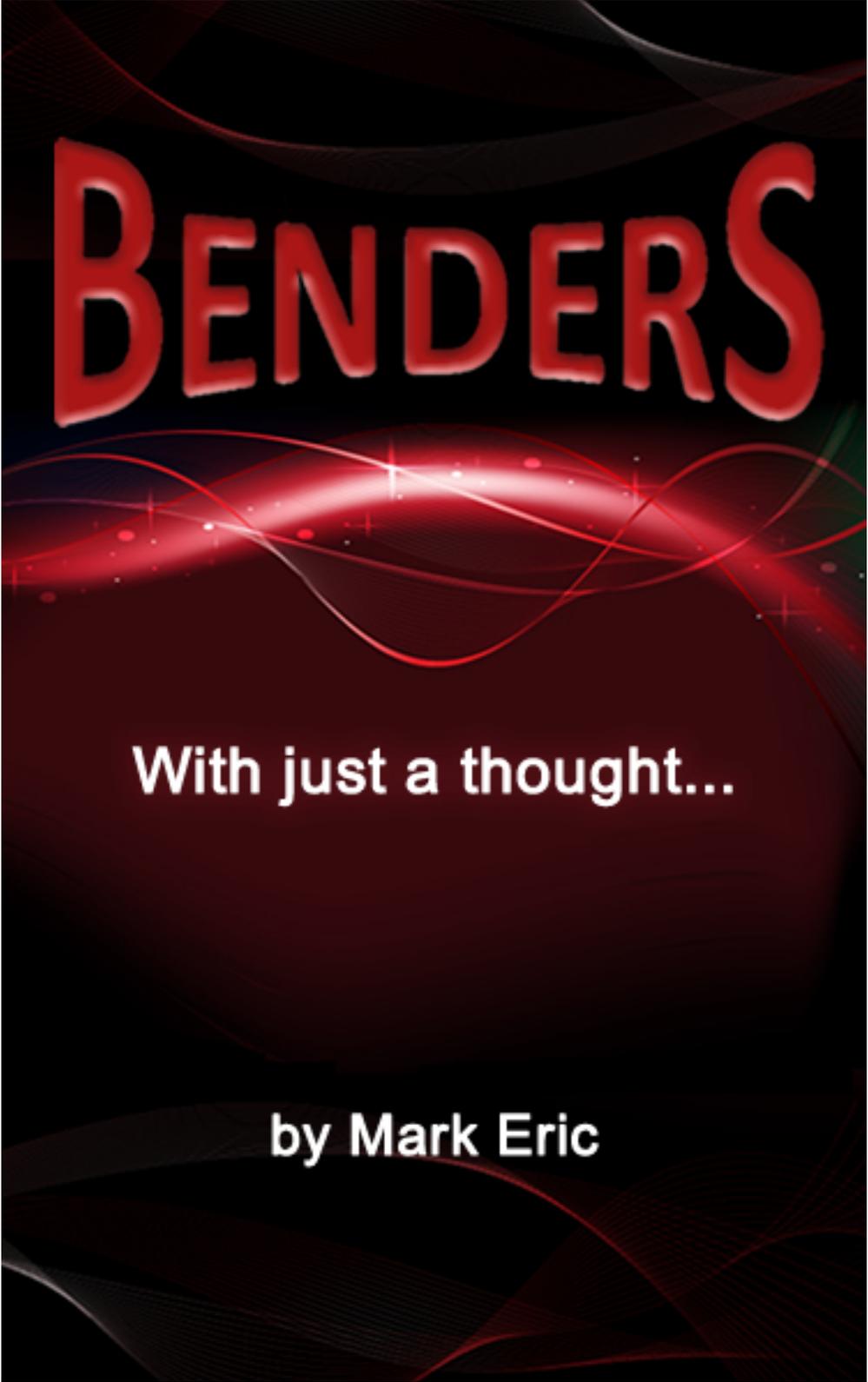


BENDERS



With just a thought...

by Mark Eric

Benders

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New York, NY

Benders
Mark Eric

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Editor/Copyeditor: Katherine Kahn
Cover Design: Mark Eric Williams & Katherine Kahn

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Published in the United States by Mark Eric Williams
ISBN: 978-0-9960354-2-2 (.Mobi - eBook)

www.MarkEricEntertainment.com

Dedication & Acknowledgements

To my mother, without whom there is no me. You have shown me unwavering support, love, and trust and I know just how lucky I am to have you for my mother. I love you.

