

*Author's Note: I originally wrote this scene to showcase Charlie's job as a communications officer for my latest thriller Catch Me. I heard so many great stories from dispatch operators, it was hard to pick just one type of call. Instead, I decided to highlight the multi-tasking involved, but also the irony of many of the situations—one person's crisis being another person's non-event. I really loved this scene, but in the way writing often works, felt it wasn't quite right for the book as a whole. In the end, I replaced it with a much tenser scene, showing how important someone like Charlie is for her officers and their safety. To learn more about how Charlie uses her quick thinking to assist a fellow officer, read Catch Me. To enjoy an evening on the job with Charlene Rosalind Carter Grant, Grovesnor PD communications officer, read below.*

“This is nine-one-one. Do you have an emergency?”

“Ummm... No.”

“Please hold.” Me, punching hold on line 1, picking up line 2, and watching my ANI ALI monitor shift magically to a whole new display of information. Line 1 had been a residential phone, meaning I’d received caller name and address. Line 2, big sigh, was a cell phone, meaning caller identification was blocked. “This is nine-one-one. Do you have an emergency?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“And what is your emergency?”

“I locked the keys in my car.”

“Sir, that’s not an emergency.”

“It will be when my mom finds out. Call the police, call an ambulance, call somebody. I’m telling you, she’s gonna kill me!”

Another sigh. “Sir, you can’t tie up nine-one-one because you locked the keys in your mother’s car.”

“Umm...what if I told you she kind of doesn’t know I borrowed her car?”

I took a second to digest that. To judge by voice, not to mention situation, my current caller was a teenage boy. “Name?” I asked.

“Kenny Brown.”

“Kenny, did you borrow your mother’s car or *borrow* her car?”

“It’s the second one. How, do you say that? The ladder one.”

I rolled my eyeballs, then glanced at my monitor. Line 1, my first caller, was still on hold, the seconds now adding up. “So Kenny, to recap, you stole your mother’s car, then locked the keys into it, and are now calling nine-one-one for assistance.”

“Yes ma’am. I figured you guys would be the best bet. After all, they don’t let triple A carry guns.”

Phone was ringing again. “Hang on, Kenny, I have to put you on hold.” A second later, “Nine-one-one. Do you have an emergency?”

“Uh, dude, I’d like a pizza. Extra large. Extra *hot*, if you know what I mean.” Laughter in the background. Giggles really. This is what happens, I reminded myself, when you work graveyard.

“And you’d like that pizza delivered to 125 Kearsage Road? Is that for Donald Jones, phone number,” I rattled off seven quick digits.

Awestruck silence. “Man, *how* did you know?”

“Are you aware that when you dial nine-one-one, your name and address appears on our monitors?”

More awestruck silence. “No way, dude!” Apparently, Mr. Jones had been imbibing more than just beer this evening.

“And are you aware that a prank call to nine-one-one is a felony offense that could land you in jail?”

“Cool!”

“Say hi to the nice policeman at your door, Mr. Jones.”

“All right!”

“And remember, this is your brain on drugs.”

Punch out line 3, back to line 2. “Kenny—”

“Too late, this is Kenny’s mom, Meredith.”

“Meredith, this is Grovesnor comm officer, Charlene Rosalind Carter Grant. So you found your son.”

“Don’t bother with the EMTs, Miss Grant. Kenny’s agreed to die quietly. It’s the least he could do.”

“He stole your car? Would you like to file a report?”

“Forget stealing my car. He drove it to *Shaws!*”

“The grocery store?”

“A chain grocery store. He knows I hate that. Seventeen years I’ve been raising this kid and he’s still as stupid as the day he was born. He wants to be a rebel, and the first thing he does is patronize some huge conglomerate, further squeezing out the little guy. Kids these days have no sense!”

Okay. “Well, Meredith, it is kind of sweet he went to a grocery store, instead of, you know, a bar. Hang on a second.”

Line 1 had now been blinking for two minutes, not good in my stock in trade. I switched over. “Nine-one-one. Hey can you hang on one more minute?”

“Ummm... Okay.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right back, I promise.” The rest of the phone lines were thankfully silent. I returned to Meredith. “You’re not really going to kill your son, are you Meredith? Because if you’re going to murder him, I’m going to have to call the cops.”

“Can I rough him up a little?”

“No roughing up.”

“Can I at least yell at him?”

“He’s your son, but four out of five child therapists would argue that’s probably bad for his self-esteem.”

“What does the fifth one say?”

“You know, they never tell you.”

Silence. Meredith seemed to be thinking. “Low self-esteem, huh. Do you think that’s why he’s shopping at a chain store?”

“Could be.”

“Okay. I guess I’ll just glare at him a while longer and make him wonder when the ax will fall. That always keeps him in line for a bit.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Well, can you send someone to get us into the car?”

“You didn’t bring a spare set of keys?”

“Nah. They’re locked in our safe.”

I wanted to beat my head against the monitor. Instead, I said with professional dignity, “Hang on, ma’am, and an officer will be there shortly.”

Line 2 finally wrapped up, no other lines ringing, I returned at long last to Line 1. “Nine-one-one. Thanks for holding, sir and what is the nature of your emergency?”

“My wife stabbed me.”

“*What?*”

“Well, would you look at that? I can see my rib bones. Hey, I don’t want to be a bother, but could you maybe send an ambulance?”

I sent the man an ambulance. Then I did beat my head against my monitor. It was just that kind of evening.