

Lauren Cuenca

### The Price We Pay

I never thought I would end up in a place like this. Every day I go to work, not knowing if I'll return as the same man I was before. It's a job not many people are privy to—a secret organization that deals with companies I'm sure you've heard of. I can't say exactly who they are—NDAs and whatnot—but I can say that it's gruesome work. Injuries are expected, and turnover is high. Bloody noses are a daily occurrence. Not many people are cut out for this line of work, but I can't leave now. Not after what I've been through.

Over the years, I've seen people come and go. They learn the gritty details: their control over us, the isolation, the lies... It's too much for some people, but what else am I supposed to do? *I can't leave.* This life is all I know. What do these years of runny, bloody noses mean if I give it all up now?

I was a recruit. I don't know how they found me, but they caught me having an allergy fit outside a mall one summer after I graduated high school. The pay was good, and the benefits were amazing for a kid with no work experience. Forget medical, forget shares, those were a given. I'm talking about as many paid sick days as a man could ask for! To an eighteen-year-old me, that was worth keeping my employer a secret. Most people think I'm joking when I tell them what I do anyway, "A tissue tester? That sounds ridiculous!"

Yes, you heard right, a tissue tester! You can thank me next time you get a cold, or whenever allergy season comes around again. [REDACTED] wouldn't be the same without me, I tell you!

Most of the time when people ask me about my job, they'll ask me what brand is the best, or what kind of tissue is the best and least irritating... And I can never answer them, not truthfully at least.

And what do I get for keeping their secrets all this time, huh? It's not like they treat us veterans like anything special! They think that just because I've been here all these years, I'm not a threat anymore, that they've eased me into submission. Oh, really? I could blab off to the next reporter I see if I wanted to! I oughta go right now! ... But I can't. They got me right out of school. I didn't go to college, I haven't had any other jobs, and I wouldn't even know what to do with myself if I left. This life is all I know.

I wake up at 6:47 am every morning on the dot. I brush my teeth, then my hair, and I eat some scrambled eggs for breakfast. I leave just in time to catch the bus that'll drop me off a few minutes away from work and I walk the rest of the way. I don't have to take the bus. I make enough to afford a car if I really wanted one. But even if I wanted to, nothing beats the atmosphere of the bus. So many people from different backgrounds, different jobs. I love talking to them any chance I get. Although, it can be dangerous if I'm not too careful.

This all happened when I was still pretty new to the job. I didn't quite know the ins and outs of what life as a tissue tester was actually like yet, still waking up on the late side, missing the bus, and "fraternizing." I was just a kid happy to be on my own for the very first time!

I woke up a little after seven that day, and I had to have cereal instead of eggs. I wasn't too worried about being late, my morning routine wasn't anything special, and you don't exactly need to be dressed up for work since they keep our uniforms there. (make it more dramatic if it contradicts the character) At least, that's what I thought until the bus pulled up to my stop earlier than usual. The screech of the brakes as the vehicle came to a stop made my ears perk up. My

cornflakes were swiftly abandoned as I rushed to slide my shoes on, left to become a puddle of mush on my kitchen counter.

I managed to grab my keycard on the way out, running down the stairs as fast as I could without tripping and got there just in time for the bus doors to close in my face. I managed to grab my keycard on the way out, leaving my door unlocked with the trust that the faulty doorknob would be enough of a deterrence for robbers, and ran to the bus stop as fast as I could. I couldn't be late again, I can't risk getting in trouble! With one hand on the window and the other knocking loudly against the door, I tapped until the bus driver gave in. He sighed, gesturing to the change box beside him. I nodded and reached for my wallet, or rather, where my wallet *should* have been. He sent me a look I suspect he gives passengers often, opening his mouth to remind me of the bus fare that he *knows* I know.

“I gotcha man.”

And there he was, my knight in shining armor. His wavy black hair reflected the morning sunlight through the window, which also made his eyes appear a rich golden brown. He rifled through his pockets to pull out the right amount of change, his rings getting stuck in the opening of his jeans. There wasn't a finger on his hand that wasn't adorned with a piece of silver. He smiled awkwardly up at the driver, his hand struggling to get free. The metal adorning his clothes clinked together with a final move to release his hand, dropping the coins in the change box a few seconds after. I followed him to his seat and took one beside him, finally catching my breath.

“Thanks for helping me out, by the way. I'm Mateo”

He looked up from his phone with a polite smile, “Carlos. It was just a few quarters, no problem.”

“I’m usually not this forgetful, but the bus got here early today and I didn’t have time to grab my wallet.”