To kat, without whom this project never gets off the ground, let alone finished. Your dedication and sacrifice to me and the project are what got it across the finish line. I love you.

To my grandfather, the only man that ever truly mattered in my life. I would not be the man I am today if not for you. Thank you for all you've done for me. I love you.

To my grandmother, you were my very best friend, and I miss you every day. I love you.

And to all those who have offered encouraging words of support and to those who doubted me at every turn, I thank you. You were the fuel that fed the fire.

Here's to the first of many. Enjoy!

~Mark

Book I: DISCOVERY

Chapter One

Tristan was running. He never really had to do much of that. He used to run in school when he was younger or when a grade may have depended on it but not recreationally. He never really saw the point, but he wished he had. He wished that he were in better shape because he was pretty sure his life depended on the sprints he was doing right now.

He didn't know the men chasing him. He didn't know why they were armed. He did know that they were relentless. They never seemed to tire or need rest, and they always seemed to know his next step no matter what trick he used. They also seemed unaffected by his abilities, and that bothered him—a lot. Throughout his life, Tristan could touch people with his thoughts to make them do whatever he urged them to do. His pursuers, however, somehow seemed immune. Once when his pursuers were close enough, Tristan had focused on trying to make them turn around and go back where they came from. Unfortunately, that proved unsuccessful. He vowed to himself that if he got the chance to urge these men to do as he wanted, his thoughts wouldn't be as harmless next time.

Tristan emerged from a thicket of bushes into an empty parking lot, wheezing and gasping for air. Ahead of him was a huge abandoned office building attached to an equally abandoned manufacturing warehouse. He was exhausted. He couldn't feel his legs, and the unseasonably warm late April temperatures had him drenched in sweat. Seeing the old manufacturing plant as a possible place to rest and maybe escape, he took off for the building with everything he had left. The pain in his side was excruciating, and his lungs were on fire. But he knew he couldn't go another long distance with them on his heels. He could hear them, the men. They were faint, but he could hear them.

He barreled into the office side of the neglected structure through the broken door, not sure which way to go. It was cavernous. He wiped the sweat from his brow, looked left, then right, and saw stairs leading up to the next floor. He chose to head upstairs. It had grown darker outside by the moment thanks to the sunset just minutes earlier. Even a partial search of this building would take them some time, hopefully enough time for him to gather his strength and make another run for it.

The second floor was a maze of empty offices and cubicles. Some still had desks, most didn't. Now just slightly wheezing from his marathon chase, Tristan walked as fast as he could down a long hallway hoping to find the least obvious hiding space. He entered a large room with more cubicles that looked like it may have been a call center. Still grasping for some kind of plan, he shuffled to the windows at the far end of the floor. The view beyond the broken glass made him smile a little.

Turning around, Tristan headed to a cubicle on his right and squeezed himself under its warped and moldy built-in desk to wait. He tried to calm his breathing. His pulse raced and pounded in his ears. *Who were these guys?* he thought and then nervously chuckled. That was the same question Newman kept asking Redford in one of Tristan's all time favorite movies.

Whoever they were, they'd be there soon. His deep breathing had slowed his heart rate, and he could finally hear more than just his pounding pulse. Now he could hear the dripping water that fell drunkenly throughout the structure. Tristan took stock of his surroundings. The room smelled dank and moldy, paint peeled in sheets from the walls, and the linoleum bubbled in the spots where the water slowly attacked. *Place must have been abandoned years ago*, Tristan thought. If these men were intent on killing him, this was not the place where he wanted to die. He leaned his head back, forced himself to come up with something, anything. When he saw a way out, Tristan fine tuned his plan, and waited.

What seemed like an eternity was no more than ten minutes when he finally heard their presence in the building.

