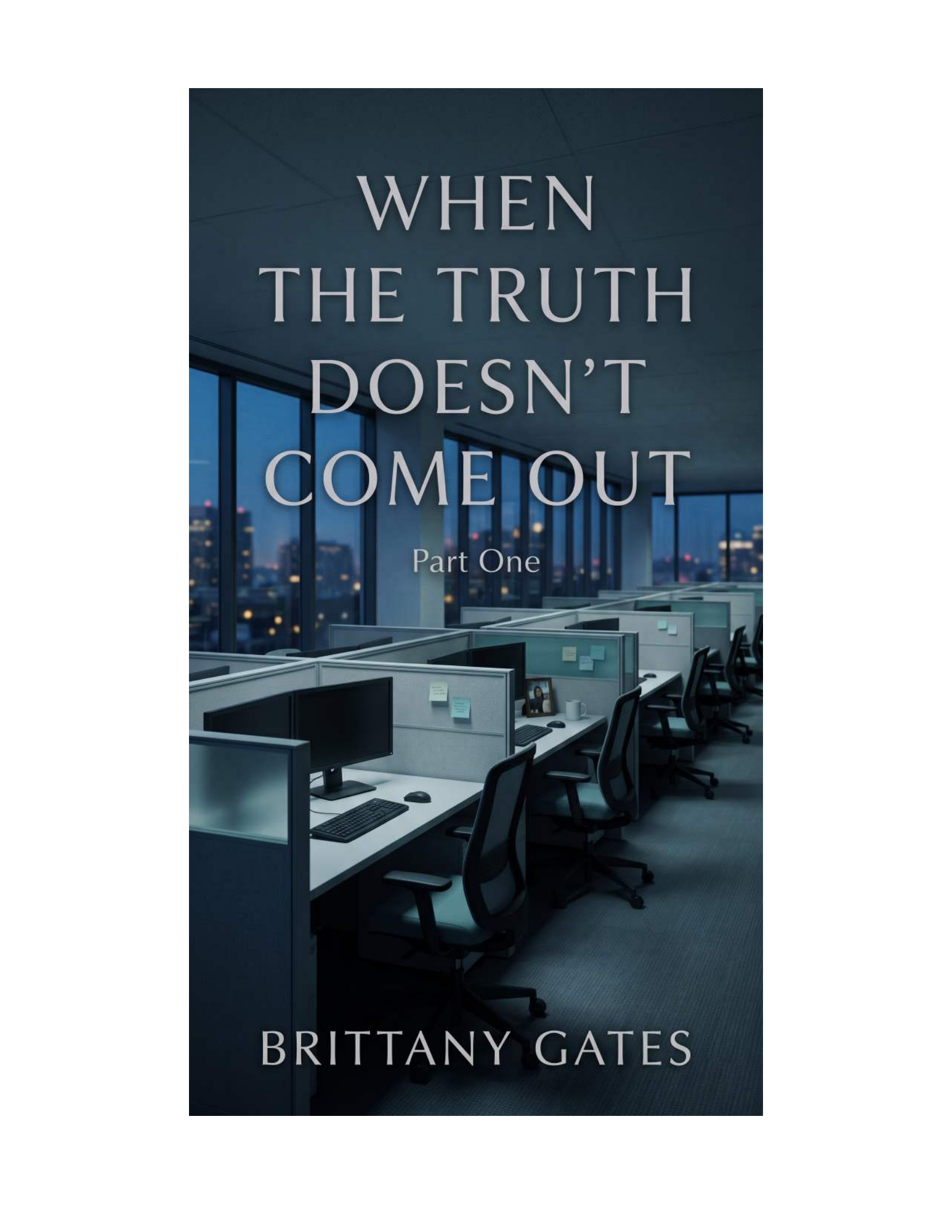


The background of the entire cover is a photograph of an office interior at night. The office is filled with rows of cubicles, each equipped with a desk, a computer monitor, and an ergonomic chair. The cubicle walls are light-colored, and some have sticky notes attached. The desks are cluttered with various items like keyboards, mice, and small personal objects. Large windows on the right side of the office provide a view of a city skyline at night, with lights from buildings and streets visible. The overall lighting is low, creating a moody and somewhat somber atmosphere.

WHEN THE TRUTH DOESN'T COME OUT

Part One

BRITTANY GATES

When The Truth Doesn't Come Out

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Thursday

Wallace Hill sits at one of the eight rectangle cubicle desks outfitted with black laminate desktops at his workplace. Each cubicle has low walls of the same material as the desktop, covered in a gray-colored cloth. Wallace's desk features two computer monitors sitting side-by-side, blocking a good portion of the longest part of the wall. Attached to the left side of the wall with clear push pins are pictures of him and his family at different events and locations. Different types of company swag hangs from the right side of the wall.