“I feel that. I feel that—Hey! You listen to Metallica?”

I looked down at my shirt as if I didn’t just put it on less than ten minutes ago. The shirt, of course, had Metallica written across the top in their classic bold letters, and a big round skull in the center was carried by a much smaller skeleton.

“Uh, no, not really. I think I stole this shirt from my brother. I’m too busy with work to find new music these days, so I mostly just listen to whatever’s on the radio.”

“Is that where you’re headed now?”

“Yeah, I work down at the—uh... I’m a consultant! Yeah, I’m a consultant for a really big company. Sometimes I wonder what they’d do without me.” I cleared my throat, trying to cover my slipup with a smile. “What about you?”

“Sounds important.” He laughs, small dimples forming in his cheeks. “I’m just coming back from work myself. I’m a product manager for a factory on the other side of town. The hours are brutal but I’m comfortable, so I can’t complain.”

The bus lurched forward, shaking the passengers in their seats as it once again came to a stop. Carlos gathers his things, his hair falling delicately in front of his face when he bent down to pick up his bag. His shirt cut off low on his bicep, his flexing muscles peeking through as he moved. He sets his things in his lap and waits for the bus doors to open.

“This is me.” Carlos stands up. “Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow?”

My eyes lit up, my shoulders perking up at the thought. “Sure.”

“I’ll make sure to introduce you to some *real* music then,” he calls over his shoulder.

I laughed sheepishly, watching him hop down the steps onto the sidewalk. My eyes followed him even as the bus started moving again, his figure soon disappearing behind the door to what I assumed was an apartment building.

I ride the bus to the last stop, all of the passengers going their separate ways, and I walk along the sidewalk by myself until I reach the “factory.” They don’t actually make the tissues here. New shipments come in on the first Wednesday of every month, then we spend the next three weeks or so doing whatever tests the on-site specialists tell us to do.

A lot of my coworkers, myself included, were hired because of our intense allergies. You might think that people with allergies couldn’t ask for anything better than to be surrounded by rooms of tissues all day, just waiting to be used and abused, but alas, the dream is nothing more than a fantasy.

Once I checked in with security at the entrance and changed into my uniform, a white jumpsuit with blue trim along the edges, I was escorted to the testing room. My nose started itching preemptively, my eyes watering as I held back a sneeze.

“Tissue?”

One of the researchers handed me the box of tissues expectantly, her eyes wide in focus, as if I was waiting to do something extraordinary when she blinked. I sighed, taking the box and blowing my nose, officially kicking off the day.

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No one really talks to each other except during our lunch break. Even then, it's pretty much crickets. The security guards standing around the perimeter of the room scared most people into silence. We’re supposed to be careful about what we say. If we’re not careful while we’re at work, you can only imagine how many of them would blabber outside of work too.

Some of the rookies chatted quietly amongst themselves, the chatty old timers scattered throughout the break room.

“Hey, Mateo! How’s the Nose Department doing today?”

I sighed, ignoring her joke, “Hi, Layla. Bubbly as ever, I see.”

She laughed and circled the table to sit next to me. Her blonde hair was put up into a neat ponytail, and her bangs were held back with an elastic headband. Layla’s green eyes hid behind a pair of wire-framed glasses, her eyes covered in the remnants of makeup she was tasked with putting on and removing again and again, leaving her eyelids pink from the motions. She brought her lunchbox to rest on the table, its bright yellow exterior contrasting the white... everything. She must have taken one of her kids’ lunchboxes again.

Layla spoke in between bites of her sandwich. “So, anything interesting happen today? No news from me, unfortunately. Aaron and the kids are on break right now so the house is chaotic, as you can probably imagine.”

I sighed, “I forgot my wallet before leaving, so I couldn’t pay for the bus fare.”

Layla’s eyebrow was cocked with intrigue, “Okay... Then how did you get here on time? Don’t tell me you walked.”

“Of course not. A guy paid for my ride.” I couldn’t help the smile that snuck on my face as I spoke.

“Oh!” she drawled out her vowels in interest, “Was he cute? Did’ya get his number?”

“His name is Carlos. I don’t have his number or anything like that. All I know is that he probably likes Metallica and that he’s a product manager for a factory on the other side of town. He didn’t say which one.”

Layla’s eyebrows furrowed, her lips forming a pout as she thought about his description.

“I don’t think there are a lot of factories on the other side of town. Let’s see... There’s the microwave place, the ranch, and...”

“And what?”

“And Puffs.”

