

A Prayer For The Soul

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Sequel to The Dark Side. In the aftermath of the Walters tragedy, Pete must face an investigation, a crisis of conscience, and worst of all: his own nightmares.

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Oh...but before you do? You might want to take just a moment and whisper...

A PRAYER FOR THE SOUL

But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be a man of honor—by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. If there were enough like him, the world would be a very safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in. The story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure.

"The Simple Art Of Murder"—Raymond Chandler, 1934

CHAPTER ONE

"I need you to look up here at the numbers on my helmet," the paramedic in the blue coat tells me. "Don't look anywhere else, just focus on the numbers on my helmet."

I do as I'm told. "Los Angeles Fire Department, number 15," I say, as he shines a bright penlight into my eyes. "Did I pass?"

He clicks the penlight off, ignoring me. He holds up his index finger. "I want you to follow my finger with your eyes, without moving your head."

I follow his fingers with my eyes, from side to side, up and down. "Would you like me to cross them now?" I ask. "I can do that, too."

He ignores me again. "When you fell down the stairs, did you hit your head?"

"No, I managed to remove it, just in time," I tell him. "I try to keep this one from getting banged up, since I don't happen to have a spare head."

He quite obviously fails to appreciate my snarky humor. "Do you recall if you blacked out at any time?"

"No, I didn't black out."

"Who's the President of the United States?"

I roll my eyes. "Mickey freakin' Mouse."

He stares at me with a dour frown. "I asked you a question. Now I'd appreciate it if you'd answer it seriously. I'm not in the business to be playing games with you."

"Richard Nixon. And I'm not playing games, either, pal. I just want to go see how my..."

"What's today's date?"

"October 18, 1973. Look, can I..."

"What's your name?"

"Peter Joseph Malloy. Badge number 744, serial number 10743. Would you like to know my favorite foods, my favorite activities, and what I want to be when I grow up?"

"Can you tell me where you are right now?"

"I'm sitting in the back of an ambulance, answering a bunch of idiotic questions, while my partner is..."

"Could you take off your coat and roll up your left sleeve so I can take your blood pressure?"

I fidget uncomfortably on the hard bench seat in the back of the ambulance, ducking my head in an attempt to look out the tiny side window of the rig in order to see up to the house. The overhead light in the ambulance reflects off of the window glass, hampering my ability to see out. I squint, but to no avail. All I can see is the interior of the rig in the shiny mirror-like finish. "Is this really necessary?" I ask, looking at the paramedic. "I'd like to go see how my partner is doing."

The paramedic gives me a cool, impersonal gaze. "You claimed you were pushed down a flight of stairs, coming to rest on a cement floor, so I'd say yes, it's necessary."

I sigh heavily, slipping off my coat and unbuttoning my uniform sleeve. "I wasn't pushed," I say. "I was kicked in the stomach, which sent me falling backwards down the steps. And I don't think I'm injured, just banged up a bit." I push the sleeve up past my elbow.

"It won't hurt you to get checked over, just to be on the safe side," he tells me. The overhead light glints off of the lenses in his wire-rimmed glasses, making his eyes look like hard chips of ice. Quite fitting for his oh-so-lovely personality. He brusquely shoves my shirt sleeve even higher...evidently I didn't push it up far enough to his satisfaction. He wraps the blood pressure cuff around my left bicep and inflates the cuff, his ice-eyes on the little round gauge. "BP 130 over 50," he says, as the cuff deflates with a hiss. He grabs my wrist to check my pulse, looking at his watch in silence. "Pulse is 100. It's a bit rapid, but that's to be expected, considering what you've just been through."

"Gee, ya THINK?" I ask sarcastically. I start to stand up. "Now can I go? I'm worried about my partner, who's still in the house up there."

"Mr. Malloy, sit back down. We're not through yet. I need to check a few other things before I consider releasing you. I'm sure your partner is fine. He's being assessed by Paramedic Anderson. He's in good hands, don't worry." He nods towards the bench seat. "I said, sit back down."

Silently fuming, I sit back down. "How much longer is this going to take?"

"Could you unbutton your shirt so I can take a listen to your heart?" he asks, putting the earpieces to his stethoscope into his ears.

"Look, I'm fine, really," I protest vehemently.

"I'm sure you are, but I just need to check. We don't want you collapsing later on from a problem we could've caught now. It wouldn't look very good for the Los Angeles fire department's paramedic service."

"Oh, for god's sake," I grumble, tugging my tie up over my head and reluctantly unbuttoning my shirt. I slip the silver tie clasp into my pants pocket and stuff the tie into my coat pocket. "Here I am, sitting in the back end of this damned ambulance, while my partner is..."

"SHHH!" he warns sharply, sliding the cool metal disc of the stethoscope over the cotton fabric of my t-shirt. "You need to be quiet!" He listens for a moment. "Now I want you to take a series of slow, deep breaths for me, in and out, so I can listen to your lungs, okay?"

Pinning him down with a thoroughly nasty glare, I comply. As I do, I think of how much I would really love to punch this cold bastard, right in his stony little face.

"Lung sounds are good," he says. "Could you lift up your shirt for me and show me where on your abdomen you were kicked?"

"What the hell do you want me to do? Strip?" I snap. "I keep telling you, I'm fine!"

He sighs, obviously getting irritated with his problem patient. "This will go a lot faster if you cooperate, Mr. Malloy. A blow to the abdomen can be quite serious. You might've sustained internal injuries, such as a ruptured spleen or a torn abdominal aorta."

I yank up my t-shirt. "There! See? I'm fine!"

"Could you lie down on the bench for me so that I can palpate your abdomen?"

"Are you KIDDING me?" I snarl. "I *feel* fine! How many times do I have to tell you that before it sinks into that little pea-brain of yours?"

"You don't need to insult me, Mr. Malloy. I would be remiss in my duties if I allowed you to just walk away, without thoroughly checking you over. I am bound by my profession to completely assess and treat any injuries you might have sustained. If I let you leave without doing that, and you should collapse or die later on, I could be held accountable. And I really don't want that on my spotless record. So I'd appreciate it if you'd just cooperate with me, Mr. Malloy," he says in a professional, detached tone. "Now lie down."

Thoroughly irked, I stand my ground. "Nope. I am NOT lying down. Not here, not there, not anywhere. Not in a box, not with a fox..."

He holds his hand up. "Fine. I get it. Play games all you want, Mr. Malloy. But you were ordered by your sergeant to get checked over, and I'm not letting you leave the back of this ambulance until that is done." He fixes me with an impassive gaze. He obviously is not going to back down.

So I try a different tact. After all, you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. "Look..." I glance down at the silver rectangular nameplate that's pinned to his coat. "Brice. Please let me go into the house and check on my partner. He's hurt far worse than I am, and I'm really worried about him. Then I promise I'll come back out here and you can finish poking and prodding me until your little heart's content, alright?"

He folds his arms across his chest and gives me a stern look. "In the time you've been wasting, trying to avoid being examined, I could have checked you over already, and you'd be on your way up to see about your partner. Now lie down. This won't take long."

Gritting my teeth, I swing my legs up, lying down. I don't exactly fit very well on the hard bench seat, so I have to squirm around in order to try to cram myself into the tiny space. My leather gunbelt creaks as I shift about, trying to get at least halfway comfortable on the seat. "What the hell ever happened to the word 'please'?" I mutter, loud enough for him to hear.

"I don't believe in it," he says with clear, undisguised arrogance. "I refuse to beg my patients to comply with my orders. The sick and the injured should be willing to do what I ask without expecting pleasantries. I don't operate that way. I am here to do my job, not make friends." He presses in on my stomach. "Any tenderness, any pain when I press down anywhere?"

"No," I tell him. "But a bit of advice for you, *Brice*. I'd be changing my bedside manner fast, before a 'patient' decides to stick that penlight of yours right where the sun doesn't shine."

He looks down his nose at me, the overhead light flashing off of his glasses once more. "I don't recall asking you for your advice, Mr. Malloy, nor am I interested in seeking it. I'm the medical professional here. You're merely a police officer." He finishes pressing in on my stomach. "No sign of internal injuries. Now when you fell, did you hit your ribs?" He begins pressing in on my ribcage. "Do they hurt anywhere?"

"Maybe a..." I wince as he hits a tender spot, "...little. But I don't think they're broken or anything. Just bruised."

"I concur. But I feel you should leave that up to a doctor to decide. You need to have x-rays taken to rule out any broken ribs." He nods at me. "You may sit up now." He gestures to the cut on my cheek. "How'd you get that cut?"

I unwedge myself from the cramped area, glad to get my feet back on the floor of the ambulance. "The guy I was trying to cuff up got away from me and struck me in the face with the open edge of the handcuff. Now are we done here? I'd like to go see about my..."

He interrupts me. "That might need stitches. You need to go to the hospital and get it checked. You don't want infection to set in," he says. "Now, do you feel pain anywhere else...your legs, your back, your arms?" He holds his hands out to me. "Can you squeeze my hands with yours just as tight as you can, Mr. Malloy?"

Frustrated and angry, I've finally had enough of his officious impersonal manner. In the blink of an eye, I snap my right hand out, grabbing a tight fistful of his shirt collar. I yank him towards me, pleased to see his eyes bulge slightly as he tries to draw in a breath around his restricted airway. "Listen here, *Brice*," I growl, my voice low and menacing. "It's *Officer Malloy*, to you, you cocky little pissant! And if you don't let me go right now, so that I can go check on my partner, I swear to God, I will wrap that stethoscope of yours around your scrawny little neck and strangle you with it. Then you will SEE just how tight I can grip my hands!"

He eyes me coldly. "There's no need to threaten me, Officer Malloy. I'm merely doing my job, same as you," he rasps. "And I should tell you, I have a black belt in karate, plus I am trained in other forms of martial arts. I assure you, I am fully capable of defending myself."

I squeeze his collar just a little bit tighter, causing him to cough slightly. "Goody for you, Bruce Lee. I'm fully capable of defending myself, too, plus I have a gun and a nightstick to back me up when the other means fail. Wanna guess which one of us would win that fight, should you be so stupid as to pick one with me? Now, *we're done here. Got it?*" I push him away from me with a small, forceful shove.

He rubs his throat where his collar was tight. "I really can't let you go, Officer Malloy. It's not proper protocol."

"Screw proper protocol," I snap, grabbing up my coat. I hop out of the back end of the ambulance, slipping the coat back on against the chilly night air. I don't look back as I hurry up to the house, but I can feel his eyes boring coldly into me as I walk away.

When I reach the cement steps, the screen door suddenly flies open, nearly smacking me in the face. I jump back, startled. "Hey, Brice!" a white-coated ambulance attendant yells. "Get in here! Anderson needs some help!" I start to enter the house, but the attendant stops me. "Stay out here!" he barks at me. Brice rushes past me, shoving me, almost knocking me down in his haste to get into the house. I quickly regain my footing and follow in his wake. There is a commotion going on inside.

"He's seizing!" the paramedic named Anderson says to Brice. "He's seizing!" he repeats into a phone receiver that's connected to a red metal box. He drops the receiver to the floor as Brice grabs a wooden tongue depressor from a black tackle box and tries to force it between the clenched teeth of the thrashing figure on the floor. He can't do it, the jaws are clenched too tight.

"Administer 10 milligrams of valium, IV push!" a disembodied voice says from the other end of the receiver. Anderson grabs the receiver back up. "10 milligrams of valium, IV push, 10-4!" he answers. "You got that?" he asks Brice.

Brice has already grabbed a glass bottle and a syringe from the tackle box. Popping the plastic cap off of the syringe, he pushes the needle down into the liquid inside. He reaches a certain amount, then he drops the bottle back into the box. Eyeing the liquid inside the syringe, he squirts a small amount of it out, then he plunges it into an IV port attached to a jittering arm. "Give it a few seconds," he tells Anderson.

Horrified, I stare in disbelief at the scene presented before me. My partner, Jim Reed, is flat on the floor, thrashing about as if he had electricity coursing through his body. His eyes are rolled completely back in his head. A heart monitor beeps frantically, as Jim's heart rate spikes with the seizure activity. He is hooked up to oxygen, the plastic tubing snaking across his pale face. They have cut away his uniform shirt and white t-shirt underneath. A large square bandage covers the bullet wound in his side, bright red blood starting to seep through the white gauze.

Sergeant MacDonald has caught sight of me. "C'mon, Pete, wait outside," he says to me. "You don't need to see this." He grabs me by the shoulders and tries to push me towards the door. I notice that his own eyes are wide with shock.

"NO!" I snap, shaking Mac's grip off of me like he were nothing more than a bug. "I'm not leaving Jim!" And seeing the look on my face, he wisely decides not to argue with me.

Reed's thrashing begins to lessen, and it soon stops. The heart monitor returns to a normal rhythm, beeping slower than it had been. He moans, tossing his head back and forth restlessly on the blue folded pillow of the paramedic's coat.

"Patient is now post-ictal," Anderson says with audible relief into the phone receiver and box contraption. "Rhythm on the monitor has returned to a normal sinus tach."

"10-4, Rescue 15. Transport patient as soon as possible and advise us of any changes. Grab another set of vitals once you get loaded up and give us your ETA when you get en route," the disembodied voice says.

"Rescue 15, 10-4. Transport and notify of any changes. We'll grab another set of vitals when we get in the ambulance, and we'll advise you then of our ETA." Anderson replaces the receiver into the red box. "Get the stretcher in here," he tells the ambulance attendants. They go to get the stretcher that is just outside the screen door.

"What in the hell just happened to him?" I ask, my voice shaking slightly. "Why did he have a seizure?"

Brice looks up at me, without any compassion at all in his eyes, and in that very instant, I know that I will hate that man forever. "Sometimes head injuries can cause seizures," he tells me coolly. "But as you can see, he's coming out of it now. There's nothing to worry about."

"THERE'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT!" I shout, my reserves of calm completely gone. "My partner was just thrashing around like he was being electrocuted, and you tell me THERE'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT!" Wild-eyed and extremely pissed, I start toward him. "I'll give you something to worry about, you jackass!" I draw my right fist back, preparing to knock the bastard out cold.

"Whoa, Pete, settle down!" Mac quickly lunges forward, catching my wrist and the back collar of my jacket in his hands, violently yanking me back in an attempt to bring me to my senses. "They're doing all that they can to help Jim right now! Don't try and stop them!" He pulls me even further back as the ambulance attendants enter with the stretcher. "C'mon. Let's get out of their way. Let them work."

"Wha'...wha' happen?" Reed mumbles from the floor.

"Just relax, Officer Reed, we're going to take good care of you," Anderson soothes in a soft voice. "You just had what we call a grand-mal seizure. We gave you some medicine to stop it. We're going to transport you to the hospital and have you checked out, just to make sure you don't have another one. Do you understand me?" He talks so gently to Jim that I immediately like him much better than his impersonal, protocol-crazed partner.

"Yesh," Reed says. His eyelids flutter open, and he looks around him, his eyes hazy with shock and confusion. "Where Pete?" he mutters.

"I'm right here, Jim," I say, trying to keep the fear out of my voice, lest it upset him. Mac releases my wrist and my collar and I move into Reed's line of vision. "See, I'm right here." The two paramedics and the ambulance attendants start preparing Reed in order to move him onto the stretcher. Deftly, they shift IV bags and equipment around him.

"Don' feel good, Pete," he says as his eyes try to focus on me. "Head hurt." His tongue sounds thick, like he's downed several shots of whiskey.

I kneel down next to him. "I know it hurts. Stuart Walters tried to break your head for you with a statue. But your head's too damned hard to break, isn't it?" I try to force my face into a smile that I don't feel.

He nods slightly, a ghost of a smile passing thinly across his lips. He winces as Brice checks the bandage over his bullet wound. "Hey," he mumbles. "Tha' hurt."

I look at Anderson, who is still kneeling next to me. "Why is his speech so slurred?" I ask in a low tone.

Before he can answer, Brice pipes up. "It's common for people who are post-dictal to have slurred speech. It's an after-effect of the seizure. It's nothing to..." But he doesn't finish the rest of the sentence when he catches me glaring icicles at him. Instead, he busies himself with making sure the IV lines are taped up and secure. "Could you move aside so we can get the patient onto the stretcher?" he asks me.

"He's not just a patient, he's my partner," I tell him with a scowl, but I stand up, stepping back out of their way. On a one-two-three move, the four of them swiftly move Reed onto the stretcher without any trouble. A tan wool blanket is quickly pulled up over him and tucked in around him, as the heart monitor and oxygen tank is gently nestled in at his side. The IV bags are placed near his shoulders. The two attendants fasten the black straps, securing Reed to the stretcher, as the paramedics pick up the rest of their equipment.

"I'll get the door," Mac says, moving swiftly behind me. As he holds the screen door open, the attendants begin to wheel the stretcher out. One of the wheels catches on the doorstep, jarring Reed with a thump. He begins to shiver as the chilly night air hits him.

"Hey, watch it!" I bark. "Go easy with him!"

Reed is mumbling something unintelligible as they hurry the stretcher down the sidewalk and to the open doors of the ambulance. I rush to keep up, nearly treading on Anderson's heels. They stop the stretcher at the back of the rig as Brice hops inside ahead of it. Anderson begins to hand him up the equipment, the red box contraption and the black tackle box.

Instantly, I am up in arms, realizing what is going to happen. In a panic, I grab Anderson by his coat sleeve. "WHAT! No, hey, I don't want *him* riding in with Reed, I want you!"

"Officer Malloy, I assure you I am one of the best paramedics..." Brice begins.

I cut him off sharply. "You may be one of the best paramedics, Brice, but you sure as hell don't have any compassion for your patients. I don't want you riding in with my partner, I want Anderson to do it. Now get out of that ambulance before I climb in there and throw you out!"

Brice exchanges a look with his partner. "Very well. If you insist." He hops down out of the back of the ambulance and Anderson climbs in. They then begin to load up the stretcher containing Reed. He groans as the stretcher tilts and bumps slightly. Once Reed is situated, Anderson begins checking the equipment around him, hanging the two IV bags from a hook in the roof of the ambulance.

Brice turns to Sergeant MacDonald. "I feel that I must inform you that your man here," and he gestures rather derisively to me, "has displayed an attitude that is quite unbecoming of a police officer."

