

Dead Season

They stepped out back and into the snow. The light eventually flickered on after them, reflecting a yellow circle on the side of a dark green dumpster. They huddled next to each other behind it, finding a little protection from the wind. Bill lit a menthol, cupping the flame and extending it to Joey. The younger man lit his own cigarette and pulled away.

Bill flipped the Zippo closed. “Goddamn,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “If I have kids—God forbid—this is why I’m gonna tell them not to smoke. Not because of lung cancer or all that bullshit. Because they’ll look like assholes in the winter.”

Joey laughed. “At least they’ll get breaks. You think any non-smoker gets to just take five minutes while on the clock?”

“You think any non-smoker would do it outside right now?”

Joey sighed, a spear of smoke shooting from his lips. Another gust of wind tore along the back of the building, sending a flurry of flakes spinning up at them. Bill could feel his jaw tremor, despite being tightly clamped shut.

“So,” Joey said, “any pointers?”

“Nervous?”

“Not really. I mean, I’ve bartended before, but not in a night club.”

“Forget everything you’ve learned, then,” Bill said, taking a drag. “This ain’t like real bartending. You don’t entertain your customers. You don’t shake a martini and carefully measure the vermouth and lovingly strain the gin in hopes of impressing your client into giving you a fat tip. Or a phone number. This is all about speed—you’ve got a crowd six-deep around the bar, yelling at you the whole time because the music is too damned loud and everyone

around them is too damn loud. Put your head down and sling drinks. Get to the next guy quick, because you're averaging about a dollar every three or four people. Know your shit because half the time they have no idea what they want, and I'm half certain they ain't got a clue about much else, either."

"Jesus, Bill," Joey said, dropping his cigarette into a snow pile. "Jaded much?"

Bill snorted. "Eventually, the whole damned industry gets to be a little too much."

"Well, the money's good. Right?"

"Only when you get to the end of the night," Bill replied, scraping his cigarette on the bottom of his boot. He flicked it into the dumpster. "That's the only time it feels worth it. As long as you don't think about rent, the money is fine."

Bill opened the door and Joey followed him in. They shrugged off their coats and hung them up. Joey flicked off the outside light. The kitchen of the club was too warm, the smell of fried bar food thick and heavy.

"Well, I'm just glad to be getting some more experience."

"Yeah," Bill said, turning on the sink to wash his hands. The water felt scalding on his trembling fingers. He pulled down some paper towels and quickly dried off. He looked at Joey and smirked, watching as the kid practiced a flashy move with his shaker tins. Bill remembered his first trick—he could flip the cup over his fingertips to balance lightly on his knuckles before dropping it down to scoop up some ice. It always impressed the black ties and mink stoles he used to serve at the country clubs. Outside on the dance floor, the music began to pulse as the night shift began.

"You want some real advice, Joe?"

“Hit me.”

“Stock up on Bud Light,” Bill said as he walked out into the club. “We’ve got ten other beers on special, same fucking price. But it’s the only goddamn thing these kids’ll order.”