

~THE POLYANDRIST~

MURDER~MYSTERY~ROMANCE

~MASON MALONE~

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Lauren is a woman accustomed to getting what she wants. At twenty-five she's in the prime of her life, and far too ambitious and heart-stopping gorgeous for any one man alone. Don't take my word for it. Ask her, she'll tell you as much herself. She should come with a label cautioning men of the danger of prolonged exposure to her. Trouble is, they'd all ignore it. She's that irresistible. As addictive as a narcotic, and twice as lethal.

Standing in front of a full-length mirror, she applies the final touches to the pussycat costume she'll be wearing this evening. It consists of a skintight leopard print bodysuit with a furry tail sewn on to it and a headband holding matching ears in place. She completes her ensemble with glue-on long fingernails, stiletto pumps and whiskers drawn on to her cheeks with eyeliner. A final 360 turn to view herself from all sides, and she's good to go.

She'll be attending tonight's Halloween party solo. Her husband would go if she asked him to, but she didn't. It's not that she's embarrassed by him. Quite the opposite. He's a tall, handsome, well-built man with wavy dark brown hair, a beard to match, and deep-set brown eyes. It's just that with him at her side, she wouldn't be free to explore and exploit certain opportunities. And one never knows when such an opportunity might present itself.

Lauren's husband is Nolan Drake. With a successful business, money in the bank and an expensive Tuscan style suburban house, he's almost perfect. He's an architect, with

his own architectural design firm. At the moment, he's holding the phone to his ear with one hand while the other pecks at a computer keyboard. The image on the screen before him is the floor plan of a client's space within a high-rise office building. The person on the phone is Dana Porter, a colleague from work. She's relaying the latest changes the client is requesting.

"They want a private bathroom with a shower in the offices of the CEO and the president?" Nolan says, confirming what Dana has told him. "We can do it. I'll have to take a couple of hundred square feet of space from somewhere else. It will probably cut down on the office space for the middle management and clerical staff."

"Personally," Dana says, "I think adding washrooms to the executive offices sends the wrong message to the rest of the employees. I mean they're the ones putting in long hours and doing most of the work. And they probably make a fraction of what the CEO does. But instead of rewarding the workers, the muckety-mucks are going to rub their faces in it by having upscale bathrooms for themselves while their underlings have to share a toilet down the hall."

"I hear what you're saying. They can take it up with their union representative. We answer to the CEO because she's the one who signs our check, without which I'd be out of business and you'd be out of a job."

"So, keep my opinion to myself, is that what you're saying?"

"You're free to express your opinion, but not to the CEO, and don't post it on social media for the whole world to see."

"Roger that, boss."

"Is that the only change they wanted?"

"As of this minute it is."

"I appreciate you letting me know, but this could have waited until Monday. Why are you hanging around the office this late on a Friday, anyway? You do remember you're on salary, don't you? There's no extra pay for working late."

“Yeah, I know, but all there is waiting for me at home is a microwave dinner and a Meg Ryan movie. So, I’m in no rush to leave.”

Nolan starts to ask about the guy she’s been seeing, but can’t remember his name. And besides, he’s probably a part of her past by now. Dana goes through men like infants go through diapers.

“You should get a dog. I hear they can be real affectionate and don’t ask for much in return. You feed them, give them a place to sleep and when you come home, they meet you at the door, nuzzle your crotch and lick your face.”

“That sounds like my last boyfriend. Actually, it sounds like half the men I’ve dated since high school. You’re lucky you met Lauren. Do you have any advice for those of us who are still single? What’s the secret to finding Mr. or Mrs. Right?”

“If there is a secret, I didn’t stumble on to it during the thirty-three years I was single. I just got lucky. And the only words of advice I have for you are don’t give up, he’s out there somewhere.”

“Yeah, right. He’s out there hiding from me. Well, enjoy your evening with Mrs. Right. Do you have anything special planned?”

“I don’t, but I never know what Lauren has in mind. Have a great weekend, and give some more thought to getting a dog. I’ll see you, Monday.”

Lauren is standing in the doorway as he ends the call.

“Mrrreow,” she purrs. “How do you like it?”

“Come here, so I can have a closer look.”

He takes her hand and pulls her toward him, careful of the fingernails which appear to be sharpened.