In a brief lapse of thought, Layla let a competitor’s name slip. The guards near our table started walking towards us when Layla put her hands up in defense.

“Lay off! You know what I meant! I meant [REDACTED]! [REDACTED], okay?”

The shorter guard motioned for her to come with them. “Ms. Thompson, this is your third strike this week. You know what this means.”

She sighed, resting her head in her hands for a moment before pushing herself out of her chair.

“Whatever. It’s not like I’m quitting anytime soon. If I was going to go against [REDACTED], I would have done so by now!”

I watched her disappear behind the double doors exiting the dining hall, unsure of when she would be back. I bit the nail on my thumb as I tried to count how many violations that would be. She was cutting it awfully close, and I was too just by talking to her. Until I could be sure where he worked, I might want to limit my interactions with Carlos as well.

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Walking onto the bus the next morning, I was on high alert. My wallet was clutched tightly in my hand, my eyes scanning the other seats for Carlos. I heard the bus driver huff when I dropped my fare into the box beside him but ignored it in my heightened state of awareness. I wasn’t going to let some guy ruin my concentration.

I spotted him in the same seat he was in the day before, looking down at his phone. Maybe I could walk past Carlos without him noticing me.

Wallet still gripped tightly in my hand, I started down the aisle with determination. I tried acting natural. I could be cool, I just needed to take deep breaths—but not too deep, or he'd notice that.

My shoes landed softly on the floor of the bus as I walked, my eyes locked in on them to make sure I didn't trip on something. I was almost in the clear. I could see the head of black hair on my left. Just a few more steps should've done it—and then the bus started moving.

I felt myself leaning forward, my feet slipped out from under me. My arms raised to shield my face, bracing for impact, when all of a sudden, there was a hand that grabbed my collar. I felt myself getting pulled back, the strong hand that came to my rescue belonging to none other than the man I was hoping not to see that day. Absorbed in my thoughts, I must have lost my footing once again, falling back right into Carlos' lap. I was stunned into silence at the situation. All I could do was stare at him blankly as he stared back.

He must have said something, I could see his mouth moving to talk, but I was too entranced by his face.

Who knew that the windows on the bus could filter the morning sunlight in such a beautiful way? A halo circled Carlos' head, and the yellow rays of the morning light filled my heart with warmth. His thick eyebrows were furrowed with concern. I had probably been staring for too long.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

He laughed, a smile of disbelief curling up on his cheeks. “I asked if you were okay. You took a nasty dive.”

“Oh!” I cleared my throat, “Yes, thank you! Sorry about that, I must have been distracted. I didn’t think he’d start driving until I sat down, but maybe he’s still mad about yesterday.”

“Must be. Lucky for you, my reflexes are impeccable, so you’re safe for today.”

“I’m not sure, what if it’s more than just a grudge? What if the driver has it out for me? I might have to switch buses for my own protection.”

Carlos’ laughter shook his whole body, reminding me that I hadn’t actually gotten out of his lap at that point. I scrambled back to my feet, apologizing furiously.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s fine, I promise. Just sit down, we can’t have you falling again.”

I obliged, sitting to his right. I tried to calm my nerves, the rapid beating of my heart blurring together with my deep breaths. I couldn’t get distracted. I couldn’t afford to lose focus.

“Sorry about that.”

Carlos sent me a friendly grin. “It’s all good. Forget about it, I have something to show you anyway.”

I watched as he pulled out his phone, his long, ring-clad fingers frantically tapping the screen to navigate the device. The smile never seemed to leave his face. It suited him.

“Here it is,” he started, showing me his phone, “I told you I would show you what *real* music is. I’ve got everything from Metallica to Billy Joel—all of the classics.”

He gestured for me to take the phone, placing it in my hand when I faltered one second too long. I swiped through the playlist. Did he make this for me?

“Wow, this is amazing,” I said, “Did you do this yesterday?”

He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand, clearing his throat as he avoided eye contact. “It’s just something I’ve been meaning to do. Besides, I can’t let you walk around in that Metallica shirt without knowing at least *one* of their songs. I don’t make friends with posers.”

I chuckled, “You think I’m a poser?”

“Well, what did I just say?” He took his phone back, tapping a few more buttons before handing it back to me. “That means you have to tell me what you think when you’re done.”

He pointed to the line at the top of the screen, telling me to put in my number. I tried to keep my excitement from boiling over, my hands shaking as I typed it out. As I got to the last four digits, my thumbs slowed to a stop. What was I doing? Giving him my number right after I told myself I would walk away and never look back. How low was my resolve to fold so easily?

“Do you not know your own number?”

