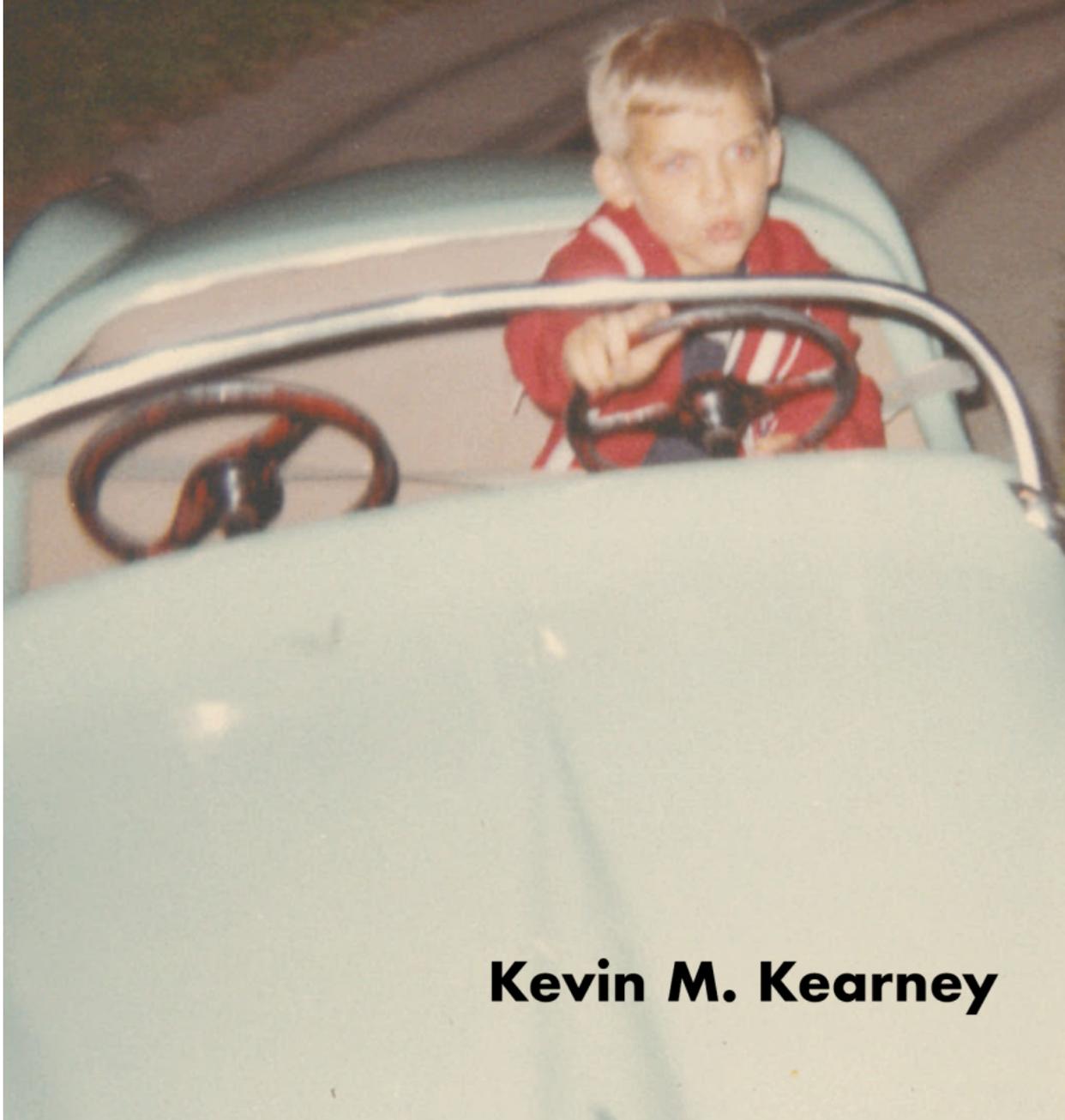


**New Fiction by Kevin M.
Kearney: Freelance**

FREELANCE

A NOVEL



Kevin M. Kearney

Excerpt from *FREELANCE: A NOVEL*

The HYPR Dryver Manual was clear: a Dryver should not, under any circumstances, touch a customer. Simon read and re-read the line on his phone, looking for an exception, something like a loophole that might help him remove the snoring man from his back seat.

They'd arrived at the destination two minutes earlier, but the man's eyes were still shut tight, his head still leaning against the rear window. "Excuse me," Simon said from the driver's seat. He glanced at the phone on the dash to double-check the man's name. "Thomas?"

The man coughed a few times, sounding like he was working through a winter's worth of mucus, but never opened his eyes. Drool ran down a gin-blossomed cheek. In the few weeks Simon had spent working as a Dryver, he'd had to deal with drunk people; getting shitfaced was one of the main reasons people called a HYPR. Before Thomas, though, that reality had never been a problem. None of his previous alcoholics had fallen asleep.