He didn't know if someone he cheated out of a company or money sent these men. Was all of this revenge for doing a so-called business partner wrong? Had an enemy resorted to this level of madness since they couldn't get to him any other way?

Tristan knew he had played dirty pool more often than he had played cleanly in the realm of business. He had always known his karma was one day going to catch up with him. He just hadn't realized it would possibly come in the form of armed gunmen nipping at his heels. He had to fight back.

It was time to put his plan in motion. It was thin, but it was all he had. Resolved, he got to his feet in the ink black darkness of the room and slunk back towards the door. Not far from the room's entryway began a long shallow coat closet that ran the length of the wall behind a series of sliding doors. He tested the sliding door's track grateful for its silence and glanced in. It was just what he needed.

He figured the closet would be the first place they'd check when they eventually got to his room, but again it was all he had. He slipped into the closet space nearest the room's only door. The voices were audible now even though they were just whispers. With nothing to absorb sound, noise traveled well throughout the abandoned building. He couldn't make out their words, but he knew they were devising a way to search the building. He crouched down and again waited. They would get to his end of the floor soon enough. He just wasn't sure how many soldiers he would have to face.

Lieutenant Fisk and seven of his 16-man unit entered the abandoned building cautiously through the broken front entrance. The other men of his platoon were on their way. Fisk fanned his men out and had them thoroughly search the main floor. The group of soldiers silently went about their tasks like the trained professionals they were. When they reported no sight of the target, Fisk grew more frustrated. He was impatient with chasing a civilian. He wanted this done and finished tonight. He finally had his prey cornered and was ready to end the game of cat and mouse. The lieutenant split the group into two-men search teams. He directed Dutch and Memphis to scour the second floor and other teams to search the higher floors. Doing his best to cover every option, Fisk ordered a team to patrol the perimeter of the building while he and another soldier held down the cleared first floor.

“Great, its pitch black in here, and he could be in any one of these rooms,” Memphis said in a whisper.

“Quitcha bitchin’, and turn on your night vision,” whispered Dutch. The two men didn’t like each other much, which is why Fisk put them together. He hated discord amongst his men, and he felt the best way to iron that kind of friction out was to force them to work together. “Now move out and check every room top to bottom. He’s in here somewhere,” Dutch said.

Dutch was Fisk’s second in command and had been in service to his country since he was old enough to sign up twelve long years ago. He was a hardened, seasoned veteran whereas Memphis was young, impetuous, sarcastic, and flippant with authority but deadly talented with a gun in his hands. The two men had almost come to blows a few times since Fisk added Memphis the group.

Tristan could hear the doors opening as the men silently stalked down the corridor and searched every office. He swallowed hard. They were almost on top of him. *How were they moving so fast?* He couldn’t see his hand in front of his face, yet these men moved like it was high noon outside. *Who WERE these guys?* he thought and again chuckled nervously.

They were right outside the door now. Tristan peeked through the crack in the closet and could barely make out their silhouettes. Unless these guys had huge heads, they were wearing helmets, which was probably why Tristan’s ability had no effect on them. That could be the only possible reason. As Dutch walked into the room, Tristan readied himself. He knew he only had one shot at this, and he had to time it perfectly. When the second soldier silently slid past him and into the room Tristan slipped out into the darkness behind him and crouched down. As fast as he could, he leapt up and snatched the helmet off the trailing soldier’s head.

“Fuck!” Memphis yelled as he began to wheel around only to stop almost immediately.

“Memphis, what the fuck’s the matter with you?” Dutch yelled, but Memphis was already leveling his weapon at Dutch.

Like his training taught him, “You squeeze the trigger. You never pull it.” That’s exactly what Sgt. Memphis Stockburn did. A thunderous volley of bullets rang out, cutting Dutch down where he stood. Without any remorse, Memphis lowered his AR-15 and turned, completely at the mercy of Tristan, who stood right in front of him wearing a sheepishly grin.

“Thanks, Memphis,” Tristan said. “Sorry to do this to you, but better you than me. You know what to do, right?” he asked.