Sitting in a standard black computer chair with lumbar support, Wallace looks at one of the two monitors as he types on mechanical keyboard. He stops typing for a few seconds to rub one of his hands through his short brown tousled hair. His head bobs from side to side as he mouths the lyrics from the song playing through the wireless earbuds in his ears.

An employee sitting in the cubicle to Wallace's right rises and walk away through the open desk layout, but Wallace doesn't look away from his monitors and continues typing. He continues working uninterrupted when the employee returns with a white mug of coffee in one hand and a pack of cookies in the other. The employee, still standing, talks to another coworker sitting at their desk across from their cubicle, alternately sipping their coffee and munching on the cookies.

A new song starts, causing Wallace to nod his head in rhythm instead of bobbing. He stops typing to move his right hand toward a wireless mouse and use it to open a new tab in the web browser. He clicks on his bookmarks and navigates the folders to click on a specific bookmark. A website loads a page containing paragraphs of text and different types of charts. Wallace moves his chair closer to his desk and tilts his torso forward. He stops nodding and his lips stop moving to read the text on screen. Periodically, his eyebrows raise or his eyes narrow.

Wallace's concentration breaks when the music stops suddenly. He checks his smartwatch fasten to his left wrist to determine why. A phone ringing sounds through his wireless earbuds, and the display on the smartwatch changes to show the caller's name and icons to answer the call or dismiss it.

"Why is Suzanne calling me?"

He presses on the green icon to answer the call.

"What's up, honey?"

"I think your company is going to have a layoff soon," she says in a shaky voice.

"What? How do you know that?"

"I read an article on CNBC's website. Some anonymous source that knows about the layoff at the company says it's going to affect about ten thousand employees."

"I haven't heard anything about...that today. You can't believe everything you read, honey."

"The article cites a source that knows about the layoff thought."

"I bet there isn't a source. I bet they put that in the article to make it sound plausible."

"CNBC wouldn't do that. They are a reputable news agency. The source said they read about the upcoming layoff from notes from a high-level meeting in the company."

"That sounds fishy. If there was a 'high-level' meeting then who would take notes that could be get leaked easily?"

"That doesn't matter, Wallace. What matters is your job. What if the source is correct and your company has a layoff soon?"

Wallace looks around the office and sees many employees sitting in their cubicles. His face darkens as he thinks.

"Suzanne, let me give you a call back in a few minutes."

"Why?"

"I'm at my desk and I don't want to disturb my coworkers. I'll go find a quiet place in the office and give you a call back."

"Okay"

Wallace ends the call, locks his computer with a keystroke, and rises from his chair. He smooths out his pale yellow knit shirt and shakes each of his khaki-covered legs. He walks through the office floor, his loafers making little noise on the carpeted floor, searching for an empty conference room.

Wallace finally finds one: A small room resembling a phone booth. He closes the door behind him, pulls out the brown cloth office chair from the small desk attached to the wall, and sits down. Then he takes out his smartphone from his right pants pocket and calls his wife. She answers his call on the first ring.

"Suzanne, honey, don't let some Internet rumor upset you."

"You think this is a rumor," she asks with some fear in her voice.

"Yeah," he says nonchalantly.

"Wallace, there have been so many Tech companies having layoffs this year. There was like, what, a hundred thousand workers laid off this year alone so far? Now there is an article that the Tech company you work for may have a layoff soon. Why don't you take this seriously?"

"Yes, you're right about all of that. The reason I don't take the article seriously because the company is doing pretty well. We've had four profitable quarters in a row. There's no reason for them to have a layoff."

"Wallace, a majority of the Tech companies that did layoffs this year are profitable too!"

"Suzanne, I need a good reason to believe there's a layoff coming."

"Okay, okay. Let find that sentence. Ah: The source says the reason for the layoff is because the company over-hired and they need money to invest into AI."

Wallace thinks for a moment before speaking: "Yeah, the company over-hired. As for AI, the company is using more of it so I could see how they need more money to spend on it."

"Are you finally getting worried for your job? I am!"

"Honey, please, please, don't worry. Don't stress yourself out over an article online. I still haven't received any communication about any layoff. So I'm not going to worry about it. There's a possibility the source was wrong and nothing happens."

"What if it isn't?"

"Well, if my company decides do a layoff I probably won't be included."

"How can you be so sure?"

"My manager just gave me another project to manage. On top of that, the other project I'm runnin' is under budget and proceeding for a on-time deployment. I'm an asset, Suzanne. Companies don't let go of assets."

Suzanne takes a deep breath. Then she takes another.

"Do you feel better now?"

"I do. A little."

"Good. Go take a break at work and take a walk outside. That will clear your mind and help you relieve some stress."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"All right then. I'll call you when I leave work."

Wallace ends the call by tapping on the red icon on his smartwatch. He takes the earbuds case out of one of the back pockets in his pants and flips it open. He removes his earbuds one by one, placing each into the case. After closing it, Wallace replaces the case into one of his back pants pocket, gets up, and exits the conference room.