His laugh broke me out of my thoughts. “I... Sorry.”

“Oh... You don’t have to give me your number if you don’t want to. Sorry, I just thought—”

“No! No, it’s not that. It’s not you. Here!”

I filled out the rest of my phone number and hit send, handing his phone back with a smile. “I have some studying to do apparently.”

Carlos’ face brightened with my change in mood. “Oh, totally. The test is next Thursday, anything less than a B and you’ll flunk the class, you know?”

“Oh really? Now I thought that—”

My thought was interrupted by a sneeze. I covered my mouth and went through my pockets to try and find a tissue. I knew I had one somewhere, who would I be if I didn’t?

“Here.”

In Carlos' outstretched hand was a small pack of tissues. I wave him off.

"Don't worry, don't worry. I have my own somewhere in here."

"I insist! God knows I have more than enough of these lying around. The factory gives these away all the time, just take it."

Everything in my very being is telling me not to grab them. It would be better if I didn't know. I could claim plausible deniability. How would they know if I never took the tissues?

"... Thanks."

Without even sparing a single glance down at my hand, my fears were realized. My heart sank. I felt it pulling me down to the ground with it. The air became suffocating, my breath hitching in my throat. It couldn't be. It can't.

Why did it have to be Puffs?

I froze, staring blankly down at the pack in my hands. I felt nauseous.

"Are you okay? You're hands are shaking."

I stood up, surprising him with the suddenness of my movements. "I'm sorry, I—I have to go. I can't stay here."

"What are you talking about? Wait!"

I kept my eyes forward as I ran off the bus, tissues still in hand. I knew Carlos hadn't followed me when I couldn't hear his footsteps anymore.

I didn't know what to do, so I kept running. I ran and ran until I found myself at the only place I could go. I was at work.

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat. My mouth was dry, eyes watering from the wind. The breeze made me run cold from the layer of sweat that coated my

skin. The tissues in my hand carried more than just the weight of biodegradable cellulose fibers and their plastic packaging—it was the weight of my world as I knew it.

If I didn't have this job, then what would I have? My family is gone. My friends from high school have all moved on and moved away. I talk to strangers with the hope that our conversations will have some semblance of normalcy, some semblance of understanding between them and me. But that time could never come as long as I live the life I do.

Without my job, I am a husk of a person. I don't know who I am outside of this life. Do I have interests? Goals? Do I have needs and desires outside of work? What if all my life to this point has been made to waste because I was pawned right out of school?

If my parents were there, what would they have said? Would they have wanted me to take this job in the first place? Would they be proud of me?

I opened the pack of tissues, removing one from the pack. I slipped it into my pocket and dropped the rest of the pack in a nearby trashcan. Off to work I went.

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I sat at the lunch tables alone for days. Layla still wasn't off of her punishment. She's still working on cleanup for a few more days before she's back with our regular group. It's hard for me to imagine how scared she is now. Is it selfish of me to go to her with my problems knowing how dangerous they could be for her? She wouldn't turn me away even if it was.

The tissue was practically burning a hole in my pocket, though. What was I supposed to do? Who should I confide in instead? Even if she turned me in, at this point it's a lose-lose situation. I have no way of knowing if there were guards on the bus today keeping an eye on me. Their random check-ins were always hard for me to keep track of, and I've been too busy talking with Carlos the past two times to really look around.

I spent the rest of the day thinking about what to do and how to get in contact with Layla. Cleaners usually aren't assigned to the same units they work for, so there was a good chance that she was on my side of the building that day. After finishing up my work in the lab, I made sure to look innocent as I meandered through the long stretches of hallway in the area.

"Layla," I whispered sharply, "Layla!"

"Why are you whispering my name in the middle of the hallway?"

I jumped, turning around to find Layla in all of her glory. Instead of the usual white uniform, she was wearing a blue jumpsuit with white stripes. It had more pockets than mine and was accompanied by gloves to keep the hands safe from the cleaning chemicals.

"Weren't you guys done with your shift a few minutes ago?" Layla asked.

"Layla, I..."

I hesitated, my hand clutching the tissue in my pocket. "I got into some trouble earlier today. I just don't know what to do."

I took the tissue out of my pocket and put it in Layla's hand.

"What is this?"

"Carlos gave me a tissue this morning."

"Gross," she cried, "Why are you giving this to me?"

She tries to shake it off of her hand, but I held her still. "I saw the packaging, feel it. It's not ours, Layla. It's... [REDACTED]."

