

“Can we come in?” the shorter detective said. He flashed his badge.

“Yeah, sure.” Joe opened the door wider and pushed trash off the sofa. “Sit down. Cops, huh?”

“Yeah. I’m Detective Bricker,” replied the taller one, “and this is Detective Herren. Now, Joe, let’s talk about last night. You called to report a scream and a body in the alley, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I sure did.”

“Thanks,” the taller policeman said. “Now, your name is Joseph, right?” Joe nodded. “Your last name? Your occupation?”

“Heddle. Joe Heddle. You mean what kind of work I do?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I--uh--I help Riley. I sweep. I wash the floor. Sometimes he lets me paint.”

“Who’s Riley?”

“The super.”

“The janitor?”

“I guess.”

The detectives exchanged glances. Joe ran his hands over his sweaty face, rocking back and forth a little. A skinny guy in early middle

age, his face bore scars of untreated acne. But his hair, clothes, and hands were clean. He grinned happily as he took the straight chair across from them.

“What did you do from the time you got off work until you heard this scream?”

“Took a shower and brushed my teeth. Then Henry took me to the pasta place. Henry, he’s my brother. I like the pasta place.”

“And when you got home?”

“I watched TV until the news. Then I turned it off to go to bed.”

“That’s when you heard the scream?”

“Yeah. I was standing there--” He indicated the door to the bedroom.

“Did this scream sound like a man or like a woman?”

“It was a guy, like this. Owoooo--” He demonstrated with a long ululating cry.

The corners of Bricker’s mouth twitched. “What did you do then?”

“I was getting ready to go to bed. I had some of my clothes off. I went and looked out the window.”

“The bedroom window?”

“Yeah.”

“Show us this window.”

Joe's apartment, behind the elevators, contained a kitchen, living room, bathroom, and bedroom, all tiny. He led them to the bedroom window. They looked out. The alley was paved with bricks and had trash dumpsters in it.

"Tell us what you saw, Joe," Herren said.

"A dead body in the alley. I called as soon as I saw it."

"We know. You're a good citizen, aren't you?"

Joe smiled broadly this time. "I sure am."

"How did you know it was dead?"

"I dunno. Wasn't it?" His forehead creased.

"Yeah, it was. Do you know who the victim was?"

"I heard it was old Pickens. He complains all the time."

"You didn't like him?"

"Nah."

Bricker took over. "OK. What happened then?"

"There was a guy stooping down."

"How do you know it was a male?"

Joe shrugged and shook his head. "Bad guys are male."

"What did he do then?" Bricker asked.

"He stood up and ran to the building."

"Then what?"

“I couldn’t see him anymore.”

“You know where he went?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Where?”

“In the little door.”

They all went down to the alley. The victim had been stabbed multiple times. An ambulance had taken the body away earlier.

“There oughta be more blood,” Bricker noted. “Guess the rain washed a lot of it away.”

“Yeah, probably,” Herren said. “Now Joe, will you show us where the perp was when you last saw him and this little door you say he went in?”

“There, that door. He ran there and I couldn’t see him anymore.” He pointed out the rusty metal door where coal had been dumped into the coal bin back before they converted the boiler to gas.

The policemen examined it. One said, “You’re sure about that? There’s no blood on it, and it doesn’t look like it’s been opened in years.”

“Uh-huh, the bad guy went in there. He did.” Joe nodded several times.

“OK, let’s have a look at it from the inside.

Joe unlocked the coal bin. He didn't mind doing it when the police were there, but he didn't like the basement, the boilers, the tangle of pipes under the ceiling, the spider webs and, most of all, the old bin.

It had no window, and the light didn't work anymore, but one of the detectives pulled out a flashlight. "Nothing here," he said after looking around, "but a bunch of dust."

They could tell Joe was slow, so they didn't get angry at not finding anything, just thanked him and gave him a card with a number to call if he thought of anything else.

Two weeks later, Joe heard screams and called 911 again. This time the police found an elderly woman dead and covered with blood in the alley. Oddly enough, it rained that morning, too.

By the time CSU arrived, a faint trail of blood still led to the rusty door, but again it seemed not to have been opened, and the bin was empty. The police started suspecting Joe, but he didn't realize it until they asked if they could search his apartment. Of course he let them. They found no evidence to support an arrest. He did say he didn't like the most recent victim either. She bossed him around. But you can't get a warrant just on heresay.

Another week went by. One morning Riley told Joe he had to be out all day, and that he should keep Tiff with him. Tiff's name was really Tiffany, after Riley's ex. "Both bitches," he would say, "but Tiff is less of a one." He ordered Joe to sweep the basement and dust the boiler pipes that day.

Joe's brothers paid for his apartment, but working for Riley gave him spending money. He had to do what the super told him if he wanted to walk down to the fried chicken place for supper most evenings.

He got the push broom and dustpan and long-handled duster, put his hat on to keep his hair clean, and then called the black and white mongrel to follow him.

The basement smelled bad, like poop. The coal bin door hung open. He dusted the pipes and did a quick job of sweeping. Tiff had wandered off. He called her. He wanted to get out of there.

The dog didn't come. He stood near the open door of the bin and begged her. Still she didn't come. Riley would fire him if anything happened to Tiff, and Joe himself would cry.

He found a flashlight on Riley's workbench and turned it on. He aimed it through the coal bin door but couldn't see anything. He heard a whimper. She might be hurt. He went all the way in.

The door slammed behind him. The basement was quiet except for lock tumblers falling into place. Tiff wandered around from the other side of the bin, sniffed at the bottom of the door and trotted upstairs to wait for Riley.

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