

Defective Goods: A Kyle Shannon Mystery

Sample Chapter

On my first day at Drip Not Paint Company, the robot nearly ran me over.

I admit to being jaded by technology. We fight two-day wars or eavesdrop on royal lovers with the same nonchalance we have about using a microwave. Technology is everywhere...in our cars, our telephones and even our toasters. But robots are not a part of the average person's daily routine.

It was Tuesday afternoon and I was in the customer service department, surrounded by tan metal cubicles, desks and file cabinets, all the traditional accouterments of the corporate office environment. Behind me, a wall of windows overlooked a canopy of brown oak leaves. I was on the third floor of the third building at Bannockburn Lakes Office Plaza.

I stood in front of Maria Ondera's desk, peering at her computer monitor and listening as she assisted a customer. The customer had ordered four cases of primer six weeks earlier and three of them still had not been received. Her soft voice stroked the customer with reassurance as she clicked from one computer screen to another, verifying information and answering questions. She confirmed that the backorder would be shipped in two days.

While I waited for Maria to finish up the conversation, I took stock of her desk and cubicle. She had filled it with personal touches: a Best Mom mug, an orange juice can pencil holder and school pictures of two girls; one with a somber face while the other displayed a toothy, lopsided grin. Maria's daughters?

Maria wore the same white Drip Not polo shirt I saw on the other customer service reps. When she pushed her long black hair behind her ears, silver hoop earrings the size of donuts clanked against the receiver. She pulled the left one off and put it on the desk.

Maria completed the call and I opened my mouth to speak to her – when I heard “Shreep, shreep.”

Maria struggled to suppress a smile. My head came up. I listened, but I couldn't detect the origin of the repetitive shrills. Whatever it was, it was coming closer. As it got louder, she started to laugh.

A five-foot long, shoulder-high, foot-deep metal cart beeped its way into the department and headed right for me. I watched in fascination as it lurched along the aisle in front of the windows, emitting a high-pitched beep every five seconds. At the last minute, I stepped out of the way and the cart halted a foot past my original position.

Maria, still chuckling, pointed to a faintly visible line on the carpeting that I had taken for wear marks. “Some kind of chemical is sprayed on. The robot follows it.”

She pulled interoffice envelopes from a slot on the robot and placed the mail on her desk. Then she took her guest chair and set it on the track, one long stride ahead of the cart.

“Watch,” she said, grinning broadly. “This is so cool.”

She pressed a button and the robot, quiet while it was stopped near her desk, shrieked a warning tone, and then jerked forward. It bumped into the chair. And there it remained, beeping and bumping, struggling to move forward, but stopped by the chair.

“It would have smacked right into me if I hadn’t moved,” I said as I walked over to the mechanical mailroom and pressed the red stop button on the front panel.

“I’d have pushed you out of the way if I’d had to.”

Maria, with a smile still on her lips and her snappy dark eyes laughing, watched as I circled the metal mailman.

Or would that be mailperson? Mail thing?

Two baskets on the top held oversized envelopes and packages. Below that, the cart was divided into twenty mail slots. The bottom third housed the machinery that made the robot move.

Thirty seconds passed. The warning tone shrieked again. Beep. Bump. Beep. Bump. The cart remained a hostage of the empty chair.

“How long will it stay like that?”

“Forever,” said Maria, clearly enjoying the robot’s distress, “or until it is rescued. If someone hits the stop button, it stays put for thirty seconds, then continues on automatically – unless a chair is in the way.”

She giggled. It was a bubbly, bright sound – not like a schoolgirl, but as an adult – who was having a very good time at another’s expense.

“How does anyone know the robot is in trouble?” I asked, completing my walk around the machine.

“It takes about thirty minutes for it to go all the way around each floor. When it’s finished, it waits by the elevator until someone from office services goes up to get it and bring it down to the next floor. Thirty minutes later, it should be back in front of the elevator door. After it does the first floor, it returns to the mailroom on its own. If it’s not where it belongs within ten minutes of the time it’s supposed to be there, they go look for it. It doesn’t get hung up for long because the beeping drives us crazy. We would rescue it just to get it to leave.” She pointed at the chair. “Move it out of the way.”

As soon as I did, the robot responded by lurching forward, lumbering along the invisible track at a slow and steady pace, heading for the next cluster of cubicles. I watched it halt twenty feet down the aisle and beep. A young man appeared, pulled inter-office envelopes from one of the slots and tossed a Fed Ex envelope into a top bin. After a moment, the robot shrilled the warning, shuddered to life and continued on down the corridor.

