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An Honest Man: Short Fiction

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An Honest Man

By Hannah Fraley

The office is empty, dimly lit by every fifth overhead light. Rows of grey cubicles with magnetic nameplates and black computer screens lead to offices lit only by the streetlamps outside, casting eerie, pallid light across stacks of balance sheets and payroll reports and the face of a woman sending an email she shouldn't.

—

Sean isn't the type to participate in company gossip. He hears it, of course. Everyone hears it. But he isn't interested in the drama, doesn't lean in with wide eyes while Katie and Sophie giggle about Creepy Connor allegedly cheating on his wife with the receptionist. He keeps his head down, manages his client accounts, and checks emails. He's worked for MarCom for ten years. He stayed through the market crash when everyone was jumping ship, and he chose not to participate in the class-action lawsuit filed two years ago by some of his coworkers. For the most part, his loyalty has paid off. The market came back up and MarCom won the lawsuit—the plaintiffs not only lost their jobs but were blacklisted in the industry. Sean is still just a little guy with a cubicle in the bullpen, but he got a raise last month. He has rent to pay and a cat to feed, so he isn't about to willingly rock the boat. Which is why he's breaking out in a cold sweat right now, staring at the ominous bold lettering of an email at the top of his inbox, subject line: Executive Eyes Only.

Sean glances up, peers over the top of his cubicle to see if he's being watched. This must be a joke, he thinks, Sophie playing a prank on him. But everyone in the office is minding their own business. Sophie is standing in her cubicle, her back to Sean, smacking her palm against her printer; she's not spying on him to make sure the punchline lands. Sean looks back at his screen and mouses over the email, afraid to open it and find out he's getting fired or that the company is dissolving. He really can't afford to lose this job.

“Hey, Sean?” Sophie's head pops up over their shared wall. Sean jumps, quickly switching to a different tab. “Sorry, didn't mean to scare ya.”

“All good.” He swallows. “What’s up?”

“I was wondering if I could use your printer. Mine’s acting up again. Marcus said he fixed it, but I think he just made it worse. Damn thing’s striping the page like a zebra.”

“Yeah.” Sean nods. “No problem. I was just gonna take my break anyway.” He stands from his desk, closes out of his browser, and picks up his company-issued iPad, hoping that Sophie can’t tell his hands are shaking.

Sophie walks around to his cubicle and squeezes his arm. “You’re the best,” she says, leaning in close with a smile.

Sean gives her a closed-lipped smile and walks past her as she plops into his chair. He makes his way to the breakroom and sits in the back corner. He lays the iPad on the table and pulls up his email. With a deep breath he taps the unopened panic-inducer and reads. He’s been blind carbon copied by an address he doesn’t recognize. The original email was sent seven months ago, its recipients the Big Bosses; the ones who have offices the size of Sean’s apartment on the top floor and are too busy playing golf and talking to German investors on Bluetooth to spend time with their own families. The body of the email doesn’t say much, it opens with some pleasantries, moves on to a cryptic mention of employee security protections, and finishes with instructions to see the attached documents.

Sean swipes to the bottom of the page and opens the first attached pdf. It loads slowly; the first thing to render is the company letterhead, geometric and imposing, then the head of a memorandum, subject: Wire Fire. As the body of the memo loads and Sean reads the first line, his jaw drops. He reads on, then opens the other files with a masochistic thirst for more, growing paler and slouching further with every paragraph and figure, until eventually he sits in a stupor, so still the motion sensor lights have turned off, leaving him in the dark to stew over his recent enlightenment.

Whoever sent this to him either wants him gone, or the company gone, and he's not sure either is a desirable outcome.

MEMORANDUM

TO: EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

FROM: THEODORE FRANK, CEO

DATE: JULY 17, 2021

SUBJECT: WIRE FIRE

I'm writing to update you all on the progress of Wire Fire, the employee surveillance scheme implemented last year following the nearly disastrous class-action suit. In a word, it's going swimmingly.

—

Katie moved to the city to escape her mother. Overbearing and melodramatic, Barbara is as pleasant a mother as a foot cramp. She wasn't too pleased with Katie's move. Told her she'd be nothing without a mother's guidance. At 28, Katie thinks she'll probably be able to hack it just fine without Barb's constant doling of so-called guidance. The last words Katie heard her mother shout after her car as she left were "beware of the youths."

It hasn't been easy since Katie got to the city. A job was a lot harder to come by than she'd anticipated. Her savings were practically gone by the time she landed her gig at MarCom. She doesn't love it, but it's a paycheck. And it's the only place, so far, she's made any friends. Sean and Sophie remind her of siblings she watched on television growing up. One always pestering the other into annoyance, but at the end of the half hour they've made up and realized they can't live without one another. Sophie is usually the one doing the pestering. Katie watches them from the other side of the aisle and acts as mediator when called on.

Today, Katie arrived a few minutes late, tired and dehydrated, venti vanilla latte in hand. With displeasure, she jumped right into work, which so far has consisted of playing phone tag with Mr. Jones for three hours, and another two mindlessly entering client information to an Excel spreadsheet. After another 30-minute phone call with Mr. Jones, she slumps back into her chair and takes a breath. Time for more caffeine.

The breakroom is dark and smells of stale coffee grounds. Katie peers into the trashcan as she walks in, nose wrinkling in disgust. The motion sensor light flicks on, illuminating the haggard face of a man in the corner. Katie presses a hand to her chest and huffs. “Sean! My god.” She laughs. “You scared me.” She turns and reaches into the cabinet for a mug.

“Sorry,” Sean mumbles.

Katie pulls out the half-empty carafe and sniffs. “You know how fresh this is?” she asks, raising the carafe in Sean’s direction. He shrugs, not looking up to meet her eye. “The things I’ll do for a pick-me-up,” she mutters, pouring coffee into her mug, hoping it won’t taste as dreadful as she thinks it will. From the looks of it, Sean could use a pick-me-up, too. Acting like a corpse in the corner.

Katie walks to the back of the room and pulls a chair up next to Sean. His iPad sits flat on the table in front of him. “Whatcha readin?” Katie asks, leaning in to peer at the screen, noticing the MarCom letterhead.

Sean lifts his head to look at her, his eyes bloodshot. “Nothing,” he says, pressing the lock button on the side of the device and pulling it into his lap. “Don’t worry ‘bout it.”