“Don’t pull my tail. You’ll rip a hole in my bodysuit.”

She raises her arms above her head and turns in a circle so he can see her from every angle.

“All in all, I like it, even the whiskers. And I’ve never cared much for facial hair on women.”

He runs his hands up her thighs, past her waist, continuing until reaching the zipper at the collar of her bodysuit. Then, he starts to slide it down.

“No, no,” she says, pushing his hands away. “I don’t have time for what you have in mind. I’m running late as it is.”

“Running late for what?! Where are you going?”

“To the office Halloween party. Don’t you remember? I told you about it a month ago.”

“No, I don’t remember you telling me about a party. I figured the sexy outfit was for me.”

“Sorry, I rented it for this party.”

“Are spouses invited, or is it an employee only get-together?”

“Some of the women will probably bring their husband, but I knew you wouldn’t be interested.”

“And you knew that because...?”

“It’s not your kind of thing, Nolan. You know that. You make fun of adults dressing up on Halloween. Besides, you don’t know any of the people I work with. You’d want to leave the second we arrived.”

“That’s not true. I can be a fun sort of guy when I want to be.”

“I seriously doubt that, but I don’t have time to discuss it, now.” She bends over to kiss him on the cheek. He twists his face to kiss her lips, but she pulls back. “I don’t want to smear my lipstick. It’s difficult to apply because of the whiskers.” She pats his cheek and turns to leave.

“Maybe when you get home I can help you out of your costume.”

“It will probably be pretty late. Don’t wait up for me,” she says over her shoulder as she’s walking out. Then, she seems to have a moment of indecision over leaving him like this. “I don’t have to return the costume until Monday. That gives us two days with it. We can have our own private Halloween party. That is, if you can come up with a costume for yourself.”

“I’ll start working on that. Have fun at the party.”

He hears the garage door open and her car—the brand new Lexus SUV he bought her on the one-month anniversary of their marriage—back out of the driveway. Then the garage door closes and all is quiet in the house. He goes to the kitchen for a glass and the bottle of Smirnoff vodka in the freezer. Before he met Lauren, this was how he spent many a Friday evening—alone at home, just himself and a bottle of vodka.

They had known each other only briefly, and were on a weekend getaway in Jamaica when it happened. One minute they were frolicking in the water flowing over Dunn’s River Falls and the next they were saying ‘I do’ at their own sunset wedding on the beach. That was nine months ago, and although neither has expressed second thoughts about it since, that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. It was influenced by the tropical setting and completely spur of the moment. Statistically, impulsive decisions like that seldom turn out well.

Nolan’s phone sounds an incoming call as he’s pouring himself a second glass of vodka. He recognizes the number. It’s Lauren’s brother, Greg.

“Hi Greg.”

“Hey bro, how’s it going?” Greg says, in his usual upbeat manner. “Is Lauren home? I’ve got a question for her.”

“Sorry, Greg. She’s out for the evening at a company Halloween party.”

“Why didn’t you go with her? You’re not working are you?”

He starts to say he didn’t go because he wasn’t invited, but that would sound like him grousing, so instead he says, “It’s not my kind of thing.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I was never into dressing up like that. Not past the age of twelve, at any rate. Well, tell her to give me a call tomorrow, if you will.”

“I’ll tell her if I see her before then,” Nolan replies, and starts to hang up.

“Hey, Nolan. Is everything alright between Lauren and you? I don’t mean to pry, but I know she can be difficult, sometimes.”

“Things between us are normal. There’s no need to be concerned.”

“Okay, if you say so. Listen man, if you ever need to talk, about Lauren or anything else, I’m here for you. You’re my brother-in-law. We’re family, right? And besides that, I was the one who introduced you two, so I’d feel bad if there were problems and I didn’t try to help.”

“Thanks, Greg. That’s good of you to offer, but really, everything between Lauren and me is just fine.”

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It is technically correct for Greg to say he introduced Nolan to Lauren, but it isn't as if he's the one responsible for them hooking up. That was simply nature taking its course. Nolan was at a sports bar with a buddy of his, Jeremy. Jeremy had broken it off with his fiancé and was in need of consolation. They were in the middle of a game of eight-ball when Greg lays a quarter on the pool table.