Memphis nodded his head. Tristan handed him back the night vision goggles, but he held on to the helmet. Once Memphis could see his way again, he headed stealthily back the way he and Dutch had come. Tristan knew the gunshots were already bringing the other men who were searching the building to his floor, and it would be only a matter of seconds before there was another firefight. He rushed towards the windows at the far end of the room and waited. As soon as he heard the gunfire and yelling, Tristan jumped out of the window and landed on the wide ledge he had eyed earlier. Gunfire again erupted below him on the first floor as Tristan climbed his way down from the overhang and dashed back into the woods once more. He never looked back.

Fisk glanced down at Memphis, who was splayed out at his feet, and feared he would find Dutch in much the same condition. He walked down the corridor with his men in close pursuit and called Dutch's name. Fisk hoped that first round of shots he had heard were because they had spotted the civilian. Granted their orders were to bring him in alive, but sometimes things happened in the field, things beyond one's control. Like him being forced to kill Memphis.

With every passing second Fisk resigned himself for the worst. When he arrived at the second floor room and smelled the gunpowder in the air, he knew his best friend was gone.

He didn't run. Experience had hardened him and taught him well. There was no need to rush. There was nothing he could do, and he knew it. When he saw Dutch almost cut in half, something snapped in him. This was now no longer just another mission. Whoever this person was, Fisk would not rest, would not stop, until he had him. He silently made that promise to Dutch.

"Bag him up," Fisk ordered. "Memphis too and let's go."

While his men got to work, Fisk stared out the window eyeing the dark woods in the distance. *You better run, motherfucker.*

Chapter Two

Mieko Jones hurried off the almost empty bus and started the one block walk towards her job at Techno City. She both loved and hated her job. While it was easy selling turntables, headphones, and assorted stereo equipment to the geeks and audiophiles that came streaming in, it bored the hell out of her. She had just gotten back into New York City last night, and she was exhausted. However she had promised Mr. Cunningham that she would be in today, and she always did her best to keep her word. She had been in Los Angeles for her grandmother's funeral. It had been a few years since she had seen her grandmother, but the two had spoken to each other at least once a week. Fighting back a wave of sadness, she considered how much she was going to miss talking to her. Mr. C had said she didn't have to come in today, but needing the distraction, she said she'd be in. The last thing she wanted to do was sit home all day crying.

Mieko was half Black and half Japanese, and she was beyond beautiful. She had a smile that could light up a city block, dimples included. But it took a lot for her to show them. She had a great sense of humor but usually kept that side of herself hidden. Her long flowing, jet-black hair reached her mid back. The hair was courtesy of her mother; her figure was primarily thanks to her dad's side of the gene pool. She had the kind of body that stopped traffic, turned heads, and drew every eye as if she were on fire. If she were the kind of girl that craved attention, her appearance would be a boon, but the attention annoyed her to no end. In her opinion, the only man worth his weight in salt was her father. The other members of his gender, with the exception of an awesome few, were stupid, mindless, and easily manipulated creatures. Not one alpha among them, and outside of her father she had yet to meet a man whose only goal wasn't simply to get her naked.

She turned the corner, grateful for the jacket she'd grabbed on the way out this morning. While it had been warm, surprisingly the whipping winds had a little bite for early May. She was so looking forward to summer.

When she crossed the street, she did her usual routine to prepare herself for the day ahead of pure geekdom. She stopped, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath before making her way the last 50 feet to Techno City. As she got closer to her store, she noticed parked illegally out front was the most beautiful piece of machinery she had ever personally laid eyes upon.

Even while leaning to its right, still, and silent, it looked like it was moving. Its black paint with pale red pearl highlights and accents screamed dangerous, and it took her breath away. She loved motorcycles, always had. Her dad, however, wouldn't even let her ride one, so she could forget about owning one of her own.

However she and her father had made a deal. She graduates from college, and she can have anything she wanted. She hadn't decided what that anything would be until now. She hungrily ate up every detail of the bike. This was definitely what she wanted. She had to remember to breathe.

What she wanted was a Suzuki Hayabusa, one of the world's fastest production motorcycles. She had read about the bike and seen pictures of it on the Internet, but she never thought she would see one up close. For some reason this dream machine was sitting in front of her store, and for the first time in a long time, Mieko was impressed. She couldn't imagine one of Techno City's customers riding that beautiful beast, but as she already knew, in NYC anything was possible.

