

Coup

By Sean Silleck

The three of us, Dan, Tanya and me, sat in Dan's cubicle, plotting how to take over the department. We were sick of the bullshit. We were sick of Morgan, the editorial director, all her stupid procedures, so we were going to take over the department by force. Dan wanted to use box cutters and maybe a smoke bomb to do the job, but Tanya insisted we'd need assault rifles and possibly explosives as well. Tanya was the leader of our group. She was good—she was really good.

“I just don't want to hurt anyone,” Dan said. “We can do this without blood being spilled.”

“I don't want to hurt anyone, either.” Tanya spoke gently, but you could see the fire in her eyes. “Unfortunately, we might have to. Upper management needs to know we mean business.”

I secretly loved Tanya. She was beautiful and could be mean but her heart was filled with goodness and she only wanted justice for us all. And also summer Fridays and three-percent raises.

“What about Neil?” I asked. Neil was Morgan's deputy director, number two in the department. “They're really close. I've seen them go out to dinner together. There're rumors that they're ... you know....”

“We'll have to make our move when the two of them are in different parts of the office,” Tanya said. “Divide and conquer. Neil has his status meeting Monday at 11. That's when we'll do it.”

“What about Natalie and Mark?” Dan said, referring to the other two editors in the department. “Will they side with us or Morgan?”

“We need Natalie,” Tanya said. “She sits closest to Morgan’s office. She’d be the one to raise the alarm first, if she’s not with us. We need two minutes in Morgan’s office, with no one knowing what’s going on. We need to report to the managing partners that we’re in control. They can only find out after we’ve taken the department. If they find out before or during our move, all will be lost. Mark doesn’t matter at all.”

“I’ll talk to Natalie,” I said. “We used to be at FCB together. We have history.”

“You have to get her on our side.” Tanya stared at me with her fierce green eyes. “Everything depends on it.”

“I will,” I said.

We decided to compromise and use pistols and duct tape for the operation. Tanya would get the pistols from an uncle of hers who lived in Brighton Beach. Dan would get the duct tape from the hardware store around the corner from his apartment.

“Make sure it’s the real stuff,” Tanya warned. “Don’t get the paper kind. You can bite through the paper kind.”

“I know what duct tape looks like.” Dan sounded angry but I knew he was just scared.

After work he and I walked to the subway together. He hunched his shoulders and looked at the sidewalk. He seemed pretty depressed.

“I’m just worried something will go wrong,” he said, his hands stuck in his pockets, his ear buds hanging down the front of his jacket. “What will happen if we fail?”

“Don’t you trust Tanya?” I asked. “Don’t you hate Morgan? Don’t you hate all the bullshit?”

“You *know* I hate all the bullshit. You know I hate Morgan, and all her fucking procedures. But I used to think we could trust Tanya. I’m not so sure anymore.”

“Why, because she’s strong and ruthless? It’s true, she is, but we *need* someone like that. We’d never be able to do this without her.”

“What if afterwards, when we’ve taken over the department, Tanya’s no different than Morgan?” Dan said. “What if there’s still bullshit, just different bullshit?”

“It won’t be like that. Tanya’s not Morgan. We’ll get summer Fridays. We’ll get three-percent raises.”

“What about Morgan’s procedures?” When Dan looked at me, I could see the doubt puddling in his eyes. I began to worry that he was weak, that he would be a problem.

“Will Tanya just get rid of all of Morgan’s procedures, just like that?”

“You keep saying Tanya,” I said, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. Dan and I had been at CDM together, years ago. We had history. His depression made me unhappy. “It isn’t just Tanya. It’s all of us. Don’t you get that? No more fucking director and deputy director calling all the shots. The department will be run by all of us. We’ll all run it together.”

“I hope you’re right, Nick,” Dan said. “I really hope you’re right.”

The next day was Friday, and I wanted to talk to Natalie as soon as possible, to get her on our side. Tanya, Dan and I had a meeting scheduled for noon, our final one before the coup, and I wanted to be able to report that Natalie was on our side. I wanted Tanya to be proud of me.