* * * *

I’m Kyle Shannon and I’m a temporary worker. When Carter and Associates, my former employer, went through a difficult merger, I lost interest in my full time position as their office

manager and decided to make a change. Being a temp seemed like a good way to earn a living while I figured out what I wanted to do and where I wanted to do it.

My work assignment at Drip Not Paint was to act as the customer service manager until a permanent manager could be found. When Margaret, my supervisor at Office Right Staffing Services, first contacted me about it, she said the former position holder had won the Powerball. I remembered it well. The single mother of six accepted the humongous check from the lottery commissioner, turned her eyes to the camera and tendered her resignation right then and there. “Take this job and shove it,” she said. CNN picked up the story so the entire country saw her do it.

Just as I was scheduled to start at Drip Not, Margaret called and canceled the assignment. Drip Not had filled the position internally. This was the first time it had happened to me, but other temps had told me it was a common occurrence. The client dumps the workload on another employee to save the cost of employing a temp. Invariably, the overloaded employee collapses under the weight of two jobs and the temp eventually gets brought in. I figured that was what had happened at Drip Not until, two weeks after her call canceling the job, Margaret called back.

“You’re not going to believe this,” she said with the tone of voice I hear from my friends when their toddlers have driven them over the edge. “The human resources manager at Drip Not just called. She told me that Riley Sachs, the guy they promoted to fill that customer service manager position, has been transferred to their plant in Maryland.”

“Why didn’t they wait to fill his position here before they moved him out there?”

“Who knows?” said Margaret. “Customers do strange things and I learned a long time ago not to ask why. The answers are too scary.”

“I know what you mean. Transfer and start dates tend to be real sore points for managers. The old department wants to fill the position before they release the employee to the new department. The new department wants their new employee immediately, usually because the position’s been open forever.”

“In this case, I guess the Drip Not plant in Maryland is the better negotiator.”

“Or has more clout?”

“Could be. According to Christine Talman, their HR manager, Riley left for the East Coast quite suddenly.”

“Considering the job market, she should have plenty of applications for the position.”

“Maybe that’s the problem. She has to post the position internally first.”

“And wait two weeks before they can interview outsiders,” I said. “With a middle management position at a nationally-known corporation, one posting on an Internet job board and they’d get hundreds of resumes to screen. Hiring someone will take awhile.”

“Look at it this way, at least you have an assignment and I get to keep my job.”

I reported to Drip Not the following Tuesday morning. Margaret’s directions were easy to follow – get myself from Vernon Hills to Route 22, then east to Waukegan Road and south to the entrance. She failed to remind me about the construction, but I couldn’t fault her for that.

Anyone who lives in Chicago knows there are two seasons, winter and construction. Commuters must make allowances for both. From March through November, crews work overtime to complete their projects and most major thoroughfares are torn up. The widening of Route 22 was one of the biggest undertakings in the county and I managed to get caught in its traffic jam clutches on my first day.

Ten minutes late, I raced a southbound commuter train to the crossing. The train won. After it went by, I turned onto Waukegan Road, passed the gas station and the drug store, and then turned left at the light.

Other than the Bannockburn Lakes Office Plaza sign at the entrance, there wasn't much to see from the street. A wall of willow trees shielded the Plaza buildings from view. When I pulled in, the first thing I saw was a three-story, black steel structure that rose above me like a tall ship surrounded by a sea of birch. The trees, dressed in fall yellow and orange, were reflected in the building's mirrored glass façade and again in a pond that hugged the western foundation. Next to it was its twin, guarded by a stand of skinny oak trees that reminded me of the banded asparagus stalks in my grocer's produce department. I couldn't see the front of it from the roadway. I wondered if it, too, had a pond.

After braking for a parade of Canada geese, I pulled into the parking lot in front of the third building. There were no signs identifying the building's only tenant. I double-checked the address. This was the place.

Black glass earth-ship number three was moored in a harbor of green lawn. Twelve-foot, ornamental crab trees stood sentinel at the overhang entrance. Inside, the building had a hub and spoke design. The center atrium was the hub and three 3-story wings were the spokes.