Simon considered checking HYPRPPL, the forum he'd been lurking on since starting the job, but he knew it would probably offer little help—its users tended to talk tougher than they acted in real life. If there were an answer, it'd be in the Manual. He tapped "Find in Page," typed "problem with a passenger," and watched as his phone jumped to a possible solution: "If you have a problem with a passenger and feel like you are in danger," it said, "contact the local authorities." Simon imagined calling the cops, the smirks on their faces as they jotted down his concerns. *This fat drunk scares you?*

He didn't need Thomas arrested; he just needed him out of the car. He needed to grab another fare. He needed to stop wasting time. "Thomas," he said again. "Ride's over." The man shook his head and rolled onto the headrest, slathering it with his

spit.

Simon returned to the wheel and stared at the crowded city just beyond his windshield, at the 2100 block of Market Street and its towering glass buildings. The people passing by his car were well-dressed. They were moisturized and manicured. They spent their days in cubicles, talking about slide decks and KPIs. He knew they couldn't relate.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and counted to 10. The day before he'd watched a YouTube video called "Calm Down QUICKLY" that suggested these techniques created positive delusions; even if things were spiraling, the woman in the video had said, controlling your breath would tell your brain all was well.

When he reached 10, though, he didn't feel any different. Thomas was still passed out and he was still stuck at the corner of 21st and Market. He would have to wait for the man to wake up on his own. He imagined the lame excuses he'd offer: something about a restless newborn at home, an early morning at the gym, a long and trying history of incurable narcolepsy. Simon gripped the steering wheel and took out some of his aggression on the worn gray rubber.

Some passengers left tips as penance for their bad behavior, acknowledgments that Simon's job was inherently shitty, that having to deal with this many people every day deserved more than what the algorithm paid. He wondered if telling Thomas about all the fares he'd missed out on while the man had been napping might subtly suggest one of these generous tips was in order. He knew that might be too soft, though. Maybe what the situation really called for was a threat. Thomas would be banned from the app—immediately, and permanently—unless he forked over a 50% tip. *No*, Simon thought, *go bigger*. It would have to be 60%. 50% sounded like a gamble, but 60% sounded assertive. 65% sounded even better. It would be 65%. The number was more arbitrary and, as a result, more official.

Now he just needed him to wake, then he would begin the blackmail. *Unfortunately*, he saw himself saying, *there's only one way out*. He looked at the man in the rearview. He was still out, but he began shifting in the seat, a move that Simon thought might be the early start of his entry back into the waking world. Instead, he let out a titanic fart.

Simon squeezed the wheel tighter, until his knuckles ached. He stared at the flesh between them, amazed at how his white skin turned even paler than usual.

Then his eye caught the Subaru logo. The horn. Of course.

He pressed hesitantly at first, worried he might startle one of the office workers on their way to lunch. The car let out a soft chirp and Simon eyed the rearview mirror, hoping to see the man's eyes creak open. It didn't work. In fact, Thomas looked rather peaceful in his newfound California King.

It would have to be harder. It would require some real force. Simon leaned all his weight into his palm and held it there, determined to get the thing screaming. He began working the horn like a mound of dough, kneading it into an atonal mess. He smiled as people on the sidewalk stopped and stared.

Thomas shot up in a panic, demanding to know where he was.

Simon pulled back from the horn. "2100 Market," he said. "Your destination."

"Good," Thomas said, and took a tin of mints from his breast pocket. He threw a handful in his mouth. Simon could see imprints of the headrest across his face.

"You were out for a while," Simon said. He was laying the groundwork for the tip. The man would feel guilty, indebted. "It ate a lot of my time."

The man stared at him for a beat. "And?"

"It cut into my other fares. I lost money." Simon decided he would go with 40%. It was the more reasonable number.

"That right?"

Simon nodded. "And as a result of your actions—"

"—sounds like a shitty business model," Thomas said, cutting him off. He left the car without another word, slamming the door behind him.

Simon took a deep breath and started counting to 10. He saw the woman from YouTube encouraging him to find the origin of his breath, to locate it deep within his chest and hold it there.

"Always, always, *always* place courtesy and hospitality above everything else," the HYPR Dryver Manual said. He knew he would need to disregard Thomas's words. He knew he could not afford to be in a bad mood for the next passenger. He would forget the entire experience. He needed to.

Simon's phone vibrated in its dashboard holster. He assumed it was a notification from HYPR, an offer for a new passenger, an opportunity to make more money. The woman from the YouTube video would've told him to ignore this, to tune out the rest of the world until his brain was at peace, but he didn't need to be Zen, he just needed to be calm. Calm enough. Calm enough to drive without jeopardizing any more fares.

The notification was from HYPR, though there was no mention of a new passenger. "Your Dryver Score has been updated!" the app informed him. For all his efforts with Thomas, he'd been awarded a single star. It had been the confrontation, he knew. If he had kept quiet, if he had just waited for the man to wake up on his own, he wouldn't be dealing with a tanked average.

He put the phone back in its holster and took another deep

breath. This time, he decided, he would count to 100.

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