I stopped by Natalie’s cube right after I turned on my computer and hung up my coat. I glanced first toward Morgan’s office—her door was closed, the timing couldn’t have been better—and then peeked in at Natalie and asked if she wanted to go grab some Joe down at Stubb’s, the chain coffee bar across the street.

“I can’t really go,” she said, softly. “I have this big fact check, and it’s really taking a long time because of that new procedure Morgan instituted last week.”

“Isn’t that bullshit?”

“It’s *totally* bullshit.” Natalie shook her head sadly. A lock of her dark hair, which she kept piled up on top of her head, fell down over one eye. “I usually don’t feel like crying at work until at least four o’clock.”

I had a big soft spot for Natalie. I’d brought her into this agency from FCB a year and a half ago. Her unhappiness really depressed me.

“C’mon,” I said. “I’m buying. Whatever you like.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

We went down to Stubb’s. I bought her the biggest foamiest soy latte they had, with an extra shot of espresso, whipped coconut cream and a double pump of caramel. I had a doppio on the rocks.

“What if it didn’t have to be like that?” I said. “What if we got rid of all the bullshit? What if we got rid of all of Morgan’s stupid procedures? How would that make you feel about working here?”

“That’ll never happen. Once you start one of these procedures, you can’t ever take it back. It’s like a fungus—it just grows and grows.” Natalie half-bit, half-sucked her lower lip. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Morgan’s going to be here forever. She doesn’t have a life. That’s why she’s such a bitch. She makes all these stupid procedures so she can take our lives away, too.”

I took a chance. I told Natalie our plan. At first she was shocked, and sat in silence sipping her foam and caramel. Then she looked scared. Like, *death* scared.

“*What if you fail?*” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Then what will happen? What will happen to the rest of us?”

“We won’t fail,” I said. “Not if you help us.”

“You want me to help you?” Natalie stared at me in horror. I think if she hadn’t been drinking massive amounts of caffeine and sugar she would’ve passed out.

“Not *help* us, not like that. We just need you to look the other way when it begins. We need you *not* to call for help.”

“But Morgan will ask me to help her. I sit right next to her office.”

“That’s why everything depends on you.” I leaned close toward her. I looked closely into her eyes. We had history. “All we need you to do is look the other way. Say nothing. That’s all. That’s it.”

She thought hard about what I was saying. Her upper lip was dotted with foam.

“And you’ll get rid of Morgan, right?” she said. “She’ll never come back, right? And you’ll get rid of all her procedures?”

“And we’ll have summer Fridays and three-percent raises.”

She took a long sip of her coffee. “Okay, I won’t say anything for two minutes. But I can’t promise longer than that. If it goes longer than two minutes, I’ll have to call for the managing partners. Otherwise she’ll know I was in on it. If you fail, she can’t know I was in on it.”

“Two minutes is all we need. You’re the best, Natalie.” I leaned forward and kissed her forehead, nearly knocking her latte into her lap. “We won’t fail. Everything’s going to be really great.”

At the noon meeting with Dan and Tanya, I was so excited about Natalie’s promise to stay quiet I could barely relate the story. I kept mixing up my words and using the wrong pronouns. “They said it wouldn’t be a problem,” I practically cried out. “They’re going to get loud for two minutes.”

“Who’s they?” Tanya asked, frowning. “What do you mean, loud? You talked to Natalie, right?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I’m just a little excited.” I wiped my sweaty palms on my thighs. I took a deep breath. “I mean, Natalie, she’s going to be quiet for two minutes. But that’s it. After two minutes she’s going to call for the managing partners.”

“Two minutes is all we need.” Tanya looked at me for a moment. I could tell she wasn’t proud of me. I started to feel upset.

“Well, we have another problem,” Dan said. “I saw Morgan talking to Steve Labrum this morning. She went into his office. And closed the door.”

Steve Labrum was the head of the copy department. He was also creative director of the agency, a senior vice president, one step down from Peter and Regina, the two managing partners. He was a really important person.

“Shit,” I said. “If the copy department backs Morgan, then we’re fucked. We’re really fucked.”