Katie stares at him. Doesn’t seem like nothing. She takes a sip of her coffee, puckers at the taste.

Sean glances around the room, looks at the clock above the door, then stands abruptly.

“You alright, Sean?” Katie sets her mug on the table and places a hand on Sean’s forearm. Sean is nervier than most, but she’s never seen him so unrelaxed as he is now. So pale.

Sean pulls away from her touch and grips the iPad to his chest. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I’m fine.” He nods. Without looking back at Katie, he hurries out of the room. Katie frowns, picking up her mug and lifting to take a drink, but she frowns down into it at the smell and sets it back on the table. No pick-me-up is worth this abysmal sludge. Besides, Sean’s behavior was enough to ignite a spark of unease in Katie’s gut. Nothing like anxiety to kickstart your nervous system.

“Hey.” It’s Sophie, blonde ponytail swinging as she walks into the room and heads straight for the coffee, her signature Looney Toons mug already in her hand. “What’s up with Sean? He almost mowed me down in the hallway.” She pulls the carafe out and lifts to pour.

“I don’t know. He was being weird with me, too.”

“Weird how?” Sophie replaces the carafe and rips open a sugar packet.

“He was reading something on his iPad when I came in, but he clammed up when I asked him about it and ran out looking like he was gonna throw up.”

Sophie hums, dumping two more sugar packets into her mug and walking over to sit across from Katie. “Super weird...” she says. She takes a drink of her heavily sugared coffee, screws up her face, and spits it back into the mug. “Oh my god.” She pushes her mug toward the center of the table. “That’s disgusting.”

“Yeah...” Katie grimaces. “Sorry, shoulda warned you.”

“You’d think a place that can afford to give everyone their own iPads could at least give us some decent coffee.” She slouches back in her chair.

“Speaking of...what do you think Sean was reading that had him so freaked out?”

“I don’t know. Maybe porn?”

“Ew,” Katie says. “He was not reading porn.”

Sophie raises an eyebrow. “The people here are freaky, Katie, I’m telling you. You remember a couple months ago when I caught Creepy Connor having phone sex?”

Katie rolls her eyes. “He wasn’t having phone sex; he was talking about home renovations with his wife.”

Sophie tuts.

“And stop calling him ‘Creepy Connor.’ It’s rude.” Sophie has half the office calling him that, pretty soon he was gonna figure out she started it and file a complaint with HR.

“Yeah, well, all I’m saying is the things he was saying were mad sensual and when he noticed I was there he got red as rain and tucked himself into his desk.”

“Red as rain?”

“Something my mom used to say.” Sophie waves a dismissive hand. “But anyway, my point is, you don’t know that Sean wasn’t reading porn.”

“Sophie!” Katie stands and dumps her and Sophie’s mugs in the sink, doing the same with the rest of the carafe while she’s at it. “It wasn’t porn. I saw the company letterhead before he shut it off.” She turns back around to see Sophie cross her arms, probably disappointed Sean wasn’t reading porn. The letterhead was more interesting than porn, though, Katie thought. More frightening. Not that someone in your workplace reading porn in a dark room isn’t a frightening thought. But company correspondences weren’t usually noteworthy, let alone illness-inducing. So, either Sean was being extremely dramatic, which he isn’t particularly known for, or whatever he was reading was big and bad.

“Maybe he’s getting fired,” Sophie says, probably thinking the same thing Katie is. She’d just want to know what’s up for the gossip points though. “Big Boss Man did say there’d be changes this quarter.”

“Maybe...” Katie swipes a hand through her hair, the spark in her gut working up to a flame. “I hope not, though. He’s been here longer than any of us.” She stares down at her feet, noticing a scuff on the toe of her shoe. If Sean gets fired, anyone could be next. There have already been rumors about layoffs after two people from accounting were let go last billing period, and three ad guys two floors up the month before. Shannon, from design, is having her going-away party today. Katie has only been with MarCom for eleven months. Why would they keep around a relatively new hire, whose job she’s pretty sure can be done by a mediocre AI, and who can’t even keep her shoes clean? Unemployment is at an all-time high. What’s she supposed to do if she gets laid off?

“Yeah...” Sophie stands and starts rifling through the fridge. “Plus, he’s been saving up for a new cat tree. Mittens deserves the best.”

Katie gets a glass of water, trying to quell the fire of career anxiety roaring in her gut. “Why aren’t you freaking out?” she asks Sophie’s back.

“I’m not freaking out—” She pulls out a Tupperware and cracks the lid, takes a sniff, and puts it back unceremoniously. “—because I’m gonna find out what has Sean in a tizzy. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“You’re the one who just suggested he might be getting fired, Soph.”

“I know that.” She finally pulls an iced tea from the fridge and faces Katie. “But until we know anything for certain there’s no point going full psycho-mode about it.”

Katie grips the glass in her hand, holding Sophie’s gaze, looking for signs of apprehension in her friend’s eyes. “Okay,” she says finally. “Just let me know what you find out, okay?”

“Of course.”

Katie nods, sets her glass in the sink, and leaves Sophie in the breakroom. Sophie is a bloodhound for information. If there’s something to know, she’ll make sure she knows it.

—

Sean scurries past the water cooler and shoulder-checks Sophie as she passes him, nearly making her drop her Looney Toons mug.

“Hey,” she says, placing a steady hand on Sean’s arm. “You okay?”

Sean wipes a bead of sweat from his temple. “All good,” he says breathlessly, continuing to the bullpen before Sophie can interrogate him. He makes it back to his desk and sets his iPad down, then sinks into his chair, making it squeal in protest. He can’t stop thinking about the email.

Particularly the attachment documenting audio data collected from every employee’s iPad.

Apparently, Wire Fire is MarCom’s way of protecting itself. They collect information about the happenings in the office and outside of it, with special attention to those employees on the lower floors where pay is low, and gossip is high.

According to a harrowing letter to the board of directors, since the implementation of the surveillance program, twenty people have either been let go for “breaking company rules” or have signed strict Non-Disclosure Agreements and been relocated to one of several satellite offices upstate. Sean hadn’t thought the lawsuit was that bad, especially considering how quickly MarCom was able to get it dismissed. But new evidence would suggest that MarCom was worried. Enough to get rid of anyone who posed a threat. Sean would be the first to say it’s better to squash something before it can squash you. It’s why he doesn’t have a credit card or a girlfriend. It seems MarCom is operating by the same idea.