Mac turns to him, his arms folded across his chest. He eyeballs Brice with obvious distaste and contempt. "Is that so," he says in a cool tone that suggests he really doesn't give a damn what my attitude is right now.

"Yes. He threatened me with serious bodily harm while I was attempting to assess his injuries, and well, you can see how he is acting now. I suggest you write him up for it."

Mac stares at him for a moment in sheer disbelief. But it's only a moment, as he quickly regains his composure. "Look, pal, that injured officer in the back end of that ambulance is not only his partner, but his friend, too, so might I suggest that YOU back off...before you have TWO of us to answer to." Mac's tone is politely threatening, and his eyes are flashing fire at Brice, who backs away in huffy annoyance.

Anderson has finished getting a new set of vitals from Reed and he picks up the receiver from the box contraption. "Central Receiving, this is Rescue 15. I have a new set of vitals to relay. Let me know when you're ready."

"Hey, what is that thing anyway?" I ask one of the ambulance attendants as I point to the phone and box..

"It's called a biophone," Brice says in a snotty tone. "Any idiot knows that." And upon receiving two withering glares from Mac and I, he looks away in a haughty manner, sticking his nose up in the air with a sniff.

"Pete..." Reed moans. "Where Pete?" He's evidently lost sight of me. He thrashes a bit on the cot. "I wan' Pete!" he demands.

I step up on the back bumper of the ambulance, my hand against the roof to support myself. "I'm right here, Jim," I tell him.

Blearily, he tries to focus on me. "Where?"

I touch his ankle. "Right here. I'm right here."

"Where 'm I goin'?" he says. "Don' wanna go."

"They're taking you to the hospital," I tell him soothingly. "You need to get checked out."

"NO!" he says. "Wanna go home! Wan' Jean!"

"You can't go home yet, Jim, you've been hurt, and the doctors at the hospital need to make sure everything's okay. And Jean will be at the hospital with you, don't worry."

Anderson has finished giving Reed's vitals to the hospital. He looks at me. "Is someone from the department going to follow us in?" he asks.

"Yeah," Mac says from behind me. "Brinkman!" he yells.

I glance over my shoulder to see Bob Brinkman run up. "Yeah, Sarge?" he asks.

"You and Walters follow the ambulance in to Central Receiving. I'll dispatch another unit to go pick up Jean Reed. Stay at the hospital with her until I get there. If there's any changes in Jim's condition, call the station and have them contact me immediately, okay?"

Brink nods. "Right." He hurries back over to where Jerry Walters stands next to their squad car. After a brief discussion, the two of them climb into the car. The squad car starts up, the engine grumbling to life, and Walters flips the red top lights on, preparing to follow the ambulance in code three to Central Receiving.

Reed thrashes a bit harder on the cot, struggling against the straps. "Pete, don' let 'em take me away...I don' wanna go...please don' let 'em take me..." He jerks his head violently back and forth. "Come wit' me, please, don' wanna be by myself..."

"Brinkman and Walters will be there with you, and I'll get there to the hospital just as soon as I can, okay, buddy?" Seeing the fear on his face really worries me. Jim Reed is not one to be afraid of much. I wonder to myself how much of his fear can be attributed to the head injury. "I have a few things here I need to get done, and then I'll be there with you as soon as possible, do you hear me, Junior?" Instinctively, I start to climb into the back to reassure him.

Mac grabs me by the back of the coat, tugging me down to the pavement. "You can't go with him, Pete, and you know that," he says with a shake of his head.

"Patient's becoming extremely agitated," Anderson says. "Let's roll." One of the ambulance attendants climbs in the back, while the other one runs around to the driver's side. The engine comes to life with a roar.

Reed lifts his head, his eyes frantically searching for me. He catches sight of me standing at the back. "Pete! Pete! NOOOOO!" he wails in pure anguish, the sound of his fear breaking my heart. Brice slams the rear doors of the rig, giving it two quick slaps, then he hurries over to the red fire rescue squad that's parked in front of the ambulance. The ambulance pulls away from the curb, its siren moaning low, and the rescue rig falls in behind it, followed by the squad car with Brinkman and Walters. I stand there on the side of the street, bleakly watching the procession of emergency vehicles as they speed off down the road, lights flashing and sirens screaming. I keep my eyes on them until the sirens have faded away and the lights have disappeared on the horizon. Hanging my head, I close my eyes, black desolation creeping softly into my soul. *Dear God, can this night get any worse?*

Dimly I am aware that Mac has left my side. He comes out of the ranch house, the screen door banging shut behind him. He has Reed's coat, hat, gunbelt and nightstick in his hands. He opens the passenger side door of his black-and-white station wagon and lays them gently on the front seat. He comes back over to me. "You okay, Pete?" he asks, concern evident in his voice.

"I wish I could've gone with Jim," I tell him. "He was..." All at once, my voice clogs up in my throat and I feel the hot sting of tears behind my eyelids. Quickly I duck my head, blinking my emotions away so Mac won't see them. After all, big tough cops aren't supposed to cry. I clear my throat. "He was scared, Mac. He didn't understand what was going on. He didn't want to be alone." I jerk my head in the direction of the ranch house. "Jim's been through hell tonight, Mac." I turn my gaze back to the pavement below my feet. "Sheer hell," I repeat in a hoarse whisper.

"He's in good hands, Pete. Don't you..."

I raise my head sharply, fixing Mac with a piercing glare. "Don't you *dare* tell me not to worry about him. You saw what kind of shape he was in," I tell him.

He puts a hand on my shoulder. "No, I know you. I can tell you not to worry about him, but I'd only be wasting my breath. So go ahead and worry about him all you want. But it never did any good, trust me."

"How do you know?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "How many times have I been in this situation with either you or Reed, or both of you at the same time? What did you think I was doing all the times I was pacing in the emergency room of the hospital? My taxes?"

"No." I can't bring myself to smile at Mac's attempt at humor. It just hurts too much right now.

"Believe me, Pete, I sometimes think the two of you are going to put grey hairs on my head faster than my kids will."

I don't answer him for a moment, my eyes staring down the road at the ambulance long since gone. "Jim's badge and shooting brass," I say quietly. "You didn't let them get lost in the shuffle, did you?"

Mac pats the breast pocket of his uniform shirt. "I've got them safe and sound, right here. I'll make sure he gets them back, along with the rest of his gear, just as soon as I can." He goes around to the driver's side of his wagon and climbs in, picking up the radio mike. "Dispatch, this is One-L-20, could you switch over to Tac 2?"

"This is Dispatch on Tac 2, One-L-20, go ahead."

"I need to have a unit go over to Officer Reed's residence and pick up his wife, Jean, and transport her to Central Receiving Hospital. Officers Brinkman and Walters will be there to sit with her. When the transport unit has delivered her to them, have the transport unit go back into service."

"Roger, One-L-20," comes the disembodied voice of the dispatcher. Then I hear her again, this time back on the main ops frequency as Mac flips the radio switch back. *"One-Xray-14, what's your location?"*

"This is One-Xray-14. We're at Hollywood and North Van Ness."

"Roger, One-Xray-14, could you contact dispatch as soon as possible for a call?"

"One-Xray-14, roger. We'll contact you as soon as we can." The dispatcher won't give Jim Reed's address or the reason for the call out over the air, in case someone should be listening to the traffic with a police scanner.

I try to remember who's working One-Xray-14 tonight. Jerry Woods and Dave Russo. That's good, because Jean knows both Woods and Russo. At least it won't be strangers that will pick her up to take her to the hospital.

Mac returns to my side. "Pete, did you really threaten that paramedic with serious bodily harm?"

I stuff my hands into my coat pockets. It's against regulations, but I don't care. "Yeah, I did," I admit. "I had to. His bedside manner was less than charming."

"And I'm sure yours was just as nice as pie, right?" He quirks his eyebrow up.

"Of course, Mac. What else would it be?" I give him my best innocent look.

Mac studies me for a moment, then he begins to smile. "I'm almost afraid to ask, Malloy, but my curiosity has gotten the better of me...just exactly what *kind* of serious bodily harm did you threaten him with?"

I feel the start of a smile ghosting about on my own face. "I...uh...threatened to strangle him with his own stethoscope."

Mac laughs, shaking his head. "You know it's not wise to make enemies of firefighters or paramedics, Pete. You never know when you'll need them."

I shrug. "Eh...so one little weenie on the Los Angeles Fire Department doesn't like me. It's no skin off my back." Mac and I walk back over to his wagon. I lean up against the left passenger side of Mac's car, tilting my head up to look at the stars that have appeared in the inky sky, now that the thunderstorm has moved off into the distance, its energy spent out over Los Angeles. Off to the east, faint flickers of lightning outline steep thunderheads, and only a muted growling grumble of thunder can be heard now and again. A crisp, clean tang is in the air, and I breathe it in deeply, drawing the air gratefully into my lungs, savoring the pure sweet taste of it. The rain has temporarily washed away the sins of the city, casting it newly reborn into the world. *Too bad I can't be as lucky*, I think bitterly to myself.

Ed Wells, who arrived on the scene shortly after I put out the call for officer needs assistance, ambles up nonchalantly. He is alone in an L-car tonight, his usual partner out sick. "What's so funny?" he asks, having heard Mac and I chuckling. "Reed didn't look like he was doing too good when the ambulance left with him." He stands in front of me, his gaze flicking back and forth between Mac and I.

"He's in good hands, Ed," Mac tells him. He goes around to the rear of the wagon and yanks the back gate open.

Ed turns to me. "What was wrong with him?" he asks.

"He has a head injury, along with a bullet wound to his side," I tell him in a short tone of voice. I have very little time for Ed Wells, especially right now at this point.

Ed lets out a low whistle, shaking his head. "That's too bad. Reed's a good kid." He looks at Mac. "You know, people can die from head injuries. They bleed inside their brains and the doctors can't stop it in time. They die without ever regaining consciousness."

"ED!" Mac barks at him in horror. "That's enough!"

Ed turns back to me, a smarmy grin plastered across his face. "Too bad you didn't go with him, Pete. After all, you two are always watching out for each other, right?" Ed says. His voice just drips with sarcasm.

I stare at him, my hands automatically clenching into fists inside my coat pockets. "I'm needed here," I tell him in a low tone. "Homicide's got to get here first and go over the scene with me. Then I have to go back to the station for the interview regarding the shooting. You should know that, Ed. Besides, watching out for each other is what good partners are supposed to do, in case you haven't forgotten."

He nods his head in an airy manner. "Oh yeah. But you know, you worry over that kid like he was your brother or something. Reed's been a cop now for, oh what, five years? Isn't it about time you let Junior off the leash?" Mimicking me, he stuffs his hands into his coat pockets. He glances at Mac with a smile. "Maybe Mac should've put him in with me tonight, then he wouldn't have gotten hurt. Seems like when the two of you work together, one of you always ends up getting injured."

"So?" I ask him, starting to do a slow burn on a fast match. "Getting injured is part of the job. We've all been there at one time or another. Need I remind you of the time Reed and I rescued your ass from that sniper who shot you on his front lawn because you stupidly ran right into his line of fire?"

Mac, who is still standing at the back of his wagon, writing something down in his report book, briefly glances up. "Ed, leave Pete alone," he tells him sharply.

Ed rocks back and forth on his heels, utterly confident and thoroughly delighted with himself. He tilts his head back, my height over him forcing him to look up at me. He hasn't noticed that my eyes have narrowed to slits as I regard him with barely disguised dismay and dislike. It's a warning he should well heed, but he foolishly doesn't. "Tsk tsk, Malloy, now that's all in the past. It's water under the ol' bridge." He shrugs. "Besides, I've learned my lesson. Now I do things by the book. And it seems to me that the *book* was one thing you and Reed threw out the window tonight in responding to this call. You should've called for back-up and waited before you two decided to enter that house. It's what I would've done."

Taking my hands out of my coat pockets, I shift my weight against Mac's car, my muscles tensing up inside of me. "Go away, Ed, right now," I growl through clenched teeth. "Go back to your own car. Leave me alone."

"Wells, I thought I put you working crowd control," Mac says, once again looking up in annoyance.

"There's no crowd to control," he says, waving his hands about. "See? No crowds, not even the media's here yet. Everyone's gone back inside for the night. It's too chilly to stand around out here. Besides, the excitement is all over for now."

"Then go work on your reports," Mac tells him. "In your car," he adds pointedly.

"I don't have any reports to write. I got them done earlier," Ed says. "While the medical personnel were dealing with Reed." He says this in the same type of pointed tone Mac just used.

"Go away, Ed, I'm warning you," I say, my voice now menacing.

He regards me with an arrogant sneer, the banty little rooster that he is. "If you think I'm afraid of you, Malloy, you've got another think coming. After all, you wouldn't *dare* do anything to me with the Sergeant standing right there." He nods his head towards Mac.

"Ed, I'm telling you for the last time, leave Pete alone," Mac says. "Or I'll turn my back and let him have at you."

Ed scoffs with disdain. He smirks up at me in anticipation of delivering his wicked final bon mot. "You know, Malloy, your partners must have big ol' bull's-eyes painted on them, since they seem to be in the habit of getting shot when they're paired up with you. First it was Howie Parker and now it's Jim Reed. What are you trying to do? Set the departmental record for most partners lost in the line of duty or some...ULP!"

Wells' sentence is cut-off in mid-utterance, as anger rockets through my blood like Fourth of July fireworks, and I reach out and grab him by the front of his coat, jerking him around and slamming him into the side of Mac's wagon, hard enough to make the car rock on its wheels. "Why don't you shut the hell up, Ed?" I snarl at him, my face inches from his. "You've tangled with me before, haven't you learned anything by now?" I give him another hearty shake, banging him up against the car again, and am pleased to see sheer terror on his face as his hands scrabble wildly at my wrists, trying to break my grasp on him. There is a roaring in my ears as blood pounds furiously in my veins. "I should kick the shit right out of you for saying that! You're nothing but a jackass, Wells!" I hiss venomously.

Instantly, Mac is at my side, his report book dropped to the ground. "Pete, let go of him, right now!" he orders, as he tries to free Wells. He tugs on my arms, while Wells pushes at me with a frightened whine as he dances furiously up and down in my grip. "Pete, let...go..." Mac yanks hard, struggling to gain any kind of a hold on me, trying to shove himself between Wells and I. "...right NOW!" With a heave, he manages to break my death-grasp, but not before I give Ed Wells another hefty shake, bouncing him merrily against the car one last time. As I stagger back under the force of Mac's weight, Wells takes full advantage of the situation, propelling himself off of the side of the car to land a nasty punch to my face, cutting open my bottom lip.

"You lousy bastard!" he shrieks at me. "How dare you do that to me?"

I lunge at him, but am stopped by Mac. "Lemme at him, damnit!" I holler, seeing nothing but a pure red haze before my eyes. I manage to break free long enough to clip Ed soundly on the side of his face, my fist landing a very firm and very satisfying blow to his right cheekbone. Mac hauls me backwards once again, and I lose my balance in the rain-dampened grass, falling hard on my ass to the ground with a jolt that rattles my teeth.

"HA! You're not so smart now, are you, Malloy?" Ed shouts jubilantly, darting in front of me and pointing his finger at me as I sit somewhat stunned on the wet ground.

"ED, GET OUT OF HERE RIGHT NOW!" Mac yells at him, whipping around in fury. "Get back to your own car before I let Pete finish you off!" When Wells hesitates, Mac points to the L-car Wells is assigned to. "Ed, NOW! Or I'm going to write both of you up for fighting!"

As Wells backs away, rubbing the side of his quickly swelling face, he glares at me. "You shouldn't have done that, Malloy." Then he turns his glare on Mac. "And I would've won, too." Huffing in poor-loser defeat, he trudges back to his squad car, climbing in and giving the door a good slam, just to let us know he's still very mad.

Turning my head and spitting blood from my mouth, I run my tongue over my front teeth, checking to see if I've lost any. Fortunately, I haven't. Shaking my head, I mutter, "Damned Wells," under my breath as I try to calm myself down.

Mac stands over me, his arms across his chest, glaring at me. "I could write the two of you up for that little scuffle," he tells me angrily. "Maybe I should, if it would teach the two of you a lesson."

I eye him dully. "Go ahead and write me up, see if I care." I heave myself to my feet, brushing myself off. My gaze lands on a scowling Ed Wells and I glare at him with clear victory in my eyes. Thinks he would have won against me? Not likely. I shoot him the best sneer I can manage with a cut lip. I spit blood out once more.

Mac cocks his head at me, his eyes still narrowed in anger. "I'm really surprised at you, Pete, losing your cool like that. You oughta know better."

"Ed Wells rubs me wrong," I tell him in a clipped tone.

"Wells rubs a lot of people wrong, but not everyone has to take a sock at him."

"I didn't take a sock at him, I merely introduced his backside to your car. He was the one that hit me first."

"Still, both of you acted in a very unprofessional manner. Fighting with a fellow police officer is against regulations, you know. What if a citizen had seen you two going after each other like that? It's conduct unbecoming an officer."

I don't answer him. I walk away from him, going over to Adam-12. Suddenly feeling drained and weary, so very much older than my 36 years, I open the passenger side door and sit down in Reed's customary spot. Massaging my temples with my fingers, I try to come to terms with what I just did. I admit I am ashamed and embarrassed at the way I acted, especially since I pride myself on being professional. Mac was right, I should have kept my cool, no matter how much Wells was needling me. A little pissant like him isn't worth the trouble. Sighing, I press the pads of my thumbs to my eyelids, trying to ease the pounding headache that has sprung up behind my eyes. I have no luck, and the anvil chorus of demons continues to strike hell in my brain. I look at my watch, wishing that Homicide would hurry up and get here. Digging a handkerchief out of my pocket, I dab at the blood on my lip. I wish I had some water to rinse the taste of copper out of my mouth, but I don't. I take the wadded-up uniform tie out of my coat pocket and toss it onto the dashboard of the car. I should really start on my report regarding the incident out here, but when I look at the black cover of the report book, I feel absolutely no desire to take pen in hand and start documenting the case. Instead, I lean my head back against the headrest and close my eyes, seeking solace in the momentary darkness behind my eyelids. I hear the engine of Wells' vehicle start up, and open my eyes long enough to see his car leaving the scene. As he passes Adam-12, Ed Wells gives me the meanest look he can muster. I shake my head with a derisive snort. *Yeah, Ed, I'm really quivering in fear.*

Mac crosses the front lawn with something in his hands. Bright yellow crime scene tape, the official announcement to the world that a crime has been committed at this address. He goes over to the chain link fence that divides the Walters' property from the property next door. Tying one end of the tape to the fence, he walks back across the front yard, the tape unspooling rapidly in his hands. I watch disinterestedly as he strings it across the whole front part of the house, effectively sealing it off for Homicide. When he reaches the carport over the driveway, he snaps the tape off and ties it to one of the carport support posts. He ties another piece of tape to the same post, then disappears briefly from my sight as he secures the open side of the carport that faces Mrs. Timmons' house. He reappears, ducking underneath the tape. "You could've helped me," he calls as he puts the tape away in his car.