“Okay, listen to me, both of you.” Tanya set her jaw, swiped her bangs out of her eyes and looked at us fiercely. “Forget about Steve Labrum. Forget about the copy department. As long as we move quickly, as long as Morgan is out before anyone knows what’s happened, we’ll be fine. Once we control the editorial department, all the other departments will fall in line. No one’s going to say anything. There are a lot of jobs going out to the client on Monday, including the core visual aid. Okay? Are you guys okay? I need to know I can count on you two.”

“I’m good. I’m a hundred percent good.” I wanted to be very clear about this. I was practically shouting, so Tanya wouldn’t think I had any doubts whatsoever. Dan was the one with the doubts, not me.

“I’m in,” Dan said, though he didn’t sound very convincing.

“Are you sure?” Tanya asked him. Her look of determination, her warrior gaze, was incredibly sexy.

“Yeah.” Dan nodded.

“Okay, good. Then we’re set for Monday. Neil goes to his meeting at 11 o’clock. At 11:05 we move. Okay?”

Dan and I both nodded. I almost hurt my neck I was nodding so hard.

“Good.” Tanya nodded back at us. Then she handed out the pistols, a Ruger .380 for Dan, a 9mm Glock for me and a .357 magnum Smith and Wesson for herself. Dan passed out the rolls of duct tape.

I looked at Dan and then at Tanya. Monday couldn’t get here fast enough.

* * *

I was on my way out that night, coming out of the bathroom after my final pee, when I ran straight into Morgan, who was standing in the hallway like she’d been waiting for me.

“Hey, Morgan,” I said. “Ah, have a good weekend.”

“Nick, I’d like to speak to you for a moment,” she said, her voice flat and dull. “Do you mind?”

“Um, I’m just, you know, I really have to....” I was nervous not only because I’d been surprised by Morgan but because the Glock was stuck into the front waistband of my pants. I was terrified it would fall out.

“This really can’t wait.” She smiled at me but it was an icy smile. It was how she always smiled, so you could never tell if she was actually happy or really pissed off. That was part of Morgan’s problem, not being able to accurately communicate her feelings. It was why no one really trusted her. That, and all her stupid procedures.

“Sure,” I said.

I followed her back to the editorial department and into her office. Morgan closed the door and went behind her desk and sat down. I sat in one of the guest the chairs and folded my hands in my lap to cover up the butt of the gun.

“I just want to say to you,” Morgan said, and looked at me with her hands pressed together prayer-wise beneath her chin. “I think you did a great job with those plasma

panels last week. The team was very happy with the way they turned out. The client, apparently, was ecstatic.”

“That’s good news,” I said. “But I just made sure there wasn’t anything wrong with them. And the others did some great second reads. It was the whole department, really.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Nick. Not all editors are created equal.” Morgan sat back in her chair. She was watching me very carefully, like she was sizing me up. She was a good-looking woman, in her mid-40s but with not a wrinkle on her face, just a few delicate lines at the corners of her eyes. Her cream-colored blouse was unbuttoned just enough to afford me a glimpse of one pink bra strap. Her well-muscled legs went on forever. “You’re very important to this department,” she said. “I want you to know that.”

“Thanks, Morgan. I appreciate that.”

“I’m putting you in for Senior Editor,” she said. “And I don’t see any reason why you can’t make it to Supervisor soon after that.”

“Really? Wow. That’s great to hear. Thanks.”

“I want you to know, Nick, that the door to this office is always open to you. If there’s ever anything you need, anything you want to say to me, you can always come in here and ... say it.”

“Okay, um. It’s just that, well....” I had no idea how to say what I was trying to say.

“Go ahead, Nick,” Morgan said in a soothing voice. “Please.”

“It’s just, I always thought I had to go through Neil. We all think we have to go through Neil to talk to you.”

“Oh. Neil.” For a long moment Morgan breathed deeply through her nostrils, and her lips got weirdly pinched, and then she rolled her eyes. “I have to be honest with you. Neil isn’t as high on my list as he used to be. He’s fallen down a peg or two. He’s disappointed me several times in the last few weeks. I’m telling you this in complete confidence, of course.”