Sean runs a hand down his face and fights the urge to scream. A hand smacks down on top of Sean’s cubicle wall and he jumps. He looks up to see Ian from accounting.

“Deep in thought there, aye, Seany?” Ian quips, grinning. Sean blinks at him wordlessly, too tense to indulge Ian’s tendency for chit-chat. Ian shifts, eyes glancing around the room before

returning to Sean with a drum of his fingers. “Marci told me they need ya up top for something.” He swings his head back, motioning toward the elevators.

Sean holds his breath. He and Marci went to high school together. She’s also CEO Teddy Frank’s secretary. He clears his throat. “You know what for?”

Ian shrugs. “Nah. Was just up there and thought I could save her a trip.” A moment passes. Ian purses his lips and nods. “Anyway...back to the grind.” He grins again, drums both hands on top of the cubicle wall and starts walking away. “See ya, buddy.”

Sean watches Ian swagger down the aisle, clapping a few other people’s cubicle walls as a hello before he disappears down the corridor that leads to the accounting offices. Sean stares at the wall where Ian last was until the grey cubicles, vaguely brown Berber carpet, and off-white walls blur to an amalgamous beige. He never gets called up to the top floor. In fact, he does whatever he can to avoid being called up there. The last time he was there during business hours was a decade ago for his new-hire orientation. His mind races with worst-case scenarios; confrontations with Teddy that involve screaming and death threats, a room full of executives all sneering and booing him out of the office as he’s dragged away by security officers. He’s sure he’s being summoned because of the email. He’ll consider himself lucky if he meets a fate akin to the twenty employees he read about. He wishes he could talk to Katie or Sophie about it. They’re good at calming his nerves. But if he’s in danger for knowing what he knows, he can’t in good conscience tell them about it.

His printer whirrs from atop his filing cabinet, a tick that startles him every time despite its frequency. He huffs. It’s unwise to keep the folks up top waiting. He bounces his knees a few times, then stands and starts toward the elevator.

—

Sophie has a boyfriend. And a goldfish named Fred 2, and a mother in Florida, and four kid-sized Snuggies that she drunkenly ordered after Fred 1 made his long journey back to the sea. The whole

office knows this. She tells anyone who will listen, especially Sean and Katie, whose desks are within a ten-foot radius of her own. In the three years Sophie has worked for MarCom, she's learned the names of everyone on her floor and the floors above, and she's the unofficial welcome committee for new hires. Everyone knows she's who you go to for the latest gossip. She prides herself on knowing the comings and goings of everyone on the floor—it's the best part of the job. So, when Sean, clearly in distress, sloughs her off in the hallway, she's irked, to say the least. Then to learn from Katie that whatever had him so upset was MarCom related...something's up, and she has a right to know what it is.

After Sophie talks her down, Katie leaves the breakroom and Sophie spends a few minutes drinking her iced tea and thinking of questions she can ask Sean without scaring him off. She played it cool in front of Katie, because Katie is usually the “calm and collected” of their group, and this thing with Sean clearly has her losing her mind, but Sophie isn't feeling great about the prospect of her friend getting fired. Of everyone at MarCom, Sean is the last person Sophie would suspect to be next on the axe list. After finishing her iced tea, Sophie returns to her cubicle and finds that Sean isn't at his. His iPad, however, sits enticingly on his desk.

Sophie looks around. A group of office jocks stand by the water cooler across the room, cocky smiles on their faces; Katie is at her cubicle across the aisle, head in hand, staring at her computer screen. It would be easy to snatch up Sean's iPad. She's pretty confident she can guess his passcode. It must have something to do with his cat or his mother, both of which are things she learned about during their tenure as pod-mates. Sophie glances around once more, then swipes the iPad and quickly sits at her desk. After trying both Mittens and his mother's birthdays with no luck, she enters 6867, M-T-N-S, a shorthand for Mittens she's seen Sean write on to-do lists. Et voila. It unlocks to the homepage, with the generic background of the MarCom logo, which is partially hidden by the few apps that are allowed on a company device. It's impossible to know exactly what

Sean was reading in the breakroom, but Sophie knows Sean never remembers to clear his App Switcher. She double taps the home button, and sure enough, four apps are still open. The most recent app is Sean's email.

She grins, pleased with herself for her hacking abilities. "Okay," she whispers to herself. She opens Sean's email, immediately struck by how organized it seems, several subfolders for clients and office-wide matters. He would have a heart attack, she thinks, if he ever saw her mess of an inbox. There are a few unopened emails at the top of his inbox, two of which Sophie also received regarding the upcoming quarterly deadlines and a going-away party for Shannon. Poor thing got fired out of the blue. Below "We'll Miss You Shannon" is "Executive Eyes Only." Sophie's brow scrunches, what was Sean doing getting emails for executives? She opens the email and starts reading, her temperature rising with each new infuriating piece of information. When she finishes, blood boiling, she swivels in her chair and hisses at Katie.

"Psst, Katie."

Katie still has her head in her hand, eyes glued to her computer screen. She doesn't hear Sophie.

"Katie," Sophie says louder. When she still doesn't notice, Sophie tosses a wadded-up sticky note at her. It hits her on the side of the head. She straightens, brings a hand to where the paper hit and frowns.

"What the hell?"

"Katie." Sophie scoots her chair closer to the aisle between their cubicles.

Katie looks up and scowls. "What? Why'd you throw that at me?"

"Come look at this."

"I'm working." She gestures to her computer half-heartedly. Sophie cocks her head.

"Fine." Katie sighs. "What is it?"

“What Sean was reading.”

“You took his iPad?” Katie’s eyes widen, taking notice of the device Sophie has tucked on her lap, and glances around nervously.

“Yes. Now look at this.” She hands the iPad to Katie and sits with her elbows on her knees as Katie reads.

“What the fuck?”

“Right?”

Katie recoils, sticking the iPad in Sophie’s face. “Put this back.”

Sophie takes it. “What? Why? We have to tell someone about this! They’re totally violating our rights!”

“Sophie,” Katie whisper-yells. “Shut. Up. If they’re recording us with those things, then they’ll hear everything we’re saying right now and I’m pretty sure they don’t want us to know this.”