He walks down the pathway toward his desk, passing by clusters of the same cubicle setup and color. Wallace sees more employees in the area than he saw before his phone call. Some speak in low volume as they stand close to each other. As he passes by some of them he sees faces of concern and shock.

Wallace turns his head to check the other side of the office and see employees sitting at their desks looking down at their phones. Some of them look tense. He slows his gait and grows concerned.

One of the employees from the first group on the other side of the office departs and walks down the path toward Wallace. He raises his hand to stop her.

"What's goin' on? Why does everyone around here look...worried?"

"You didn't hear?"

"Hear what?"

"Multiple reports about our company having a layoff soon."

Wallace's pleasant countenance drops.

"Yeah, it's all over X and Bluesky. They say the company is set to lay off ninety-six hundred employees."

"When?"

The employee shrugs. "None of the reports have the exact date. Some say it could happen later this month, while one states it will happen next week."

"All right. Thanks"

The employee departs and Wallace walks the short distance to his desk. He sits down and inputs his password into his computer to unlock it. Instead of getting back to work, he stares at the various applications on the monitors.

"If there are more reports now about the layoff then it's probably not a rumor. And I just told Suzanne to go take a walk and not stress out about it. How will it look now if I call her back and tell her she may be right? It would only make things worse. But not telling her now will make things worse too. Crap."

Wallace sighs and runs both of his hands through his hair. His brown eyes continue to stare at the monitors, but he doesn't look at anything in particular. He clears his throat.

"I can't focus on this. If the company decides to have a layoff then we'll get notice of it. Until then I have work to do."

Friday

Wallace arrives at the office the next morning wearing a black t-shirt bearing the name and symbol of his company, blue jeans, and black sneakers with white accents. He carries his company-branded backpack from the handle at the top as he walks across the expansive office floor toward his desk. Wallace greets other employees as he passes by with a quick “Good morning” or with a nod.

Once he arrives at his desk, he places his backpack into his office chair, opens it, removes his company laptop, and connects it to the laptop dock sitting on the desk. He opens the lid to power on the device and removes the backpack from the chair so he can sit down. Wallace places it onto the floor underneath the desk.

He logs onto the computer when the sign-in screen appears and opens various work applications, chatting with his coworkers as they arrive at their cubicles. After checking his email and chat messages, and replying back to some emails and chats, he locks his computer, rises from his chair, and joins a few of his coworkers to grab breakfast from one of the company’s cafes.

After breakfast Wallace returns to his cubicle with a compostable cup of coffee. He logs into his computer and reads his packed email inbox. There’s no expression on his fair skin face as he sips away at his coffee. A few minutes into reading his email his mouth drops open and his eyes widen. Wallace sets his coffee down onto his desktop.

“It’s true.”

“What’s true,” his coworker on his left asks.

“Did you see the latest email sent by the CEO?”

“Um, no. Is he talking about some new deal the company made?”

“Nah, man. He announced a layoff.”

“He did,” the employee says as he bolt out of his chair and looks over the low wall at Wallace.

“Yeah. That’s why I said it’s true. About the articles that came out yesterday about a potential layoff at the company. You should read the email.”

“I will,” the employee says and then retakes his seat.

Wallace takes out his smartphone from his right pants pocket and unlocks it with his face. He opens the text message app and sees a list of ongoing chats. He taps on the one with his wife’s name and types a message with his thumbs. A minute or so later he gets a response. Wallace locks his computers and rushes out of his seat gripping his phone tightly in his right hand.

He speeds through the office floor to the elevators. Finding a large group of people waiting for the next available elevator, Wallace turns and takes the staircase nearby. He descends three floors to enter the lobby. From there he exits the building through the front entrance and jogs through the parking lot to his car. Once there, he opens it with the remote he fishes from his left pants pocket. He sits in the driver’s seat and calls his wife. She picks up on the third ring.

“Wallace, I got about ten minutes to talk before my next meeting.”

"I'll keep it quick,"

"You sound out of breath."

"Yeah, I jogged to my car."

"Is there something wrong? Is that why you had to talk to me now?"

"Yeah. That article we talked about yesterday, the one from CNBC, it's correct. The CEO sent out a company-wide email about ten minutes ago announcing a layoff."

Suzanne gasps.

"Let me read you what he wrote. Give me a second to open a work email."

Wallace pulls the phone away from his ear and turns on the speakerphone option. Then he navigates on his phone to pull up his work email app.

"Okay, I got it. This is what the CEO wrote: 'As many of you know by now several news outlets reported yesterday that our company would have an upcoming layoff. Those reports are true. This is not how I planned on informing everyone, as I wanted to wait until all of the details about the upcoming layoff solidified. Yet, here we are. In this email I will reveal some of the details about layoff as of now..