I waited five minutes in the reception area before Christine Talman bustled out to fetch me. She was a petite woman, barely coming up to my shoulders, with the wiry body and long legs of a dancer. Perhaps thirty years old, she had shoulder-length, streaked blonde hair that framed an oval face. I didn't see much make-up beyond a touch of lipstick.

After a cursory but polite greeting, she led me into her office, invited me to sit down and pulled a one-inch thick book from a desk drawer. A pair of tortoise-shell glasses lay on her desk and when she put them on to review the resume I handed her, they accentuated her green eyes.

She laid the resume down and picked up the book.

"This is our employee manual. You need to know about our work rules." She turned to a yellow Post-It flag and read, "The office hours are eight to five with an hour for lunch. You will take a lunch. We don't pay overtime. No exceptions so don't think you can pretend to work through your lunch and get overtime."

She paused and looked up. I kept my mouth shut and a smile on my lips.

What was I going to say? Better to let her get said what she needed to say. If she expected a challenge, I wasn't going to give her one. I needed the job.

“We insist on appropriate dress.” She flipped to a blue flag. “No visible body art, no piercings with visible ornamentation other than one in each ear, no bare midriffs and you must wear underwear.”

I can't think of a single time I've gone to work without wearing underwear.

Christine's voice was still clipped as she continued, “If you are ill or tardy, you are to telephone me directly. Don't call Office Right. If they don't get around to calling me until noon, I won't know that we don't have coverage up there.”

I nodded in agreement.

I will also call Margaret at Office Right but you don't need to know that.

“Finally, there is absolutely no smoking in the building or on the grounds. Our health insurance policy doesn't permit it.”

Not an issue. How many people here still do?

She looked up at me and frowned. “I guess that doesn't apply to you. You're not on our policy.”

Does that mean I can smoke anywhere because I'm not insured?

“I don't smoke.”

“Good. Then there's no problem.” She flipped some pages. “As a manager, you don't get a break. You do get an hour for lunch – unpaid, of course.” She looked up again. “But as an hourly person, you get two breaks and a half hour for lunch.” She frowned. “Temps are so difficult to manage.”

“I'll make it easy for you. I'll pretend I'm a manager. I won't take breaks.” I waited for her to respond and when she didn't, I said, “Do you want to sign my time card?”

“Heavens, no.” She looked like I had asked her to put her name on an order of execution. “Have Maria sign it. I can't be bothered with that.”

“Maria works in the department?”

“She's the senior rep. When we go upstairs, I'll introduce you.” Christine slipped the handbook into a desk drawer. “There's something else I need to make clear to you. As you know, you are covering the customer service manager position. I want it understood that, even if you were interested, I would not consider you to fill it. I never, ever pay fees to agencies so don't waste your time and mine by applying for a job I will never give you. I have no intention of buying out your contract.”

What makes you think it's up for sale?

Some managers make a habit of hiring their temps. It's a great screening method that I used myself. Management has a chance to see how a worker performs and whether that person fits in with the team. Hiring is never foolproof; however hiring a temp removes some of the risk. On the other hand, many staffing agencies charge as much as twenty percent of the starting salary if a client hires a temp within one year of the assignment. That can take quite a bite out of a budget plus the practice circumvents human resources.

Ab, that's the problem. You'd lose control if managers started hiring their temps and bypassed HR.

I didn't have a contract with Office Right but every time a client signed my time card, they did. It was all there in teeny, tiny print. In any case, it was my first day and I was a long way from making any decisions about Drip Not as a possible permanent home. However, any good feelings I might have had about it, Christine Talman had just squelched.

I tried to keep my voice flat as I said, "I'm not interested in a full time job at this time."

"Excellent. Then we'll have no issues." Christine leaned back slightly, some of the tenseness leaving her face. "After seeing your resume, I have something extra in mind for you. I'd like you to work on a special project while you're here. Riley started a review of our customer service department manual. It contains step-by-step instructions for solving specific problems that vex Drip Not Paint's customers. These commonly include lost or damaged shipments, incorrect bill rates and defective products. The customer service staff handles all complaints. They have full authority to resolve the issues."

She passed me a three-ring binder. It was so heavy I used both hands to grasp it and even so, I felt a twinge in my right wrist.

"Even though we're still in our busy season," she continued, "you'll find the department practically runs itself. With the exception of one new hire, everyone in customer service has been there at least two years. They all get good performance reviews. We just need you to keep an eye on things. What we really want you to do is finish this project."