Sophie pulls her lips between her teeth and nods. “Right,” she says, speaking extra quietly. “Smart. So then what do we do? We should go to HR or something, right?” Sophie searches Katie’s face, looking for her usual signs of gear-working: far-off eyes, twitchy fingers, lip-biting. When Katie is motivated and doesn’t feel she’s in mortal peril, she’s pretty good at solving problems.

“We can’t go to HR.” Katie bites her lip.

“Why not?”

“Didn’t you read that?” She points to the iPad. “HR is the one who’s been firing people on behalf of our CEO. They’re clearly in on it.”

“We don’t know that for sure...”

Katie shakes her head. “I don’t think it’s a good idea, Sophie. I don’t want to raise any flags with them. We should talk to Sean before we do anything else anyway.” She looks to his desk.

“Where’d he go?”

Sophie shrugs. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since he basically knocked me over in the hallway.”

Katie stares off across the room, running her thumb along the edge of her finger. “I guess Sean’s not getting fired. We’re just all in danger of saying the wrong thing...then getting fired anyway.”

“Don’t think like that. Right now we have a problem to solve. Should we go look for Sean? Maybe he went upstairs.” Sophie stands, ready for action.

“Hold on a second. We can’t go running around every floor looking for him, that’s crazy.” Katie brings a hand to her mouth and bites her thumbnail.

“What’s crazy is what was in that email.” Sophie moves into Katie’s cubicle and leans against her filing cabinet. She’s about to suggest she start looking for Sean in the media department since he’s been spending time there recently checking graphics for his client about to launch a social media campaign, but her phone rings before she can say anything. She walks back to her desk and answers the call, making eye-contact with a jumpy Katie while she listens to the receptionist tell her that Mr. Jones just stormed in and is waiting for them in the conference room.

“Shit,” Sophie says, looking for the Jones file on her desk.

“What is it?” Katie leans forward.

“Mr. Jones is here. He’s in the conference room.”

“Shit. What is he doing here?”

Sophie starts walking toward the conference room and Katie follows, smoothing down her skirt. “Why don’t you tell me. I thought you said you were handling it.”

“I was—I am. I spent three hours on the phone with him today talking him out of firing us because he thinks we aren’t giving him the same quality artwork that KeyServ got last year.”

“What? We spent weeks finalizing his designs. They’re great.” Sophie stops just before the conference room’s large windows and turns to face Katie. “Hopefully he’s just here with jitters about his face being on TV. You ready?”

Katie gives Sophie an affirming nod, then they both step into the room.

—

Sean rides the elevator to the top floor with lead in his gut. He swipes at his forehead, pulling his hand away to see a sheen of sweat. As the elevator jostles and stops, Sean wipes his palms against his pants. The doors open to reveal the pristine appearance of the executive lobby. White, shining floors; two sleek couches, punctuated by a glass table bearing a pitcher of lemon water and several glasses; and stunning, unobstructed views of the city. He steps into the lobby and glances around, not entirely sure where to go; if he’s supposed to wait for someone or go straight to Teddy’s office. He lingers in front of the elevator doors and has just taken an unsure step toward the couches when Marci appears around the corner.

“Sean,” she says brightly, extending a hand to lead him down the hallway. “Good to see you.” Her smile is tight and practiced, so different to how Sean remembers her from high school. She was such the opposite of practiced, always stumbling over her feet and her words. It’s that clumsiness that Sean so admired in her, the way she wore it with confidence. If he hadn’t been graced with his own variety of messiness—an inability to speak his mind, and a staggering distaste for change—they may have been more than just friends.

Sean walks toward her, anxiety churning in his stomach. “You, too. It’s been a while.”

“Ugh, I know.” She waves a hand up in mock exasperation and they begin down the hall, her heels clacking with each step. “Ever since they moved me up here, I barely see anyone anymore.”

“Right...” Sean stares out the windows, thinking it would be more enjoyable to hurtle toward the sidewalk than meet with Theodore Frank.

“Well, thanks for coming up. Mr. Frank has been wanting to speak with you.” She turns her head and smiles at him, and he returns it weakly. They reach the end of the hallway which houses another small lobby. Marci gestures to a chair. “Have a seat, and I’ll let Mr. Frank know you’re here.”

Sean sits, and Marci rounds her desk, which sits at the corner of the small lobby, and speaks into her phone. A moment later, Marci tells Sean he can head in. He stands, straightens out his jacket, and approaches the imposing double doors of Teddy’s office. He looks back at Marci, his hand on the doorhandle, and she smiles at him. This smile is more relaxed, more like the Marci Sean knew, and it’s just enough to convince him he’s not in mortal danger. He turns back to the door and walks in.

Theodore Frank is notable for his lollipop habit—he eats them even during televised interviews—and notorious for his business practices, which haven’t gotten him in enough trouble to be arrested yet but have put him in the spotlight often enough that anyone who watches the news regularly would recognize him. Shady deals, speculation of insider trading, and a history with America’s most questionable politicians make him easy bait for news outlets. As Sean steps into his office, which really is the size of his apartment, Teddy sits at his desk, hair messy but not unkempt, feet up near his keyboard, and a lollipop in his mouth. He straightens as Sean steps into the room. “Mr. Peterson,” he says over his lollipop, the stick bobbling between his lips. “Please, come sit.”

Sean walks over and gingerly sits down in one of the leather chairs placed in front of Teddy's desk. The chair is firm and slick, and squeaks when Sean moves.

Teddy takes his feet off his desk and pulls the lollipop, nearly gone, from his mouth, tossing the stick under his desk. "Tell me," he says, leaning back in his chair. "You've been with MarCom for how long?"

"Ten—" His voice comes soft and thick. He clears his throat. "Ten years, sir."

Teddy lets out a low whistle. "Longer than me, even." He smiles, then barks a laugh, revealing the bright candy red of his tongue. Sean laughs nervously, shifting his weight on the chair. Teddy stares at Sean a moment, then leans forward, mouth pursed, and brow furrowed. "Tell me, Peterson," he lifts a pointed finger at Sean, "what did you think of that lawsuit a couple years ago? As I recall, it was people from your department who filed the suit."

Sean gulps. "I...wasn't a part of it, sir. Not much to think about once it was dismissed."

"Ah, yes. I suppose an honest man such as yourself wouldn't get caught up in all that bullshit." He stands and walks around the front of his desk, picking up a jar of lollipops and tilting it in Sean's direction. "Lolli?"

"Oh, uh. No, thank you."

