



## Sick Day

Lewis called in sick Wednesday morning, when the new girl, Addy, was at the front desk. He knew she wouldn't make him invent an affliction. The one time he'd talked to her, on her first day, she'd been nervous as a bunny. He had to lean in to hear her, a few soft words, like they were in a library.

*Why would they hire a wallflower for the lobby? Maybe because she looked like Audrey Hepburn in Sabrina.*

He invented something anyway. *I've been retching all night, he told her, can't even keep water down.*

He drove forty-five minutes to the multiplex over by Ashford. *Twelve screens!* The night before he'd worked it all out. *Rom-com, doc, thriller,* like a film festival.

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Five minutes into the documentary, a laborious thing about corn syrup and politics, the exit door down by the screen opened, momentarily dousing the theater in afternoon sunlight.

Sanford Duval, the big boss, and the new girl crept into the middle two seats, three rows in front of him. Until then, he'd been the only one in the theater.

She turned around and looked straight at him, but without any sign she knew him. He doubted Duval would recognize him, he only remembered seeing the big man one other time, at a new product event, where he chatted up the sales staff and left before the Power Point started.

After a few minutes Lewis relaxed and leaned back. If he got caught, there'd probably be a dust storm, but he was pretty sure it was *three strikes and you're out*, and he had no strikes.

Then things got interesting. Duval put his arm around the girl. She flinched and jerked forward, but Duval didn't move his arm. She twisted

around a little, putting some space between them, but he just moved closer. She stood up.

"I'm going to the Ladies'," she whispered. Duval shrugged and sat back.

When she returned, she left a seat between them. Duval just laughed and moved over. He put his arm around her again and pulled her close. She tried to stand, but Duval grabbed her arm.

Lewis leaned forward and said, "Leave her alone".

She whirled around. "Lewis?" she said. "I thought you were sick."

"Is he bothering you?" he said.

"No, Lewis," she said, "I can deal with this."

"You know him?" Duval said.

"Yes, he's one of the sales guys," she said.

Duval looked at him. "Don't bother coming in tomorrow, dumbass. You are so fired. You should have kept your mouth shut. Tell him to go away, Addy. *Go away, Lewie,*" Duval said, *false*.

"I want to hear her say it," Lewis said.

"No," the girl said, "stay out of this, Lewis."

"I can give you a ride," he said to her.

"I'm fine," she said, "This is no big deal, Lewis."

Lewis leapt up from his seat and vaulted over the row in front of him.

Duval stumbled backwards and fell, landing on his ass, between the seats. Lewis leapt over another row and Duval skittered backward, on his hands, like a crab. The girl ran toward the exit.

Lewis turned and walked after her.

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They gave him a cardboard file box to put his stuff in. He could have loaded it into his briefcase: the book he was reading between sales calls, his collection of lucky rocks, the trophy from the trivia contest; a picture of his son, taken last summer when he'd had the boy for a two months, before Jennifer went apeshit and changed the parenting plan. *Two weeks is better than every other weekend,* his lawyer told him.

He walked past Addy without looking at her, but she called to him, before he went out. "Lewis, wait."

He ignored her, but she followed him into the hallway. "Lewis, please," she said.

He turned toward her and she ran over to him, catching him in a clumsy embrace.

“Lewis,” she said, pulling away. “Please don’t hate me. You’re a good man, Lewis.”

He smiled at her. “Addy,” he said, “I don’t hate anybody.”