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### **Coffee Breaks**

At the end of a trying day, Jimmy pushed back the damnable hood and sat hard on the concrete stoop in front of the Fredricks Apartment building. Sweat poured down his forehead and into his eyes, stinging. These blasted suits were like having on a walking sauna. The heat of a Kansas summer afternoon stretched his nerves till they were twanging like guitar strings too tightly wound. He could hear his own emotions humming in his ears, fighting with the cacophony of honking horns, screaming somewhere close by, and a child yelling back at his mother inside the building.

“I don’t have to tell you where I been,” the voice shouted. Its owner sounded young, maybe ten or eleven years old, to Jimmy. He put his fingers in his ears, so he didn’t have to hear the mom’s screaming reply.

Moments later, the boy came slamming out of the front door and joined Jimmy on the stoop.

“You here again, man?” the child asked. It was Marco, a ten-year-old he had met many times before when servicing this god-forsaken building.

Jimmy only grunted. He had no energy left for conversation.

“That guy in 12D needed a whackin’” Marco announced. “That creep was selling the worst dope ever, mixed with all kinds of crap. My cousin, Danny, almost died from that crap.”

Jimmy lifted his tired head to gaze into Marco’s shining black eyes. The boy was an opiate addict at ten. His mother ran heroin regularly. All this he knew from listening to curious neighbors on his coffee breaks. He had made business friends with several residents, he was here so often. Fredricks was on 32<sup>nd</sup> and Prospect – smack dab in the notorious Washington-Wheatley area. More murders and violent crimes in this area, per capita, than any other in Kansas City. The Kansas side anyway.

Marco’s smirk irritated Jimmy today.

“G’on,” he said. He waved his hands at the kid in a shooing motion. “Not today, boy.”

Jimmy wrestled out of his Servpro Hazmat suit. His Servpro t-shirt stuck to him, wet with his sweat; his slacks were almost gooey. He reeked and longed for a hot shower. Besides his perspiration, he could smell the chemicals he had used to clean up the blood, semen, and brain matter he had found all over apartment 12D. Not a professional execution job, for sure. Somebody with a grudge, a big gun, and probably a hatchet had taken Clifford Allman out of this world.

His job paid an amazing amount for a high school dropout. He had been able to move from his poverty-driven area to Johnson County last year. At twenty-seven, he felt he was moving up in the world. Though thoughts of where he could go from here had him at a loss. His girlfriend, Diana, said he should get his GED and then go on to take business at the community college. She had graduated from hygienist school two years ago and when they moved in and shared their incomes, things had gotten very comfortable.

“I hate school,” Jimmy said now under his breath, thinking of Diana’s nagging again last night.

“Ditto,” Marco said.

“Get away from me,” Jimmy laughed, the cooling evening air starting to mellow his mood.

Marco sat down instead and lit up a wrinkled cigarette he had pulled from his hoody pocket.

“Was there lots of gore?” he asked Jimmy.

Jimmy ignored him. He was forbidden to discuss cases with the neighbors. And he was for sure not going to describe that horror to a child. He pulled his cigarette out of his armband and lit it, sucking in deep pleasure. Then he hacked for a few minutes. This always happened when there was more than an hour between ciggies. He sounded like an old man, his lungs wet and full. He spat across the sidewalk and hit the curb.

“Nice,” Marco pronounced. He then chugged up a wad himself, aimed, and spat it about a foot farther than Jimmy’s disgusting offering.

This made Jimmy laugh and pat the kid on the back. He noticed how Marco dogged him whenever he found him in the building on a break. The office called them coffee breaks, but they were really smoke breaks. Get me out of here before I lose my mind breaks, Jimmy called them. He was allowed two “fifteeners” a day. He usually used them both up before lunch. His half-hour lunch break was spent on a stoop or in the truck eating out of a paper bag. And smoking —thus, the coughing fit.

He had told Diana about Marco and she had decided, never even meeting the kid, that he was looking for a father figure. Some father figure, Jimmy thought. His mind started wandering to his job again. The nasty daily grit of it. The uncomfortable suits, the harsh chemicals he employed, the frightening parts of town that made up his “zone”. Like waiters had certain tables they were assigned, Servpro allotted certain neighborhoods to staff after their training was completed. The trainers took newbies to the richer homes and businesses, not wanting to scare anyone away. They also tried to get a good mix: some murder sites, sure – but also chemical spills, fire extinguisher clean-ups, and flood repairs.

They asked a lot of questions and listened to their new employees, watching for signs of the ones they could send to Washington-Wheatley and the like. His supervisor, Denny Morrison, had treated him like a prima donna. He gave him a lot of praise and pats on the back. So much so, Jimmy thought at first that he was gay. He figured it out when his permanent assignment was revealed. Denny had been softening him up for the slaughter. He had not complained, however, because twenty bucks an hour was gold to someone of Jimmy’s background. He would have *eaten* blood to make that much money in the beginning. Four years ago.

His sigh was long, drawn out, and dramatic. Marco glanced over in concern but said nothing. He looked just like a puppy, hoping everything is all right with “daddy” so there still might be a treat in store.

You wouldn’t look at me like I was your hero if you knew me, kiddo, Jimmy thought.

Again, his mind went to the path his employment had taken him.