“Okay if I play the winner?” he asks.

“Fine with me,” Jeremy says. “Maybe you'll do better than me. I've lost three in a row.”

Nolan noticed Greg earlier, joking around with some other guys in the place, like he's a regular here. He's a friendly guy with an easy manner, nearly six foot, clean-shaven with close-cropped black hair, who dresses and looks like a successful type. Maybe he's a lawyer or realtor. Hell, maybe he's a pool shark. He sips from a bottle of Heineken while he waits patiently for the game to end.

As predicted, Jeremy loses. Greg feeds quarters into the coin slot to release the balls, and racks them for the next game. Nolan is chalking his cue in preparation to break when Jeremy nudges him and says, “Check it out.” Nolan follows his gaze to see what has his attention. That's when he gets his first glimpse of her.

Lauren is a few feet inside the front door, walking slowly as she scans the room looking for someone. She's wearing a loose-fitting silk tunic dress. The place is dark except for the neon beer signs and big TV screens. Each time she passes in

front of the light, her near-perfect body is silhouetted beneath the fabric. Nolan can't stop staring at her.

Suddenly her head pivots in his direction, and her eyes lock on him. They seem to glow in the dark, like the eyes of a feral beast at night. She smiles, and then starts in his direction. He drops his cue stick and bends to pick it up. When he looks up again, Lauren has her arms spread to embrace Greg. Close up she's even more striking. Tall, maybe five foot ten, with long strawberry blonde hair and piercing gray eyes.

Nolan is thinking, what a lucky guy, until Lauren says, "Well, big brother, are you going to introduce me to your friends or should I do it myself?" She was looking directly at Nolan and he felt sparks fly. Or at least that's how he remembers it. Next she says, "Is this a guys-only game, or can a girl play?"

Nolan and Jeremy trip over each other getting her a cue stick. When she bends over the table to line up her first shot the entire place falls quiet, as if someone hit the mute button. Every man there is mesmerized by the gorgeous babe playing pool.

"I can't decide which ball to shoot at, Nolan. Which one would you choose?" she asks.

He steps closer until their shoulders touch, and says, "Maybe the 9-ball. It's a straight shot into the corner pocket."

"I don't know if I can do that. Show me how to line it up."

"Alright. Put your left hand here," he says, guiding it to a spot four inches behind the cue ball. He reaches around her to position her right hand near the butt of the cue stick. She leans against him as he does.

"I don't know how to stop the cue ball from going in."

"Flatten your left hand slightly, so the tip of the stick strikes the cue ball below the equator. That's right, just like that. Now, make the shot."

She jabs the stick forward, striking the cue ball too low and causing it to hop before rolling into the 9-ball, which comes to a stop at the lip of the pocket.

“Oh, darn,” Lauren says. Nolan bumps the table with his hip, and the 9-ball falls in. “Look, I made it! Did you see that, Greg? That’s so exciting!” She throws her arms around Nolan’s neck, and kisses him. It isn’t a passionate lingering kiss, just a friendly smooch, but from that point on, he’s completely under her spell.

The game takes forty minutes to complete. No one challenges for the table. No one wants Lauren to step away from it. Under the spotlight of the tiffany shade lamp hanging above, Lauren is the center of attention, and seems to enjoy every second of it. The men ogle her and whisper to one another. She responds to their lecherous leers with a flirtatious smile. Any one of them would kill for a minute alone with her, but for whatever reason she chooses to spend her time with Nolan.

While they play they exchange small talk about their occupations, their homes, what foods they enjoy, their interests and marital status. While he racks the balls for a second game of eight-ball, she applies a layer of chalk to the tip of her cue stick. Nolan looks up from the table as she parts her lips, blows the excess powder away and winks.

“I’m not very good at this. Would you show me how?” she says, when it comes time to begin the game.

“You can place the cue ball anywhere behind these dots. The objective is to knock it into the triangle of balls as hard as you can, without sending balls off the table. Here, I’ll help you set up the shot.” Again, he guides her hands into their proper positions, then says, “Okay, break ‘em.”

The cue ball glances off the racked balls, separating only three of them from the pile. A half dozen men applaud, and she rewards them with a smile and a curtsy. The second game lasts longer than the first, and when it’s over they notice both Greg and Jeremy are gone.

