

Stunt

"You're up, man," Carl said to Blake, handing him the putter and resetting the plastic cup that had rolled out of place after his third shot had finally gone in. Blake grabbed the handle and smacked his shoulder.

"Come on, hallway golf? You know that ain't a black man's game." He smiled and shrugged. "But, whatever, I beat you no matter what. Watch this."

Blake backed up across from the printer. The office was mostly empty, half the sales force out with clients and some of the admins at training. Carl glanced around the cubicle walls. Nobody coming. "Go, man, go," he said.

His putt ricocheted off the metal heater with a clank. It rolled to a stop six inches short. Carl smiled. "Come on, grandma. Gotta hit it if you wanna win it!" Blake's next shot tagged the rim. "Oh for two!" The last wasn't even close. It bounced off the baseboard and rolled away. He turned and found himself face to face with Stevens.

Oh, damn.

"Let's go," their boss said. "Room four."

Carl's face flushed. He could feel sweat on his palms. Holy crap, this was it. They were gonna get fired. Damn, damn, damn! He looked at Blake, who still had that stupid grin on his face. The man leaned in and whispered. "It's all cool, bro. No worries." He smelled like he'd just put on a healthy dab of cologne, or like an automobile air freshener. How the hell did he manage not to freak out?

It did not make Carl feel any better. In fact, it probably made it worse. Why couldn't he calm down? Why did he have to be so nervous? They would get out of it. Just a warning, probably. So they were goofing off a little bit. Who didn't from time to time? Stevens probably wanted to play and was jealous. He grinned despite his fear.

Carl and Blake sat down. Stevens had a pained look on his face. "Gentlemen," he folded his hands on the table. "This is not the first time you've been caught in a stunt like this." Carl glanced at Blake, who seemed smooth and cool. Himself, he felt twitchy and restless. He squirmed. "Do you have anything to say?"

Carl tried to start, but Blake cut him off. "Listen, I know what we was doing looks kind of bad, but, really, it's Friday afternoon and the whole place is dead. Nobody's working. So what?" He leaned in the chair, an arm slung over the back. *What are you gonna do about it?* the posture said.

Stevens looked them in the eye, in turn. Blake, then Carl. Damn, Carl thought. Here it comes. "This is the last straw. I can't have any more of this. Central is just looking for reasons to make my budget smaller. I'm sorry," he said. "But I'm going to have to let you go, Carl. You can come back for your things tomorrow." Fear crashed like a tidal wave, like a train out of control and barreling down the tracks. It was really happening! Oh, god, they were getting fired! And for something stupid like golf? What the hell?

He stood up, uncertain if his legs would work. Somehow they did. He looked around for help and saw Blake still sitting. Huh? "What about him?"

Stevens looked, dropped his gaze, shuffled Carl out of the room, closing the door behind him. He shook his head. "I can't. Can you imagine the lawsuits? Discrimination. Hostile work environment." He inhaled big, shuddering. He whispered, like it was a secret, "*Racism.*" Stevens smelled like sweat and cigarettes. He leaned back out and patted Carl gently on the back. "I really am sorry, Carl. I wish things were different."

Yeah, me too, Carl thought. *Me too.*