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NICK GRANT PACED inside the yellow police tape, watching firemen drench what was left of the smoldering roof of his father's house. A blonde reporter from the local CBS affiliate elbowed her way through the crowd and waved a microphone in his face just as paramedics appeared, rolling a black body bag down the cobblestone driveway. Grant jostled her aside, burst past a group of police, and tugged on the zipper of the frayed bag, exposing a woman's contorted and charred face. He squeezed his eyes shut as he collapsed to the pavement, dizzy and nauseated.

Moments later, two firemen carted another stretcher down from the second floor to a waiting ambulance. A tiny face, obscured by bandages and an oxygen mask, peeked out from a gray blanket. Grant gasped for air as he struggled to his feet. A lanky man with a medicine-ball paunch and FIRE CHIEF emblazoned across the back of his coat grabbed Grant's arm. "One of my men will take you to the hospital," he said, pointing to a white Chevy parked by the curb, its colored lights flashing in staccato fashion. "You'll get there right behind the ambulance." The

fire chief shot a quick glance over at a silver-haired man hunched against a massive oak tree. "I'll have the medics take a look at your father when they're done here."

"What about my wife?" Grant asked, watching her body being loaded into the first ambulance.

"The coroner wants her taken up to the morgue," the fire chief replied, pointing to a stubby man with a pronounced chin. "It's normal procedure when we suspect arson."

"Arson?" Grant repeated, his eyes widening.

"My men just found another badly burned body in the basement. Do you know who that might have been?"



The emergency room physician in charge at Riverside Hospital had ordered a Code Yellow as soon as he got the report from the paramedics. They rushed Billy Grant into the resuscitation room and examined his nose and throat for signs of soot. A nurse took a laryngoscope from the drawer, turned on the attached light, and explored his upper airway. At the same time, two other nurses removed gauze the medics had applied, broke the blisters on the second-degree burns, and pasted Flamazine on the leathery gray surface. After assessing Billy's weight and the magnitude of the burn area, they hooked up two IV's of Ringer's lactate to compensate for the loss of body fluid which had seeped through his skin.

Nick Grant's father had been taken upstairs for observation, so Nick waited alone in the corridor outside the room where they were working on Billy, not budging from his chair by the water fountain. Finally the door opened and an orderly, flanked by two nurses, rolled a stretcher

into the hallway. "Where are you taking him? How is he? Where's the doctor?" Grant fired off in rapid clips.

"He's doing fine," the younger nurse replied with a tentative smile. "We're taking him to an isolation room in the Intensive Care Unit."

Grant sat at the end of the bed, his lean six-foot-two frame covered by a blue mask, cap, and barrier gown as he watched Billy breathe with the help of a ventilator. Grant didn't know much about burns, but he knew it was bad. He was relieved, in a way, that he couldn't see under the gauze wrapped around Billy's arms and head, which gave him the look of a mummy.

Saturday had been Billy's eighth birthday and was to have been the day of his first softball game. Grant had stopped by Sports Authority to buy him a new glove before picking up his father at the office. Grant, Marcy, and Billy had moved in with his father while their turn-of-the-century house on Olentangy Boulevard was being renovated. Now, barely two days later, his wife was dead, his son was in the Intensive Care Unit, and his father was being treated for shock one floor above.

"Sorry I'm late. I was operating," Dr. Myers explained as he pulled the cap off his head, exposing a curly mass of white hair. "Things are looking better. We've been in touch with the skin bank up in Akron and we're number three on the waiting list."

"For what?" Grant asked, furrowing his brow.

"Fresh skin. It's better than frozen," Myers said. "It lessens the likelihood of infection and stops protein and electrolyte loss. But it's not easy to get people to donate. Scares them," he said. "Much easier for them to tick the box to give their organs."

Grant gripped his jeans, trying to make his hands stop trembling as the doctor went on. "They've given Billy systemic and oral antibiotics, but my big worry is pneumonia. He's more susceptible because of the smoke damage."

"Are you sure he's getting enough painkillers?" Grant asked.

"That's a fentanyl drip," Myers said, pointing to a bag of liquid hanging from a shiny metal post. "It's more potent than morphine. We've also sedated him with midazolam. Believe me, he can't feel a thing."

"Then why is he wincing?" Grant said, his own body stiffening.

"It's just a spastic movement, a reaction to the drips," Myers replied, not bothering to look back. "Nothing to worry about."

Grant took a deep breath. "Level with me, Doctor. How does it look?"

"Mr. Grant, you can never tell with burn victims, but I'd say he's almost out of the woods."

ANGELA FERRARO PARKED her rusted Ford Escort next to a dumpster behind the Bluebird, a dilapidated two-story motel on Broad Street in the Bottoms, a decaying section of Columbus. She thrust her bony hip against the car's warped door several times, until it finally closed, and then meandered through a motley assortment of jeeps, pickups, and motorcycles to the employees' entrance. She fumbled in her purse for her gold-plated cosmetics case and applied a plum-colored blush to her already-prominent cheekbones, and a thick band of glossy lipstick, first to her upper lip and then to her lower one, before smacking her lips together several times. Then she yanked her dress down over her thighs and headed up the cement stairs.