“Is he coming back for you?” Nolan asks.

“I don’t think so. He probably assumed you would take me home. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. I’ll be happy to. Do you want to play another game?”

“Not really. I’m ready to go, if you are.”

“That’s fine with me, but there are a lot of guys in here who are going to be disappointed to see you leave.”

“At the moment, there’s only one man I’m concerned about disappointing.”

Prior to meeting Lauren, Nolan’s architectural design company had an inflow of work, from a stable list of clients which included some of Houston’s most prominent builders. He put in forty hours a week, and spent his spare time with friends and clients having drinks or playing golf. His long-term business plan was for slow steady growth over the next few decades, and when the time comes, sell the company and retire.

Since marrying Lauren, Nolan has been expanding his business and putting in more hours. He works at home before and after his day at the office, as well as on Saturdays and Sundays. And because he no longer has any spare time, his friends have taken a back seat to his career. Lauren doesn’t mind him devoting so much time to work and neglecting her the way he does. In fact, she encourages it.

In response to his apologies for spending more time working than with her, she tells him, “I don’t want to be with some poor schmuck who’s struggling to get by. I’m proud of you for being ambitious and wanting a better life for us. It makes me love you that much more.”

Whenever the heavy workload begins to take a toll on him, and he feels his energy level waning, Lauren finds a way to motivate him. She’ll get all dolled up and have him take her someplace fancy, where all the men turn their heads, envious of Nolan as he walks by with her on his arm. Or she’ll greet him wearing sexy lingerie when he comes home late from the office. It’s a not-so-subtle reminder of what he gets in return for his hard work.

“I’ve done without for most of my life. I’m not interested in living that way any longer,” Lauren confesses, two days after they meet. “That’s the thing about you, I find most attractive. You’re a go-getter. You have a nice home, a

good income and money in the bank. You're going to make something of yourself, and I want to be there when you do."

The statement was so Lauren, as he would later learn. She stroked his ego, and at the same time invited herself along on his climb up the ladder.

"Really! That's what you find most attractive about me, my house, bank account and earning potential? And here I thought it was my Dodge truck with four-wheel drive."

"Well, it's a nice truck, but it falls a little further down the list. Your good looks are what got my attention, but without your financial status, we wouldn't have made it past that first night. I have high standards, as you can see."

"Some people would refer to that as high-maintenance."

"It goes with the territory. Nice things sometimes require additional upkeep. And I think you're the kind of guy who likes nice things."

The conversation was eye-opening for Nolan. Lauren is a breed of woman he's unfamiliar with. She knows what she wants, isn't shy about pursuing it, and is confident her gorgeous looks and savvy smarts will get her everything and everyone she's after.

The Halloween party is taking place at the home of Gordon Weston and his wife, Erica Dupree. Gordon manages the investment firm where Lauren works. She enters the address into her GPS as she leaves her house and it directs her to a big sprawling estate in the River Oaks section of Houston. According to office gossip, the home belonged to Erica before she met Gordon. Her father is supposedly some kind of old-money oil tycoon. After a look at the estate, Lauren feels it must be true. It's too expensive a property for someone with Gordon's income.

A valet greets her as she pulls up to the entry of the mansion. "Great costume," he says, with a lascivious wink and a smile.

The front door opens before she can ring the bell. A young Vietnamese woman in a servant's uniform escorts her through a foyer into a huge room decorated with tombstones, jack o' lanterns, skulls and crossbones. Ghosts, bats, skeletons and witches on brooms hang from the ceiling. There's an open bar and a buffet table of food with servers standing by. Most of her coworkers have already arrived. They're appropriately costumed and spread around the room, standing or sitting with a drink in one hand and a plate of hors d'oeuvres in the other.

"Lauren, we're so glad you could make it," Gordon Weston says. He is decked out in a devil costume with horns on his head and a barbed tail pinned to his ass. It's a world of

difference from the conservative tailored suits he wears to the office. "This is my wife, Erica."

"It's so good to meet you, Erica. You have a beautiful home, and I love your costume."

Lauren guesses Erica to be thirty-five, give or take, a few years younger than Gordon, but a decade older than herself. She is dressed as Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, and giving Lauren a run for her money in the sexy costume competition.

"Thank you," she tells Lauren. "Your husband didn't come with you?"