With a sigh of infatuation for the Hayabusa, she walked into Techno City and as usual ran smack dab into Josh. He was so in love with her, had been from the very first day he was hired, and while he never said anything to her except "hi" and "bye" his feelings were painfully obvious. She did her best to walk that fine line of not breaking his heart but not leading him on either, so she was kinder to Josh than she was to most men. She chalked that up to his non-predatory personality. He was a lanky, geeky, pasty kid who stood about six foot two and weighed about 160 on a good eating day. It never mattered what time it was, he was always there to greet her at the door, and she hated that. It was like being greeted by a very happy puppy, one that couldn't wait to lick her face. His eagerness was one of his major drawbacks in her opinion, and she often wondered if he had her lojacked because he always seemed to know just when she would walk into the store.

"Morning Mieko," Josh said through a huge grin as he pushed his glasses back up his nose. "Welcome back."

"Hi, Josh. Thanks," she said as she flashed him a smile she didn't feel and skirted past him in order to keep the small talk to a minimum. Josh followed behind her.

Mieko was headed to the back of the store and the break room, when she saw Mike and detoured toward the sales counter to speak to him. He was the store's inventory specialist, and without him there would be no store. He was the brains behind the entire operation. Mr. C may have owned the store, but Mike "worked" it. He was busy counting boxes of turntable needles, clipboard in hand as usual. In her book, Mike was one of the coolest guys she knew, mainly because he didn't want anything from her. He never asked her out, and he never made any snide or lewd comments, that she knew of anyway. Maybe it was because he was exactly her height, five seven, and thought he didn't stand a chance. Or maybe he was gay. Either way, she still thought Mike was cool, and she had him down as one of those awesome few.

"Hey, Mike," she said with a genuine smile.

"Hey, Mieko," he said and held out his fist. She gave him dap. "I'm sorry to hear about your grams. You all right?"

"So far so good," she said while she put her bag on the counter and shrugged off her jacket. Josh stood to her right, leaning on the counter.

"How was your flight?"

"Long."

"Did you get a good movie?"

“No. Some shit I wouldn’t have paid to see in a million years.”

“Yeah, I hate that,” he said as he jotted down a number on his clipboard.

“Hey, whose bike is that outside?” she asked trying to sound casual. Mike smiled.

“It belongs to the new guy. Nice, huh?”

“As always Mike, you are master of the understatement. What new guy?”

“He’s in the break room,” Mike said as he started counting their stock of turntable belts.

Without another word, Mieko grabbed her bag off the counter, walked around Josh, and continued to the break room, leaving him in her wake. “Great,” she mumbled, “leave for a week and everything’s changed.” *Mr. Cunningham doesn’t have enough money to give me a raise, but he has enough money to hire someone new?* she thought to herself. Even though he was a sweetheart she always had the sneaky suspicion that Mr. C was full of it, and this just proved it.

She pushed though the plastic strips to the back room, trying to calm down. Her temper was legendary, and right now was not the time or the place to lose it. She turned right, picked up her time card, and punched in. She scanned for the new guy’s card but didn’t see one, which struck her as odd. She pushed through the door, where an “EMPLOYEES ONLY” sign hung with the most obnoxious font. That was there for the benefit of an ex-employee named Maria, who had a habit of bringing her boyfriends back into the break room to do “adult things.” Mieko had felt like there was truly a God when Mr. C had finally let the budding porn star go.

She stopped in her tracks the moment she entered the break room. Standing in front of the vending machines at the far end of the brightly lit space was “the new guy.” She watched unnoticed as he shook one of the temperamental contraptions. He was tall, about six-foot one, languid, and lanky. Not Josh lanky, she could see that the “new guy” had some meat on his bones, but he couldn’t be described as husky. He was bald and had the complexion of deep milk chocolate. With one hand on his hip, he gestured gently with the other, as if trying to reason with the vending machine. She couldn’t help but smile at the silliness of it all. She liked him already.

“Whatever you do, don’t hit it. You’ll just piss it off,” she warned. The new guy turned around to face the unknown voice of wisdom.