When I don't answer him, he comes over to me. "Didn't you hear me? You could've helped me, you know."

"But you did such a fabulous job yourself," I tell him dryly. "It looks very professional. You've elevated crime scene tape-stringing to an art."

Mac regards me for a moment. "You do realize that you're out of uniform, right? Regulations state that your shirt must be buttoned up and tucked into your pants, and you must wear your tie when you wear the class-C uniform. Plus, you look like you've gone dancing with a meat grinder. You should've let that paramedic clean that cut up for you. You're a disgrace to the LAPD uniform, Malloy." But his comment isn't barbed with cruelty, just a gentle rebuke.

"Mac, ask me if I really care about uniform regulations right now," I say wearily. "Tonight's the night I threw all protocol out the window. I decided to give the little blue book a break."

"What's gotten into you anyway, Pete?" he asks me. "Normally you're pretty level-headed. But tonight you're acting like a cranky child in need of a nap. First you snap at the paramedic, then you go after Ed Wells. I don't get it."

I shake my head. "It's nothing, Mac. I'm just tired, that's all," I white-lie to him. I look at my watch. "I've been out here for what seems like forever. I want to get the walk-through with Homicide done, then the shooting interview, so I can get to the hospital and check on Jim."

Mac looks up at a car that pulls in behind his wagon. "Homicide's here," he tells me. "Looks like your wish is granted."

"Took 'em long enough," I grumble. I get out of the squad car to see Sergeant Jerry Miller and his young partner, Sam Bingham approach.

"Jesus Malloy, I swear, you get uglier every time I see you," Jerry says to me by way of greeting.

"Jerry, I think you need to learn a new line, but that involves reading, and that would probably tax your poor little brain too much," I tell him.

"Seriously, what in the hell happened to you?" he asks.

I exchange a look with Mac. "I went dancing with a meat grinder."

Jerry rolls his eyes. "Sorry I asked." He nods to Mac. "We would've gotten here sooner, Mac, but we were tied up on a robbery/homicide over on Sepulveda. Liquor store owner got shot in a holdup, but he managed to get a round off at the kid who robbed him. Both were taken to the hospital. Liquor store owner was DOA, but the kid survived long enough for us to get his dying declaration. Took some time. It's been one helluva night for murder, that's for sure." He gestures to the house. "So what do we have here?"

"Quadruple homicide," I tell him. "The guy who committed the murders is lying dead down in the basement. I shot him."

Jerry sighs heavily and takes out his notebook. "Okay, Pete, from the top." He hesitates a second, looking around him. "Where's Reed? He out sick tonight?"

"No, the murderer tried to bust his head open with a statue," Mac tells him. "He also shot Reed with his own weapon. Jim's at Central Receiving right now."

Wincing, Jerry says, "Ooh, ouch. I'll have to wait then and get his version of the story when he can be interviewed." He points to me. "So for now, I'll just go with yours. Who lives in that house?"

"Lady by the name of Melissa Walters and her three young children, Natalie, Andrew and Matthew. Her soon-to-be ex-husband is the one lying dead in the basement. His name's Stuart Walters."

"What time did you get the call to come over here?"

"Around 11:40. Dispatch gave it to us as a welfare check. The neighbor lady was concerned about the Melissa Walters and her kids."

"What's the neighbor lady's name?"

"Mrs. Timmons. That's T-I-double M-O-N-S. I didn't get her first name."

"Okay, why was she concerned about Melissa Walters and her children?"

"She had heard a disturbance coming from the residence about 3 hours prior to calling us. She said she heard a lot of yelling and screaming, and the sound of stuff being broken. Then about 5 minutes before she called us, she spotted Stuart Walters leaving the house. She said he wasn't supposed to be there, Melissa Walters had an order of protection against him. She noticed that after he left, there were no lights on in the residence. She said there should've been. The little girl who lives there is afraid of thunderstorms, so her mother turns the porch light on to comfort her."

"She waited three hours before she decided to call us? Why?"

"I don't know, Jerry, you'd have to ask her."

"Did she attempt to make contact with the family on her own?"

I shake my head. "No, I don't think so. At the time all of this went down, that thunderstorm was pounding the hell out of the city, so I doubt she would've ventured over in the rain. It was only after seeing Stuart Walters leave that she decided to call the police. Apparently he was pretty violent towards Melissa Walters and the kids. According to her, he used to beat them."

Jerry nods. "Okay. Sam, why don't you go on over to Mrs. Timmons' house and start interviewing her. I'll go ahead and do the walk-through with Officer Malloy."

Sam is just young enough, just green enough, to be flabbergasted by Jerry's request. "Now?" he asks incredulously. "It's nearly 2:00 in the morning! She's bound to be asleep!"

"And that's why you knock on her door or ring the doorbell, my friend. So you can wake her up and begin the interview," Jerry tells him.

"But NOW?"

"Yes, now!" Jerry snaps, his patience worn thin. "In this business, kid, time has a funny way of blurring witnesses' memories. That's why it's important to interview them as soon as possible, while the memories are still fresh in their minds."

"Okay," Bingham says, shaking his head. "But if she gets mad at me, I'm telling her it was your idea, Jerry." He turns and walks up the sidewalk to Mrs. Timmons' house.

"Having fun breaking in Junior G-Man, there?" I ask Jerry somewhat snarkily.

He shakes his head with a disgusted sigh. "You know, I think he got his detective's badge out of a cereal box."

"Oh, well, I'm sure even Melvin Purvis got on J. Edgar Hoover's nerves every now and then," I tell him.

Mac clears his throat. "I think I'll take a quick swing over to Central Receiving, see how Reed's doing. I'll meet you back at the station, Pete. I'll be there for the shooting interview."

"Fine," I say. While Mac would usually be the one to accompany me into the station, especially since I shot and killed a man tonight, he is taking a bit of an extraordinary step to leave the scene to go check on Jim Reed. He's evidently as worried about Reed as I am.

"Don't let the interview start before I get there," he tells me. "I don't want you going through it alone."

"You ready to hit the house?" Jerry asks me.

I take in a deep breath, casting a wary eye towards the tidy little ranch house. "As ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

CHAPTER TWO

As Jerry and I walk up to the house, I hear Mac's station wagon pull away. "Reed in pretty bad shape?" Jerry asks.

"He'd had a seizure before they loaded him into the ambulance," I tell him. "He was pretty out of it. Plus Stuart Walters shot him in the side. I don't know how bad that injury was. He'd lost quite a bit of blood by the time the paramedics got here."

"That's rough," he says, shaking his head. We duck under the yellow tape in order to reach the front steps of the house. "Okay, Pete, take me through it from here."

"Well, we tried to make contact at first by ringing the doorbell. When no one answered, we decided to look inside the windows, see if we could see anything. I took the front, while Reed took the back. The only windows that allowed us to see into the residence were the kitchen and the living room windows. The rest had the blinds pulled down. From what I could see in through the picture window, the living room was pretty well trashed. Reed came back and reported that the kitchen was the same way. We attempted to make contact again, this time opening the screen door and knocking on the interior door, just in case the doorbell didn't work. When I knocked on the interior door, it swung open a little bit. It wasn't latched. We noticed that there was what appeared to be blood on the doorframe." I shine my flashlight on the blood spot. "Right there. Like somebody with blood on their hands touched the doorframe on their way out of the house."

"Why didn't you guys stay out here and call for assistance?"

"The fact that the door wasn't locked really concerned me. If Melissa Walters had an order of protection against her husband, I would've thought that she would've kept the door locked at all times. Plus, there was that spot of blood on the doorframe. I was worried that someone may be lying inside the house, severely injured, and in need of immediate help. I wasn't going to risk an innocent person's life just to wait for our back-up to arrive. It might have taken too long. I was the one who made the decision to go in. Reed only followed my command."

"You realize you broke protocol in doing so, right?" he asks.

I nod. "I realize that, Jerry. And I'll probably face some sort of disciplinary action for doing it. But what's done is done, it's not like I can take any of it back, even though I wish like hell I could."

He points to the wooden interior door. "Did either of you touch the door when you entered?"

"Just the exterior screen door. I nudged the interior door open with my flashlight."

Jerry has scribbled down what I've told him in his notebook. "Okay, let's go on inside." He opens the screen door and steps casually across the threshold.

I hesitate. I do not want to go back inside that house *at all*. I've seen the ghastly horror that lies within the four silent walls once already, I have absolutely *no* desire to see it again.

"Malloy, c'mon," Jerry urges, looking over his shoulder at me as he holds the screen door open. "Don't tell me you're afraid to come in here."

No, not exactly afraid... Drawing in a deep lungful of cool night air, I force myself back into that quiet little house of the dead and the damned. And even having Jerry Miller by my side doesn't make it any less difficult. It was far different when the paramedics, the ambulance attendants, Mac, and I were in here with the injured Jim Reed; at that time, my attention was focused solely on my partner, and not what ghoulish specter of horror lay within. But now, it's back to just two of us, and I must confront my sense of unease once more.

There's lights on in the living room, the medical personnel turned them on while they were tending to Reed. The debris left behind from their work on Jim lies strewn around the floor, adding to the already disastrous mess. I scan the room, my eyes taking in the details, cataloging them neatly for my unwilling brain. There's a splotch of darkening blood on the back of brown plaid couch...Reed's blood, from his bullet wound. There's also a stain of it on the beige carpeting, where I'd helped him down to the floor after he said the room wouldn't stop spinning. Dear God, I died a thousand deaths of my own as I tried to keep him talking to me, tried to keep him comfortable until the medical personnel arrived. I kept peppering him with inane questions, silly comments and jokes, so that he wouldn't catch on how worried I was about him, how scared I was about his increasing lethargy and repetitive questions that he kept asking me. What happened to him, where was he, how'd he get here? all asked, over and over again. And then there was the blood...it seemed that his entire lifeblood was draining out before my very eyes...and I couldn't do a *damned* thing about it. I tried to stop it, tried to staunch the crimson flow, but he winced when I put pressure on the wound, so I kept just a minimal pressure on it, not wanting to cause him any further pain. I nearly wept with relief when first Mac showed up, then the medical personnel a few seconds later. And then Mac ordered me out to the ambulance to get my own injuries checked out by Brice, the paramedic from Hell, so I wouldn't bear witness to the work they were doing on Reed. He spared me that, but I wish to God I could've spared Jim Reed the whole dreadful hellish experience, from start to finish. *We never should've set foot in this damned house*, I think to myself as I study the faint traces of Reed's blood that is still embedded within the whorls of my fingertips. *The blood of the innocent upon my hands...and the only reason it's there is because of me.*

"Pete, I asked you a question," Jerry says. "Didn't you hear me?"

"Huh?" I shake myself out of my eerie reverie. "No, sorry, Jerry. Could you repeat it?" I rub the palms of my hands on my pants. The fabric is rough across my fingertips.

"Did the medics turn the lights on in here or did you guys?"

"No, they did, when they were working on Reed. We didn't turn any lights on at all, we just used our flashlights to see to navigate through the house." And even with the lights on, the house retains its silent, spooky air. I gesture to the trashed living room, casting my gaze over it once more. "Outside of the medical debris left behind by the paramedics, the living room was like this when we entered." I point to a red metal gas can lying next to the shattered tv set. "The gas can you see there was brought in by Stuart Walters when he returned. He was evidently going to torch the place." Quietly, I study the destroyed living room while Jerry scribbles notes. In the light, it is far worse than what Reed and I first spotted upon coming inside the house, with only the thin, bright beams of our flashlights to guide our

way. The once-beautiful cherrywood curio cabinet has its glass doors ripped off and smashed underfoot, along with the bevy of knickknacks that were housed inside. A large painting of a tranquil forest scene leans drunkenly up against a wall, its wooden frame broken. Where the TV was shattered at, a dark smudge of soot rises up from behind it on the wall, as if it sparked briefly when it was struck. Magazines and books lie scattered about, pages ripped from them and tossed about like pale leaves from an exotic tree. A large potted plant is tipped over on its side, the black dirt spilling out onto the beige carpeting. A small bronze statue of a horse's head lies on the floor, the same one Stuart Walters used to brain Reed with. The faint smell of gasoline tinges the air. That damned grandfather clock, the only thing *not* damaged in the vicious rampage, bongs out the two o'clock morning hour, causing me to jump like it did the very first time. As my heart beats out a rapid-fire conga somewhere near the base of my throat, Jerry gives me an amused glance, but doesn't say anything.

"Did either of you call out, try to make any further contact? Identify yourselves as police officers in case someone in here did need help?" Jerry asks, scanning the living room with impersonal eyes.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I guess we didn't think. We were both pretty stunned by the amount of damage we saw just in the living room alone. I guess you could say we were shocked into silence."

He turns and looks at me, his brows drawn together in a frown. "That's funny coming from you, Pete. Usually you and Reed are pretty by-the-book. Why'd you decide to continue through the house if you got no response? You should have backed out and called for help." He starts to jot stuff down in his notebook.

I shrug. "It was a feeling I had, Jerry, that something was very wrong here."

"A feeling?" he asks, puzzled.

"Yeah, Jerry. It's called intuition. You might try listening to yours sometime. You could learn a lot."

He snorts. "I go by the cold hard facts, my friend. Evidence doesn't lie, people do. The only time I listen to my intuition is when I'm interviewing a suspect. Then my intuition tells me if they're telling the truth or not." He points to the living room. "Okay, so you had a feeling that something was wrong in this house and you didn't back out to call for help. You and Reed continued through the residence. Did you split up?"

I shake my head. "No, we stuck together. I think we were both pretty nervous about what we were afraid we might find here in the gloom and doom." I give a nervous chuckle. "There's safety in numbers, you know."

Jerry nods. "So where'd you two go next?"

"Well, we continued on through the living room. The kitchen is off to the side, so we looked in there. We saw that the kitchen was in bad shape, too."

Jerry walks through the living room to the kitchen, with me drifting slowly in his wake. He lets out a low whistle when he catches sight of the kitchen. "Man, somebody must have been pretty pissed to have done this much damage and destruction." He makes notes in his notebook, shaking his head in wonderment. "Looks like World War Three in here."

"Yeah, well, try seeing it only by the light of a flashlight," I tell him dryly. "It's much more eerie."

He lets out a laugh. "Eerie? Pete, you sound like one of the Hardy Boys. The Case Of The Cursed House."

"That's about what it is, too, Jerry."

As he writes in his notebook, I survey the kitchen, now that the living room lights cast some illumination into it. Two of the wooden chairs that go with the kitchen table are broken, the legs sticking up in jagged fingers. A can of Del Monte peas has rolled over to the table, along with a can of corn and a can of peaches. A jar of homemade preserves is shattered against the formica countertop, while the contents of the refrigerator still slop disgustingly on the floor. The wooden knife block that probably held the butcher knife used to kill the toddler is knocked over on its side, white flour dusting it as if preparing it for SID to check it for fingerprints. Dishes, cups and plates have been thrown all over, some of them breaking into delicate china shards, others withstanding even the hardest of throws, landing in topsy-turvy fashion on the black-and-white checkered tile floor.

Jerry next starts down the hallway, glass from shattered picture frames crunching under his feet. Spotting the wedding picture on the floor, he nudges it with his foot, just like Reed had. "Nice couple," he says. "Started off happy. Too bad it ended the way it did." He looks back at me. "You coming?"

I'm still standing in the open area leading to the kitchen. I don't really want to go any further than where I'm at. I draw in another deep breath. Right now I would kill for a cigarette, just to soothe my jangled nerves. *Relax, Malloy, it's not the dead you need to fear, they can't hurt you. Only the living can do that.* Chiding myself for having such a silly, irrational response, I steel my resolve and follow Jerry down the hall. "We came to the master bedroom first," I tell him. "The door was standing open a bit, so I nudged it the rest of the way with the flashlight again. That's when we found Melissa Walters on the bed, strangled to death. I entered the room just long enough to check her for a pulse, then I backed out."

Jerry has entered the bedroom while I stay out in the hall. He flicks the light on inside the room with his pen. "How sure are you that this was Melissa Walters?" he asks, looking over his shoulder at me.

"She's the same lady in the pictures," I tell him as I step just inside the bedroom. In the brightness cast by the overhead light, the scene is even more vividly grotesque. Lividity has started to settle in on Melissa, and rigor mortis keeps her body at the same frozen-shock angle on the bed. Her white cotton nightgown is still shoved up past her parted thighs, baring inhumanely her most private parts to the world. What looks like clothesline rope binds her wrists tightly to the white-painted cast-iron headboard. Her cloudy eyes gaze sightlessly up at the ceiling, the spark of life long since gone, hopefully before any of the horror was inflicted upon her. A thin trickle of dried blood and vomit drain from the corners of her gaping mouth. Her long chestnut hair is tangled and matted across the pillows behind her head. Her hands are twisted into grotesque claws, and even from where I stand, I can see

she put up one helluva struggle against her killer. Her nails are ripped and torn, her fingertips bloodied from her life-or-death fight. I look away from the scene, slightly sickened by the sight of her cruelly ravaged body once more. I spot a small black patent leather purse on top of the white vanity. I go over to it, picking it up and unsnapping the cool metal clasp. It clicks smoothly against my fingers. I locate a red leather wallet inside and gently pull it free, flipping it open. I find Melissa Walters' driver's license and a picture ID for her job at a local factory. In the photo, she is peeking coyly up at the camera, her long, dark brown hair pulled back into a high ponytail, a faint smile creeping around her lips. "It's Melissa Walters," I tell Jerry, his eyes meeting mine in the shards of the shattered vanity mirror. "I found her ID in her purse."