"What, specifically, needs to be done?" I leafed through the pages; quickly scanning detailed lists of procedures. "This seems quite comprehensive and the revision date is last year. Is it outdated already?"

"Possibly. Probably. We need a thorough review of each written procedure in every department. All the manuals must match what is currently being done. For customer service, you can update the form samples. Add data wherever needed. The finished product should be an exact representation of what goes in that department."

"That's quite an assignment," I said.

"Every department is doing it. We're working on our ISO re-certification."

"As you saw on my resume, I'm well-qualified to evaluate your processes. However, I've never been directly associated with the ISO program."

"Oh. Well, ISO stands for International Standards Organization. Our participation represents a serious commitment on the part of management. Our board of directors feels it's an absolute necessity for the company. It makes us more attractive to some of our customers who have quality programs of their own." She stood up. "Do you have any questions?"

I hesitated. Should I give her the bad news or should I let Margaret tell her that my bill rate would rise substantially if I took on the project. I decided to let Margaret handle it.

"No, no questions at the moment."

Christine smiled and, for the first time during our interview, it was broad enough for her teeth to show. My response must have been a relief. If she was so insecure that she had to read the corporate rules directly from a manual, then she sure didn't want to field ad hoc questions from me.

"Good," she said. "Then let's go up to the department and have you meet everyone."

We walked through the lobby in the atrium to the elevators. After we boarded the elevator, Christine punched '3' and we started our ascent. When we got off, Christine pointed toward a drinking fountain that hung on the wall to the right of the elevators.

"Restrooms are here next to the fountain. Customer Service is this way."

She turned and walked down a corridor. The wing was divided down the center by enclosed offices and facilities like the elevators and stairwells. Management had the offices with walls; support staff, in cubicles along the perimeter, had the best view. As Christine and I walked along, I had noticed that some offices had floor-to-ceiling windows facing the corridor. Others did not. The customer service manager was one of the fortunate people who warranted windows. Of course, that had nothing to do with the importance of the position. It had everything to do with keeping an eye on the staff.

About half way down the aisle, she pointed toward a darkened room. "That's your office."

We turned right at an intersection and walked toward the windows, coming to a stop in front of half-height cubicles in three rows of three. Eight of the workstations were occupied. All but two staff members were speaking into headset microphones. It was quieter than I would have expected the call center would be.

During my former life as a manager for a software consulting firm, I was in several customer service departments and call centers. Toll free calls from customers were routed to the representatives by computer. As soon as the rep concluded one call, another call was sent to their open extension. Overhead, digital displays told workers how many calls were in the holding queue.

Call centers are notorious for measuring performance purely on the quantity of calls processed. The computer tracks the length of every call and strict time standards are enforced. If a call goes over the established limit, a supervisor is notified and joins the call. In one department I visited, the computer also served as the time clock. A representative was "clocked in" when he or she logged onto their computer. As soon as they logged on, they started receiving calls. If a rep took a little time to get settled or listen to messages before logging onto their computer, it was unpaid time. Consequently, a rep could be at work for as much as fifteen minutes every day and not get paid for it.

At least there wasn't a call holding counter board hanging over the Drip Not department. That gave me hope.

"Maria is the senior customer service rep," said Christine, indicating the woman seated at the desk directly in front of us. "She's been here about five years. She claims she knows everything about the department. Maybe, if she had her degree, she'd be the new manager and you wouldn't be here. She will sign your timecard. I'll leave you with her now."

“Thanks,” I said, although I was sure that the human resources manager didn’t hear me. Christine Talman was already gone.

I looked at Maria Ondera. Her jaw was set. Her dark eyes were moist and her upper lip quivered. Christine’s comments had stung.

“Hi. I’m Kyle Shannon.”

Maria took my outstretched hand without saying a word.

“Why don’t you give me about thirty minutes to get settled?” I said. “Then we’ll get together so you can give me an overview of the department.”

Maria inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. She checked her watch. “Did Christine take you to see the cafeteria?”

I shook my head.

“It’s almost break time. When you’re ready, if you want, you can come with me. We can get some coffee and talk there. After that, I can show you the computer system.”

“Sounds good.”

I went into the manager’s office. Having windows overlooking the aisle and the staff cubicles was a little like being in a fish bowl. Natural light came into the office and gave it a sense of space, but it also meant that I would not be able to put my head down on the desk and take a snooze or dance around in my stocking feet.