“Oh ... wow.” This was shocking. Unbelievable. Neil was the deputy director. He and Morgan went out to dinner. There were rumors that they ... you know.... “I won’t tell anyone,” I said. “Don’t even worry about that.”

“Your promotion should come through next week,” Morgan said. “The agency-wide e-mail will probably go out on Thursday. Friday at the latest.”

“Hey, thanks so much, Morgan.”

“Have a good weekend, Nick.”

I got out of her office as fast as I could. I couldn’t stay in the building one minute longer. My head was filled with all kinds of crazy thoughts. I didn’t look at anyone in the elevator or in the main lobby and I didn’t see Neil until I was halfway through the revolving door and couldn’t turn back. He was outside the building smoking a cigarette. We looked right at each other, and I nodded and kept going on.

“Nick. Hey, Nick.” He ran to catch up to me. “How’s it going?”

“Hey, Neil. Have a good weekend.”

“Wait, I have to talk to you.” He put a hand on my shoulder. “I know what you’re doing. Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“What I am doing?” I could feel the butt of the Glock poking into my belly button. It felt like it was about to slip down my pants.

“I saw you going into Morgan’s office. What was that about?” He still had his hand on my shoulder. I tried to brush it off but he put it back on again. “Why didn’t you go through me if you had something to say to Morgan?”

“Can you please take your hand off my shoulder?” I said.

“Just tell me. I’m the deputy director.”

“I can’t tell you. What she told me she told me in confidence.”

“In confidence? What kind of bullshit is that?”

“Neil, please stop touching my shoulder.”

“Next time, you go through me. Understand? You want to talk to Morgan, you go through me.” He squeezed my shoulder painfully. He was such an asshole.

“She told me she’s disappointed in you,” I said.

“What? That’s a fucking lie.”

“It’s the truth. She told me ten minutes ago. You’ve disappointed her several times.”

“You’re a fucking liar. Fuck you, Nick.”

“Fuck you, Neil.” I slapped his hand off my shoulder. I was ready to fight him, and I probably would have, if I hadn’t been worried about the gun falling down my pants.

Neil took a step back. His cigarette still dangled from his mouth. He swiped it from his lips, threw it down on the pavement and mashed it under his heel. He stared at me with real hatred.

“Don’t fuck with me,” he snarled. “I’m still deputy director. Morgan listens to me. Fuck with me and I’ll become your worst nightmare.”

I glared back at him. I didn’t want to be the first one to walk away. Something was happening between Neil and me that I didn’t understand. I could tell how much he hated me, but was it really me he hated, or was it Morgan?

I walked away.

It was a miserable fucking weekend.

* * *

When I got to the office on Monday I was a wreck. I’d hardly slept at all. It was already nine-forty. I’d just turned on my computer when Tanya came into my cube. She had an amazing light in her eyes. She looked like someone sitting on top of a huge mountain looking down at the rest of the world. I was seriously in love with her.

“Dan isn’t in yet,” she said. “Dan’s never in late.”

“Do you think he called out sick? Would he do that? Would he call out sick on the day of the coup?”

“We have an hour and a half. If he’s not in here at 11:05, we’re still going as planned. Do you have the gun?”

I patted the pocket of my jacket.

“Good,” Tanya said. “I’m really counting on you, Nick. You’re not going to let me down, are you?”

I shook my head. The idea was inconceivable to me.

The next hour was excruciating. I was reading a first mechanical, a reprint carrier with dozens of charts in it, and all the numbers began to float in front of my eyes. I got my en dashes and em dashes mixed up. I couldn’t remember if reference numbers went inside or outside of colons. My skin tingled weirdly.

The minutes crawled by. Every now and then I went down the aisle to peer into Dan’s cube, but each time it was empty. I IM’ed him and texted him and checked his Twitter feed and Facebook page but found no sign of him. I couldn’t believe Dan would do this, not come in on the day of the coup. The idea really upset me.

It was going to be all up to me. It was going to be me and Tanya, just the two of us. I couldn’t believe it. The idea really excited me.

