

Writing Sample - Branching Narrative

CONTEXT

Writing sample for a visual novel dramedy.

SCENE

The player (Detective J) has started an affair with a coworker. Their late-night rendezvous have been caught on the department's CCTV. The player must convince frenemy Detective Lane to erase the footage before J's husband, Police Chief Brian, learns of the affair.

GOALS

- User Experience Goal: The agony of pleading for mercy.
- Player Goal: Convince Lane to erase the footage.
- Design Goal:
 - Allow players to choose between vulnerability or dignity.
 - Establish Lane as a potential threat.
 - Identify and raise stakes.

Note: Non-dialogue copy is presented as text narration to the player.

[MAIN PATH]

It's a busy Tuesday morning at the office. Administrators flit between offices carrying paper and mugs of coffee. I gulp down mine, praying drinks will clear the haze of the morning and sear away the crud of hangover. It doesn't.

KAREN, OFFICE GOSSIP: "Morning, Detective?"

PLAYER: "Have you seen Lane?"

KAREN: "I think I saw her at her desk, for once? She's usually around Sam's desk. Think they're dating? Brenda said she spotted them together over the weekend."

Oh Karen, if you only knew. Sam wouldn't go for a smarm like Lane. He'd rather go for someone who's professional veneer and marital vows dissolve with vodka.

That would be me.

Damn it, I need Lane's help to make sure Karen doesn't learn the truth.

PLAYER: "Thanks, Karen".

I right myself as I walk to Lane's desk. She's smiling to herself while feigning work. She spots me and I can see her picking her opening barb.

LANE: "Rough workout this morning?"

PLAYER: Sigh. "I can't win this morning, can I?"

Lane smells something amiss. Hopefully not the vodka.

LANE: "What's up? I don't normally have the pleasure of seeing your cross into my domain."

PLAYER: "I need your help with something... can we chat in private?"

LANE: "In private? Must be serious..."

CHOICES:

1. "Honestly, it's just something a bit embarrassing."
2. "Right. It's something serious."

1. "Honestly, it's something a bit embarrassing."

PLAYER: "I would rather not talk about it in the middle of the bullpen..."

I nod towards Karen.

[To Main Path]

2. "Right. It's something serious."

PLAYER: "I think it's best we discuss this elsewhere."

LANE: "Well, color me intrigued."

[To Main Path]

[MAIN PATH]

Lane smirks.

LANE: "Lead the way"

I lead her to the CCTV storage room. It's a cramped, musty, and poorly lit room with boxes of tapes and one largely untouched computer. Lane looks at me like a cat trying to figure out if I'm prey, a toy, or both.

LANE: "Care to explain why we're in the stuffiest room in the department?"

PLAYER: "I was in the office late last night."

LANE: "Working?"

PLAYER: "Not quite. I came back after drinks."

LANE: "Explains the smell."

PLAYER: "I went overboard with the drinks... might've done something a bit... unbecoming of an officer."

LANE: "Well, what?"

CHOICES:

3. "I brought someone back to the office."

4. "Nothing illegal.."

3. "I brought someone back to the office."

PLAYER: "Someone who wasn't Brian."

Lane's jaws drop in a mix of surprise and admiration.

LANE: "Wow, Detective J. Didn't know you had it in you. Well done."

[To Main Path]

4. "Nothing illegal..."

PLAYER: "The details aren't important, it's a personal matter."

Lane's usual smugness drops into exasperated disappointment.

LANE: "You're this cagey while asking for favors?"

[To Main Path]

[MAIN PATH]

Lane's shrugs.

LANE: "Well, who am I to judge? So what do you need my help with?"

PLAYER: "I think my indiscretion was caught on our cameras."

I gesture to the sole computer in the room. Lane and I know that the CCTV footage can only be expunged from this machine. Lane knows that I don't have access; she does. Lane's brows furrow in befuddlement but I can't tell if the confusion is genuine or if she's baiting a plea.

In either case, I have to beg.

PLAYER: "Could you erase last night's security footage?"

For the first time since I've worked with her, Lane turns stern.

LANE: "We're cops. You know that's a crime."

CHOICES:

5. "I know."
6. "Sounds a lot worse when you put it like that."

5. "I know."

PLAYER: "It's not right but I could use the help."

[To Main Path]

6. "Sounds a lot worse when you put it like that."

PLAYER: "... but I guess you're right"

[To Main Path]

[MAIN PATH]

LANE: "Good to know we're on the same page."

Lane's rubs her temple, as if to quell the competing voices in her head. My face flushes hot and cold with chaos, uncertainty, and last night's drinks. She sighs.

LANE: "I thought you were one of the good ones."

CHOICES:

7. "I messed up."
8. "Just this once. Please."

7. "I messed up."

PLAYER: "I just need some help cleaning up this mess."

[To Main Path]

8. "Just this once."

PLAYER: "Please."

[To Main Path]

[MAIN PATH]

[BRANCH #1] - if Player chose 3 ("I brought someone back to the office.")

LANE: "Alright, I'll do it. It's just another workplace affair."

[To Main Path]

[BRANCH #2] - if Player chose 4 ("Nothing illegal...")

LANE: "I can't do this without knowing what happened."

PLAYER: "Wait, I can explain—"

Lane has already started scrubbing through the footage from the past 24 hours. I freeze in terror and awe with how quickly Lane zeroes in the images of Sam and me in the break room. Lane's jaws drop in a mix of surprise and admiration.

LANE: "Wow, Detective J. Didn't know you had it in you. Well done."

LANE: "Alright, I'll erase the footage. It's just another workplace affair."

[To Main Path]

[MAIN PATH]

My lungs fill with relief.

PLAYER: "Thanks Lane."

LANE: "Just hang on for a bit, this should be easy enough..."

Lane leans over the computer, clicking and typing commands with an ease and familiarity. I stand waiting, sheepish, as a final confirmation prompt appears on the computer screen. Lane pauses and turns to me before

LANE: "Oh, by the way, if I'm going to do this I'll need something from you..."

LANE: "I need you to end things with Brian."