, and then we grab another pair and continue scrubbing.

Once we're finished, the apartment smells like a combination of bleach, all purpose cleaner, Lysol, and shit. It's not really better than before. We put away the cleaning chemicals, discard our gloves, sponges and etc., and then move to the bathroom to do something with Paul's clothes. We decide to stuff them in a heavy duty garbage bag and set them outside on the balcony. Somewhere along the way, the pile of hazmat came in contact with the shower curtain and left skid marks all over it. We look at each other, shake our heads, and then silently move to take down the shower curtain. We're tired and exhausted; neither of us can stand the thought of cleaning up any more shit.

We carry the defiled curtain through the apartment and out the back door, careful not to come in contact with anything along the way, and finally stuff it in the dumpster out back. The garbage men are going to love it.

"Thanks for the help," I say as we make our way back up the stairs to our apartment, "and sorry."

"No worries," he says, opening our door. "Buy me a few rounds later and we'll call it even."



“Deal,” I respond and take a quick look in on the living room. Paul is still passed out on the couch and hasn’t moved in the slightest. The two of us then head off to our rooms to try and catch a little sleep before work.

An hour or so later, the light in my room turns on again, only this time it is my brother standing in the doorway.

“What the hell happened to my shower curtain?” he says annoyed and confused.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” I say, motioning for him to turn the light off. “Just use mine for now.”

Thirty minutes later, Dan finishes his shower and morning ritual, leaves my room, and heads off to work. I roll over anxious to get back to sleep. A couple minutes later, the bedroom light turns on again.

“What now?” I yell, bolting upright in the bed.

“I was just curious why your apartment smells like shit and why I woke up naked on your couch?” Paul asks, now wearing the towel around his waist.

“Great,” I groan, falling back in the bed. “Turn the light off would you.”

“But...”

“Your clothes are out on the balcony,” I say, rolling towards the wall and pulling the covers up over my head. “And you owe my roommate Nick and I many rounds of drinks.”

## Beginnings, Endings and the Path Between

The microwave clock reads 10:55 a.m. Emma and I sit across the break room table from one another, holding hands and watching the door. We wait like anxious defendants outside a courtroom expecting a guilty verdict to come back.

Emma and I started dating a couple months back. The relationship's been surprisingly good, considering my past excursions into the dating world, however there's the small problem of me being an assistant manager at the same store where she's a pharmacy technician. The relationship hasn't put any sort of strain on our working environment since I don't directly supervise her; the pharmacy has their own manager and hierarchy. But technically, I am still over her, and that's a no-no. So, this is why I decided to disclose the relationship to my store manager and see about getting myself transferred to another store.

I informed him about the situation an hour ago. We've been sitting in the break room ever since. He doesn't seem to be taking it well. Emma's worried. I'm annoyed.

"Mr. Knauff to the office," Mr. Summers, the store manager, says over the intercom.

"Here we go," I say, getting up from the table. Emma grips my hand tighter. "Don't worry." I lean over to kiss her on the forehead. "It's going to be fine."

I walk out of the break room, across the hall, and into the office. Mr. Summers is sitting at the desk with his back to me, looking at something on the

computer. Even though he paged me less than thirty seconds ago, he's acting as if he has much more important things to be doing.

"What did the DM say?" I ask, grabbing a chair and pulling it up next to him at the desk.

"Nothing. I didn't called him," he says without taking his eyes away from the computer monitor.

"What? How come? Why have we been waiting this past hour then?"

"I've been thinking."

"Thinking about what?"

"About how I'm going to handle this situation."

"What do you mean?" I say and lean forward in my chair. "The rules are fairly straight forward. If a manager and employee in the same store start dating then one of the two of them, usually the manager, needs to transfer. It's pretty cut and dry.

"Well not in this case, not with this girl," he says, finally looking at me.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means what I say it means," he says, finally turning to look me in the eye. "As of this moment you have two options. You can either break up with Emma and just pretend like nothing ever happened between you two, or I can call Loss Prevention and make a report saying I found the two of you making out in the stock room."

"What!" I jump up from my chair and glare at Mr. Summers. He doesn't

flinch. "That's bullshit. You can't force us to break up, there's no reason for that, and we've never done anything like that in the store."

"Guess it'll be your word against mine then," Mr. Summers says looking up at me, not realizing how close he is to getting punched in the face.

I walk away from him, take a deep breath, and move toward the door. I stop, just short of the door, and look through office window, across the hall to the break room, and see Emma standing just outside. She smiles at me; that's when I understand.

"Oh, I get it now," I say, turning back toward Summers.

"What do you get?" he asks, turning in his chair to face me.

"I get your unethical, immoral, and most likely illegal attempt to blackmail me. I guess it sucks to be trapped in a loveless marriage, and have your fantasy girlfriend swept off her feet by someone who works for you, huh?"

"What did you say to me?" Summers says as he too now jumps up out of his chair.

"Please," I say and wave off his posturing.

"You think you can..."

"Give it a rest Mighty Mouse," I say and reach for the door handle. "I've decided to go with option three."

"Option three? There is no option three. Your options are to either..."

"No, see, you don't get to make decisions about my life. Now, I'm going to go home and prepare for the interview I have tomorrow, because God knows



I've never had any trouble finding jobs in the past, and you ... well you can go fuck yourself." I open the door and exit the office.

Emma meets me in the hallway and grabs my hand. "How did it go?"

"It went great," I say, looking back at Summers through the office door and smiling.

"So what did he say?"

"He said, he wishes us luck on this chapter in our lives."

We walk together to the end of the hall, and I open the door leading back out into the store. "Did he really say that?" Emma asks looking toward the office door.

"Sure, why not," I say as the two of us walk hand-in-hand down the aisle and out the front door.