'The layoff will happen next Friday. The number of employees that will be affected is ninety-six hundred. The affected employees will be notified through their personal email at 6 AM next Friday morning. Although the affected employees will not be allowed to work, they will be employed by the company for an additional 60 days so the company can comply with the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act. The affected employees will receive a severance package. More details about that package will be released to the affected employees via email next Friday.

'The reason for the layoff is two-fold: First, the company has redundant employees doing the same role at the company after the merger with Polytiq two years ago. Second, the company's Artificial Intelligence products need more investment to meet customer demand. As the costs for memory chips, hard drives, and data center construction increases, so does the company's capital expenditure.

'I know you will have questions and we will do our best to answer them. Please submit your questions through the HR Portal and we will do our best to answer them.'

"That's it. That's how the email ends."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry."

"No need. You didn't do anything wrong. It's the company that did this. That merger is finally comin' back to affect the employees. Many of us at work thought there would be a layoff after the merger was done. Turns out we were right, just two years early."

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. I know you gotta get to your meeting. We'll talk when I get home."

"All right. I love you. Bye."

"I love you too."

Wallace ends the call and looks out the windshield at the rows of parked cars. He sighs.

As the double-car garage door closes Wallace ceases the engine in his full-size SUV. He pockets his smartphone and grabs his backpack sitting in the front passenger seat. Then he exits his car and walks over to the door leading into his two-story house. The door opens before Wallace reaches it and Suzanne stands in the doorway. She wears a cream short-sleeve blouse and sky blue Bermuda shorts. Her petite feet showcase a recent pedicure.

"Hey, honey," Wallace says with some tiredness in his voice.

"I know you had a tough day at work. I came out to see how you're doin' before you come inside. Just in case you wanted to talk without the kids around."

"I rather go inside and have a nice dinner with my family."

"All right."

Wallace steps over to his wife and looks her over as he encircles her waist with his free arm. Suzanne's shoulder-length blonde hair is pulled back into a low ponytail. Her brown eyes look up at her husband as she smiles. He gives her a quick kiss on her lips and guides her into the house.

After closing and locking the door, Wallace drops his backpack onto the hardwood floor next to the door. Then he removes his shoes, placing them onto a multi-tiered shoe rack not far from the doorway.

"Do the kids know what happened at my work today," he asks in a low voice.

"No. I didn't tell them," Suzanne responds in a low voice.

"Do you think they know? They could have learned about it online."

"All they do online is watch TikTok and YouTube videos."

"It's just...how can I say this? I don't know if they could handle the uncertainty of what a job layoff brings. Especially when I have to wait until next Friday for what happens at my job."

"They're gettin' older, though."

"They're still teenagers."

"Who are growing up in a world that will make them mature faster. Life is so much more advanced than it was when we were their age."

Wallace nods. "I'm gonna change my clothes. I'll say hi to the kids and see if they say anything."

He crosses the living room and goes up the stairs. Then he turns right and walks down the hallway.

"Robbie! Emma! What are you two up to?"

The children respond with short answers.

"Come out here and say hi to your dad after he's worked all day."

A minute or so later son and daughter emerge from their bedrooms and walk over to their father. Wallace kisses each of them on the top of their head.

“Soon I won’t be able to kiss you like that, Robbie. You’re almost as tall as me.”

The young man giggles.

“How was school today?”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

“Did you learn anything interesting?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess so.”

“Did you hear anything interesting in the news today?”

“The news,” they ask almost in unison.

“Yeah. Don’t you watch news reports on your phone?”

The children look at each other before returning their attention to their father.

“The news is diabolical.”

“It ruins my vibe.”

Wallace grows confused and shakes his head.

“I don’t understand the new lingo you two say some times. What does that mean?”

“We don’t like the news, dad,” his daughter explains.

“That’s all you had to say.”

“We did,” his son says with a look of confusion on his face.

“I’m doing to change my clothes. You two go downstairs and help your mom with dinner.”

The children depart, groaning as they tilt their head back.

Wallace walks down the other end of the hallway toward the primary bedroom. Once inside, he walks around the unmade King size bed to enter the walk-in closet. He disrobes to his fitted boxers and places the clothes into a cloth hamper in a corner of the closet. Then he grabs a gray t-shirt with the name and logo a rock band and a black pair of gym shorts. He walks barefoot out of the closet and the bedroom, making his way to the kitchen to join his family.

Monday

Wallace enters the office wearing a black quarter zip jacket with a white button-down shirt underneath. A pair of blue Chino pants and solid black sneakers finish the outfit. His hair is slicked back.

Sitting down at his desk, Wallace connects his laptop to the dock and boots up his computer. After logging in he starts his workday navigating between different browser tabs collecting updates about the projects he leads. He takes that information to update spreadsheets and their associated documents.