"No, he's not really a partygoer. He'd rather stay home and watch TV."

"Well, that's a shame. I would love to have met him."

Roughly translated that means, she'd rather he was there keeping an eye on Lauren, so she and the other wives at the party wouldn't have to.

"I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself, nonetheless," Gordon tells Lauren.

"Yes, I'm sure she will," Erica agrees. "Get something from the bar and the buffet table, and then join your friends. We're going to do karaoke later, after everyone has a few more drinks. It should be a lot of fun."

Lauren has the bartender make her a vodka martini, extra dry with three olives. She strolls around the room chatting with coworkers while sipping her martini. All eyes are on her, and she's well aware of it. She performs for her audience, taking the olives from her glass and sliding them off the toothpick, one at a time with her lips, and then rolling them on her tongue before biting into them. The bartender brings her another martini with two toothpicks holding three olives each as soon as she finishes the first. He's hoping for an encore. She doesn't disappoint him.

An hour later, when everyone who is coming has arrived, they take a vote for the best costume. Gordon moves around the room holding a hand over each partygoer while the others applaud. The end result is a tie between Lauren and Erica. The prize is dinner for two at Houston's finest steakhouse. As party host, Erica doesn't feel right about taking it.

“You take it,” she tells Lauren. “Your husband will give up a night of TV for a nice steak dinner won’t he?”

“I think I can persuade him. And, thank you. That’s very generous of you. I hear their food is excellent.”

“I can assure you it is. I’ve eaten there many times.”

Even though everyone is well lubricated by the time the karaoke music begins, no one is eager to go first. Never one to shun the spotlight, Lauren steps onto the makeshift stage and selects a song by Shania Twain, ‘That Don’t Impress Me Much’. The best-selling video of Shania performing the song features her in a smoking-hot leopard print outfit. Lauren looks the part and she sings in a sultry, albeit somewhat off-key voice.

Her performance inspires a few others to take a turn. With help from a couple of guys from his office, Gordon sings a Van Halen song, ‘Running with the Devil’. It draws plenty of laughs, and applause. To close the karaoke session, Erica selects a Celine Dion number, ‘My Heart Will Go On’. No one there realizes Erica has had years of voice training. Her performance is spectacular. Everyone watches in awe, and afterward there is no question of who’s won this competition.

“You have an incredible voice,” Lauren tells Erica. “Have you ever sang professionally?”

“Not really. I’ve performed at various venues for charity events. You did a very convincing imitation of Shania Twain. Do you have acting experience?”

“I played the role of Maria in our high school’s rendition of ‘West Side Story’. That’s the extent of my acting experience.”

Several others are nearby listening to the conversation and waiting for an opportunity to tell Erica how much they’ve enjoyed the party and her performance. Lauren’s phone buzzes. She takes it from her purse to glance at the screen.

“You can take it in the kitchen where it’s quieter, if you like. It’s through that door there,” Erica suggests, and points the way.

A member of the catering staff is cleaning cooking utensils at the sink as she enters. It is only marginally quieter than the

big room. Lauren moves to the other side of the kitchen, puts the phone to her ear and says, "What do you want, Greg?"

"Hey, babe. Are you still at the party?"

"Yes, I am. I'm in the kitchen where it's not as loud. Why are you calling?"

"I talked to Nolan, earlier. He didn't sound happy about you going without him. You've been with him for almost a year. I'd hate to see it all go to waste because you wanted a night out."

"Look, Greg. If it all goes to waste it will be because of you, not me. You don't need to call Nolan, and you don't need to check up on me. I've got my end handled. Nolan worships the ground I walk on."

"Every man has his limits. You can only push him so far."

"Every man? Does that include you? Is this call about me and Nolan, or is it more about you and me?"

"Lauren, don't get upset. I'm just reminding you of the time you have invested, and asking you to be careful. That's all."

"Fine, Greg. Message received. Now if there's nothing more, I'm going to return to the party." She disconnects and lets out a sigh of exasperation.

"Was that your husband wondering where you are?" Gordon Weston asks. She has no idea how long he's been standing behind her or what he might have overheard.

"My older brother," Lauren replies, as she turns to face Gordon. "He's always been overly protective of me."

