

IT ALL STARTED AT THE COFFEE HOUSE

By Liane Fazio

The morning rush ended at the coffee house and the only patrons left were two stay at home moms sitting together, complete with strollers in the aisles, a middle-aged woman typing away on her laptop at a single bench seat near the restrooms, and Ethan, working remote and starting his day with an overpriced salted caramel with an espresso shot.

Ethan sat at the corner table next to the window, tapping away at his keyboard while listening to his earbuds, when his table was bumped by one of the strollers, and his coffee sloshed over the rim of the cup and onto his phone. He quickly snatched up his laptop and looked around. Both mothers were holding their babies in their laps, but looked unbelievably at a man walking up to the counter. Ethan caught one mom's eye and took his earbuds out.

"Everything OK?" he asked her.

She sighed exaggeratedly. "That rude man just ran in so fast he kicked my stroller! Thank goodness I was holding my baby," she whined. "I'm sorry it knocked into your table. Did we disturb you? I'll be glad to buy you another coffee," she told Ethan.

"No, that's alright, thank you," Ethan assured her. He mopped up the coffee spill with a handful of napkins and got up to throw them away. The man who had just walked in was now standing near the garbage bin and talking on his phone while waiting for his order. Ethan looked him up and down as he approached.

The man was clean, early 40s, wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, and on his left hand, which was holding his phone, was a wedding ring. As Ethan stepped past him to throw away his soaked napkins, he inhaled and smelled soap. Old Spice, he thought.

"I told you, I want her dead!" the man whispered into his phone.

Ethan stopped with his hand over the garbage bin. Did he just hear what he thought he did? He held his breath and leaned towards the man to listen better.

"You've got to be friggin' kidding me!" the man yelled. The barista behind the counter glanced at him, and the man smiled and waved her off. Lowering his voice, the man continued, "I already paid you, but you're the one who messed up and is the reason the stupid bitch is still alive. So why should I pay you again?"

Ethan dropped the dirty napkins in the bin, quickly spun on his heels, and walked back to his table and sat down. He was shaking because he could not believe what he had just heard. This man was planning on having someone murder his wife!

"Enjoy the rest of your day."

Ethan jumped. The mom had gotten up and was leaving, and the mom whose stroller had bumped his table had spoken to him.

"Oh, thanks. You too," he fake-smiled at her. Ethan then watched the man sit down at the table the moms had just vacated, right next to his. Deciding he had to step up and do something, Ethan Googled the local police department website, found the link for the hearing-impaired communications, and clicked on it. He began to type.

"Pfft. My kids would be better off without her," the man said into the phone. He took a noisy sip of coffee and listened, and shook his head. "Explain to me why on God's green earth I should give you one more dime of my money?"

Ethan was explaining to the 911 operator he was typing to what the man was saying, word for word. He had given the address to the coffee house and an exact description of the man,

right down to the color of his socks that had shown when his pants rode up as he sat down.

Ethan's adrenaline was pumping, and it wasn't just the espresso shot coursing through his veins.

"Of course not!" exclaimed the man. "I'd rather you do it when my kids *aren't* home. Sheesh, I'm not a monster."

Ethan rolled his eyes. Yeah, right, he thought. He was sweating now and kept glancing out the storefront window for the police to show up. Actually, he was willing them to show up so they could nab this guy before an innocent woman was killed and kids grew up motherless.

"I don't know if she's there. I'm not home." Another loud slurp of coffee as the man listened to his phone. "Well, isn't that your job? You're supposed to find her and kill her. Not me!"

Ethan's fingers were clicking and clacking away on his laptop. He turned his head around to look at the woman sitting near the restrooms to see if she was hearing any of this, but she was bopping her head to whatever she was listening to on her earphones. Casually looking back towards the man so as not to look suspicious and then out the window, Ethan spotted the first police car. He heaved a sigh of relief.

Three more squad cars pulled up flanking the coffee house with their lights and sirens off. Ethan typed to the 911 operator that yes, he did see the officers, and he was going to hang up now, and closed the tab. He took a deep breath and waited.

"I expect this to be done today. I will not put my kids through this one more day. Living with her has been utter torture. Let me know when it's done." The man hung up the phone.

Suddenly, the front door flew open, and a dozen cops ran in, guns drawn and yelling. Ethan immediately put his hands in the air as he was told. He watched as the woman by the restrooms did the same, although she was very confused. The cops swarmed in on the man.

“Hands up!” they shouted at the man.

The man dropped his phone on the table and put his hands up.

One cop grabbed the man’s arms and roughly pulled them behind him, cuffed his wrists, and held him by the collar of his shirt. Another cop picked up his phone and swiped through the screen.

“What’s going on?” the man asked, clearly scared.

“We received a call about a possible murder for hire. Know anything about that?”

“What? No!” they yelled.

“Are you sure?” a cop asked him coyly. “You’re not planning on killing your wife?”

The man’s mouth fell open. “What are you talking about? I love my wife!”

“Uh-huh, that’s what they all say.”

“Who said I wanted to kill my wife?” the man shrilly asked.

“We received an anonymous call.”

“Well, someone is playing a joke on you. I don’t want to kill my wife!”

“Did you or did you not say, and I quote, ‘I told you, I want her dead,’ and, ‘My kids would be better off without her,’” the cop asked.

“Well, yeah, but...”

“But, what?” the cop smugly asked.

“I wasn’t talking about my wife,” the man said.

“Oh? Then just who were you talking about?”

“A possum.”

“What?”

“I have a possum living under my porch, and I called an animal control guy that was supposed to remove her last time but failed to, and I told him that I need her gone today before my kids get home,” explained the man.

The cop rubbed his face. “So, you’re telling me that you have a possum you’re trying to get rid of and not your wife?”

“Yessir,” the man said quietly.

The cop shook his head. “Alright. Who called 911?” He looked around at Ethan, the woman sitting by the restrooms, and the baristas. “Huh? Who called us to come out to arrest this man because he has a rodent problem?”

The cop stared at Ethan. Ethan shook his head and cocked his head towards the woman sitting near the restrooms.