At ten minutes to 10 AM, a notification sound from his smartwatch grabs Wallace's attention and he looks down at his left wrist to view the watch's display.

"Ah, it's almost time for my biweekly one-on-one meeting with my manager."

He undocks his laptop, closes the lid, and sets a small notebook and a pen on top of it. Then he grabs the laptop, rises from his chair, and heads the conference room booked for the meeting. Wallace enters through the open door and his manager, a middle-age Asian man wearing a partly-zipped white hoodie with a solid white knit shirt with a collar underneath, sits on the other side of the conference table. He smiles at his direct report, his skin wrinkling around the eyes and mouth. He sweeps one of his hands over his black hair, fixing some of the layers of his bowl cut.

"Good morning, Wallace."

Wallace returns the smile, closes the door behind him, and takes a seat across from his manager. He sets out the notebook and pen to the side of the laptop. Then he opens the device.

"Good morning, Wei. How's it goin'?"

"Ah, it's Monday," he says with nervous chuckle.

"Yeah, I totally understand."

"I know I allow you to direct our one-on-one meeting 'cause it's your time, Wallace. However, I would like to start today if that's fine with you?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Let's discuss the elephant in the room: The upcoming layoff this Friday. I've already been asked by your peers if I have any additional about it. Unfortunately, I don't. That's above my pay grade. I directed your peers, and I suggest you do this too if you have any questions, to submit those questions to HR via their portal."

"You don't know if anyone from the team is gonna be impacted?"

Wei shakes his head. "I don't. In full transparency, I wasn't asked to give a list of my top, middle, and bottom performers. Other managers I asked weren't directed to do that either. Some companies will task their managers with that when the company is about to do a layoff. I wasn't asked for that."

"How will the company determine who to let go?"

"I don't know. Maybe the executives already have that information in some database or dashboard only they are allowed to see? Unfortunately, we have to wait until Friday to find out who is, and isn't, impacted."

"All of this makes me feel...out of control. Does that make sense?"

"It does. I feel the same way. Others I talked to feel that way too."

"I wish that...that...never mind."

"Say what you have to say, Wallace. You know our conversation only stays with us."

"I know. It's not that I'm afraid to speak my mind, but I don't think it's going to help me. It'll probably make everything worse. Let's just change the subject."

"All right. Um...do you have the updates about your projects?"

"Yeah, I uploaded everything to into the shared drives like you asked."

"Let me check."

The manager goes silent as he clicks around on his laptop using a wireless mouse. His eyes narrow as his face contorts from thinking.

"Ah, yes, everything is here. Good. I'll provide an update to my manager when I meet with her later today. Oh, how's the career development going?"

Wallace and Suzanne snuggle together as they lie in their bed. The lamp on the nightstand situated at the head of the bed not far from Wallace's head illuminates part of the room in a soft light. Suzanne has her eyes closed as her husband strokes her loose hair. Wallace stares at the wall opposite of him.

"I think I made a mistake at work today," he says.

"Don't focus on that. Push it out of your head so you can go to sleep."

"I wish I could, honey, but I can't. I just keep replaying the scene over and over."

"Is that why you were were out of it after you came home today?"

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"I told my manager I felt I was out of control because of the impending layoff."

"How was that a mistake?"

"He could tell his management chain that I'm not strong. Or he could tell them my performance could weaken because I can't focus. That could put me on the chopping block."

"Would he do that?"

"I don't know. He's always been a good manager, but a layoff can change people. They start lookin' out for themselves. Tryin' to find a way to keep their job."

Suzanne opens her eyes and moves to kiss her husband on the cheek. He continues to stare at the wall.

"Wallace, honey, I want you to remember you are a great employee who is in control. Don't let what the company is doing make you think any different."

He stops stroking his wife's hair and turns his head to look at her. He smiles.

"You are such a good wife. I really did luck out marryin' you."

"I always feel the same way about you."

Tuesday

Wallace begins his morning by taking a shower. Afterwards, he dries off his body with a white bath towel and wraps it around his waist. He walks over to the double sink vanity and looks at himself in the large mirror.

"I didn't sleep well last night and it shows."

He sighs. Then he grips the edges of the vanity with both of his hands, leans forward, and drops his head.

"I can do this," he whispers to himself. "I can do this."

Wallace raises his head and looks at himself in the mirror again.

"I'm stressed out. This damn layoff is stressing me out. I can't focus on it, though. I got work to do. And I want to work. I enjoy working. I mean, I gotta work to pay the bills, to survive, to live, but my employer doesn't care. They only see me, and all the other employees, as a liability. If they didn't, then there wouldn't be a layoff."

Wallace stands up straight and opens one of the drawers in the vanity. He takes out a tube of lotion and applies some onto his slightly-hairy arms and chest. After placing the tube back into the drawer, he takes out a can of hair product, opens it, and takes out a glob with his fingers. He smears the product between his hands and applies it onto his hair. Wallace sculpts his hair into a messy slick back style with his fingers. Afterwards, he washes his hands and dries them off with a nearby white hand towel.