"Yes, I got that impression from what I heard of your end of the conversation." Gordon is standing close. He has a glass of bourbon in one hand and a martini with three olives in the other.

Lauren gestures to it and asks, "For me?"

"Who else?"

The woman who had been washing pots and pans when Lauren came into the kitchen has since left. It's just the two of them, standing closer than their spouses would think appropriate. If it worries either of them, they don't let it show.

Lauren came to this party anticipating Gordon would try something with her. There's been a sexual tension between them at the office for a while now. He's a little old for her, but not bad-looking for a guy his age. He seems to stay in shape. His sandy brown hair is graying at the temples, which gives him a distinguished look. He's nowhere near as handsome as Nolan, but at the same time, Lauren sees potential there. She lets her eyes wander around the room.

"This is a huge kitchen. Do you entertain often?"

"Erica belongs to several charitable organizations. She hosts one function or another at least once a month. They're usually pretty boring compared to this one. Would you like a tour of the rest of the house?"

"Are you sure Erica would approve of you showing me around?"

"She probably wouldn't, but she'll be busy with the other party guests for a while longer. Follow me. We'll go this way."

He takes her by the hand to lead her from the kitchen and down a hallway past several closed doors.

"This is what we call the servants' wing. We have one maid and a man who is Erica's assistant living here. She stays in that room." Gordon tilts his head toward one of the closed doors. "He's in the one across from that."

He pulls Lauren into a room farther down the hallway. It's a good-sized bedroom with its own bath, a queen-size bed, an armoire and dresser. She gives herself a tour of the room, running a hand over the dresser, glancing into the bathroom and finally sitting her pussycat-clad ass down on the bed.

"It's very comfortable. These are nice accommodations for the household staff."

Gordon shuts and locks the door. "Careful with your tail. I wouldn't want you to break it," he says, as he crosses the room to join her on the bed.

"Worry about your own tail, you devil. Mine is just fine. Why did you lock the door?"

"Why do you think? I don't want anyone walking in on us. I've been dreaming about this for a long time." He moves in to kiss her, but she holds him off with a hand to his chest.

“You can dream about it all you want, but that won’t make it happen. I’m not interested in having any more than a working relationship with you. And even if I was, I’m not going to screw you right here under your wife’s nose in her own home. That’s a little too risky, don’t you think?”

“Don’t worry about Erica. We have an understanding.”

“Really?” Lauren says skeptically. “The two of you openly discuss your extramarital affairs?”

“Of course we don’t. That’s why it’s called an understanding. There’s no need to talk about it. Besides, I don’t have extramarital affairs, I have fun. That’s all this is. We’re two people looking to have a little fun. Come on, Lauren, we’re wasting time.”

“I think not, Gordon. We have different ideas about what is fun. Thanks for the home tour. I’m going to rejoin the others. I’m not confident Erica didn’t see you follow me into the kitchen. She could be standing outside this room with her ear to the door, right now.”

She gets up from the bed. He grabs her left wrist to stop her. She brings her right hand around to slap him, but he grabs that wrist as well. Holding her arms to her sides, he pushes her back against the armoire, pinning her there with his body. “Gordon, what are you doing?”

“I’ve wanted you since the first time I laid eyes on you. You want it, too, don’t you?”

He kisses her roughly as she squirms to break free.

“Let go of me, Gordon. You’re hurting me.”

Her distress only seems to excite him all the more.

“Stop fighting me and give it up.”

“No, I’m not doing this. Quit it, now!”

He tries to wrestle her back onto the bed. She stops struggling. Her expression is one of resignation.

“Alright,” she sighs.

He relaxes his grip on her arms and eases back. As soon as he does, she lays her hands on his shoulders, and sinks her knee into his balls three times in quick succession.

“You jerk,” she says, and pushes him away. He’s still bent over in pain when she returns to the big room. The party is

winding down. Several are saying good night to Erica and leaving. Lauren decides the time is right for her to exit, as well.

“It was a terrific party. I had a wonderful time. That was my husband on the phone. Apparently he’s feeling lonely, so I’ll leave now.”

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Lauren. Hopefully, your husband will come with you next time and you won’t have to rush home.”

“I can’t speak for him, but maybe. Tell Gordon thanks for inviting me, and I’ll see him at the office.”