He doesn't answer me, instead studying her battered body lying there on the bed. He peers closely at the black nylons that are knotted tightly around her delicate neck. "I figure he probably killed her first," he says. "She would've fought him like a she-bear in order to protect her kids from him. With her out of the way, he could do whatever he damn well wanted." He studies her frozen-horror expression on her cold face. "Wonder if she knew that's what he was going to do to her? Or did she go along with him in fear, hoping that if she kept him appeased, he'd leave her kids alone, only to have him kill her anyway?" He lifts up the edge of her white nightgown slightly. "I'm going to have the coroner check for sexual assault. I think she was raped. The question is though, was she assaulted before her death or after?"

I feel my spine stiffen, as cold horror shoots through me at his casual remarks. My eyes meet his in the mirror once more. "Are all homicide detectives this callous towards death?" I ask. "Or is it just you, Jerry?"

He shrugs. "You become used to it after a while, Malloy. The cause of death may take many varied gruesome forms, but it all remains the same as far as the final outcome. Murder is murder. It's a crime as old as the Bible, my friend. Cain slaying Abel and all that."

I shudder. "I'm glad I'm not a homicide dick, Jerry. I couldn't become *that* callous to the shocking loss of a human life."

He points to the word 'whore' that's scribbled across the wall in bright red lipstick. "He must have really hated her," he says. "Wonder what set him off tonight?"

"Dunno, Jerry. That's your department to figure out, not mine." I scan the top of the vanity table, spotting the smashed tube of lipstick used to scribble out the hated word. Revlon's Cherries In The Snow. A white wooden jewelry box is thrown open, glinting gold rivers of delicate necklaces streaming out over the blue velvet interior. A large paste-jewel cocktail ring is perched in a slot in a tray, next to it a simple gold wedding band and matching solitaire diamond engagement ring. The diamond looks to be at least a carat, if not more. The diamond winks coolly at me under the overhead light, creating tiny prisms of rainbows across the velvet. A long rope of pearls, real or not, I can't tell, hangs precariously over the edge of the box. Suddenly it slides to the wooden floor, the pearls rattling crisply against the hard surface. Jerry looks over at me and I shrug. "Necklace slid off," I tell him. A flowered container of Coty face powder is upside down, the powder dusting the top of the vanity and everything nearby. The strong reek of spilled floral perfume stings my nose, making my headache worse. It's a rose-scented smell, very heavy and cloying. I try to breathe through my mouth, but the stench clogs up in my throat,

and I cough. I put the sleeve of my uniform jacket up to my nose, trying to filter the smell through the cloth. With a slight ping of horror, I realize that the jacket sleeve itself smells worse, the faint coppery scent of blood on it. Probably Jim Reed's blood that I got on me and didn't notice. I quickly grab the front tail of my unbuttoned and untucked uniform shirt, holding that up to my nose instead. "Doesn't that bother you?" I ask Jerry, my voice muffled by the tail of my shirt.

"Doesn't what bother me?"

"That perfume."

He shakes his head. "It's not too bad. I've smelled worse. I worked a homicide once where an elderly fellow was murdered by his friend. No one discovered the body until a week later. He lived in a house that had no air conditioning, all the windows were shut, and we'd had a steady temperature of 100 degrees for that week. Poor guy was pretty much soup by the time he was found. Smelled really ripe, too. That's why I keep a jar of Vicks in my pocket. When I know I'm going to be working a particularly smelly scene, I dab a bit under my nose before I go in. Works wonders."

I bite back a gag. "Thanks, Jerry, for the wonderful imagery. I *really* needed to hear that." I scowl at him in the shards of the shattered mirror.

Jerry crosses the floor of the master bedroom, his heels clicking on the wooden floor, coming back out into the hallway. "What room did you two enter next?"

"The bathroom," I tell him, as I follow him, turning my back on poor dead Melissa Walters lying bound on the bed.

He pokes his head in. "Looks like he tried to clean up a bit," he says, nodding to the grimy red ring in the sink and the bloody towels nearby. "Out, out, damned spot, huh?"

"Why, Jerry, I didn't realize you knew Shakespeare," I say sarcastically.

"Romeo and Juliet? Oh sure, everyone knows that story. A tragic romance between two star-crossed lovers, who end up committing suicide so they can be together."

I snort. "It's not Romeo and Juliet, Jerry, it's MacBeth."

He looks puzzled. "Really? I could've sworn it was Romeo and Juliet." He brushes past me to get to the nursery room...the room with the double horror inside. "The boys' room?" he asks. When I nod, he kneels down and looks at the palm print on the door, just above the doorknob. The bright crimson has started to darken to a dull maroon. "Looks like he touched the door on his way out." He glances up at me. "Or was it one of you?"

I shake my head. "Jerry, both Reed and I have enough brains to know not to touch anything in a crime scene. Our contact within this scene was pretty minimal." I point to the door. "The door was again slightly open. I nudged it with the flashlight. I entered and found Andrew and Matthew dead inside," I tell him. I lean back against the hallway wall, not wanting to enter that nursery *at all*. "Look, do you really have to go through each room with me? Can't we just get to where I shot the guy in the basement and get it over with?" I ask nervously. The longer I'm inside this damned house, the more spooked I feel.

He regards me with a glimmer of amusement in his eyes, a faint smile on his face. "What's the matter, Malloy? You afraid of ghosts?"

"No," I tell him quickly, defensively. "I just want to get this over with, that's all." I point to the nursery. "And unless you need me to, I'm *not* going inside that room with you. I've seen it once already, and that was enough for me."

With a shrug, he says, "It can't be that bad, Malloy." Then he enters the nursery, with its frolicking Mother Goose wallpaper, its bright cheery colors, and the gruesome scene inside. "My god," he says softly, obvious shock and disbelief echoing in his voice, as he flicks on the light. "This is absolutely horrible! How could a man do this to his own kids?"

I close my eyes against the recalled sight, swallowing hard the saliva that rapidly fills my mouth. *Please don't make me go in there*, Reed's voice whispers in my head. *I don't think I can handle what I know we're going to find*. A faint tremor of remembered horror tickles me, and I repress the shudder I feel creeping down my spine.

"Hey, Pete, come in here a second, I need you," Jerry calls, his voice sounding hollow.

"For what?" I ask, a tremor in my voice.

He sticks his head out around the door. "For God's sake, Malloy, I need you to identify these two kids for me," he snaps impatiently. "Don't be such a wimp

I narrow my eyes at him, a wisp of anger smoldering in my brain. "I'm not a wimp, Jerry. I can identify them for you without coming in. Andrew's the one on the bed, and Matthew's the one in the crib."

He stares at me. "I need you to visually ID them for me, Pete. You were the one who found them." He comes over to stand in the doorway of the nursery, and I notice that he himself won't turn around and look back inside. Instead, he keeps his gaze fixed on me.

"Why?" I groan. "Isn't my word good enough this time?"

He shakes his head. "Nope. You were the idiot who decided to enter a house where a gory quadruple murder had been committed, so you have to put up with the consequences. And that means a visual identification from you. Otherwise, you'll hamper my investigation."

"But I can see them in my mind!" I say. "Andrew's the one on the bed, Matthew is the one in the crib. There's no doubt. Mrs. Timmons next door said that Andrew was a toddler, and that's about the age of the kid lying on the bed with a butcher knife rammed through his chest!" I fix Jerry with a withering glare.

He rolls his eyes and sighs. "Jesus, Malloy, I'm not asking you to do the freakin' autopsy on them, just step inside the room and ID them for me!" he snaps.

"FINE!" I growl, shoving past him to enter the nursery once more. And all at once, the ghastly tableau is laid out before my eyes, the brightness of the overhead light picking out things I hadn't seen before...and wish to *God* I hadn't seen now. Andrew, the toddler with the riotous mop of blonde curls, is still pinned to the bed under the bloody butcher knife, but now I see a vivid spray of crimson washed across the racing-car decorated headboard and Mother Goose wallpaper. He wasn't stabbed once, but twice, his lifeblood pumping out viciously in freedom from his tiny body. The final stab drove the knife into his small body nearly up to the hilt. The love-worn teddy bear is still clutched firmly in his wee fist, but splotches of red darken and mat the plush brown fur. Crimson still drains from his open mouth, drying across his tiny, tear-and-snot stained cheeks. Blood is pooled stickily underneath the bed, a thin film coating it like a skim over a ghastly type of pudding. A plastic drinking glass lies on its side atop a gaily-painted wooden toy box, the water inside spilled out and mixed with some of the blood on the floor, turning the water a pale pink. My stomach rolls and I swallow hard.

I drag my eyes across the nursery, taking in the blue-and-white changing table with tidy stacks of diapers on top of it. I look unwillingly over to the blue baby crib, a handmade quilt with bright colored squares tucked lovingly across the slats. The baby, Matthew, is beaten beyond recognition, blood and brain matter skittering out in violent arcs across the nearby wall and ceiling. The gore-covered hammer used to carry out the dastardly deed still lies alongside his tiny body, the mobile of happy yellow ducks tossed in nearby atop him. I quickly duck my head, keeping my gaze on the wooden floor beneath my feet. The smell of blood and violent death hangs in the air like a near-visible haze of smoke. "Andrew," I say thickly, pointing to the pinned toddler. "And Matthew." I gesture to the crib with its gruesome contents inside.

Jerry stands next to me, his face pale. "Did you check them for signs of life?" he asks, his voice sounding shaky.

I swallow hard again, my eyes locked on the polished wooden floor. "Yes. I checked Andrew. I didn't check Matthew. I couldn't see any point. He was obviously dead." I look up at Jerry. "Can I leave the room now?" I ask, a slight tremor in my voice. "Or do you need me to identify the murder weapons for you?" I try to sound sarcastic, but what I really sound like is that I'm struggling to keep from throwing up...which I am.

"No, no. You can step back out into the hall, Pete," Jerry says. I notice that he looks quite queasy himself. He quickly looks down at his notebook, scribbling notes as I step back past him. "Jesus," he mutters. "I've been to plenty of gruesome homicides, but this one takes the cake."

"Could you please not mention cake?" I ask, leaning once more against the hallway wall for support. My stomach grumbles, and it's not from hunger, I know. I take in deep breaths through my nose, trying to will myself not to vomit. I shove my hands in my coat pockets and close my eyes. I try to think of happy things, like fishing, or dancing, or making love to a beautiful woman. Unfortunately, none of them work, and the scene in the nursery comes back unbidden underneath my eyelids. I open my eyes. Leaving Jerry still inside the nursery, I wander down the hall to Natalie's room. I step across the threshold to stand just inside the vibrantly painted pink bedroom. A dainty canopy bed covered with a pink-rose bedspread sits in the middle of the room. The upended music box on the floor is still playing "The Teddy Bears' Picnic" in dainty, plinking tones, but the music is much slower now; a rather mournful cadence, as if the mainspring in the box is wearing down. An intricately-made two-story dollhouse lies tipped over, the doll-sized furniture within is in as much disarray as the real-sized house furniture is.

"Hey, Pete, where are you?" Jerry calls.

I stick my head out around the door to Natalie's room. "I'm down here, Jerry. In the last bedroom."

He joins me, still looking rather queasy. "Christ, I'm gonna be seeing this scene in my nightmares for weeks," he grumbles.

I look at him. "I thought you were immune to stuff like this, Jerry," I say. "After all, murder is murder, right?"

He shakes his head. "Not when it's kids, it's not. Adults I can handle. Little children I can't." He jerks a thumb back at the nursery. "Those poor kids didn't even stand a chance. Probably the last thing they saw before they died was their daddy standing over them, the knife and hammer in his hand." He shudders visibly. "I hope to God they didn't suffer." And in the voice of the callous veteran homicide detective, I hear genuine compassion and sorrow. He clears his throat. "How'd Reed handle seeing that, with him having a kid of his own?"

"You wanna know how Reed handled it, Jerry? The sight of it made him literally sick to his stomach. He had to leave the house in order to puke." I gesture around at Natalie's room. "This is Natalie's room, that's the little girl. But as you can see, she's not in here."

Jerry scans the room, making notes in his notebook. "My little girl would go nuts to have a room like this. Pink is her favorite color, too." he says. His eyes flick across the disemboweled stuffed animals, the crushed porcelain dolls, the tipped over wooden dollhouse. "She'd love to have a dollhouse like that." He looks at me. "So where is Natalie at?"

"The basement," I tell him. "She's down in the basement."

He nods. "Okay, let's go." We cross the carpeted hallway, the glass from the broken pictures crunching under our feet like grits of sand. We pick our way around the destruction in the kitchen, avoiding the mess of spilled food and tossed dishes and utensils as best we can. I turn my head to avoid looking at the nauseating glop in front of the refrigerator. When we reach the top of the basement stairwell, he turns to me and says, "Who turned the light on? You?"

I shake my head. "No, Reed did, when he came downstairs to see if I was okay." My heart begins to thud heavily in my chest and my mouth goes cotton-dry as I stand at the top of the steps. A few minutes ago, I was eager to get down to that basement, just to get this whole damned ordeal over with; now, I don't want to go down there at all. *I nearly died down there.* Fear prickles along my neck, making my hair stand on end. As I stare down the wooden stairwell, I feel as if I'm looking down a tunnel that leads backward into time. Even my feet won't move at my command. I'm stuck in place, like a fossilized dinosaur mired in the La Brea Tar Pits. A tremor runs through me, and when I look at my hand, it is shaking slightly.

Jerry is already half-way down when he realizes I'm not following. He stops on the steps and looks back at me lagging behind him in obvious annoyance. "Come on, Pete, I don't have all morning!"

I don't answer Jerry, I just stare at him. "Give me a second," I mumble, having a hard time finding my voice.

"You can't stay up there, Pete. You killed a guy down here, and you have to walk me through it. I can't take your version of events from the top of the steps." He frowns.

"I know it!" I snap. I move my leaden feet beneath me, my steps clumping hard upon the wooden stairs as I slowly descend down into the basement. "This isn't exactly easy for me, Jerry," I tell him. "This is where it all ended."

He shakes his head as he continues on down the steps ahead of me. "Christ, you'd think that you were facing your death down here or something," he grumbles.

"I WAS facing my death down here," I say. "Oh, and watch..." I start to warn him.

He nearly runs into Natalie's wee body hanging from the overhead pipe. He jumps back with a startled yelp, slamming hard into me.

"...it," I finish with a hiss, as Jerry's backward jump into me knocks me down. I sit down with a heavy thud on my ass on the wooden steps. I catch myself on the handrails just in time to keep from falling sideways through the open gap between the handrail and the stairs. "Damn it, be careful where you're going!" I snarl at him.

He whips around, his eyes huge. "Why the hell didn't you warn me she was hanging down here?" he asks in an accusing tone.

I steady myself. "I *told* you she was down here in the basement. Besides, *you* were the one who was in such an all-fired hurry to get down here, not me."

He looks back at her. "But Jesus, she's hanging *right there!*" he says, pointing to the tiny body of Natalie that is swinging gently from his slight bump. The rope creaks under her weight. He approaches her limp marionette form warily. "I presume you checked her, too?"

I step down onto the cement floor of the basement. "Yeah, I did. When I first came down here and found her, I thought I saw her move, but it was..."

"Your eyes playing tricks on you?" he interrupts.

I avert my gaze from the little girl's battered and beaten corpse. "Yeah, something like that," I murmur.

Jerry walks carefully around Natalie's cruelly brutalized body, his eyes taking in the sight of the fresh cigarette burns that mark her thin arms, the harsh welts left behind from a belt, the bruises that darken and mottle her face. Her brown hair falls across her freckled cheeks, her sorrowful eyes from the family Christmas picture upstairs pinched tightly shut into slits. "He must have really had it in for this kid," he says softly. "Looks like he took a lot of anger out on her." He points to the garish slash across her delicate white throat. "Did you find the weapon that did that?" he asks, turning to me.

I shake my head. "No, I didn't look." My gaze lands on the pool of blood beneath Natalie's tiny feet, and I quickly flick my eyes away. I am so damned sick of seeing blood tonight; the children's blood, Melissa's blood, Stuart Walters' blood, and worst of all, Jim Reed's blood. *The blood of the innocent is on my hands*, I think to myself once more.

"Wonder if the knife he used is from the set in the kitchen upstairs?" Jerry leans in close to the dead girl, inspecting the knife slash. Natalie's body sways slightly in the breeze created by his movement around her. He scans the basement, his eyes landing on a small step-stool that is kicked over onto its side nearby. He goes over to it, kneeling down and looking at it with a critical gaze. "Maybe he had her stand there, the noose over her head, while he took his time torturing her." He points to cigarette butts that are discarded around the basement. "Looks like it's possible, wouldn't you say?"

I close my eyes, not wanting to even imagine that wicked horror. "I don't know, Jerry, I'm not a homicide detective. You are. I'm not going to do your job for you. I don't get paid enough."

He stands back up, brushing dust off of his pants. "She was probably the last to die, I figure," he says. "The two little boys, now it didn't take much to kill them. Couple of stabs with a sharp knife, couple of blows with a hammer, and the dastardly deed is done." He points to the little girl. "Now this one...this one he must have particularly hated, for whatever reason. He wanted her to feel pain, a *lot* of pain, before he killed her. Wonder why?" He turns to me. "What would you say, Pete?"

I stare at him for a moment. Then I speak. "I'd say that Stuart Walters was one *evil* sonofabitch to have committed all of these atrocious acts against his own family." I gesture to the basement. "Look, Jerry, all I did was come down here and find her. I didn't survey the scene looking for the weapon that killed her, and I didn't stand down here trying to piece together what happened to her. Like I said, that's your job, not mine."

He holds his hand up. "Okay, okay, no need to get testy with me, Malloy. I was just curious as to what your thoughts were." He scribbles something down in his notebook. He eyes her body again. "You know, I think I'll have the coroner check her for possible sexual abuse. Call it a gut feeling, but I don't think Stuart Walters confined his violent activities to just beating the crap out of his wife and kids. I think he might have molested her, too."

I give him a grim look. "I thought you didn't go on gut feelings."

He points to her body with his ballpoint pen. "This time I am." He spots the corpse of Stuart Walters lying near the steps. "That the bastard?" he asks.

"That's him," I tell him.