Teddy shrugs, pulling out one for himself and setting the jar back on his desk. He unwraps it, this one purple, and sits in front of Sean against the edge of his desk. "We've been doing well lately, the company. And I've decided it's time to reward those who contribute—in no small way, mind you—to our success." He pops the lollipop in his mouth and swishes it around, clacking it against his teeth. He pops it back out, and brandishes it at Sean. "You, Mr. Peterson, are one of those people."

Sean can't believe his ears. He looks up at Teddy in shock. "Wow," he manages to choke out. "Thank you."

“Thank *you*. And because of your loyalty to MarCom, I’m giving you the Barnes account.”

“But that’s one of our biggest accounts.” Sean can’t seem to pick his jaw up off the floor.

“That it is. And now it’s yours.”

Sean is speechless. The Barnes account is coveted at MarCom. It was one of the first clients founder Malcolm Kent brought in. They’re a huge moneymaker for the company, and up until now had been handled by a muckety-muck upstairs.

“Cheer up, buddy.” Teddy claps a hand on Sean’s shoulder. “You’re moving up a few floors. Your office will be ready next week.” He stands and sticks the lollipop back in his mouth, then moves back behind the desk and sits down. “Marci will give you the account info on your way out. Study up, they want to meet you on Monday.”

Sean doesn’t move, just stares at Teddy unable to fully process what’s just happened. He came here expecting to be fired, and instead he’s just been given an office and one of the biggest clients in the company. Teddy can’t possibly know about the email. Sean is half tempted to decline just so that he won’t have to be even closer to the man who organized illegal and invasive mass surveillance of his employees, but this is a change Sean isn’t eager to repel. To finally be recognized for his deep-seated distaste for drama and distraction makes his heart race. Maybe he can just delete the email and forget any of it ever happened.

Teddy clears his throat from across the desk and raises an eyebrow at Sean.

“Right, thank you, Mr. Frank.” Sean stands and floats back out to Teddy’s lobby.

Marci grins at him as he steps up to her desk. “Congrats!” She grabs a thick, deep blue file folder and hands it to him. “Here’s the Barnes account. You’ll have the digital copy on Monday once all the paperwork goes through.”

“Thanks,” he says. “I can’t believe that just happened.”

“Well, if anyone deserves it, it’s you, Sean. You’re the only one here I’d trust with my business.” She smiles shyly, spinning a pen between her fingers.

“Thanks, Marci.”

—

Sean grips the Barnes folder in both hands as he makes his way back to his desk. Marci watches him leave with a nervousness that makes her hands tremble. After Sean disappears around the corner, she checks her watch. 4:40. She needs to leave soon if she’s going to make her appointment. She stands and knocks lightly at Teddy’s door. “Come in,” he calls from the other side. Marci steps inside, carefully closing the door behind her.

“Hey,” she says, sauntering over to Teddy’s desk. He has his lollipop in his mouth, eyes on his cellphone. He glances up as she approaches, finishes typing out a text while she leans against his desk, then sets his phone face down beside his keyboard.

“Hey, there.” He smiles, pulling the lollipop from his mouth and leaning in to give her a peck on the lips.

“I have to head out now, but I made sure everything is in order for tomorrow morning’s meeting. And I let Cara know that she’s on call if you need anything else today.”

“Thanks, Em,” he says, grabbing her by the waist and pulling her between his legs. “Am I still coming over tonight?”

Marci grins. “Absolutely.”

Teddy stands and kisses her—he tastes like grape—moving his mouth down her jaw and nipping at her ear. Marci giggles, then presses a hand against his chest.

“I really have to go, Ted, or I’m gonna be late.”

Teddy groans, stealing another kiss before pulling away. “Fine,” he says, pulling her hips against his. “To be continued. Have fun getting your hair done or whatever.”

Marci scoffs through a smile and moves away from her place between Teddy and the desk and starts for the door. “Oh,” she says, spinning on her heel, “and try not to run in to any of my neighbors tonight. You caused a *lot* of gossip in my building last time.”

Teddy laughs. “I’ll be careful. Promise.”

“Good.” Marci spins back around and returns to her own desk for her coat and purse.

—

Sean returns to his cubicle and plops down in his squeaky chair. Sophie and Katie are both away from their desks, thank God. He doesn’t think he could handle any questions from them right now, especially considering the turn of events, and they would absolutely have questions. He was caught off guard by them both in the breakroom earlier. He should’ve tried to hide what he was feeling, or have turned off the iPad before someone walked in. But Katie has a way of catching him in his vulnerable moments. He hates that about her; wishes he could stop the fluttering in his stomach whenever she pays him too close attention. What’s done is done, though. He has bigger things to worry about than the peace of mind of his coworkers, anyway. He has an email to delete, and he just inherited a huge client and only has a few days to study up.

He boots up his computer, and while he waits for the loading images to cycle through so he can log-in, he centers the bulging blue folder in front of him on his desk and flips it open. Sitting on top of everything is a yellow sticky note with vaguely familiar handwriting.

I sent it.

Meet me at Flannery’s Pub @5

-M

—

Katie's only value at MarCom is her ability to keep clients talking. She's not an expert at talking them off ledges, but she doesn't make them jump faster. The rest of her job is trivial, she has yet to work on any accounts by herself, and data entry is a menial task. So, despite the grave timing of Mr. Jones' arrival, and the grating sound of his voice, Katie is actually excited to be doing something more than staring at a spreadsheet and worrying about saying something wrong in front of her iPad.

The moment she and Sophie enter the conference room, Mr. Jones starts ranting. He paces the room, running his fingers through his hair, making it stick straight up like he's doing a bad cosplay of *NSYNC. "I spent hours today—hours—trying to talk to you about this and you've yet to give me the attention I deserve. My wife tells me that I should be more patient—"

"Mr. Jones," Katie says, raising her palm toward him.

"—but this is unacceptable. The fact that I've had to show up here to get anything done—"

"Mr. Jones!"

He quiets.

"Please, just take a second to calm down and have a seat."

Mr. Jones pulls a chair from the long table and sits down, but squirms as Katie sits across from him.

"I can assure you, you have our full attention, Mr. Jones," Sophie says, sitting at the end of the table and crossing her legs. He eyes her warily, lingering on her high ponytail and bright blue nail polish.

He turns back to Katie. "I just want to make sure you're giving my campaign the appropriate care. We can't afford for this to fail."