At first, Denny had remained close, but he was promoted and replaced by a slithery guy named Sharky Mulligan eighteen months ago. Sharky was his nickname; if he had a real first name, he wasn’t sharing. He was a moody, middle-aged guy that mumbled when they spoke. He would never look Jimmy directly in the eye. His gaze would move around Jimmy’s head like he was looking for his lost comb or something. His eyes would move up to look at the sky, to the left, at a building maybe, then back to Jimmy’s forehead. All while mumbling orders for the day.

Mumbling, until that one strange evening six months ago. Sharky had been waiting for him when he brought his truck back at day’s end for restocking, refueling, and washing. These were tasks he usually completed, but that day Sharky told him the maintenance guy, Al, would do it for him.

“Wanna go for a beer?” Sharky had asked.

Jimmy had hemmed and hawed, repulsed by this man. He gave him some story about needing to take his girlfriend out to dinner as promised.

“This won’t take long,” Sharky insisted. “Give her a call and I’ll meet you at Docs.”

Docs was a dingy dive around the corner from Servpro – right across the street from the police Crime Lab. To think about that made what happened next even eerier.

After a beer and ten minutes of small talk, Sharky got to it. He leaned across the table and his words were low but clear as a bell.

“Want to earn some extra flow, kid?” he asked.

Jimmy stared at this unappetizing individual and gulped. This did not sound good. He was, however, planning to ask Diana to marry him and needed a big diamond to wow her. Wowing Diana was his life’s ambition.

“How?” he ventured. He kept his eyes drilling into Sharkey’s, who returned the look with an intensity that surprised Jimmy.

“Easy,” he said, “all you gotta do is keep your ears and eyes open in your zone.”

Jimmy nodded for him to continue when the pause went on too long.

“Yeah, just listen for information that might be helpful to me and my colleagues.”

“What kind of information?”

“Oh, just neighborhood talk, you know. Like, who the real rats in the area are. Who is dealing what; who has a bad reputation even with the dope heads...things of that nature.”

Jimmy nodded as if this was perfectly reasonable, all the while his mind screaming reasons Sharky might want this information. Was Sharky dealing dope and wanted to know about the competition? And who were his colleagues? Did he mean his superiors at Servpro? That didn’t seem likely. Sharky was not a beloved employee.

“Why?” he asked.

“You let me worry about why,” Sharky snapped, his eyes starting to flit around like usual.

“How much money are you talking about?” Jimmy asked.

“For every name that checks out, \$100. If you can tell me their address and when they will be home and that checks out \$200.”

Jimmy whistled; he couldn't help it. He heard lots of names during his rounds. And usually, they were in the building he was servicing. Finding out their regular routine would not be that hard. He was worried about the who's and why's still. But looking at Sharky, he knew not to ask more questions.

That was how he started his making an extra \$300 to \$500 a month extra! This was riches beyond his most narcissistic dreams.

However, he began noticing something. All the men, and one woman, he had given to Sharky lived in his Zone. He realized that not long after he reported them, he would come to work and find himself driving to their building. To clean up a murder. In their apartment.

Murders of the very people he had reported to Sharky.

They were not professional hit jobs, but like the one today, they were gruesome. As a matter of fact, today had been one of the people he had just turned in as a bad egg. No wonder he was feeling all dark and out of sorts.

Marco was staring at him with eyes that seemed to guess things he *could* not know at his age. He shoved the kid in the middle of his chest, lightly. He smiled at the irresistible boy. His dark curly hair hanging over his eyes made him appear angelic. How would he make it to

adulthood with a mother like his? He had heard all about Janine, the mom, and Marco from the elderly woman in 10C. Janine was unequipped to raise a child. When she was alert enough to even notice him, she just screamed at him. Marco rarely went to school, and she never responded to the school or the police when they came around asking about the boy.

The poor kid was already addicted to Hydro's he managed to cadge off the street. He had started running mule for different dealers to get his daily high. Janine kept a death grip on her heroin, or he might have tried that.

"I've warned you not to mess with that heroin," Jimmy said to him now. He almost sounded angry.

Marco started. Jimmy had told him not to mess with his mom's drug of choice about two months ago. He looked surprised to hear it repeated today.

"No worries," Marco promised. "I see what it does to mom."

Jimmy nodded approvingly to him. He suddenly realized that when he had initially said that to Marco is when the kid had started haunting him after work.

A dark idea surfaced in Jimmy's head. A dark, but a good idea.

"Look, kid," he offered, "you ever find yourself alone, needing someplace to stay or something, you mention me to any adults that are asking if you have relatives. OK?"

"You a-a-ain't no relative," the boy stuttered.

"Yeah, sure," Jimmy calmed him. "But you told me your mom was all you had."

Marco nodded this time. Other than his smack-driven mom, he was alone in the world. Unless you counted the grandmotherly woman in 12C.

Jimmy decided that should not be so. This would be the last time he would give Sharky a name. He would look for another job, first. As soon as the colleagues reacted, he would change jobs – but give a forwarding address and phone so he could be found.

He would pick the ring up tomorrow and pop the question this weekend. And he would get that GED and go to business school. He mussed Marco's hair affectionately as he stood and sort of skipped to the truck. He found himself whistling as he headed back to base and Sharky. Life was looking better and better.

And, after all, Diana would make a great mom.