Dan came in at 10:12. He went straight into his cube without looking at anyone. Tanya and I got there at the same time.

“We thought you weren’t coming in,” Tanya said. “Why are you so late?”

“I’m here, okay?” Dan seemed really defensive. I had a feeling he hadn’t gotten much sleep over the weekend, either.

“Where’s your gun?”

“I’ve got it.”

“What about the duct tape?”

“Right here.”

Tanya and I went back to our cubes. I kept reading my first mechanical. Each minute that passed was like a giant stone dropped from the top of the sky. My heart was about to crash through my ribcage. Tanya came into my cube at 11:03.

“We have a problem,” she said, “a huge fucking problem.”

“Did Dan leave?” I was so wired, so excited and nervous and scared, I could hardly hear my own voice.

“It’s not about Dan, it’s about Neil. His status meeting’s been cancelled.” This was terrible news, but Tanya’s eyes were fiercer than ever. “He’s still in his cube. He’s doing a full read on the core visual aid. It’s going to the client tonight.”

“What are we going to do?”

“When he goes to the bathroom, you have to go after him. Nick, you have to kill him.”

“Kill him?”

“There’s no other way. When you’ve killed Neil, go straight to Morgan’s office. I’ll already be there.”

“What about Dan? Why can’t he kill Neil?”

“What do you think?” Tanya’s green eyes flashed hotly. “Dan’s coming with me. As soon as Neil walks by, go kill him.”

“How do you know he’ll have to go? What if he doesn’t have to go for hours?”

“He’s halfway through a double grande from Stubb’s. He’s going to have to go to the bathroom any second. When I see him go by, and then you go by, I’ll wait one minute and then go to Morgan’s office. Meet me there.”

Tanya left. I gulped a lungful of air and pulled the gun out of my jacket pocket and put it in my pants pocket. I sat sideways in my chair so I could see the aisle and Neil when he walked by. I didn’t even try to read my reprint carrier. I was tired of the bullshit. Things

around here were going to change. Neil was an asshole, and I was going to kill him. There would be justice for everyone.

Neil walked by. I had to clamp a hand over my mouth to keep from crying out. It was hard to take a full breath. I got out of my chair and followed after him.

He went into the bathroom. I waited outside in the hall for 30 seconds and then followed him inside.

The bathroom was empty. It took me a few seconds of panic to realize that Neil was in one of the stalls, taking a dump. I went into the stall two doors down from his and sat on the lid of the toilet. I probably should've kicked his door in and killed him while he was taking a dump but this didn't seem fair. And anyway, what if I couldn't break through the lock? This wasn't an Xbox or Playstation situation. This was reality I was dealing with here.

Someone else came into the bathroom. I heard the door open and then footsteps and then the sizzle of piss hitting a urinal cake. Whoever it was began to whistle. I couldn't take it any longer. I flushed the toilet and went out to the sinks and began to wash my hands. The gun was in my waistband.

Behind me, the urinal flushed and Brian, an account executive, went up to the sink next to mine and began to wash his hands.

"Hey, Nick," he said.

"Hey, Brian."

"See that game last night?"

"That was crazy."

"Unbelievable." Brian shook his head. "That call in the fourth quarter was bullshit."

"Totally bullshit."

Brian didn't use any soap, just rinsed his hands. He took a long time rinsing his hands. He was drying them off when Neil's toilet flushed.

“See y’round, Nick,” Brian said.

“Take it easy, Brian.”

I hurried to the urinal and pretended to pee. I held the gun in front of my crotch. I was waiting for Neil to get to the sinks. Then I was going to kill him.

Neil came out of the stall. I could hear his footsteps behind me. He must have seen me standing at the urinal but he didn’t say anything. Jesus, he really hated me.

As soon as he started washing his hands, I turned around very slowly. I brought the gun up in one hand. I wanted to get very close so I wouldn’t miss. But he must’ve been watching me in the mirror. All at once, he swung around and slapped the gun out of my hand. It went bouncing across the tiles, all the way to the other side of the room.