"We completely understand. Like I told you this morning, your ad is just going through final polishing. There won't be much more to do until it airs. Our editing and design teams are very good, you have nothing to worry about."

“Right, but—”

A manicured hand smacks down on the table. Katie and Mr. Jones jump and turn to Sophie, who is staring into the office through the conference room windows.

“Sophie?” Katie stares at her in disbelief.

Sophie looks back to Mr. Jones. “If you’ll excuse me a moment.” She smiles tightly and stands from her chair, sending it rolling back a few feet. “I’ll be right back,” she says to Katie, keeping the faux sweetness in her voice for Mr. Jones’ benefit, no doubt.

Katie shakes her head slightly, side eyeing Mr. Jones. Sophie widens her eyes and tilts her head, trying to convey something that Katie doesn’t understand. She looks back to Mr. Jones, horrified, as Sophie darts out of the room and through the office.

“Where on Earth is she going?” he asks, face turning red.

Katie forces a smile. “She’ll be...right back.” And she better be. Because now Mr. Jones is really going to think they don’t care about him.

—

Sophie feels bad for leaving Katie with Mr. Jones. She knows it could create some bad blood with that account and probably occasion a scolding from their supervisors. But as she sat in the conference room, listening to Mr. Jones whine, she caught sight of Sean hurrying down the hallway toward the exit. She couldn’t let Sean leave without talking to him first. Finding out why and how he has that email is far more important than reassuring Mr. Jones of his hiring decisions.

Sophie scurries down the hallway, stopping by her desk to grab her keys and coat before running down the hall after Sean. The receptionist gives her a strange look as she slams into and out of the front doors. She spots Sean stepping into his car and runs for hers. She fumbles with her key, scraping up the paint on her door as she unlocks it. Eventually, after much effort and several

frustrated cries at her slowness, Sophie manages to start her car and buckle her seatbelt and pulls out of the MarCom parking lot after Sean.

She tails him all the way to Flannery's Pub. It's an odd place for Sean to go, especially as a destination he'd leave work early for. It's far from the office, on the outskirts of downtown. Most MarCom employees frequent nightclubs and bars with updated speaker systems and bathrooms that have been cleaned in this century. Flannery's is a dive. Sophie's convinced the only reason it's still open is because the owner is a trust fund kid with a romanticized idea of pubs.

Sophie hangs back as Sean pulls into the small parking lot, finding a spot on the street where she can see the entrance to the pub and still feel hidden. Sean walks in and moments later a shiny, black BMW pulls into the lot. A woman with brown hair in a sleek updo wearing bright green high heels steps out and checks her reflection in her window before walking into Flannery's.

"Holy shit," Sophie says. "That's Teddy Frank's secretary." She reaches into the backseat of her car and grabs a baseball cap and hoodie that she usually wears at the gym. After pulling them on and straightening her cap in the rearview, she steps out of her car and wanders into Flannery's Pub.

There aren't many patrons inside. A few people sit at the bar, and a few others sit at the tables and high-backed booths, but it's mostly quiet apart from the rock music coming from speakers in the corners. The air smells like cigarette smoke with a hint of urine. Sophie spots Sean and Marci at a booth in the back. It's dimly lit and separated from the rest of the room by a large pillar. She pulls her cap a little lower on her face and creeps along the edge of the room, slipping into the booth behind theirs and slouching low.

"Thanks for meeting me," Marci says. "I was worried you might not open the file until tomorrow." She lets out a soft chuckle. Sean doesn't say anything, or if he does it's not loud enough for Sophie to hear. "How've you been?"

“Seriously?” Sean snaps. Sophie raises an eyebrow. She hasn’t heard Sean be so stern since Sophie took it too far with a stapler prank last year.

“What?”

“Let’s quit with the pleasantries, alright? You dropped the bomb of the century on me, I don’t have time for whatever it is you think you’re doing.”

“Okay,” Marci says. She’s quieter; sounds resigned to drop any pretenses. “I sent you that email because you’re the only one I trust to do the right thing.”

Sophie brings a hand to her mouth. She pulls out her phone and sends a text to Katie.

Sophie: email from marci

“And what’s that?” Sean says, sounding almost bored.

“Take it to the authorities.”

Katie: what are you talking about?

“Why would I do that?”

“Because what Teddy’s doing is wrong, Sean. You know that.”

Sophie: get to flannerys pub asap

“If it’s so wrong, then why haven’t you taken this to the authorities yourself?”

Marci sighs. “Look,” her voice is softer, “I can’t be tied to this information coming out. Teddy would—” She pauses. “I have things at stake and...it just can’t be traced back to me, okay?”

“I don’t want this tied to me either, Marci. I just got handed gold by Teddy himself. I’m not about to willingly wreck the one good thing I have going right now.”

Sophie practically shakes in her seat, fights the urge to pop up over the seatback and tell Sean to do what Marci’s asking him to do. But she wants to hear more.

“I know,” Marci says. “I meant it, earlier, when I said you deserve that account. You’re great at what you do, Sean. But I’ve been watching Teddy ruin people’s lives with Wire Fire for months, and—”

“Why are you so torn up about it now? Why not say something before it could get this far?”

“It wasn’t that simple.”

“But now it is?”

“Yes, Sean. Now it is.” There’s a pause. Marci sighs. “It started out as a way for the company to weed out bad apples. People who only had bad things to say about MarCom and its employees. People who posed a threat, basically. And they were fired. Not for no reason, but for the reason anyone is fired. They don’t fit with the company in a productive capacity.”

Sean scoffs.

“What?”

“I just don’t understand how you ever went along with this. You sound like you’re being fed lines. I remember a time when you could barely make it through a presentation you’d memorized.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not sixteen anymore.”

“Clearly...”

Dang, Sean, Sophie thinks. Don’t hold back the shade. He’d be much more fun at work if he engaged with the gossip she provided the way he’s treating Marci right now.

“And neither are you. We’re adults. We’re supposed to be responsible and...and do the right thing. I’m just trying to do the right thing.” Marci takes a deep breath. “Teddy started doing more than was initially proposed with Wire Fire. He’d find reasons to get rid of people whose only crime was doing something to annoy him. He started relocating people because of how they looked, claiming that they presented a bad image for the company.”

“That’s not in the email...”

“Because Teddy doesn’t want the board to know. But it’s happening. And if you don’t do something about it, it’s gonna hit close to home.”