Jerry walks over to the crumpled form on the cement floor, Walters' cranium mostly gone from the eyes on up, a result of my close-range, dead-on single bullet to his brain. Blood, bits of skull, and brain matter has pooled in a dark sticky puddle behind what's left of his head. Jim Reed's service revolver is still next to him, just a hairsbreadth away from his icy fingertips. My handcuffs are still on him, the one cuff loose and open, the other braceleted around his thick left wrist. The gun and the cuffs glint silver in the light of the basement. Jerry glances at me, his eyebrows raised. "Looks like you caught him right in the head, Pete. Single shot?"

I nod. "I sure as hell wasn't going to miss." I swallow hard and look away from the body, as the sudden memory of Stuart Walters' head popping like a ghoulish balloon; a fine, gory mist of red and grey spraying out behind him, flickers across my brain. All at once, a hot wave of anger, disgust, and loathing washes over me; shaking me, rocking me in its grip, leaving me trembling and unsteady in its wake. I look back at the body with narrowed eyes. *You evil bastard, I hope you rot in the deepest bowels of hell for what you've done.*

Jerry kneels down, patting Stuart Walters' shirt pockets, looking for ID. "His wallet must be in his pants pocket," Jerry says. He looks up at me. "Give me a hand in rolling him, Pete."

I hesitate. "It's Stuart Walters, Jerry. The same guy in the pictures upstairs."

"I need to make sure, though," he tells me. "C'mon, he's not going to hurt you."

While I am not usually this squeamish, there is something I find rather unsettling about handling the corpse of a cold-blooded killer, especially this particular one. I kneel down next to Jerry, gritting my teeth against the quiver in my stomach. Together, Jerry and I heave the heavy weight of Stuart Walters over long enough for Jerry to pull the wallet out of his back pants pocket. The minute Jerry has the wallet in his grasp, I quickly yank my hands away from Walters' cold, stiffening corpse. I don't wish to touch that vile being any more than I absolutely have to. As the body settles back onto the cement floor, Jerry flips open the black leather wallet, his fingers riffling the contents in search of ID.

"Here it is," he says, pulling a driver's license out. "It's Stuart Walters, all right." He riffles through the wallet again, this time a bit slower. He gives me a lascivious grin. "Looks like ol' Stuart here really had an eye for the ladies." He hands me the wallet. "Check out the pictures."

Grudgingly I take the wallet. Flipping it open, I find that the plastic inserts designed to hold pictures indeed has pictures in it...of completely naked women. One picture, that of an ample-bosomed blonde, has an inscription written across it in blue ink. 'For Stu', it says. 'Sweet dreams, loverboy'. And it's signed 'Candi', with a heart in place of the dot over the i. I close the wallet with a snap, handing it back to Jerry with a look of disgust. "That's pretty nasty, Jerry."

Jerry lays the wallet on top of Stuart Walters' stomach. "Some guys have all the luck, huh?" He stands up. "So take me through it from down here. What did you and Reed do?" He waits, his pen poised over his notebook to take down my statement.

I take a deep breath of the damp basement air and begin the final tale. "Reed wasn't with me when I came down here, Jerry. Like I said, he'd gone outside to get sick. I came down here to the basement alone, and that's when I found Natalie's body. I was still down here when Reed came back inside. He told me that he'd gone ahead and radioed for Homicide. I wouldn't let him come down here and see her hanging like that. I thought he'd already seen enough tonight as it was." I pause, closing my eyes for a moment. A heavy wave of guilt passes over me as I remember the hell my own stupidity has put a good man like Jim Reed through. It presses down hard on my soul, and I feel it cringe deep inside of me. I study Reed's blood embedded in my fingertip whorls once more. "Am I going too fast for you, Jerry?" I ask, staring at the faint crimson marks. *Out, out damned spot!*

Jerry looks up from his writing. "No, go on."

I continue. "He heard a car pull in the drive, and thinking it was Homicide, he went to see. Instead it was Stuart Walters coming back. I heard a scuffle break out upstairs about the same time Reed called out for help. I started back up the steps to help him, but when I reached the top of the steps, Walters kicked me in the stomach and sent me falling back down the stairs." I hesitate once more. "By the time I got my feet back under me, Walters had evidently already knocked Reed out with a bronze statue. It's the one of a horse's head lying on the floor upstairs, it has a little bit of Reed's blood on it. Then he must have gotten Reed's gun, because the next thing I heard was a gunshot." I close my eyes for a minute, remembering in icy horror the next few minutes, the longest few moments of my life. "I knew that I was next, so I turned off the light there, and hid under the steps. He came looking for me, Jim's weapon in his hand."

Come out, come out, wherever you are...

"When he went to turn the light back on, I was already behind him, my revolver pointed at his head. I ordered him to drop Jim's weapon."

Ooh, a tough cop, huh? Whaddaya gonna do, pig?

Blow your brains six ways to Sunday, all over this basement...and I did, too...

"He finally complied, and I ordered him over to the tool bench. He was complacent until I snapped the first cuff on him. That's when he made his move, attempting to get away from me. I tried to overpower him, but he was too strong. We struggled for a few moments, but I knew he had the upper hand on me. I managed to get the light turned back off, and I dived for the shadows under the stairs. I stayed hidden, watching as he tried to find his way around the basement with a lighter. He was able to find Reed's weapon. Just as he was about to close in on where I was at, Reed came to the top of the stairs and flicked the light on. That's when I fired at Stuart Walters, killing him."

Jerry is busy scribbling down what I've just told him. "Show me where you were at under the steps when you killed him, Pete."

I ease my way around the corpse and find the spot where I was tucked noiselessly away under the stairs. "Right here. I was standing right here." My stomach rolls queasily and my skin crawls when I see exactly just *how* close in proximity Stuart Walters was to me when I killed him. Icy fingers caress my neck and I shiver involuntarily. Standing where I nearly met my end unnerves me. Something tickles at the back of my memory but I push it away. It flutters back...something about the exact moment right before I pulled the trigger. I take a deep breath and try to calm myself, batting the memory away once more.

"You say the lights were off while you were hiding from him the second time? How could you see to track him through the darkness?"

"My eyes adjusted pretty fast to the dimness. Plus, it was lightning out like crazy, and like I said, he was illuminating himself every time he flicked the lighter on." I point to a dull black metal Zippo lighter that is still clutched loosely in Walters' hand. "That's it, right there." I start to step out from underneath the steps but Jerry stops me.

"Hold on a second, Pete. Stay right where you're at," he says, holding up his hand. He fumbles in his pockets. "Damn, I must have left it at the station," he mutters.

"What are you looking for?"

"My tape measure," he says. "I usually carry it with me, but I must have forgot it this time."

"Maybe there's one over on the tool bench," I say.

He crosses the basement floor and rummages about in the tools atop the workbench. "Ah-ha!" he says with delight. "A tape measure!" He holds it up in front of him as he comes back over to where I'm still standing at.

"Most home workshops *have* a tape measure, Jerry," I tell him dryly.

"Oh, I know, I know. I just didn't want to have to measure this off by eyeballing it. My eyes may be accurate, but they ain't *that* accurate."

I snort. "No kidding."

"Here." He hands me the beginning edge of the tape measure, then starts walking backwards to where Walters' body lies. He looks up at me. "Go into the shooting stance you took, Pete." Putting the metal edge of the tape measure under my foot, I assume my firing stance. He studies the space between Stuart Walters and I. Shaking his head, he re-measures it. He lets out a low whistle. "I make it about seven or eight feet, give or take a few inches." He looks at me in surprise. "That's pretty close range, Pete. What'd you do, just lie in wait for him and then pull the trigger?"

"No." *Yes, I did.* I point my finger at the corpse. "Look, Jerry, it was kill or be killed down here. I saw what that man did to his family upstairs, and I heard him fire the shot into Jim Reed, murdering him for all I knew. I wasn't about to let that happen to me. Believe me, if I wanted the sonofabitch dead *that* bad, I had ample opportunity to shoot him as he was coming down the steps in search of me." I glance at the dead man in front of me and then look away. My stomach growls sourly.

"Oh, I'm not disputing that you didn't have justification to shoot him, Pete. I'm not saying that at all. I just think that you didn't have a very good handle on the situation down here from the get-go." He looks back down at the corpse and begins writing in his notebook. "But don't get me wrong, Pete. It was hardly something that was your fault to begin with."

But it IS my fault that I lost control of the situation...if I'd never made us set foot in this damned house, if I'd followed Reed back up the steps instead of hesitating down here, none of this would've happened. I'm glad that Jerry's gaze is upon the dead body of Stuart Walters instead of me. I don't think I could stand his eyes upon me right at this point, I'm afraid he'd see the guilt I feel inside my eyes. I shift uneasily on my feet, and when I do, my foot slips off of the edge of the tape measure Jerry is still holding in his left hand, underneath his black notebook. It zips merrily across the floor, the metal end of it whipping quickly across Jerry's knuckles, scraping them.

"Ouch, sonofabitch, that stings!" he yelps as he drops his notebook in surprise. He glances at his scratched knuckles and glares at me. "Damn it, Pete, I thought you had ahold of the end of it!"

"Sorry!" I snap back. "Why the hell didn't you have the button pressed down to hold the tape measure in place?"

He pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket and dabs at the tiny weal of blood that wells up over one knuckle. "I hope to God I don't have to have a tetanus shot for this," he grumbles.

"For Christ's sake, Jerry, it's just a minor scrape. I've had *paper* cuts that have been worse than that," I tell him with a roll of my eyes.

With a huff, he picks up his dropped notebook and dusts it off. "So, what made you fire when you did? He get a fix on your location and draw down on you?" he asks.

"No, a split-second before I fired, Reed had turned the light on from the upstairs switch. I just used the temporary diversion to my advantage to get the drop on Walters before he got the drop on me."

"Did you have him lined up in your sights or what?"

Damned right I did, from the moment he started hunting me once more. "No, I didn't. Not until just before I fired."

"How was he holding the gun in relation to you? Was he holding it at his waist, out in front of him, what?"

"At his waist. Right before I fired, he'd turned towards me, as if he realized I was there in front of him. He started to raise the gun up, but I pulled the trigger first and beat him to the draw. He was facing me dead-on when I shot him." And then memory that is tickling around in the back of my mind surfaces. Quite vividly, I remember Stuart Walters' eyes meeting mine, right before I slammed that bullet home in his head, his gaze cold and evil, as it stared into my own. It hits me like a sudden blow to my gut. I shiver slightly, but Jerry doesn't notice it.

"About how long were you down here with Walters?" he asks.

"Maybe ten minutes at the most. I didn't look at my watch, Jerry. I was too busy trying to keep him from killing me."

"How long from when he tried to get away from you until you shot him dead?"

"Three, maybe four minutes." *It only seemed like an eternity.* "For a big guy, he moved pretty fast across the basement after I got the light turned off."

"How'd you get the light down here turned off after he tried to get away from you?"

"There was a string hanging from the light fixture. When I yanked on it, the string came off in my hand. I dropped it on the floor."

"Would you say you had a good visual on him at all times from where you were at under the steps?"

"Yeah, I did. Like I said, he was using the lighter to try and find his way around. Plus, there was the lightning from the thunderstorm."

"So every time he flicked his Bic, you could see where he was at?"

I nod. "Yeah, I could."

"Did you call out to him, tell him to halt, drop his weapon, anything like that?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't want to give away my location to him."

He studies me with a frown. "I'm just curious, Pete. How come you simply didn't pick Reed's weapon up off of the floor when he first relinquished it? You should have done that instead of just kicking it away from him."

"I didn't feel comfortable exposing myself to a possible attack by him. I wanted to maintain control of the situation."

"But you *didn't* maintain control of the situation, Pete. Not at all."

I am quiet for a moment. "Yeah, I know. You don't have to point that out to me again."

He shrugs. "It's an easy mistake to make. It all probably would've ended in the same outcome. You would've killed him, anyway."

"Maybe not. If I'd followed Reed back up the steps instead of staying down here a moment longer, I might have been up there with him when Walters entered. I'm sure between the two of us, we could've taken Walters down, no problem."

He stares at me. "Wait a sec, you mean you hadn't started back up the steps before Walters entered the residence? Why?"

I look at Natalie's battered body through the open framework of the wooden stairwell. "I had...a...a reason, I guess."

"Like what?"

I flick my gaze to him. "Like none of your business, Jerry."

He shrugs. "Fine. But don't be surprised if whoever conducts the shooting interview back at the station questions that." He gestures to the dead man. "Hell, as close as you were when you shot him, I'm surprised you don't have some of his blood or brains on you." He looks at me. "Or do you?"

I shake my head. "No, I don't. At least I don't think I do." I hold my arms out in front of me, studying the sleeves of my uniform coat in the light. And to my abject horror, I see several dark purple splotches against the dark blue of my coat...not the blood of Jim Reed like that that stains my hands, but the blood of Stuart Walters. As I peer closer, I see tiny specks of grey clinging to the dark, stiffened spots. *Walters' brains*. I close my eyes, fighting the nausea that wells up and threatens to overtake me. "Oh my god," I whisper hoarsely. "I...I...I guess I did get some on me," I stammer in pale shock.

Jerry comes over to me. He lifts my coat sleeves up, looking at them himself. "Yep, you sure did, Pete," he says so nonchalantly, as if a gore-splattered police officer is an everyday occurrence. He points to my badge. "Looks like you got some on your badge, too."

I look down at a faint red smear that mars the raised gold emblem of City Hall. I suddenly feel weak and shaky, like a newborn kitten. My knees tremble beneath me, and I feel myself sway a bit. There's a roaring in my ears as sudden fear grips me. *I need to get this coat off of me, NOW!* Tugging frantically on the sleeves, I yank it off of me and drop it onto the floor. I stare at it in wide-eyed horror. I can't believe I've spent the last couple of hours wearing Stuart Walters' blood and brains on my coat like they were gruesome medals of honor.

Jerry grips my arm. "Hey, Pete, you okay?" he asks, his voice sounding far away. "You don't look so good."

"I...I...I need to sit down, Jerry," I say. *Dear God, please get me out from underneath these damned steps before I collapse!*

He guides me over to the wooden stairwell. "Sit here until I get this diagrammed, okay?" he asks. "Will you be alright?" Concern tinges the edges of his voice.

I nod as I sit down. "Yeah, I'll be fine, Jerry," I tell him, my voice shaky. I drop my head into my hands, trying to take in deep breaths to calm myself down. I feel strangely feverish and chilled at the same time. The shock of the whole incident is finally hitting me, as I realize just *how close* I came to wearing *my own* blood and brains on my coat. I shudder violently. Something seizes at my soul, making me gasp softly with the sheer, bright pain of it, clutching tight within me with razor-sharp claws. I cannot tell what it is, nor do I really want to know. I just wish it would go away. Scrubbing my face with my hands, I close my eyes, the sweetish, coppery stench of blood thick in my nose. I dimly hear Jerry murmuring to himself as he diagrams out the area. Vertigo swirls around me and I lean against the wooden stair rail. It feels cool against my fevered forehead. My stomach keeps rolling and twisting, churning inside of me like an angry, storm-tossed sea. There is a buzzing sensation in my skull, as the horrific images from the house flicker across the screen of my eyelids; the full, gruesome, technicolor display of them all. The last one I see is Stuart Walters' eyes meeting mine with an evil glare, right before his head explodes from my bullet. I open my eyes quickly, as the dizziness and nausea dance wickedly around me. I grab the wooden stair rails on either side of me tightly in my sweaty palms, my eyes fixed firmly on a spot on the cement floor in front of me, desperately willing the awful feeling to go away.

"Pete, are you sick or something?" Jerry asks. "You really look like hell."

I slowly raise my eyes to see that he's standing in front of me, his brows furrowed together in a frown. "Air," I rasp. "I need some air." I haul myself to my feet, clutching the rail for support, and turn, hurrying back up the steps. I nearly collide with Miller's partner, Sam Bingham, at the top of the steps.

"Whoa, hey, you okay?" he asks me in a startled voice.

I don't answer him as I shove him roughly aside in my haste to flee. I don't want to be in that house any longer, not with its gruesome spectacles hidden behind the half-closed doors. Not with the spooky air, the eerie silence, the macabré dead. Not face-to-face with a dead man who looked right into my eyes before I killed him. I just can't stand to be inside that ghastly house that smells like blood and death, like violence and hate and plain-dirt evil any more. The screen door bangs shut behind me, my feet thud hard upon the cement steps. I pace the tiny front sidewalk nervously, my arms folded tightly across my chest, breathing in the cool air in sharp quick gulps, trying to quell the nausea and settle the pounding kettle drum of my heart. The soles of my shoes rasp sharply against the cement with my frantic pacing steps. I shiver violently, chilly sweat beading on my forehead and running down my back. *You're okay now, Malloy, you're out of that house, so calm down.* I press my palms to my temples, trying to quiet the damned anvil chorus of demons inside my brain. I tilt my head back, breathing through my nose in order to try and clear out the awful odor of blood that seems to be permanently lodged within my sense of smell. I shudder again, the shaking violence of it nearly driving me to my knees.

"Pete, are you okay?" Jerry asks. He has followed me outside, with Sam Bingham at his heels. "Do you need me to call an ambulance for you?"

I shake my head and tell him a lie. *I just want to get the hell away from here.* "No, I'm fine," I tell him, my voice sounding thin and hollow in my ears. "I just had to get out of there, Jerry. I've seen enough of it already tonight." I keep my back to him so he won't see my pale expression and sweaty face.

"Well, we had to do the walk-through, you know that," he says. "You couldn't have gotten out of it."

"Yeah, I know, but the horror certainly didn't dim any the second time around," I tell him. "Plus it was hard to be back under those steps once more, especially seeing how close I came to meeting my death down there." My breathing begins to ease a little and my heart has slowed a bit. I swipe at the sweat on my forehead with the sleeve of my uniform shirt. I turn to look at Jerry and Sam, forcing my face into a small grim smile. "Scenes like this never get any easier, do they?" I say with a shaky chuckle, trying to downplay my discomfort.

Jerry nods. "Yeah, that's true." He hands me my coat. He must have picked it up off of the basement floor. "Here," he says. "A good drycleaner might be able to get those stains out for you." He then casts a fishy look at Bingham, as if suddenly realizing his young partner is there beside him. "What the hell took *you* so long, Bingham?"