Neil threw a right hook at me but missed and I countered with a jab to his midsection. He grabbed me around the waist, and I tried to spin away, but we both went down. We rolled across the floor. He bit me on the shoulder and I bit him on the arm. I got up on my knees and he shoved me forward and I went crashing through the door of the first stall. Neil came in after me but I ducked and grabbed his neck and threw him headfirst into the wall. He grunted and went down on his knees. I kicked him in the ribs and then pushed his head into the toilet. I flushed and the water swirled up around his head, up past his mouth and nose. He fought wildly against me but I held his head down and kept flushing. I flushed and flushed until Neil stopped moving. I flushed a couple more times just to be sure, and then I hurried out of the bathroom.

I had killed a man.

I ran down back down the aisle past my cube, turned into the main aisle and approached Morgan’s office. I could already hear loud voices, yelling. One of those voices was Natalie. She was standing up in her cube screaming for help. She looked terrified. She was calling for the managing partners.

I ran past her and into Morgan's office. I closed the door behind me. Tanya was on the floor and so was Morgan. There was a spot of blood on Tanya's forehead. She looked confused. Morgan was on her knees, her tight skirt hiked up almost to her hipbone. One sleeve of her blouse had been ripped off. A black patent leather pump lay in front of her, snapped in half.

"Nick," she said. "Get the gun. Kill Tanya."

"No, Nick," Tanya called. She was too weak to get up. They were both too weak to get up. "Kill Morgan."

"Nick, listen to me." Morgan pointed toward the phone on her desk. The receiver was off the hook. "That's Steve Labrum on the other line. The head of the copy department. A senior vice president. He's going to support me. The entire copy department is going to support me. Ask him yourself."

The gun was in the corner. I went and picked it up. That's when I noticed Dan lying in front of the couch, his arms wrapped around his knees. He was weeping uncontrollably. I turned to face Morgan and Tanya.

"Nick," cried Tanya, imploring me with her beautiful green defiant eyes. "Think about the bullshit. Think about all the stupid procedures."

"Nick," cried Morgan. "The e-mail announcing your promotion is going out Thursday, Friday at the latest."

I looked at the two of them, first Tanya, then Morgan, then Tanya again. Someone began to pound on the door. Dan's weeping became a wail.

"Nick," said Tanya.

"Nick," said Morgan.

I made the obvious choice. I shot Tanya.

The next moment, Peter and Regina, the agency's two managing partners, burst into the room. They were really angry.

“Ah, Morgan, is everything okay?” Peter said. “Is there a problem here?”

Morgan stared at him like she didn’t know what to say. I’d never seen her like that before, not knowing what to say.

“We have a lot of jobs going out to the client today,” Regina said, and folded her arms. “I hope this doesn’t impact any of today’s deadlines.”

“Neil’s been found dead in the bathroom,” Peter said. “Can you tell me why your deputy director is dead in the bathroom?”

“Wasn’t he supposed to be reading the core visual aid?” Regina asked. “It’s going to the client tonight.”

They were both looking at Morgan but I was the one who spoke.

“They were trying to take over the department,” I said. “Tanya and Neil. But we stopped them. Everything’s okay now. I’m going to read the core visual aid. Dan will read my reprint carrier. We won’t miss any of today’s deadlines.”

“Oh. Okay. That’s great. Glad to hear it,” Peter said.

“That’s terrific,” Regina said. “Let us know if you need anything.”

The two managing partners left the office. I helped Morgan to her feet. She put her phone back on its cradle, smoothed out the front of her skirt and thumbed her bra strap back into place. She smiled at me. For an older woman she was insanely attractive.

“Tell the others we’re going to have a meeting in the morning,” she said. “We’re going to have to input a lot of new procedures to make sure this never happens again. I’d like very much to have your thoughts on the matter.”

“Of course,” I said. “Whatever you need, Morgan.”

“Dinner tomorrow night. I know a little Thai place close to my apartment. Can you have a few ideas ready for me by then?”

“Sure. That’s not a problem.”

I tucked the gun into my waistband. I left Morgan's office and went into Neil's cube. I threw all his stuff into the aisle and sat down at his desk and started to read the core visual aid.

It was going to the client tonight.

The End