He leaves the en suite bathroom and enters the primary bedroom, walking over to his still-sleeping wife in bed. He shakes her gently.

"Time to get up, honey."

"All right," she groans.

Wallace walks around the bed, enters the walk-in closet, and chooses his outfit for the day: A pale yellow long-sleeve t-shirt featuring a beach scene, light wash blue jeans, and solid white socks.

When he exits the closet, he finds his wife sitting up in their bed.

"Don't look at me like that. You know I'm not a morning person."

"I'll go downstairs and make us some coffee."

"Thank you."

"Is it fine if I take my coffee to go? I want to get an early start to work."

"Sure. Fine."

Going over to his wife, Wallace bends over and kisses her on a cheek. Then he leaves the bedroom, goes downstairs to the kitchen, and makes coffee. He pours it into two insulated tumblers. He leaves one on the kitchen counter for his wife, and takes the other.

After putting on his shoes and grabbing his backpack, Wallace goes into the garage, enters his SUV, starts the car, and opens the garage door.

Wallace drives to work in silence. Upon arriving to his workplace he parks his car, ceases the engine, but doesn't move to leave. He stares at the cluster of large buildings surrounded by trees and professionally-landscaped grounds.

"In three days ninety-six hundred employees will no longer come here to work for no fault of their own. And I could be one of them."

He grabs his tumbler from a cup holder in the center console and sips the coffee. He watches other employees arrive to work, park their vehicles, and head inside the buildings.

"What's goin' on in their heads? How do they feel about the layoff? Are they worried? Do they about their feelings with someone? Do they even have someone to talk to?"

Wallace continues to sip the coffee, watching the parking lot fill up. After he finishes the coffee, he sighs and grabs his backpack.

Wednesday

As the workday inches closer to its end, Wallace types steadily on his keyboard as he looks at one of his two computer monitors. He wears his noise-canceling earbuds listening to music. He nods his head to the beat.

A red notification bubble appears on the chat application icon in the taskbar, stealing Wallace's attention from his current task. His eyebrows raise.

"Who's pinging me?"

He shifts his eyes over to the second monitor which hosts the chat application, among many other applications. He moves the mouse pointer over to that application and clicks on the Direct Message section to expand it. A list of names appears.

"Oh, it's Wei."

Wallace clicks on his manager's name and reads the message: *"Wallace, are you free right now? Can you come to my office?"*

He clicks on the text box and types: *"Yes, I'm free at the moment. I can come to your office. Do I need to bring anything?"*

He sees some dots appear in the application as his manager types a response.

"No. You don't need to bring anything."

Wallace replies: *"All right. I'm coming your office now."*

He locks his computer, rises from his chair, removes his earbuds, placing them into their case, and sets it onto the desktop. He walks across the office floor toward his manager's office.

Upon reaching it, he sees Wei sitting at one of the three desks in the room. His manager rises from his chair and waves him in as he moves from behind his desk. Wei wears a dark green long-sleeve shirt with the company's name and brand on the upper-right breast, dark gray jogging pants, and slides with black socks.

"You can close the door behind you. The other two managers are in different meetings for the next hour or so. I have the office to myself for a little while."

Wallace closes the door behind him and stands next to his manager.

"Thanks for coming on short notice. I didn't want to talk about this via email or chat 'cause I don't have great news."

Worry develops on Wallace's face and his body goes rigid.

"What's the news?"

"I have to transfer Project Orion from you to a more senior Project Manager."

A flash of anger burns the worry away as Wallace's eyes grow wide and he throws his arms up.

"Why? I worked on that project for seven months without any issue. Why do you have to transfer to another Project Manager? And who's takin' it over?"

"Oscar Lopez is taking over the project because he's managing the prerequisite project to Project Orion. I know you're angry, and I would be too if I was in your shoes. I, I really tried to keep the project under your management, but our org's Director is involved and she made the decision."

"Did I not do a good job with the project? Is that it?"

"No. You did a fantastic job so far. The project is on time and right on budget. It's just that both projects are for a VIP client, and the Director wants to make sure both projects release on time."

"It sounds like she's gonna be involved with managing these projects."

"Oh yeah! I feel sorry for Oscar 'cause now he has multiple stakeholders he has to provide updates to multiple times a week."

"If he needs help, I can help him."

Wei shakes his head. "He's not gonna take it. Oscar wants to leave the IC path and become a manager. If he can deliver both of these projects on time with high customer satisfaction then that will probably be enough for him to move into management."

"So he wants to be like you?"

Wei laughs. "I think Oscar doesn't want to be like me at all. I think he thinks becoming a manager will open more career opportunities for him. It can, if one wants to move up the management chain. But if one is a poor manager it can ruin one's career."