She gasps, pushing the tissue back to me. "Why did you bring that here? Are you trying to get me hurt? I'm already on cleaning duty, what do you think they'll do to me when they find out I had my hands on a competitor's product? What is wrong with you?"

“Layla, calm down, someone will hear you. I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t know what to do. I don’t know who else to go to.”

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. Layla’s gaze softened. She reached out to pull me in for a hug.

“I’m sorry... I get it.”

Her arms tightened around me as my tears fell.

“Listen to me. If you don’t want them to find out about this, it would be best if we didn’t talk for a while.”

“But, I—”

“Listen! It’s too dangerous right now. I overheard some of the managers talking. They found a package of [REDACTED] in the trash by the factory. They know someone’s cracking. They’re looking hard at people who have been getting in trouble, so that means you and I are on their list. I have a family to worry about. I can’t afford to make another mistake, and I’m not about to take you down with me either. You’ve got to find a way to get them off your scent.”

“Layla...”

Her lips curved upwards, the smile not quite reaching her eyes. “Hey now, don’t give me that look. You’ve got a bus to catch. Go on, I’ll be fine.”

I held her hand when she turned to walk away. “Will you be okay?”

“Me,” she chuckled, “Always.”

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I took a sick day off from work for the next few days. I was nearing my breaking point. The past few nights I would wake up to the sound of loud footsteps outside my door, and I would hear cars stop in front of my window at random hours of the day. *They knew.*

I couldn't keep asking for days off, that would just make me look more suspicious. I'm just bringing attention to myself by hiding.

I couldn't sleep the night before, so I was up early enough that this decision meant I would go to work that same day.

I walked down the stairs to the bus stop as slowly as I could. I knew I couldn't miss the bus, but I was afraid of what seeing Carlos would do to my resolve. He was like a breath of fresh air in my monotonous life. I couldn't see it before, but I could never be satisfied working this job for the rest of my life. I need to talk to people, to love, to connect. Talking to Carlos makes me think I can do whatever I want, and we can't have that.

"Mateo."

I cringed at the confrontation immediately after entering the bus. I tried to walk off the vehicle, but Carlos followed after me.

"Hey! Stop!"

He put a hand on my shoulder. "Why are you acting so weird? What happened yesterday?"

I shrugged off his hand. "Nothing happened. I'm fine!"

"No one runs off like that unless something happened. Did I do something? I'm sorry, okay?"

"No... No, it's nothing that you did—I mean, it's not your fault."

"Then what happened? Are you okay?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but a sliver of black caught my eye from across the street.

"It's my job. I can't talk to you because it conflicts with my work."

He scoffed, “That doesn’t make any sense, what kind of job do you have that doesn’t let you talk to people? Are you gonna get in trouble for talking to me about music?”

“I can’t tell you. It’s hard to explain.”

“Harder than running away from me every time you see me? What, are you just going to miss the bus for the rest of your life just in case? What’s so important about your job that you can’t have innocent conversations with people? Huh?”

“I can’t tell you, Carlos, I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“No! This is really weird. If you don’t want me to talk to you anymore, all you have to do is say that.”

Another flash of black took me out of the conversation. I saw a head peeking out from a corner.

“They’re here. They know. Oh my God.”

Carlos looked around confused, “Who’s here? What are you talking about?”

I backed away from him. “I really can’t stay. I have to go to work. It’s not safe for you to talk to me right now.”

Carlos grabbed my hand to keep me from running off again.

“No! I’m not leaving until you explain what’s going o—”

“It’s because you work at Puffs, okay?”

I covered my mouth in shock at the outburst. Carlos stared at me blankly, letting go of my hand.

“You... You work at Kleenex, don’t you?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Mateo, it’s okay. I—I’m sorry.”

“I have to go. I think I’m being followed.”

“Wait!” He ran to cut me off. “I know what you’re going through, and I can help. There’s a program for people like you. People that want to leave.”

“There are others?”

“Dozens. If you leave with me right now, I can get you away from here, and get you to safety.”

“But what about—”

“You said you were followed? That means that they already know about me. They’re going to try to get you away from me as soon as possible. And once they do, they’re going to transfer you to an even more remote town in the middle of nowhere, and they’re going to make sure that you never meet someone like me again. You hear me? They’re going to keep you trapped there until you die.”

I looked around, the black spots were getting closer.

“But... I don’t know how to do anything else. I don’t even know the first thing I would do if I got out.”

He smiled, “If you leave with me, we can find out together.”

Carlos held his hand out to me. The sun peeked out from the clouds to illuminate his figure. I smiled back at him.

“Okay.”