“What do you mean?”

“He added Katie Nelson to his list. I’m not entirely sure why. I know she works near you.”

Sophie clenches her fists, now more than ever fighting the urge to interrupt. She can’t believe Teddy would have reason to fire Katie, even if that reason is ridiculous and unfounded.

There’s silence for a while. Then Sean says, “I don’t know, Marci. Even with what you just told me; I don’t know if I can take this to the feds. I have to think about it.”

Think about it?! Sophie thinks. What’s there to think about? If everything in the email itself isn’t enough to convince Sean that Teddy needs to be stopped, then surely the fact that Katie is going to be fired for no reason unless he turns Teddy in would. He’s had a crush on her since she started at MarCom. Plus, there was an audio file in that email of a conversation Sophie had with her boyfriend while he was in Colorado for a month. They were...*lonely*. She’s not thrilled the CEO of MarCom might have heard that. It’s super creepy.

Katie: I’m here

Sophie slouches low and slides out of her booth, making her way to the front of the pub to intercept Katie. When she walks in, hair mussed and her giant purse slung over her shoulder, her face scrunches in disgust and she glances around the room looking for Sophie.

“Hey,” Sophie says from beside her.

Katie jumps. “God,” she says. Then, noticing Sophie’s outfit, “what are you wearing?”

“Not important. C’merc.” Sophie leads them to a table at the front, tucked up by a window, and they sit down.

Katie glances around. “This is where you came after leaving me to deal with Mr. Jones by myself? You said you’d be right back.”

“Yeah...”. Sophie grimaces. “Sorry about that. Something came up.”

Katie lets out a grim laugh. “Okay, Soph. What are we doing here?” She makes a pinched face at Sophie, but it falls as she spots Marci walking to the door. “Is that Teddy’s secretary?”

“Yes! She sent Sean the email.”

Katie’s eyes snap to Sophie. “What? Did you follow her here?”

Sophie shakes her head. “No, I’m not a creep. I followed Sean here.”

“Sophie!”

“Just listen. Marci sent him the email and asked to meet here so she could convince him to take it all to the feds. Apparently, she’s known the whole time—probably sleeping with Teddy—but now he’s firing people for basically no reason, and—” She cuts herself off.

“And what?”

Sophie walked herself into this one. “And you’re on his axe list.” She chews on her lip.

“What?”

“I’m really sorry. But if we can convince Sean to take the email to the feds then it won’t matter ‘cause Teddy’ll get canned.”

“What do you mean if ‘we’ convince Sean? I thought you said that’s what Marci did.”

“Yeah, well, despite Marci’s efforts Sean just said he’d ‘think about it.’” Sophie uses air quotes and rolls her eyes.

Katie stares out the window, watching a bird pick at a discarded wrapper. “I mean, that’s fair.”

“How can you say that?”

“It’s a big thing—”

“Duh.”

“—and it’s not like he found out about it on his own. The secretary just sprang it on him. He doesn’t know what’ll happen if he takes it to the feds. Let the man think about it.”

Sophie scoffs, lolling her head back. “I can’t believe you. He can’t not take it to the feds. It’s like…” she glances to the ceiling, “like witnessing a murder and not telling anybody. You become an accessory to a crime!”

Katie stays quiet, bites her fingernail.

“Not to mention that if he doesn’t take it to the feds, you get fired.” She emphasizes each syllable of “fired,” leaning forward and trying to catch Katie’s eye.

“I mean, yeah, the best thing is to tell the feds. I’m just saying he should be allowed to think about it.” Katie looks back to Sophie.

“Well, he’s allowed to think, but not for long, and he’s not allowed to say no.” Sophie stands and reaches a hand toward Katie.

Katie frowns. “What?”

Sophie wags her hand in Katie’s face until she stands. Before Katie can protest, Sophie is dragging her by the hand to the booth at the back.

—

Sean sits with his head in his hands, mind spinning, when someone slides into the booth across from him. He looks up to see Sophie and Katie. “What are you guys doing here?” He gives Sophie a once over, she’s wearing a stained sweatshirt and a ratty ballcap. “And what are you wearing?”

“I heard everything,” Sophie says, ignoring the comment on her wardrobe, clasping her hands, and leaning forward on the table. “You have to do what Marci’s asking. Take the email to the feds.”

“How do you know about the email?” Sean’s eyes get wide.

“Sophie stole your iPad,” Katie says, flopping back against the booth. “We read everything.”

“Fuck,” Sean says under his breath. He should have deleted it the second he got it.

“Yeah, ‘fuck’ is right. This shit is messed up. We have to take it to the feds.” Sophie looks between Sean and Katie, who both stay silent. She elbows Katie in the ribs.

“Ow.” Katie places a hand where she was jabbed. “Sophie’s right, Sean. We can’t let MarCom get away with this. And based on how you were in the breakroom today, I’d say you’re not okay with it. You can’t just sit on this information and not say anything.”

“It’s like witnessing a murder and not telling anybody,” Sophie says. “Which you basically would be since Katie is next to get fired.”

“God, Soph. Did you eavesdrop on my entire conversation?”

“That’s not important. What is important is that if we don’t turn this in, we’re all accessories to a crime.”

Sean looks at Katie for a moment, notices the way her hair lays against her cheek, thinks about what would happen if she were fired. She’d probably have to move back with her mom, a situation she worked so hard to get out of. He leans his head back against the vinyl booth, staring at the planked ceiling. Turns out he can’t just delete the email and pretend it never happened because now he’s not the only one involved. His friends won’t be able to let it go. But would he even have been able to let it go? He’d just sit up in his new office, with his fancy new client, and stand idly by while every MarCom employee, including himself, is watched like prisoners? Possibly getting fired or relocated based on things they say in confidence? Or for reasons that aren’t even really reasons? Not to mention that by ignoring the issue, someone he cares about will get hurt.