“Thanks for the advice. I was just about to smack it around a bit,” he said.

“I wouldn’t recommend it. Do that, and you’ll never get your Snickers.”

“Impressive, how did you know I was going for a Snickers?”

“What else could you possibly be going for? A PayDay?”

“Too many peanuts,” the new guy said as he crossed his arms.

“A Milky Way?” Mieko asked, placing her hands on her hips.

“Too boring.”

“A Mounds?”

“Way too much coconut.”

“A Twix?”

“Bite your tongue.”

“And my point is proven,” she said with a smirk.

In her opinion the new guy was kind of cute. He had warm eyes, a broad nose, and lips that weren't too bad, and Mieko had a thing for lips. Her friends called it a fetish, but she didn't see her “lip thing” as being something all that serious. The “new guy” was definitely okay on the eyes, though nothing exotic or over the top special. He had the kind of face that could get lost in a crowd. That was until he smiled.

“You should have been a detective or something, or at the very least working for a candy bar company somewhere,” he said with those dimples and that grin beaming. His entire face transformed into that of an eight-year-old boy whose cheeks you just wanted to pinch. His smile reached all the way to his brown eyes, and for that split second you wanted to smile just because he was.

His smile hit her like a punch in the chest. She looked away quickly, so he wouldn't see the flush of color that raced to her cheeks. While she wasn't exactly fair skinned, a blush was noticeable. She composed herself, and focused her gaze past him to the vending machine.

“Let's see if we can rescue your snack,” she said as she walked up next to him to try her hand. *He smelled really good*, she thought. She touched the right side of the machine about waist high, gave it a firm nudge, and a Snickers bar fell down into the retrieval bin. Mieko leaned over, her hair falling in a ripple of waves as she fished it out. Rising, she turned to the new guy, arm outstretched, candy bar in hand.

“Here you go, new guy,” she said.

“Thanks. It's Montgomery. Montgomery Atwood actually but everyone just calls me Monty,” he said as he accepted the candy bar.

“I'm Mieko.”

“I know.”

“How did you know?”

“Well, I've been here for four days now, and I've met everyone here, except you of course. I am sorry for your loss,” he said as his smile faded to gentle compassion. His eyes bore into her, and she saw something earnest in them.

“Thank you, Monty,” she replied quietly. “Hey, is that your bike out front?” she asked changing the subject as she took a few steps back to break the unanticipated connection.

“Yeah, that's my Sheba,” Monty said, breaking into a proud smile.

“Nice Hayabusa.”

“You know bikes?”

“I love bikes,” she gushed.

“Do you ride?” he asked opening his candy bar and taking a bite.

“Oh God no. My father would never let me.”

After he swallowed he replied, “That's too bad.”

“How fast have you had her up to?” Mieko asked eagerly.

“Two hundred and hanging on for dear life.”

“Where did you do that at?”

“Out on Long Island.”

“You did the run?”

“Oh, so you know about the run, huh? I thought you didn’t ride?”

“Just because I don’t have a baby doesn’t mean I don’t know how to change a diaper,” she reasoned.

“Good point. Yes, I did the run. Did it in 51 minutes and 23 seconds.”

Mieko was again impressed. The run was an urban legend to those who didn’t ride. To those that did, it was a rite of passage and a wager a seasoned rider couldn’t pass up. The rider takes off from Queens and rides as fast as their bike can take them to the tip of Long Island, out to Montauk, and back. Mieko knew of only one person making the run in less than two hours until Monty, or so he claimed. Most believed finishing the run in less than two hours to be impossible. She longed to know more, but she wasn’t about to let him know that.

“Bull!” she remarked and opened her locker, throwing her jacket and bag in before slamming it shut.

“Seriously, it won me twelve grand,” he said, almost nonchalant. “I almost killed myself in the process, but it was worth it I think.”

“You have no proof, so how am I supposed to believe you?” she asked.

“You want to ride bitch next time I go?” Monty asked.

“What did you just say?” demanded Mr. Cunningham who had just entered the break room.

“I asked her if she wanted a ride on my bike.”