"What's going to happen to my performance metrics for the year? Project Orion was a big part of it."

"You can claim all the work you did on the project for your performance review. The Director gave me that assurance in writing."

"Does she know this looks bad with the layoff coming up?"

"She does. However, she focused on the future, no matter what the layoff may bring. She's right to think that way."

"What if she loses her job?"

"Then the company's future isn't her problem anymore. If she doesn't lose her job, then she has to deliver results. Just like you and me if we aren't eliminated on Friday. That's what we need to focus on."

"I'll try."

"Good."

"Can I go back to my desk? Or is there anything else we need to discuss?"

"The last thing we need to work on is collecting all the files related to Project Orion and transfer those over to Oscar. Preferably today. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, I can. I'll go work on that now."

Suzanne knocks on the closed door to the primary bedroom, opens it slightly, pokes her head inside, and sees her husband sitting on the cream-color ottoman situated at the end of the King size bed. Wallace, with his head in his hands and his arms propped upon his knees, doesn't move.

"Honey, are you okay?"

He doesn't respond. Suzanne slips inside the bedroom and closes the door behind her. She doesn't move from the doorway.

"The kids are worried. You left dinner without sayin' anything. You didn't eat much either. What's wrong?"

"Can I just be alone? For a little while?"

"Did something bad happen at work?"

"Please, Suzanne! I just need to be alone right now."

"All right. I'll go tell the kids you're not feelin' too well. I'll leave you alone."

Suzanne turns around, opens the door, and slips out.

Thursday

"I wake up expecting the anger I went to sleep with last night would still be burning inside of me, but it's not. I search my entire being for it and I can't find it. I want to, though. I want to be angry because I should. The project I worked on for so long, and saw through its ups and downs, was taken from me by a Director I met in person maybe six times (or was it five?) in my twelve years at my employer.

"If I want to be angry again I need to focus my attention on the Director. I picture her in her office, sitting before her computer, making decisions to harm my performance rating, but her face is missing from my vision. I have little idea of what she looks like. I strain to remember, because I really want the anger to return, but I can't put a face to the name.

"The exercise tires me and I close my eyes. I didn't sleep well last night 'cause I was so angry. I try not to go to sleep angry because it ruins my sleep, but I wouldn't let the anger go last night.

"I can't go to sleep now. I gotta get ready for work soon.

"I open my eyes and I feel something new in my being. I struggle to determine the feeling. I turn over onto my side and face the back of my wife. As I stare at her slender figure in her nightgown I determine what is the new feeling inside of me: Acceptance.

"I accept losing Project Orion. That's why I'm not angry anymore. The project never belonged to me. It doesn't even belong to my employer. It belongs to the customer. They came to us with a problem and wanted a solution. The customer directed Project Orion. They directed my employer. My employer directed a series of employees, including me.

"I did my job following those directions. I did it well. Come tomorrow morning I may not have my job. Now that...I haven't accepted. I don't know if I truly can.

"I like my job. It challenges me. My coworkers are pleasant most of the time. They're helpful too. My manager is fair. He cares for me not only as an employee, but as a person too. I can't see myself working as a Project Manager at another employer.

"Why does the layoff have to happen? Why can't my employer just allow me and all the other employees continue in our roles and let us work? We don't want much. Just the salary and benefits we accepted upon signing our offer letters. My whole world hinges on an email arriving at the crack of dawn tomorrow. I can't accept that. Not at all."

Wallace yawns as he sits at the kitchen island as Suzanne waves at their children as they leave the kitchen after finishing their chores. Then she joins her husband at the island, exhaling hard.

"it's been a long day," she says.

"Don't I know it."

"I feel like having some wine. Do you want to join me?"

"That sounds good. I haven't had any wine in awhile."

"I think we only have white wine left."

"That's fine with me."

"All right. I'll go get it."

"Do you want any help?"

"Nah. You sit there and relax."

Suzanne slides off her chair and moves about the kitchen to get the wine bottle from the wine fridge and two wine glasses from a cabinet. She brings everything over to the kitchen island and sets it onto the countertop.

Wallace grabs the wine bottle and opens it. He pours the wine into each glass. After placing the bottle back onto the countertop, they each take a glass and sip the chilled beverage.

"This is good," Wallace says with a chuckle at the end.

Suzanne smiles. "It's nice to see you in a good mood today."

"I am. I'm happy that I feel better."

"I don't like it when you're in a bad mood."

"I know."

They drink in silence for some time.

"Wallace, will you tell me now what put you into a bad mood yesterday?"

He taps on the stem of his wine glass as he thinks. Suzanne grows nervous and shrinks. After some time he stops thinking and sighs.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Let's enjoy our company and the good wine."

Wallace gulps down the remaining wine in his glass and pours himself another. Suzanne looks on with a straight face.