Bingham jumps at Jerry's sharp tone. "Sorry, sir. I was interviewing Mrs. Timmons, and she gave me some milk and cookies."

Jerry stares at him a moment in open-mouthed disbelief. "She gave you milk and cookies? What are you, Bingham, *five*?"

Bingham looks flustered and embarrassed. "No...uh...I told her I hadn't had seven yet, so she gave me something to eat." His eyes dart back and forth between Jerry and I. He looks genuinely frightened. "I'm sorry, sir, should I have brought some for you and Officer Malloy?"

Jerry rolls his eyes, smacking his forehead with his palm. "Jesus, I swear they get younger and younger each year." He rips a diagram and a couple of sheets of paper out of his notebook and hands them to me. "Here, give these to whoever conducts the interview with you at the station. The first is the diagram and measurements I took, the second couple of sheets are the notes I wrote down regarding your version of the shooting. Check and make sure the diagram is accurate before you leave."

I take the papers from him, glancing at them. The map of the basement is quite accurate indeed, with Stuart Walters' body marked out with an X like a gruesome pirate's treasure, and my hiding spot under the stairs marked out with my initials, P.M. I don't bother looking at the notes. "It's right on the nose, Jerry," I tell him as I fold them up, tucking them inside my shirt pocket. "So are we done here?" I ask.

"Well, you are, Pete. We've got to wait for SID to get here and start processing the scene. If I have any further questions, I'll get ahold of you."

"Thanks, Jerry," I say, and turn, walking away from them, my marred coat in my hands. I toss it in the front passenger seat of the squad car. Climbing into Adam-12, I put the key in the ignition with shaking fingers. The engine coughs to life and I pull away from the curb, leaving that tidy little ranch house with its ghoulish spectacle inside. My hands are clammy on the steering wheel, and unease still tickles the back of my neck. And about halfway to the station, my stomach gives one final sickening lurch, rebelling against my will, and I have to pull Adam-12 to a screeching halt in the middle of a quiet road, quickly opening the car door so that I can stick my head out and throw up. When I'm finished puking my guts out, I lean my forehead against the cool ridge of the steering wheel for a moment, an ether-myriad whirl of thoughts swimming in my feverish brain. Pulling the car door shut, I glance out the windows at the darkened houses around me. *And who knows what secret hells play out behind their*

closed doors? I wonder. How many of them will eventually end up like the Walters family? And worse yet, what if Jim and I are the ones dispatched to take their calls, just like we took the one tonight?

I grip the steering wheel tight in my hands, as inexplicable hysteria bubbles up inside of me. I try hard to control the giggles of insanity that I feel welling up in my throat, but I can't. I'm forced to give in, roaring like a drunken hyena, throwing my head back against the headrest as the gale-force glee pulls me into its mad whirlpool. The eddies of my hysterical guffaws bounce around the interior of the car like wayward ghosts. Tears roll down my cheeks as I giggle and chortle, my shoulders shaking hard with my insane laughter. I can't even explain *why* I'm laughing. There's certainly nothing funny about this whole tragic situation. For a brief fleeting moment, I wonder if I'm going crazy. Then it hits me: *I looked into the eyes of a dead man right before I ended his life...his cold blue gaze flicking up to meet my own steely stare, just before I pulled the trigger on him.*

That does it. I collapse against the steering wheel as the hysteria leaves me as quickly as it came on. I wipe my eyes with the sleeve of my uniform shirt. My breath comes in rasping pants, my lungs drawing air in with great wracking heaves that oddly feel like sobs. I sit there in the squad car on that quiet, homey little street, staring at the dark and silent road in front of me. A thought flickers across my mind like a comet's tail. I close my eyes as it washes over me. *I killed a man tonight, his eyes meeting mine right before I pulled that trigger. And in that brief, fleeting instant, he knew me, I knew him. We were brothers under the skin, both of us cold-blooded killers in that dark, damp basement. Only he drew first blood, and I drew the last...his. And I don't regret doing it one damned bit.*

With a weary sigh, I put the car back into gear and head towards the station. Another thought flitters around in my brain, one that I can't quite ignore. It dances lightly around my mind, finally landing like a tiny, solid arrow deep within my conscience. It clutches once again at my heart, my soul, with those razor-sharp claws. With a shiver of realization, I reach over and flick on the heater, trying to stave off the chill I feel. It doesn't help any, I feel as if I might freeze before I reach the warmth of the police station. The thought nags and prickles at me, chasing itself around and around in my tired brain. *I am surely as a cold-blooded killer as Stuart Walters was, especially if I don't feel any regret for killing him. That makes me no better than him.* An icy shudder passes through me.

Dear God, what is to become of me...what is to become of my very soul?

CHAPTER THREE

Back at the station, I take the two shotguns and the keys to the squad car inside, returning them to the duty sergeant, Sergeant Frank Scanlon. He eyeballs me as he takes the keys and shotguns from me. "What the hell happened to you tonight, Malloy?" he asks, taking in the cut on my cheek and my split lip.

"I walked through the valley of death tonight, Frank," I tell him with a grim little smile. "But yea, I shall fear no evil, for I verily slayed it."

"Huh?" he asks, confused. "What the hell does that mean, Pete?"

I shake my head. "Never mind, Frank. It's just been a long night."

"Where's Reed at?"

"Central Receiving. He got hurt on one of our calls."

"How bad?"

"I dunno, Frank. He wasn't doing too good when the ambulance left with him."

"How come you're not at the hospital with him, Pete?"

"I've gotta be here for an interview, otherwise I *would* be at the hospital with him."

"An interview? What kind of interview?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "You know, Frank, you sure ask a lot of questions sometimes," I tell him sharply.

He stares at me. "Geez, Malloy, you don't hafta get snippy with me. I was just wondering what happened to you two tonight. You look like you've been in one helluva fight."

"I *was* in one helluva fight, Frank," I say. "A fight for my life." With that, I brusquely turn and walk away, going back outside to make a second trip to the squad car. I grab our helmet bags from the open trunk and our briefcases from the back seat. I set them just inside the entrance of the station. I make a final trip back to the car, grabbing my gore-spattered jacket and the report book from the front seat, and my uniform tie from the dash. I take a quick survey of the vehicle, then I lock it up. As I start to open the door to the station, I nearly run head-on into Jerry Woods, who, with his partner Dave Russo, is getting ready to leave the station and return to patrol.

"Whoops, sorry, Pete!" Jerry exclaims as the door nearly smacks me in the face. "I didn't realize you were there."

"Don't worry about it, Jerry," I tell him. "That's only the second time in this shift that I've nearly been hit by a door. I'd try for a third, but I don't wanna mess up my already gorgeous looks, you know." I step past him and Russo in order to retrieve Reed's and my gear from the floor.

"Here, let me give you a hand with that gear, Pete," Jerry says. "Dave, you go on out to the car, I'll be there in a minute."

"Sure, Jerry," Dave says. "Catch you later, Malloy." He exits with a half-wave of his hand.

Jerry bends down and picks up Reed's helmet bag and briefcase. "So what in the world happened with you and Reed tonight, anyway?" he asks as we walk down the hallway towards the locker room. "Last time we heard, you guys got a welfare check call. Then we heard you put out the officer-needs-assistance call. The next thing we know, we're getting dispatched to go pick up Jean Reed and deliver her to the hospital where Jim's at. And you look like you've gone a few rounds with Muhammed Ali." He shoves the locker room door open ahead of me. "What gives, anyway?"

"Just set Jim's stuff down in front of his locker," I say, dumping my own gear on the floor in front of my locker. "I've got an extra key to it, so I'll put it away."

Jerry sets Reed's helmet bag and briefcase on the bench in front of Reed's locker. He folds his arms across his chest, studying me. "You didn't answer my question, Pete. What in the hell happened to you and Reed tonight, anyway?"

I fish around in my pocket for my key. "I can't really tell you much, Jerry, except that it wasn't our night tonight."

"You *can't* tell me or you don't *want* to tell me?"

I eye him. "Both, Jerry." I open my locker door with a hard yank, the door bouncing off of the metal locker next to it. "Did you hear anything at the hospital about how Jim was doing when you delivered Jean there?"

He shakes his head. "No, he was still in the ER when we left. We didn't stick around after we dropped her off. Dispatch wanted us back in service right away. But Brinkman and Walters were there to sit with her."

I nod. "I know. I was standing right there when Mac sent them down with the ambulance." I gesture to Reed's equipment. "Thanks for helping me with Reed's gear, Jerry. You'd better get back to your car. Mac's running pretty short-handed tonight."

He studies me for a moment longer. "Sure, Pete, no problem." He turns around and starts towards the door. "Hey, Pete?" he asks over his shoulder, his fingers on the door handle.

"Yeah, Jerry?"

"Are you alright?" He looks back at me with a concerned frown.

I smile thinly. "I've never been better. Now you'd better go before you get a hotshot call and Russo has to come in here hunting for you."

"If something's bugging you, though, Pete, I'd like..."

I hold my hand up, stopping him. "Jerry, I'm *fine*," I say with exasperation. "I'm just really beat and my night's not over yet." *Please, Jerry, just go away and leave me alone!*

"Huh," he says with a shrug. "Well, if you ever wanna talk..."

"Jerry, I repeat, *I...am...fine!*" I snap. "Now do I hafta pull rank on you to order you back on patrol or what?"

"Geez, Pete, you don't need to bite my head off," he says in a wounded tone. "I'm only trying to be helpful."

"And you would be even *more* helpful if you were out on the streets right now patrolling them!" I point to the door. "Now, GO!"

Shaking his head and muttering under his breath, he yanks the locker room door open and leaves.

Fumbling around on the top shelf of my locker, I locate the extra key to Jim's locker, the one he had made just for situations like this. I unlock the door and put his gear away. As I start to shut the door, my eyes land on a small piece of paper that has fluttered out of his locker and landed on the ground at my feet. I stoop down and retrieve it, turning it over in my hands. I really shouldn't read it; after all, it's none of my business, but the dramatic bold heading, written out in bright blue felt-tip marker and underlined, blares visually out at me like a polka-dotted elephant dancing down the street. *Oh, it's a list of some sort, probably a grocery list from Jean*, I think as I scan it. But, to my surprise, it's far from a grocery list. Shocked, I start to read it.

INVESTIGATOR'S EXAM DATE: NOVEMBER 13, 1973 it says. Then, underneath the date in a similarly bold heading is a list.

PROS:

Increase in pay

Step up in rank

Stabler shifts

More time at home with family

Better chance at advancement than with patrol work

Less chance of getting injured or killed

Opportunities to work undercover

Get a chance to see how cases come out

No more patrol work

More opportunities to prove my worth

Wouldn't be stuck in a car most of the shift

Wouldn't be paired with Pete anymore

CONS:

Wouldn't be as exciting as patrol work

Wouldn't get to meet different people every day

Would miss the one-on-one interaction with citizens

Would miss working with my fellow officers

Wouldn't be paired with Pete anymore

Stunned, I stare at the last two lines of each column. *Wouldn't be paired with Pete anymore.* I feel a hot wave of anger wash over me. I throw the piece of paper back into his locker. *What the hell's wrong with being paired with me? Am I no longer good enough to be his damned partner? Pissed,* I slam his locker door so hard shut that the key falls out of the lock and lands on the floor. I bend down and retrieve it, staring at it in the open palm of my hand. *If he thinks that little of me, let him have his stupid key back!* I start to slip it between the vent slats on his door, but hesitate. *No, I'd better not do that. He'd wonder why, and then I'd have to tell him that I saw his list.* With a sigh, I toss the key back onto the top shelf of my locker, where it lands with a tinny plink. I put my own helmet bag and briefcase inside the locker and then wearily, I sit down on the wooden bench in front of the lockers. Where I was greatly relieved to have reached the station just a little while ago, without having any more attacks of hysteria or nausea, now I feel upset once more. The discovery of Jim Reed's list feels like a harsh betrayal to me; as if he were a sell-out Judas in a blue Dacron uniform. The fact that not being paired with me was also listed in the 'con' column does little to ease the sharp stab to my heart. And I've certainly done nothing tonight to change his opinion of me, either. What kind of partner am I if I nearly got him killed tonight? Maybe he's entitled to erase me completely from the 'con' column, and just leave not being paired with me in the 'pro' column. I drop my head into my hands, rubbing my throbbing temples. "Sonofabitch," I mutter to myself. "And this shift just keeps gettin' better and better as it goes along. I can't *wait* to see what's in store for me next."

I glance over at my blood-and-brain spattered jacket lying on the bench next to me. Gingerly, I pick it up, holding it out in front of me. *A good drycleaner might be able to get those stains out for you*, Jerry Miller's voice says in my head. Studying it for a moment, I shake my head. *Nope, there's no way in HELL I'm going to wear that jacket anymore*. I unpin my badge from the front of it, run my hands through the pockets and empty them out, and then, still holding the damaged coat out in front of me, I stand up and take it over to the trash can, wadding it up and stuffing it down to the bottom of the can. I'll put in for a new coat, and if the department won't cover it, I'll pay for the damned thing out of my own pocket.

Taking a rag out of my locker, I dampen it slightly with water from the sink tap, then I go about washing the blood of Stuart Walters off of my badge. I polish it up on the shine rug when I'm done, my eyes running carefully over the silver and gold metal surface, but I can detect no more specks of blood. I re-pin it back into place on my shirt, then I set about making myself presentable for my shooting interview. I study Jim Reed's blood in my fingerprint whorls again, then turning the water on as hot as I can stand it, I start to scrub the faint maroon marks from my hands. It takes me three times before they're nearly all gone. *Out, out, damned spot, indeed!* Turning on the sink taps once more, I splash lukewarm water onto my face, wetting a paper towel down to scrub away the dried blood on my cheek and bottom lip. Both wounds sting like hell when the water hits them, but as I examine the cut to my cheek in the mirror over the sinks, I can see that it is really nothing more than a deep scratch and won't need stitches after all. It looks far worse than it really is. Cupping my hands and catching water in them, I rinse the sour taste of vomit out of my mouth. I dry my face with a handful of paper towels from the dispenser, and run dampened fingers through my hair, combing it back into place. I lean forward over the sinks to look closer at my mirrored reflection, making sure that I've gotten all the dried blood washed away. "You sure as hell aren't going to win any beauty pageants, Pete," I tell myself in the mirror. I meet my own eyes in the silvered glass, and the image of Stuart Walters gazing into my very soul right before I killed him flashes before me. *Brothers in blood, under the skin...* A surge of panic grips me and I quickly look away, turning my attention to my uniform. *Best not to think of Walters right now. Otherwise I'll end up like I was in the car just a little while ago.*

I button the shirt back up over my white t-shirt and tuck it into my pants, smoothing it out as best I can. It's still a bit wrinkly, but right now I don't really care. I fish the silver tie clasp out of my pants pocket and, grabbing the tie up from the wooden bench, I noose it back around my neck, sliding the clasp back into place. Casting a critical gaze over myself in the mirror once more, I decide that I'm at least presentable. I carefully avoid meeting my eyes in the glass. I look at my watch, it's almost 3:30 a.m...and it's not over for me yet. Shaking my head, I go over to my still-open locker and slam it shut, grabbing the report book up off of the bench. I head out of the locker room.

Bob Brinkman and Jerry Walters are sitting in the report desk cubbyhole. Both of them look up as they hear me coming down the hall. "Hey, Pete," Brink says. "You guys have had one helluva night tonight, huh?"

"Yeah, Brink, that's the understatement of the year," I tell him dryly. "I thought you two were still at the hospital with Jean."

"Mac released us to go back in service," Jerry says. "He's got Ed Wells sitting with Jean for now."

"Ed Wells?" I ask, horrified. "Is Mac out of his mind? Ed Wells is the *last* person who should be sitting with Jean Reed!"

"Well, Mac needed the two-man car out on patrol worse than he needed the L-car," Brink says. "I guess he thought Wells would be okay staying with Jean." He shrugs. "Besides, after they got Jim moved up to the ICU..."

"Wait a sec, Jim was put in the ICU? Why?" I ask, interrupting Brinkman.

"They did it mostly as a precaution, Pete. They wanted to make sure he didn't have any more seizures," he tells me.

"Did he?" I ask. "After they got him into the hospital?"

"No-o-o," Brink says, drawing the word out. "But he..." He exchanges a glance with Jerry Walters.

"But he *what*?" I ask impatiently. "Tell me! What was wrong with Jim?"

Jerry clears his throat. "Pete, I think we'd better let Mac tell you how Jim's doing."

"Damn it, Jerry, what was wrong with him?" I demand. "Did he take a turn for the worse?"

Brinkman stands up. "Pete, Mac was still there when we left." He exchanges another look with Jerry. "That's why it's best you ask him, not us."

"Yeah," Jerry chuckles a bit nervously. "We just got back in service about twenty minutes ago. We had to stop by the station and drop off some reports."

I glare at Jerry and Brink through narrowed eyes. "What aren't you two telling me?" I ask in a low tone.

"Nothing!" Brink says in his best innocent tone. "We aren't trying to avoid telling you how Reed's doing, Pete, we just honestly don't know ourselves!" He tugs on Jerry's coat sleeve. "C'mon, Jerry, let's get back on the streets."

"Yeah," Jerry says. "We'd better get back out before Mac has our asses on a platter." He brushes past me. "See you later, Pete," he says as the two of them hurry down the hall to the outside. I see them speaking to one another quietly, leaning towards each other like kids with a secret as they leave. Before Brinkman opens the outside door, they both look back at me.

Shaking my head, I go into the breakroom, hoping it's empty. But with my shitty, crappy-ass luck this shift, it's not. Ben Ryan and Claude Johnson are in there on their seven, along with Frank Scanlon and one of the jail officers, Greg Powers. They were talking when I first walked in, now they fall dead silent with my presence. I feel their eyes on me as I go over to the snack machine.

"Don't let the party stop just because I got here," I tell them, my back to them as I peruse the brightly-wrapped candy bars, the packages of cheese crackers, and the packets of mixed nuts.

"Hey, Malloy, I hear you killed a man tonight," Ryan calls out to me. "That true?" He's extremely cocky and over-confident; a younger, more souped-up model of Ed Wells, and I like him just about as much as I like good ol' Ed himself.