“I thought I heard the word bitch,” Mr. Cunningham said, his brow furrowing, darkening his face.

“Relax Mr. C,” Mieko reassured him. “It’s just the terminology for someone who rides on the back of a motorcycle. He wasn’t calling me a bitch.” She turned to face Monty, “You weren’t calling me a bitch, were you?” she asked, suddenly acting indignant.

“I absolutely was not!” Monty exclaimed. Mr. Cunningham, however, looked like he was about to explode, but just as quick he calmed down and smiled. His sudden shift in attitude caught Mieko by surprise. The one thing Mr. C was notoriously known for was his quick temper and hard to calm manner. He was almost as bad as her. Once he got upset he usually stayed that way for days, which was why he was dealing with a bleeding ulcer and hypertension. Suddenly though, there he was smiling at the two of them like a proud parent on prom night.

“I see you two have met. Mieko this is Montgomery,” he said to her. “He’s new,” he whispered to her, like it was some big secret he didn’t want Monty to hear. Monty smiled, and Mieko couldn’t help but offer up a goofy grin herself.

“I didn’t see a time card for him, Mr. C. Did you forget to make one up for him?” she asked, figuring that was the case.

“Oh, Monty won’t be punching the clock. He sets his own hours, can come and go as he pleases. Working strictly on commission gives you that kind of freedom, ya know. But you, young lady, I assumed you’ve punched in already?”

“Yep, I’m on my way to the floor right now. Just have to put on my fashionable lime green vest,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll see you two kids out there,” he said almost giddy, completely missing Mieko’s sarcasm. “It’s going to be a great day. I can feel it,” he said and left the break room.

Shell shocked, it was a few seconds before Mieko was finally able to speak. “Okay, I am officially weirded out now.”

“Why?” asked a still smiling Monty after swallowing another bite of his candy bar.

“You don’t know Mr. C like I do. I’ve been here for two years, and he has never calmed down that quickly unless he was drinking, and it’s way too early for him to be dancing with the spirits,” she stated.

“He’s in a good mood. Can’t the man just be in a good mood?” Monty asked, his voice dripping with sincerity.

“Look, Mr. C wouldn’t recognize a good mood if it came up and sat in his lap. And you,” she said pointing a finger at him. “I feel sorry for you.”

“Why?”

“Working strictly on commission in THIS place? I sure hope you don’t need to eat or something crazy like that anytime soon. If we get five customers a day, it’s a banner day for us here at Techno City.”

“We’ll see. I’m pretty serendipitous, so you never know,” Monty said. Another bite of Snickers disappeared in his mouth.

“I know your name is Montgomery and all. But you don’t look Irish, and unfortunately, you’ll need that kind of luck working here.”

“Care to make a wager?” he asked.

“Sure, what’s the bet?”

“The bet is I finish the day with five hundred dollars in commissioned sales.”

Mieko chuckled at his outrageousness. “And just what are you willing to lose because you are definitely going to lose?”

“If I win, you buy me dinner. You win, and I buy you dinner. You name the place. Deal?”

“Deal,” she said. “We’re going to Keen’s Steakhouse.” She put on her vest and headed to the floor. “I can just taste that porterhouse right now. Good luck, Monty.”

“Same to you, Mieko,” he said still smiling. Then he swallowed the last of his Snickers as he admired her walk out the door.

For the rest of the day Mieke watched Monty work his magic on any and everyone who walked in, and people poured into the store. The only time the store was this busy was during the holidays, and today was a nice and sunny day in early May.

People arrived empty handed but left happily with all kinds of equipment. Everything from turntables, mixers, amplifiers, and subwoofers to racks, cords, and memory cards was moving out of the store. People vowed to come back and tell their friends as well. One guy even vowed to tell his brother about the store even though the two of them hadn't spoken in years.

Mr. C had a smile plastered on his face from ear to ear. Mike did his best to keep the stock on the floor replenished while Mieke took down information from customers who wanted items shipped. Josh appeared in over his head at times, but for the most part, he held his own.

The star of the show though was Monty. If someone came in looking for something they didn't have on hand at the time, he easily convinced them to try what was in stock. Surprisingly no one ever balked at any of his suggestions.