He thinks back to junior prom. He’d asked Marci to go, made a cute sign and everything. She said no because Jake Reinhardt had already asked her earlier that afternoon. Jake Reinhardt the senior basketball star and infamous ladies’ man. Sean criticized Marci for going with him, told her

she'd have a terrible time. He was embarrassed. They argued. Then, the Friday before the dance, he found out Jake was going to stand Marci up because he'd gotten back together with his girlfriend. Sean could have—should have—warned Marci. But he was angry, convinced himself the situation wasn't about him, he didn't need to get in the middle of it. At the dance, Jake and his girlfriend were crowned royalty, Marci spent most of the night in the corner of the room, and all anyone could talk about for a week was how pathetic it was that she showed up at all. It made Sean sick to see her that night, looking so beautiful and so sad. He and Marci eventually made up, but he never told her that he could have prevented her embarrassment. It's because of her that he has tried so hard not to let things get the better of him, of the people he cares about. He can't do to Sophie or Katie what he did to Marci all those years ago. They don't deserve to get burned for being his friend. He needs to squash this before it squashes him and his friends.

“Alright,” he says. “We can go to the feds.”

—

Sophie, Sean, and Katie spend a while in the back booth making a plan. They all agree to meet up at Sean's apartment before work the next morning to call their local FBI office. Then they leave Flannery's and head their separate ways. Sophie tells her boyfriend everything the second she gets home, going into excruciating detail about her “car chase” and subsequent stealth operation. Katie spends the whole night staring at her ceiling, second-guessing their plan to talk to the feds. What if she gets fired anyway? What if being involved in this ruins her career in ways she can't even imagine? She refuses to move back in with Barbara, she doesn't think she'd survive it. Sean can't sleep, either. He keeps replaying his conversation with Teddy Frank. *“It's time to reward those who contribute to our success.” “I'm giving you the Barnes account.” “An honest man such as yourself wouldn't get caught up in all that bullshit.”* Except now, thanks to Marci, Sean is smack in the middle of a whole lot of bullshit.

In the morning, all sleep deprived and anxious, the three convene at Sean's apartment.

"Wow, Sean," Sophie says, stepping inside, a travel mug in her hand. "I always thought your apartment would be really drab and empty." She takes in the navy sofa and bookshelf full of knickknacks and books with colorful spines.

"Thanks?" Sean says, closing the door behind her. Katie is already there, sitting in an armchair, Mittens pawing at her pant leg. Sean sits down on the sofa and Sophie sits at the other end. She sets her mug down on the coffee table and pulls her phone from her jacket pocket.

"Ready?" Sophie asks, looking between her friends. Katie nods, fingers picking at the piping on the arm of her chair. Sean stays silent. "Sean?"

He breathes deep. Giving up with Katie, Mittens jumps up in Sean's lap.

"I understand you're nervous," Sophie says. "But this is important. I need you to be on board."

Sean nods, running a hand down Mittens' back. "I'm on board. Make the call."

The line rings, and they tell the FBI what they know. After being transferred to a few different people, a man with a deep baritone voice talks to them and tells them to bring the email and the iPad to the FBI field office downtown. They're all assured that an investigation is being launched and are told to go about their days as usual.

Sophie finds this increasingly difficult. The best piece of gossip she's ever held, and she can't tell anyone. It makes her itch. After two weeks of living in their code of silence she develops an actual rash. Sean moves to his new office, with many begrudged congratulations from Sophie and Katie, and finds it relatively easy to go about his life. If not a bit stressful. He tenses every time he sees someone in a blue jacket, afraid the FBI is finally here to tear everything down. Since Sean has a shiny new client, Katie is finally given her own account to manage. She likes her new responsibility much less than she anticipated. Especially since it means she doesn't get to work with

Sophie anymore. It's also difficult to enjoy the sorta-promotion when the threat of sudden ousting by the man upstairs hangs over her head. Until the FBI does anything, she's still on Teddy's list.

A month goes by with no word from their friend at the FBI. Then one morning, as Sophie stands at Katie's cubicle bitching about the new prices on the vending machine, several men and women, all wearing navy jackets, march to the elevators and board with stern faces.

"Oh my god," Sophie says, interrupting herself.

"What?" Katie turns to see what Sophie's staring at. "Oh. Holy crap. It's finally happening."

Not long after, Theodore Frank, CEO of MarCom, is escorted off the elevators in handcuffs. People stand from their chairs, their heads popping up over their cubicle walls like prairie dogs in a field. Teddy still has a lollipop in his mouth, a grin on his face. "Don't worry everyone," he says as he's paraded toward the front doors. "This is all just a misunderstanding." One of the men holding onto his arm jerks him through the door and his grin falters.

Employees rush to the windows to watch the Big Boss Man get shoved in the backseat of an officer's car, his lollipop forcefully removed from his mouth. Sean stands behind a few of his gasping coworkers, a small part of him feeling guilty.

The next morning, every major news station tells of Teddy Frank's fall from grace. The entire executive board resigns, hoping to avoid ruination. MarCom's stock tanks and investment companies and PR firms everywhere scramble for a piece of the crumbling MarCom pie. It comes out, too, that Teddy was having an affair with his secretary, putting Marci under a harsh spotlight. Every news channel shows a pitiful still of her sobbing in front of MarCom's sign as she watches Teddy get taken away.

Marci later tells Sean that she's grateful to him for doing what she'd asked, whatever his involvement led to in the end. Though, it turns out it probably would have been better for her to

take the email to the feds after all. She gets caught up in the trial despite trying to stay out of it. Teddy is charged a hefty fine and sentenced to two years in prison. The other participating executives receive similar punishments. For her involvement, Marci is also fined.

MarCom doesn't entirely disappear. Though, some rebranding is necessary after such a scandal. The board is replaced and the company who holds controlling interest makes MarCom an extension of their company, ditching the name for their own. A lot of MarCom's employees are retained in the transition. But many are let go, forced to retrain in other industries or file for unemployment.

Sean was forced to participate in the trial as a witness, testifying to the conversation he had with Marci at Flannery's. With the trial being so prominent in the public eye, he's labeled a whistleblower and finds it difficult to get a job. The Barnes account changes firms. They tell Sean they can't be associated with anyone from MarCom anymore. He understands but thinks every day about what he could have done differently. After a decade of loyalty to a company that screwed him over, no one wants to hire him. He thinks his actions should count for something, but no one wants to listen.

Sophie stays after the rebranding. They even promote her to a supervisor role, which she's stoked about. Finally, she can put her interpersonal skills to good use. Katie stays after the rebranding, too, for a while, but job hunts in her off hours. She eventually finds something that's more suited to her skillset and pays her more than MarCom did. She misses Sophie, but the two of them and Sean stay in touch. They frequent Flannery's Pub for the cheap beer and the memories, despite the smell.

The End