I shrug. "Your guess is as good as mine, Ryan," I tell him casually, keeping my eyes on the candy in front of me. "Not that it's any of your business." I make a selection and fish the appropriate amount of change out of my pocket and drop it into the coin slot. I push the button and wait for my purchase to drop.

I hear Ryan stand up and approach me. Crossing the breakroom in a few strides, he stands directly behind me, crowding me, and I run right into him when I turn away from the candy machine, my roll of peppermints in my hand. He puts a meaty hand on my chest. "I asked you a fair question, Malloy," he says in a friendly tone that is laced with arsenic-tipped daggers. He gives me a small shove, a big fake-assed grin plastered on his broad face. "The proper response from you would be 'Yes, Ben, I did kill a man tonight.'" He looks over his shoulder at his partner, Johnson, and the other two. "Wouldn't you say Malloy here isn't being a very good conversationalist?"

"I'd say I'd leave Pete alone, if you know what's good for you, Ben," Johnson warns with a frown.

Ryan looks back at me. He's built like an NFL linebacker, but I don't doubt that I could take him. After all, brawn doesn't equal brains, especially in his case. He gives me another little shove. "Whatsamatter, Malloy? Cat got your tongue?"

"Get the hell out of my way, Ryan," I growl. "Or I'll drop you on your ass so fast your *teeth* will hurt!"

"I'm not afraid of you, Malloy," he says, echoing the sentiments of the whipped Ed Wells from earlier. With a finger, he flicks the patches on the shoulders of my uniform, the ones denoting my higher rank as Police Officer III. "Just because you have those pretty little patches on your sleeves doesn't mean you're better than us." He pokes me hard in the chest.

I grab his finger before he can poke me again. "Not better, Ryan, just smarter than you," I snap. Then I shove his hand back up against his chest, forcing my weight hard against him. It has the desired response, he stumbles back a bit and I easily slip past him.

Scowling, he rubs his hand where I slammed it against his chest. "The next time we tangle, Malloy, you might not be so lucky," he threatens.

I pause at the breakroom door. "And there won't be a next time, Ryan. Assholes like you have no place in Central Division. I'll do my damndest to get you transferred out of here just as fast as I can." I yank open the door and step out into the hall.

The report desk cubby is vacant, but I decide not to sit there to start writing my report on the Walters incident tonight. Instead, I slip quietly into the Watch Commander's office and shut the door behind me. I take a seat behind the desk and open the report book in front of me. Peeling back the tinfoil on my roll of peppermints, I dislodge one from the roll with my thumb and pop it into my mouth. I find the requisition form for getting a new jacket and fill it out first, putting it into Mac's 'in' basket. Then I set about writing down the report for tonight. I keep it short and to the point; if there's any whiff of elaboration on my part, someone is bound to wonder just exactly what I'm covering up. I'm so engrossed in my writing, I don't hear Mac enter the office.

"So who died and made you Sergeant, Pete?" he asks.

Startled, I nearly swallow my peppermint, the second one I'm working on, in surprise. "Huh?" I ask. "I'm sorry, Mac, I didn't hear you come in."

He hangs his coat and hat on the coat rack in the corner. He looks as weary and beat as I feel, his face drawn with fatigue. "Well, obviously," he tells me dryly. "You're pretty enthralled with whatever you're working on there."

"My report for the Walters incident," I tell him. "That's what I'm working on." I return my attention back to the report. "I'm almost done."

"Huh, and here I thought maybe you were trying the desk on for size," he says with a small smile. "Getting the feel for being a sergeant."

I look up at him. "I've gotten the feel for being a sergeant before, Mac. It's nothing new to me."

He comes over to me. He leans down, eyeing me suspiciously. "What's that you're eating, Malloy?"

I shift the peppermint into my cheek, trying to hide it. "What's what I'm eating, Mac?" I ask innocently. "I'm not eating anything." Thank God I hid the roll of candy in my uniform breast pocket before he ever came in.

He sniffs at me. "Smells like peppermint to me," he says.

"Do you *mind*?" I ask with dismay, leaning back in the chair away from him. "Haven't you heard of a thing called 'personal space'?" I point to the report, the one now under his hand. "And if you've smudged that report, I'm *not* rewriting it."

He taps the roll of peppermints in my shirt pocket with his finger. "It's mint candy, Pete, I knew it."

"So? I'm allowed to eat candy if I want, *Mother*," I tell him in my best snotty tone.

"Oh, I know. It's just kinda odd for you, Pete. You don't usually eat candy. At least not like your sweet-toothed partner." He gestures to the roll of mints again. "So why the mints?" He leans on the desk and fixes me with a steady gaze.

"So how's Jim?" I ask, deftly changing the subject. "I ran into Brink and Walters earlier and they really didn't tell me much." I slip the report out of the book and slide it into Mac's 'in' basket. "In fact, they were acting like Jim's in pretty bad shape. Is he?"

"I'll tell you how Jim's doing if you'll tell me why you're eating mints." He folds his arms across his chest.

"That's not fair!" I cry. "What's it any of *your* business why I'm eating peppermints?"

"Are you trying to cover something up, Pete?"

I glare at him, his implication quite clear. "If you're thinking I'm trying to cover up the smell of booze, *no*, I'm not chewing them for *that* reason." When he continues to stare at me with that steady gaze, I finally relent with a sigh. "Alright, alright. I'm chewing them to take the taste of vomit out of my mouth! Are you happy now?"

He eyes me with obvious concern. "You got sick, Pete? Why?"

I rub my forehead. "Never mind why, Mac. I just got sick, that's all."

"But you have a pretty strong cast-iron stomach. Are you coming down with the flu or something?" he asks, reaching his hand out as if to feel my forehead for a possible fever.

I bat his hand away irritably. "Touch me and you die!" I snap. "I'm not sick with the flu! Now tell me about Reed."

He doesn't answer me; instead, he opens one of the desk drawers and takes out a bottle of aspirin. He pops the cap off and shakes two out into his palm. He rattles the bottle in front of my face. "Need some of these?" he asks.

Wordlessly, I hold my hand out for two. He replaces the bottle back into the drawer and goes over to the water cooler, pouring each of us a cup. He sets mine down in front of me.

"Thanks," I say, downing the two aspirin with a single gulp of cool water. "Now are you going to tell me how Jim's doing or do I have to leave here and go find out for myself, shooting interview be damned?" I toss the empty cup water cup into the trash.

Mac sighs heavily. "He's in stable condition. They found no evidence of a skull fracture, but he's got a really nasty concussion. He was vomiting pretty bad from it, so they ended up giving him a shot of something to keep him from throwing up. He's in a lot of pain, and they can't give him a whole lot of pain medication because of the concussion. The good news is, the bullet he took in the side didn't hit anything major. It's basically just a flesh wound." He tosses his own empty cup into the trash can. "When I left the hospital, they were getting ready to transfer him up to the ICU, just for tonight. They want to keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't have any more seizures."

"They definitely ruled out a skull fracture or a brain bleed, though?"

"Yeah. He got a little combative with them in the emergency room. They said it was because of the concussion. They did a CT scan on him, in addition to the x-rays. There was nothing out of the ordinary on either of them." He chuckles ruefully, shaking his head. "You know what that damned fool said to me when they wheeled him back to his room after they got done doing the CT scan?"

"With Jim, it's hard to say."

"He said, 'Well Mac, according to the doctors, my brains are ordinary.' It took me a moment to realize that he meant that the CT scan *itself* was ordinary, and not his brains. Then he made me swear not to tell you he had ordinary brains, said it might ruin your high opinion of him."

I snort, shaking my head. "As long as his brains weren't *scrambled* by the blow Stuart Walters inflicted on him, he'll be fine." I look at him hard. "But you *are* telling me the truth, aren't you? Jim's going to be fine?"

Mac nods. "I wouldn't lie to you about something like that, Pete. I know how worried you were about him at the scene. The doctors think he'll be able to go home in a couple of days, maybe three."

"Why'd you stick Ed Wells with Jean?" I ask. "He's not exactly the best man for the job, you know."

Mac regards me solemnly. "No, the best man for the job is currently sitting in my chair," he says. "I had no choice, Pete. I needed to get the two-man car back out on the street as soon as I could, especially with the shift already being down in manpower. You and Reed are out of commission for now, and Wells' partner may not be back until Monday, so I felt the better option was to have him sit with Jean instead of Brinkman and Walters." He shrugs. "Besides, by the time I left, the ICU staff had placed a cot in Jim's room for Jean to sleep on for tonight. Wells won't be around her that much. And he's not that bad, Pete. Remember, his own wife went through this when he got shot, so he's a bit more understanding than you'd think."

I look at him in amazement. "You've gotta be kidding me, right? Ed Wells a bit more understanding?" I shake my head. "Not likely."

Mac sighs. "What do you want me to do, Pete? You can't be there with her right now. And I sure as hell couldn't stay."

"I know. Maybe Jim wouldn't want me there anyway," I say, the words slipping out of my mouth before I can stop them. Inwardly, I cringe.

Mac looks at me with a puzzled frown. "What do you mean, Jim wouldn't want you there anyway? Why wouldn't he? You're his friend and partner, Pete."

"Just forget it, Mac. It's nothing."

"Did you two have an argument or something?"

I look up at him. "Please, just drop it, okay?" I'm not going to tell him that I saw Reed's pro-and-con list. I look at my watch. "When are the detectives conducting the shooting interview supposed to get here?" I ask, changing the subject.

Mac looks at his own watch. "Yeah, you'd think they'd be here by now. Maybe we should wander down to the interrogation room, d'ya think? Could be they're already there, waiting for us."

"Maybe," I say, shoving myself away from Mac's desk as I'm still sitting in the chair. "I'm tired of staring at these four walls, anyway, so let's go stare at some others for a while." I stand up and stretch, yawning into my fist.

Mac shakes his head. "You know, Malloy, you looked right at home behind that desk. So when are you going to take the sergeant's exam?" he asks with a laugh.

I look at him. "When I'm damned good and ready, Mac."

"What if you have to wait?" he asks as we walk out of the Watch Commander's office.

"So I'll wait. Haven't you ever heard that expression, 'all good things come to those who wait'?"

"I don't know that it applies to the sergeant's exam, though, Pete."

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it, then," I tell him. My tone does not invite anymore discussion on the sergeant issue. Mac and I have been over it countless times, and he's always come out the loser against my sheer Irish stubbornness.

"I see you got yourself back in uniform, Malloy, and cleaned yourself up," Mac says as we head down the hallway to the interrogation room.

"I wanted to be presentable for the detective conducting the shooting interview," I tell him. "I didn't want to look like I'd gone dancing with a meat grinder, as you so generously put it." I open the door to the interrogation room. "Along with the Walters report in your basket, I've also put in a requisition form for a new coat."

Mac looks at me. "A new coat? Why? What was wrong with the old one?"

"It has Stuart Walters' blood and brains on it," I tell him.

"A good drycleaner would get that out, Pete."

I give him a hard look. "Would *you* want to wear a coat you knew had gore on it, even after it was cleaned up?"

He thinks a moment. "No, I guess I wouldn't," he says. "In your report, I take it you left out the little...uh...*scuffle* you had with Ed Wells?"

"Yes." I hesitate. "Should I have put it in?"

Mac shakes his head. "No. If you had, the Captain might wonder why I didn't write the two of you up for fighting. I'm not about to do more paperwork just because you and Wells couldn't control your tempers." He stops me with his hand. "Mind you, Pete, that if something like this happens again, your ass is on the line. You will be written up, sat down before a conduct board, and disciplined as the board sees fit. Do I make myself clear?"

Embarrassment reddens my face. I feel like I'm five years old and just got caught making mud castles with my mother's favorite cake pans. "Yes, Mac. It'll never happen again, I assure you."

Mac regards me for a moment. "Well, I really wish I could believe you, Pete, but I know your temper. You need to learn to control it better. And for God's sake, don't let Ed Wells get to you. Just let what he says to you go into one ear and out the other. It's what I usually do." He gestures to the room. "Go ahead and have a seat, I think I'll go to the breakroom and grab a cup of coffee. You want some?"

"Sure."

"Black, no cream or sugar, right?"

"Yeah, thanks." He returns a few minutes later, two styrofoam cups of hot, steaming coffee in his hands. He sets one on the table in front of me, then, after shutting the interrogation room door, he sits down with his own cup.

I pick up the cup, letting the bitter smell of the coffee drift past my nose. "I think right now I could kiss you, Mac," I tell him gratefully, as I breathe in the coffee aroma like it's the world's sweetest perfume.

"I'd really rather you not, Malloy. My wife might get jealous," he tells me with a laugh.

I take a sip of the scalding drink. It burns my tongue a bit, but I don't care. "Who's conducting the interview?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "Don't know. Whoever they pull in, I guess." We are quiet for a moment, then he speaks. "This has really gotten to you, hasn't it, Pete?"

I look up at him quickly, then look away just as fast. I don't want to meet his eyes with mine, for fear of what I might see in them...or worse, what he might see in my own. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mac."

"This whole ordeal tonight...it's bothering you, isn't it?"

I shrug as nonchalantly as I can muster. "No, not really," I tell him, once more the lie coming quite easily to me. *Christ, Malloy, first you kill a man tonight without any remorse whatsoever, then you tell countless white lies to your superior officers. What's next for you? Ripping the manufacturer's tag off of your mattress?* "I told you at the scene, I'm just tired, that's all. And I was worried about Jim." I laugh, and it sounds uneasy in my ears. "I've been in worse situations, Mac. This one isn't that bad."

He leans forward in his chair. "Pete, c'mon. I've known you for a long time now. I know when things are starting to eat away at you."

I feel a sudden flash of irritation towards him. "Okay, so maybe it is. What do you want me to do? Break down and start bawling like a baby? Get angry and stomp around, throwing things? Retreat into a catatonic state? Fall all over myself apologizing for killing that man...that...that *monster*, tonight?" I slap the top of the table with my open palm, narrowing my eyes at him. "Because, newsflash for you, Mac, I'm *not* sorry I killed him! And I never will be!" I lean back in my chair, my arms folded across my chest, glaring at him. "I'll bet you didn't expect me to say *that*, did you?" I challenge.

He is quiet for a moment, his gaze locked on his cup of coffee. "No...no, I didn't," he says at last. "But in a way, I can understand where you're coming from, Pete. In the space of only a couple of hours, you've discovered a horrific crime scene, had your partner and friend get seriously injured, and been forced to fight for your life, all of which resulted in you shooting and killing a man tonight. It's been pretty rough for you."

"Gee, ya *think*?" I ask sarcastically. I rub my forehead wearily. "Look, Mac, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you. I feel bad enough as it is already."

"Why?"

I hesitate, staring at the scarred wooden table top in front of me. "It's my fault all of this happened anyway. I was the one who made the decision to enter that house in the first place. Reed didn't want to go in, he wanted to wait for back-up. If I'd listened to him and not gone in, none of this would have occurred. Reed wouldn't be lying in the ICU ward at Central Receiving right now, and I wouldn't have shot and killed someone tonight."

"You did what you thought best under the circumstances, Pete. You had no idea any of this was going to go down the way it did. You can't blame yourself for that."

I laugh harshly. "Can't I, Mac? I'm always the one who's the stickler for the rules. I can quote the little blue book in my sleep. So what gave *me* the right to toss the rules out the window tonight?"

Mac studies his hands. "Okay, so let's play the 'what if' game, Pete. What if there *was* a critically injured victim inside that house, in need of immediate medical attention, and you decided to play it safe and call for back-up before you entered the residence. And that critically injured victim *dies* in the time-span you waste while waiting for your back-up to arrive. Does that make it any easier, knowing that while you decided to follow proper protocol and wait, an innocent person died?"

I am silent for a minute. "No. It would actually make me feel a helluva lot worse." I take a couple of swallows of coffee. It settles bitterly in my stomach.

"So, you took the initiative and decided to enter the residence anyway, to check the welfare of the occupants inside, protocol be damned. I'd have probably done the same thing, if I'd been in your shoes."

I snort. "I highly doubt that, Mac. You have more brains than that."

"It's not always brains that gets the job done, Pete. Sometimes you have to go on your gut instinct, trust in what you feel is right."

I swirl the black coffee in my cup, staring at it. "Maybe Jim's right. Maybe I am jaded and bitter." I feel the corner of my mouth twist up in a sardonic half-grin.

"When did he tell you that?" Mac asks.

"Right before we got the welfare check call. We were having a discussion...an argument really, over developing dark sides to our personalities and getting burned out on the job."

Mac looks at me, his eyebrows raised. "Dark sides and job burnout?"

Sighing, I shake my head. "He'd read some damned article in a magazine, said it told him everyone has a dark side to their personality. He's afraid he's developing his, especially after experiencing some of the crappy calls we take while on the job."

"What does he do, spend the entire shift encased in a bubble of sunshine and lollipops?" Mac asks dryly. "Some days, it seems like EVERYONE has a dark side to them, including me. But then that passes, and we go on."

"I tried to tell him it's just human nature, everybody has a little bit of a darker side to them once in a while, but he's really worried about it. I think he's scared he's going to turn evil or something."

Mac shrugs. "As long as he doesn't start whacking innocent people with his nightstick, what's the problem?"

"That's precisely what I told him, in those exact same terms." I drain the last of the coffee from the cup. "He's also pretty convinced he's suffering from job burnout. He wants to take the investigator's exam when it comes up in a couple of months."

"So? If he wants to get out of patrol work because he thinks he's getting burned out, then let him. He knows what's best for him, Pete, not you."

I sigh, rubbing my eyes tiredly. "I know that, Mac, and I'm the *last* person on this earth that would stand in the way of Reed advancing in his career. He's too good of a cop to remain a patrolman forever."

Mac regards me with amusement. "You know, I seem to recall telling someone else that, too, every single time the sergeants' exam has come up. And every single time, he refuses to take it."

I glare at him. "I told you just a little while ago that I'd take the exam when I'm damned good and ready, but not before then."

"Who says I'm talking about you?" he asks innocently.

"Who else would be good enough to take the sergeant's exam?" I ask. "I'm not boasting or anything, don't get me wrong, but there's not too many other officers in this division that could be considered candidates for becoming a sergeant. Not Brinkman, not Woods, and sure as hell not Ed Wells."

"You forgot Jerry Walters, Pete."

"I think Jerry's considering taking the exam to enter the air fleet within the next year or so."