A Leroy Neiman lithograph of a golf game hung on one wall; several pictures of manufacturing facilities hung on another. I looked at the photographs closely. The labels said Janesville, Wisconsin; Tucker, Georgia and Thurmont, Maryland. There was also a picture of a Drip Not semi trailer truck with the Drip Not logo of a bright red paint drop that I recognized from television commercials and print ads.

I sat in the desk chair and nearly sank to the floor. Riley Sachs either had the shortest legs on earth or someone had been playing with the hydraulics. Pressing the lever under the seat, I raised myself so that I fit at the desk. Swiveling toward the computer, I took stock, examining the mouse, keyboard and flat screen monitor. I found the processing unit on the floor under the desk and turned it on, watching as the monitor crackled to life. The Windows desktop appeared. I saw several icons that were unfamiliar. I was sure that they represented Drip Not internal programs. Something to confirm with Maria.

I opened each desk drawer and had no doubt that Sachs had left suddenly. The pencil drawer in the center of the desk held several frayed photos of young children, a collection of small change and a Timex watch. A box of energy bars sat in the bottom right-hand drawer. And so did a pair of dirty socks.

I took out several files and reviewed the contents. The list of staff home addresses and phone numbers showed a recent revision date. It made me wonder who had moved or been recently hired. I took out one of my Office Right business cards and jotted my cell phone number on it. If Maria had to reach me, she’d need a way to do it. I folded the staff list and slid it into my planner.

When I finished my superficial tour of the office, I took my wallet from my purse and went to get Maria.

We descended to the first floor.

"I usually take the stairs," Maria said, pointing to a nearby doorway, "but I thought that would be too confusing for you. It helps if you use the elevators as a guide." We walked down a hallway and Maria pointed to partition walls on the right. "That's the mail room. And the fancy copier is in there, too. That," she indicated a double metal door, "is the maintenance department."

We turned left down a cross-corridor and came out in the cafeteria. The clatter of pots and pans against stainless steel appliances signaled the end of breakfast and the beginning of lunch preparations in the galley-style kitchen. The dining area was adorned with potted palm trees and Norfolk pines wearing necklaces of burgundy and gold mums. Sunshine, cascading in through the wall of windows, drew patterns on the wooden tops of the round dining tables.

"We're too late for anything from the grill but there are plenty of breakfast things still out," said Maria as we entered the serving line. "And don't look for a menu. There isn't one. They always have the same thing every day, except for two specials. The specials were posted as we came in. I'll bet you didn't see them."

"Vegetable panini, meatloaf with mashed potatoes and the soup of the day is broccoli cheddar."

She looked at me quizzically. "That's scary. Most people who work here don't see the sign at the entrance. How did you?"

"I was looking for it." When she looked skeptical, I explained. "I'm a temp. We get used to looking for signs and restrooms and fire escapes."

"I get it," she said, taking a bagel off a tray and putting it into a nearby toaster. "We look at that stuff every day so we don't see it. You have to find it because you don't know where it is."

I looked at the picked-over remains on a pastry tray. "How's the food here?"

"It's good. For lunch, I usually get the salad plate. It has chicken salad, tuna salad and fruit. It's one of my favorites."

I settled for a cup of coffee and paid the cashier fifty cents. We found a table in a corner where we could talk. I sat with my back to the windows so I could watch employees as they came and went.

My coffee was smooth and rich. "Drip Not subsidizes the cafeteria?"

"Sixty percent. It's one of the best benefits."

"That would be a problem for me. I'm afraid I'd eat too much."

"Tell me about it. I've put on ten pounds since I started here. I should probably work out or do aerobics or something." She patted her thick thigh. Then she pointed toward the cashier. "That's what workouts can do for you."

I looked toward a dark-skinned man standing at the end of the checkout line. He had broad shoulders, a tight butt and a raven-colored ponytail that hung down his back in some type of binding. His jaw was well defined and he had deep-set eyes.

“Wow,” I said.

“Yeah,” sighed Maria. “He’s a martial arts guy. Goes to the gym every morning. I hear he’s so serious about it that he won’t attend any breakfast meetings.”

“Jake!” shouted a man with slicked-back hair standing at the entrance to the cafeteria. He scanned the populated tables then moved to his left and surveyed the crowd again. Raising his arm into the air, he called out again. “Jake Prince!”