"Do you want me to top off your glass?"

She shakes her head. Wallace offers a weak smile before he lifts his glass and drinks.

"Can I ask a hard question," Suzanne asks with a stern look on her face.

Upon seeing her serious demeanor, Wallace sets his glass upon the countertop and straightens up in his chair.

"Go ahead."

"What are we going to do if you lose your job tomorrow?"

"If I lose my job tomorrow I will look for another one. We have savings, and that should last us several months if we're cautious with our spending. I know I'll get a severance package. And I have those stocks the company granted me. If we really need the money I can sell them."

"Do you want to take a break from working? Let your mind and body rest for a bit?"

Wallace shakes his head. "I rather work to find a new job. The market is tough now and the competition is strong. It would be better for me to use my network, find a new job, and then rest."

"Don't stress yourself out."

"I'll stress myself out just being in the house all day knowing bills are coming due, and will keep coming due, and we have to be cautious with our money."

"I still have my job, though. We'll still have money coming in."

"Yeah, we will. We'll have to be tighter with our spending."

Wallace swallows the last of the wine in his glass and pours more wine into the glass. He takes a big swallow.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"All right. I need to get ready for bed."

Friday

The alarm goes off at six AM, waking up Wallace with a start. He fumbles his left arm from underneath the bed covers and uses his right hand to slap on the smartwatch fasten to his left wrist to stop the alarm. As silence returns to the bedroom, Wallace slips his arms back under the covers and closes his eyes.

Soon, he slips into a light sleep. Wallace doesn't feel his wife turn over in the bed and move over to cuddle him. He wakes up when Suzanne squeezes him tighter.

"Oh. Oh, did I wake you up," he asks with a mumble.

"You did."

"Sorry. I forgot to turn off my alarm."

"It's all right. I'll get an early start on my day."

"All I want to do is go back to sleep. I got a headache."

"You drank too much wine last night."

"I did."

"I'll go make some coffee."

"Thank you, honey."

Suzanne gets out of bed and turns on the lamp sitting on the nightstand next to the head of the bed. A soft yellow glow fills the room.

She enters into the walk-in closet and grabs a think sky blue robe hanging on her side of the closet. After donning it and dying the belt around her waist, she exits the closet and leaves the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Wallace turns over onto his back and looks up at the ceiling. He sighs.

"Stop delaying, Wallace. Check to see if you have a job or not."

He looks over at the nightstand next to his side of the bed and sees his phone sitting next to the lamp. He turns over to grab it and returns to laying on his back.

Wallace unlocks his phone with his face and opens his work email app. He sees an email at the top of his inbox from his company. The subject line makes him gasp as his eye widen.

Wallace tops on the email to read it in its entirety. AS he reads his face contorts from shock. Upon finishing reading the email he drops his phone onto his chest and closes his eyes. A sob escapes from his mouth. He shuts it close and slaps one of his hands over it. With the other hand he throws off his bed covers and gets out of bed. Wallace rushes into the en suite bathroom, closes the door behind him, and locks it using the button in the door handle.

His hands shake as his legs feel weak. He sits onto the tile floor as he breathes deeply. Tears slides down his cheeks. Wallace cries silently as he holds his head in his quaking hands.

"Twelve years," he gurgles outs. "Twelve years with the company. They let me go with a damn form email."

The tears continue to flow as Wallace sits on the floor. Suzanne returns to the bedroom carrying a cup of coffee. She looks around the room.

"Wallace, where are you?"

He hears his wife and freezes in place. Then he shakes the shock away and readies himself to answer.

"I'm, I'm in the bathroom."

"Oh," she says as he moves closer to the bathroom door. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just using the bathroom."

"Okay. I'll put your coffee on the nightstand."

"Thank you."

"I gotta clean up. I can't let her see me like this."

He gets up from the floor and walks over to the toilet. He relieves himself and flushes the toilet. While washing his hands in the sink, Wallace looks at his face in the mirror.

"I look like I've been crying."

He takes his soap-free hands cups them together to collect the running water, and bends over the sink. He splashes his face several times before rubbing his faces with his wet hands. He turns the water off and grabs a nearby towel to dry his face. Wallace looks at his face in the mirror again.

"Better. I can face Suzanne now."

Wallace hangs the towel back onto its hook and twists the doorknob to unlock the door, opening it. He sees his wife sitting on the side of the bed reading something on her phone. She looks up at him and smiles.

"Thanks for makin' me some coffee."

"Anything for you, honey. Do you feel better?"

"Yeah. I splashed some water on my face."

Wallace walks over to the nightstand near his wife to grab the cup of coffee. He takes a few sips.

"Did you...hear anything about your job?"

"Ah, yes. I still have one."

"Oh, that's so great to hear!"

"It is. Now you don't have to worry."

"Neither do you."

"My worries are just beginning."