With the young guys he would talk sports. With the older gentlemen the topic of conversation would maybe center around jazz, and when the two older Italian women came in looking for something for their grandsons, Monty got wrapped up with them in discussing the differences between northern Italian cuisine and southern. Mieke marveled at how this Monty person could talk to anyone about any given topic and hold his own. And his smile was the deal sealer. Not that he ever needed it to close a deal. It seemed like no one ever told him no.

When there was a lull in the action, Monty stepped outside the store for a short break. Mieke grabbed the opportunity also. *Was he a smoker? Was that his one drawback?* she wondered, *because the guy just seems too good to be true.* When she stepped out onto the curb and spotted Monty, he had something in his mouth, but it wasn't a cigarette.

"What are you, a junky?" she kidded him. He was snacking on a Twizzler.

"Sort of. Candy is my crack," he answered.

"I thought you were a Snickers man."

"I am, but only when I'm craving nougat, peanuts, caramel, and chocolate. Any other time it's Twizzlers. Like the slogan says, they make my mouth happy," he said and smiled that champion smile of his.

"Cavities?" she inquired.

"Never, and don't go jinxing me."

"How's our bet going?" Mieke asked quickly changing the subject.

"You're about to lose," he said matter of factly.

"That's crap. I've been watching you. I've already lost. Haven't I?"

Monty offered her a Twizzler, but she declined. "It'll make your mouth happy," he said, waving the pack at her. She relented and took one.

"To answer your question, yes, you've already lost. Busy day today, is it always this busy?" Monty asked.

“Only during the holidays,” she answered.

“I never thought Memorial Day was that big of a deal,” he muttered to himself.

“Apparently it’s a huge gift giving holiday around these parts,” Mieko stated.

“Must be a Brooklyn thing,” he said which made her laugh. After she composed herself she asked where they were going for dinner on her dime.

“Gray’s Papaya.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am deadly serious. I love their hot dogs, and I haven’t had one in a while. Besides, a free one always tastes better than one you have to pay for, so that’s where we’re headed.”

“I hate their hot dogs! Can’t you pick another place?”

“No whining allowed. You lost, so you have to pay up.”

“Fine, when?” Mieko asked as she folded her arms across her chest and pouted.

“Let me know when you’ve scrapped together five dollars, and we can go,” he said with a wink and walked back into the store leaving her standing on the curb with an uneaten Twizzler in her hand.

About the Author

Mark Eric, an up and coming indie novelist, bursts into today's fictional landscape with a refreshing blend of realistic heroes within larger than life plots. He pours his creative energy onto the page in a way that both thrills and entertains as he infuses his stories with characters that become fond friends and dreaded enemies that beg to be destroyed.

Eric's writing career has spanned 20 years across multiple genres and media. Fans will be delighted with his range and unique tales. His dynamic multicultural casts reflect the rising demand in American entertainment for a richer, more diverse mix of age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Eric's first release, *Benders*, is contemporary fiction of a gifted young Black man being pursued by one of the country's most politically influential men. His second novel, *Charlie*, is set to release late 2014, and a collection of his poetry will be released Summer 2014. Two other novels are also in the works for 2015. Eric will be filling our traditional and digital bookshelves for years to come.

Equally passionate—if not fanatic—about both films and music, Eric shares his wealth of intelligence, humor, insight and layman reviews as an avid blogger. In addition, the NYC native is a fiery social advocate against racism and social inequality. While writing, he divides his time between the culture rich concrete jungle of NYC and quiet woods on the outskirts of Youngstown, Ohio.

To learn more, visit www.MarkEricEntertainment.com.

Coming Soon – Charlie

In his stunning second novel, Mark Eric tackles the intricate fabric and issues that surround America's Black Men in a way few have dared. This gritty yet poignant work follows Charlie as he navigates the dangerous waters that will take him from boy to manhood, while dealing with the expectations put upon his shoulders by those closest to him. Charlie will learn one way or another how to stand on his own two feet, and he'll realize that sometimes you choose the battle and sometimes the battle chooses you.

Visit www.MarkEricEntertainment.com to learn more about *Charlie*, which will be available late 2014.