A balding man in a white short-sleeved shirt stood behind a scratched Plexiglas shield at the front desk, which doubled as a cashier's stand for the coffee shop. "You're almost a half hour late," he complained as he doled change out to a customer.

"I had car trouble," Angela replied.

"Look, honey, I can't keep covering for you," he said,

closing the cash register. "They pay me to be a manager, not a cashier."

"I'm going to get it fixed after I get my next paycheck. I promise."

"That's what you said last week." He pulled his cash drawer from the register and moved aside as Angela put hers in its place. "I'll take my drawer over to the office and we'll balance everything when you're finished your shift."

A wiry, hard-eyed man with pale skin and a face mottled with broken veins sat alone at a corner table, finishing a late breakfast and the last of his coffee. He dropped a few coins on the table for the waitress, stood up, and headed for the front desk. When he saw Angela counting out some bills from her register, he knocked on the inch-thick glass. "Angela, when we goin' out?"

"Bones, we've been through that before," she said, rolling her eyes.

The man's face reddened as he yanked on his drooping earlobe. "First of all, it's not Bones—it's Jimmy! I've told you that a hundred times," he blurted out. "Second of all, I don't like to be turned down."

"It's not going to happen," she said, picking up the bill he slid under the glass. "Don't you have anything smaller?"

"What you mean is you're still not sure," Jimmy Rosa said, replacing the fifty with a ten. "Well, I'm still waitin'."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, counting out his change and sliding it back to him.

He pushed his hand under the partition and grabbed for her hand, but she managed to pull it away. "So, what do you say? When can I call you?"

She stared down at the cop in his baggy suit and bulky

black shoes. "I don't have a cell phone," she said. "And if I did, you still couldn't call me."

Rosa cocked his head back and gave her a lopsided grin. "Yeah, sure. That's what you say now, but we'll see down the road. Anyway, a fine lady like you needs someone to look after her. Know what I mean?"

"I don't need you or anyone else to take care of me."

"We'll see, Angela," Rosa said, scraping his teeth back and forth. "We'll just see."



A black Lexus sedan straddled two parking spaces behind the motel. A heavysset man, leaning against the car, popped a stick of gum into his mouth and crushed it between his yellowed teeth. He kept his deep-set eyes fixed on the exit. Angela Ferraro backed out of the doorway, carrying a large plastic bag.

"Let me help you with that, miss," he said as he approached her.

She looked up, recognizing the man in a gray silk suit who had been sitting at a front table in the coffee shop for the last week. "I can handle it," she said, quickening her pace. One of her high-heeled shoes caught in a deep crack and she tripped, causing her laundry to spill out of the bag and onto the pavement.

"You should have let me carry it," the man said, stifling a laugh and offering her his flabby hand.

"I don't need any help," she blushed, reaching for her shoe and the heel that had popped off.

"My name is Tommy Castellano," he said, tightening the knot of his striped tie. "I understand you're looking for work."

"I have a job, Mr. Castellano. Right in there," she said, pointing to the run-down motel.

"I'm talking about work that pays real money."

"Has Bones been giving you an earful?" Angela asked, stuffing her clothes back into the bag.

"Let's just say I have my sources," Castellano said, fingering a deep scar under his sagging chin.

"You don't know anything about me."

"Well, for one thing, aside from having great legs and a killer smile, I know you been in town for a couple of months. And I know you were living up in Toledo before that." He unwrapped another stick of gum and jammed it into his yawning mouth. "Word has it you had a bit of a problem up there—part of a Ponzi scheme that blew up and cost you fourteen months in the slammer."

"Who have you been talking to?" she asked, beads of perspiration forming on her forehead.

"And you're just working this dump 'cause you know that's where some of the wiseguys hang. So I figure that means you're looking for a sugar daddy, or work—and I don't figure you for a hooker."

"Is that what Bones told you?"

"Rosa's a worm. I've seen the way he comes on to you."

"I did my time," Angela said as she edged over to her car. "I'm straight now."

Castellano scanned the parking lot and moved in closer—close enough so that Angela could smell the whiskey on his breath. She backed up a step and felt the sun's heat from her car door on the back of her leg.

"You know you can do better than that half-double you live in," he said, referring to one of the many small attached houses in the Bottoms.

The Window Washer

“You know where I live?” she asked, her big green eyes widening.

“Two-twenty McDowell,” he said, exhaling into the hot, stale air. “Not bad for the Bottoms, but that’s not saying a lot.”

“So how much more has that prick Bones nosed into my private life?” she snapped.

“It wasn’t Rosa,” Castellano said. “Look, I think we’re off on the wrong foot. Why don’t you just hear me out?”

“Hear you out about what?” she said, her hands planted on her slender hips.

“About a job. It’s cream puff. Only a few hours a day—and it’s a shitload more than what you’re making in this dump.”