Maria twisted around. “That’s Mr. Wilton, our CFO. Customer Service reports to him.”

I craned my neck to get a better look. A Norfolk pine blocked the chief financial officer from view.

“He’s yelling?”

Maria’s eyebrows came together. “He does that a lot lately.”

“So who’s Jake Prince?”

“Right there.” Maria pointed at the man we’d been admiring.

“What does he do?”

“He’s a programmer.”

Prince finished with the cashier and moved toward the dining room entrance. His mouth was moving and a dour expression appeared on his face. Was he speaking to the CFO? I couldn’t tell.

I looked back at Maria. “He’s Native American?”

“Christine hates his hair but there’s nothing she can do about it. He’s always within the dress code requirements and there’s nothing in the code about long hair on guys.” She smirked. “I could just eat him up.”

“Stop it, you bad girl,” I said, pointing to the rings on her left hand. “You’re married.”

“I’m married. I’m not dead.”

“And are you also a mom? I saw the pictures on your desk.”

“My girls. I’d love a boy. My husband insists that two is enough.”

I leaned forward. “Okay, let’s talk business. Tell me what the Drip Not customer service department does.”

Maria took a breath. “We do everything. We help trace lost shipments. We replace damaged shipments. We fix shipping and billing errors. We route requests for information to the proper departments. We issue credit for defective material. We do it all.”

“Can you give me an example of a specific problem so I can better understand your process?”

“Okay.” I watched as Maria thought about which story she wanted to share. “Ah, I know one. This happened two weeks ago. My phone rang and it was a distributor from Indiana. He had a big problem because his custom color blue was lying all over I-65. The carrier had been in an accident and the truck had lost its load including three fifty-five gallon drums of custom blue. The distributor said that if I drove down I-65, I’d know where the accident happened when I saw the blue trees.”

“Was he angry?”

“Fortunately, he was laughing. That helped a lot.”

“So what did you do?”

“The first thing I had to do was find his original order so we could duplicate the color. Then I negotiated a new shipping date. Custom colors can take several weeks to produce. I put in a rush replacement order and called the plant to explain why I was rushing a custom. Then I sent a request for a proof of delivery from the trucking company. When that came back, I had official notification of the accident so I filed a freight claim for the value of the damaged paint and issued credit to the customer.”

“Is this the same process I’ll find in the customer service manual?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never read it.”

“How did you learn your job?”

“Sasha taught me.”

Of course she did, I thought. And Maria teaches me and I wonder if any of it matches the manual. The process Maria described made perfect sense and seemed to be pretty straightforward, a sure sign that it would not match the manual.

Maria explained how the portion of the company computer system used by customer service impacted nearly every other department. Inputting an order for replacement material registered with manufacturing and shipping. Issuing a credit for the damaged material affected accounts receivable, sales and claims.

“Thanks,” I said. “Christine Talman was right about one thing. You know your stuff.”

Maria flushed.

“Speaking of Christine,” I said, lowering my voice, “she made quite a point of your not having a college degree. I hope that isn’t the only reason I’m filling this spot and you’re not. You obviously have the knowledge.”

Maria was quiet for several seconds. She shrugged her shoulders. “When they posted it, they required a college degree. I don’t have one so I did not apply for the position.”

“What about all your experience?”

“They insist on a degree for every supervisory or manager position. I know they have not made exceptions because others have been passed over for this reason.”

I frowned. I didn’t say that a college degree only guaranteed that the individual made it through college. A degree didn’t guarantee that the person knew how to handle a staff or make decisions. It didn’t even guarantee literacy any more.

“Are you working on your degree?”

“I take a night course every semester at Roosevelt. I get good grades. I have to get an A or the company won’t pay the tuition.”

“How close are you to graduating?”

A veil of resignation clouded Maria’s eyes. “I need four more courses to finish my junior year.”

That was another year and a half if she took a class during the summer term. And if she was that close to a degree, the courses she needed probably were not routinely offered in the summer semester. So she was looking at two years.

“You’re not enrolled in one of those accelerated programs?”

“I cannot attend classes on Saturdays because my husband works on many weekends so I must be home with the girls. I take my classes on his night off.”

“How long have you been at this?”

“Four years.”

And they thought Maria wasn’t management material? A young mother with two small children who was able to take college classes at night and get A’s? How could Christine Talman fail to be impressed by that level of dedication?