Mac sighs. "Look, Pete, don't you want to advance in your career?"

"Sure, but not because I'm being forced into it, Mac," I say. "I want to advance when *I'm* ready, not because someone else is telling me I have to do it."

"Even Val Moore moved up to Captain," he points out.

"Val got captaincy because he was next on the list," I tell him. "He moved into Captain Banks' position after Banks retired from Wilshire Division." I shrug. "Besides, it was no big secret that Val had his eye on becoming a captain. I've known that for a long time, and so have you."

"True, but let's face it, Pete, you can't remain a patrolman forever. You have too much skill and potential to waste on being a career patrol officer." He chuckles. "Now Ed, I can see *him* remaining a beat cop until his retirement."

I eye him. "That is, unless he gets his ass shot first." Tearing off a little piece of the styrofoam cup, I toss it on the table. "Besides, I wouldn't make a good sergeant."

"Why's that?"

"Too jaded and bitter." I smile sourly.

"Maybe the self-truths that you are not willing to face are the hardest self-truths of all."

I look at him for a moment. "I didn't know you could speak fortune cookie, Mac."

"How long have we been friends, Pete?" he asks, a thoughtful expression on his face.

With a shrug, I say, "I dunno. Twelve years or so, I guess."

"Sometimes your friends can see you better than you can see yourself."

I sigh and roll my eyes. "Okay, Confucius, you win. So Pete Malloy is jaded and bitter. Who cares? Maybe I'm entitled to be."

"Maybe you are. It's not my place to say. But I'll tell you, it's a pretty harsh outlook to have on life, that's for sure." He cocks his head, frowning. "When I first met you, Pete, in your rookie year, you used to be a bit of an idealist and an optimist. What happened to you?"

"I traded idealism and optimism in on a healthy dose of pessimism and ice-cold reality. Makes the world a helluva lot easier to live in, that's for damn sure. A couple of years on the job taught me that." I laugh harshly. "The bitter medicine of life is easier to swallow with a chaser of clear antipathy. The soul is soothed because it doesn't have to get involved with the struggles of the downtrodden, the anguish of the constantly sorrowful, the squabbles of the dregs of society. Sometimes when I get home from work, I just want to take the hottest shower I can stand, in order to wash the suffering of that day's humanity off of me. And rarely does it work, either."

"Sounds to me like maybe you're the one suffering from job burnout, not Reed."

I look at him. "Mac, even if I am, what the hell am I supposed to do? Find another job? Save for a factory job that I had when I was a lot younger, I've never been anything but a cop. I came into the job nearly straight out of the Army. Even when I was going through the Academy, I held only small-time gigs."

"Didn't the Army teach you anything?" he asks.

"Yeah, I learned how to march in all kinds of weather conditions, how to assemble and disassemble a rifle in under four minutes, how to eat the slop they serve in the mess hall, and how to take orders without question, no matter how stupid or insane they may be." I grin wryly with rather fond remembrance. "Oh, and I also learned how to chase and catch beautiful, buxom frauleins, too."

"The Army didn't teach you any special skills?"

"Does chasing and catching frauleins count?" I ask, still grinning.

Mac sighs and rolls his eyes. "No, it doesn't, Pete. But it's something you're quite good at isn't it?" he asks dryly.

I shrug. "Eh, sometimes. Other times I get shot down like Baron von Richtofen."

He chuckles, shaking his head in amazement. "You mean to tell me that the legendary Strawberry Fox *himself* strikes out every now and then?"

"Infrequently, yes." I frown. "And what exactly do you mean by 'legendary'? I'm not *that* much of a Casanova."

"No, you've *only* broken the hearts of nearly every hot-blooded female, young *and* old, that you've ever chanced to meet."

"I haven't either," I scoff. "Just a few, Mac. And I can't imagine I'd be the type to break the hearts of little old ladies. Not on purpose, anyway."

He eyeballs me. "No, the little old ladies think you're just darling, the older women want to mother you, the women in your *own* age group want to marry you, and the younger ones want to go to bed with you." He sighs heavily in mock disappointment. "If only the *rest* of us men had your kind of problem."

"Hey, it's not my fault," I say defensively. "I can't help it if women find me irresistible."

"Okay, outside of chasing the ladies, didn't the Army teach you anything else? Any kind of special skills?"

"Where do you think I learned to be a sharpshooter at?" I ask. "I didn't learn it through a correspondence course, Mac." Reflexively, my fingers touch the gold Distinguished Expert shooting medal that's pinned to my shirt. "Let's face it, I'm a little too old to change horses mid-stream, career-wise, you know."

"So? Take the investigator's exam in a couple of months, like Reed wants to do."

I shake my head. "No, I'm not one to follow along in another's footsteps. I've always been my own man. Besides, I don't think I'd like being a detective, either."

"Why not? It's a step up, an increase in pay. You're not out on the streets as much."

I tear off another little piece of styrofoam, tossing it on the table alongside the first piece. "Like I told Reed earlier, it's just trading one cross for another. Detectives deal with the anguish, the sorrow of a crime a lot longer than we do. On the street, we deal with it as we're dispatched to it. We take the report and turn the case over to the next sucker in line. Then we're back on patrol again. It requires a lot less emotional involvement, that's for sure."

"So if it's a lot less emotional involvement, then why is *this* particular scene tonight bothering you so much? You've seen worse, so what makes this one any different?"

I study the tabletop in front of me. Closing my eyes, I put my forehead in my hand. "I don't know, Mac. I don't know why this scene is bothering me so much."

"Is it because it was gruesome? You've witnessed ghastlier ones than this one."

"Maybe that's a little bit of it," I say, my eyes still closed. The images from the house flicker in front of me. I shake my head to try and rid myself of them. "I...I...I just can't explain the rest of it to you, Mac. I wish I could, but I can't."

"You can't explain it, or you don't want to?" he asks.

"Both," I say quietly.

"Try explaining then what you *can* explain to me," he says gently. "Maybe I can help. We've all been there at one time or another. You can't keep your emotions hidden forever, you know. It's not good for you."

"What do you want me to do?" I ask miserably. "Break down and cry? Cleanse myself, my soul, of the emotional baggage just by shedding a few tears? It doesn't work that way for me." I put my hands out on the table, palms up, a gesture of sincere pleading. "Please, Mac, just let it drop, okay? I'll deal with it the way I see fit."

"Is it because Jim got hurt?" he asks, ignoring my plea. "Are you feeling guilty for that, Pete? Because you shouldn't. It wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it WAS!" I say angrily. "Jim got hurt because I made the decision to enter that damned house in the first place!"

Mac eyes me, a frown upon his face. "You know, Reed said a rather strange thing to me while I was still at the hospital with him, Pete. He said you weren't upstairs when he got attacked by Stuart Walters. Where were you?"

Stunned, I stare at him for a second. "I was in the basement yet. I hadn't gotten upstairs yet when Walters entered."

"Why? According to Reed, you'd already discovered the little girl's body down there. Why didn't you start back upstairs? Between the two of you, you might have been able to take Walters down. Or at least you might have been able to come to Reed's aid faster. What exactly were you *doing* in the basement, Pete?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "That's none of your business, Mac!" I tell him sharply.

He shrugs. "Were you contemplating something, having deep thoughts over what had happened in that house, what?"

"I *said*, it's none of your business!" I snap. "And I mean it!"

He continues, almost as if he's talking to himself. "Because now I can SEE you feeling guilty for dragging Reed into that house in the first place..."

"I didn't *drag* Jim into that house! He entered on his own volition!" I interrupt hotly. "He only followed my lead! He could've stayed outside...in fact, I suggested that to him myself!"

He looks up at the ceiling, still ignoring me. "But now a double helping of guilt would weigh on me, that's for sure," he says. "If I were feeling guilty for dragging my partner into a horrific crime scene, and then allowing him to get injured because, for my own reason, whatever it was, I decided to stay in a basement for a minute longer, putting him in harm's way." He looks at me coolly. "Is that how it goes, Pete? You're feeling guilty for what happened with this whole incident?"

I jump up out of my chair. "You wanna know what I'm feeling, Mac?" I ask, as heated anger pounds thickly in my blood. "I'm feeling guilt, yes, for what happened to Jim! But I'm also feeling hatred for Stuart Walters for what he did to his family! Combine those two emotions with the shock and horror I felt after we discovered that woman and her three small children brutally murdered by her psychopathic husband, then you'll know why I'm bothered by all of this! And I have every right to be, too! Have you ever walked in on a ghastly scene like that? A young mother strangled on her bed, her two young sons beaten and stabbed in their nursery, her young daughter hanging down in the basement like she was a slab of beef?" I am yelling now, and Mac flinches a bit at my verbal barrage. "You're damned right I'm upset by all of this, Mac! I'm sickened and saddened by what I saw in that house! And the only thing I keep wondering is how someone could be that cruel, that inhumane, that

EVIL, to their own family! Can you answer me that, Mac? Can you? 'Cuz I sure as hell am having a hard time finding an answer myself!" Turning away from him, I lean on the black filing cabinets that line one wall of the interrogation room. My breath comes in pants from my outburst. Folding my arms on the top of one of the cabinets, I rest my head on them, closing my eyes tightly. "Go on, Confucius. Lay some of that age-old wisdom on me," I tell him, my voice sounding hoarse from my shouting. "I could sure as hell use some right now."

Mac doesn't answer me for a long minute. Then, clearing his throat, he speaks.

"Actually, Pete, I *do* know where you're coming from. I handled a call like that myself," he says quietly. "It was back before you ever came on the force. Val Moore and I got a call to go do a welfare check on a family, just like you and Reed did tonight. Neighbors hadn't seen the family in a few days and grew worried. They said they thought they'd heard what sounded like shotgun blasts a few days earlier. We had to break down the door to get inside. Once we walked in, I knew in my gut what we were going to find. Val knew it, too. But we went ahead and started through the house." He is silent, remembering his own scene. "We found the two little girls first. They were only eight and ten years old, tiny little things with long blond hair. They were shot dead in their beds, a shotgun blast catching each of them once in the head, and once in the heart. Just tore their little bodies to pieces. There was blood and brains everywhere. All over the beds, all over the walls and ceiling, even on their toys." He coughs. "We found the father next, in the master bedroom. He had been killed the same way, shotgun blast to the head and to the chest. But the killer exacted an even more gruesome toll on his body. He sustained a third shotgun blast to his groin." Mac pauses for a moment, then he continues. "At first we couldn't find the mother at all. We searched the house for her, afraid that we had a fourth homicide victim on our hands. We were still thinking at that point that it was a horrific murder case, and that maybe she'd been kidnapped by the killer after her family had been slain. Then we found a note, taped to the refrigerator door. 'To whom it may concern' read the outside envelope. Val, being the higher ranking officer, opened it, and we discovered her suicide note. She said she killed her two little girls because she was jealous of them, of the attention her husband paid to them. Said she didn't care what happened with *their* bodies, but she wanted to remain pretty, even in death."

"So where'd you find her?" I ask, not turning around. "The garage?"

"Yeah. She'd asphyxiated herself with car exhaust. Why nobody heard the car running is beyond me, but then again, I couldn't understand why nobody called in when they heard the shotgun blasts a few days earlier."

"It wouldn't have made any difference, you know," I tell him. "They were dead the minute she pulled the trigger on them."

"No, I realize that. Of course, I didn't then, and I spent a long time being angry at her for robbing her husband and children of a life. I mean, if she wanted to take gas and kill herself, that was her problem, but why wipe out the innocent lives of your family?"

"That's what I'm trying to understand here, Mac. And I have yet to hear an answer from you." I keep my back to him.

"It bothered me for the longest time. I began to look for the bad and the evil in all our calls, brooding over every little bit of injustice, every little bit of meanness, every little bit of downright awful. I'd get upset, angry, depressed, you name it. Sometimes it seemed I'd hit every emotion in the book in a single shift. It wore on me, it wore on Val, and it especially wore on my family. Finally one day, after a particularly brutal shift, Mary said something to me, something that I carry with me to this day. Know what it was she told me, Pete?"

I look over my shoulder at him. "No, but you're going to tell me, aren't you?" I ask wearily.

"She told me, 'You see humanity at its absolute worst, day in and day out, but you *can't* let it wear on you, day in and day out. You have to find the goodness in life wherever and whenever you can. And when you *do* find it, grab it and hold on to it just as tight as you can. It'll *always* outweigh the evil in the end.'"

I study my hands, noticing that I've gotten most of Jim Reed's blood out of my fingerprints. "Did you look into that mother's eyes, though, Mac, before she killed herself?" I ask.

"No, why?"

I'm quiet for a moment. Then I take in a breath. "Never mind," I tell him. "It's not important." I shake my head. "Not important at all."

"Did you look into one of the victim's eyes tonight, Pete? Were they not quite dead when you found them?"

"No, they were dead," I say. "They'd been dead for a while." I rest my head on my arms once more. "Just forget it, okay?"

He stands up and comes over to me, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Look, Pete, I'm just trying to help you through what I know is a rough time for you right now."

"I don't need any help, Mac. I'll get through this on my own."

"What about Jim Reed? Do you expect him to go through this on his own? Surely the shock and the horror of tonight is doubly hard for him, since he's got a wife and young son. He may turn to you for guidance, Pete, and how are you going to guide him through this if you can't guide yourself? You need to consider that."

"Don't think that I haven't, Mac. I worry more about how *he's* gonna handle this than how *I'm* gonna handle it."

"And *I* worry about you, Pete," he says gently. "Reed's got a family to give him additional support when he needs it. You don't, and that really bothers me. Who are you going to turn to when the nightmares get rough? When every welfare check call you're sent on from here on out turns your stomach queasy with fear? When the cruel injustices that you see every day sit like lead on your soul?"

I look at him. "I handled Parker's death, Mac. Handled it just fine, I thought."

"Sure, if you think drinking yourself into an alcoholic stupor every night just so you can sleep counts as handling it." He shakes me by the shoulder. "You *didn't* handle Parker's death well, Pete. Not at all. And you're kidding yourself if you think you did. Val and I were afraid we'd come over to your apartment some day and find you dead, either from alcohol poisoning or from sticking your revolver in your mouth and pulling the trigger. You damn near lost your career over not dealing with Parker's death, just because you couldn't get a good grip on your emotions."

I shake his hand off. "I'm a little older and wiser now, Mac. I know how to keep the bad thoughts at bay."

"Really? How? By drinking again?"

I turn on him angrily, pounding the top of the filing cabinet with my fist. "No, not by drinking again!" I snap. "I never was at risk for becoming an alcoholic, anyway, so why should this start me drinking again? I can get a handle on my emotions, don't worry! And without the help of booze!"

"Your dad," he says. "You told me once, a long time ago, that your dad used to drink heavily. He was over in the European Theater during the war, you told me, and what he saw weighed heavily on him."

"Yeah, that's right, it did!" I tell him. "But his unit was one of them that liberated Buchenwald. He was forever bothered by what he saw over there, but he never talked about it. And..." The meaning of Mac's words hit me, dawning on me like a brick sunrise. "And that's probably why he drinks. To forget what he saw." I close my eyes. "But I'm not going down that road, Mac," I tell him, my voice a whisper. "I refuse to. I won't let myself become my father. I *won't*."

"So how are you going to keep from doing just that, Pete?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I don't know," I rasp. "I really don't know." I look at him. "But I do know that I don't want to talk about what happened at that house." I shudder. "I just can't. Not right now. And maybe I'll never want to talk about it, either."

He regards me solemnly. "You know the saying, though, Pete. No man is an island." His voice is quiet.

I look at him, forcing my face into a small grim smile. "Hell, I didn't realize being a sergeant required such a philosophical bent, Mac. I guess I'd better brush up now on my Kant, Sartre, and Plato, if I ever want to be a good sergeant."

He smiles, cocking his head at me. "I thought you said you weren't going to take the exam, Pete."

I am quiet for a moment, studying the floor in front of me. "No, not right now, I'm not. But I'll tell you what, Mac. Two years from now, if I'm still on the force, I'll take the exam and pass it. Then I'll get your old job."

"MY old job! Where will I be? Out to pasture?"

"You'll be a Lieutenant by then."

He starts laughing. "Are you serious, Malloy? Who says I want Lieutenant?"

"Would Captain be better?" I ask. "Since you're so hung up on promotions?"

"That's even worse!" He falls silent for a moment, then he speaks. "Why wait two years, Pete? Why not take it the next time it comes up?"

I shrug. "I'm not quite ready to give up patrol work just yet. Give me a couple more years on the streets, then I'll be ready."

He leans back against the row of filing cabinets, arms folded across his chest, fixing me with a stern gaze. "I'm holding you to two years then, Malloy. If you don't take the sergeants' exam in two years time, I'm going to kick your ass for you until you do."

I ponder it for a second. "You got yourself a deal, Mac" I finally tell him, holding out my hand. "Shake on it."

He shakes my hand firmly. "Sergeant Peter Malloy. You gotta admit, it has a nice ring to it."

Just then there is a knock at the door and it opens. Two men stride briskly into the interrogation room. One of the men is a wiry little man, white-haired and rather grandfatherly looking. The other man is dark-haired and stern-faced, the kind of guy who won't take any crap *at all* from anyone. I exchange a startled look with Mac, who seems just as surprised as I am. *Surely these aren't the two detectives that are going to be conducting the shooting interview with me, are they?* I wonder.

The tall, dark-haired man nods to Mac and I. "Sergeant MacDonald, Officer Malloy," he says in a clipped, staccato tone, his voice rattling across the room like machine-gun fire. "Officer Gannon and I will be conducting the shooting interview this morning," says Sergeant Joe Friday.

And when I hear that, my stomach plummets all the way down to the soles of my feet. *Great, just great! Sergeant Joe "Just-The-Facts" Friday, and his loveable sidekick, Officer Bill Gannon, WOULD have to be the ones to conduct this interview!* I exchange another look with Mac, who now won't meet my eyes.

Oh my god, I am SO screwed...

CHAPTER FOUR

"Officer Malloy, if you'll please have a seat, we'll get this interview underway," Sergeant Friday says to me. He sets a black briefcase down on the table.

"Sure," I say, resuming my seat at the wooden table. Mac sits down across from me, while Bill Gannon sits down at the end, opening a notebook in front of him.

The only one who doesn't sit down is Sergeant Friday. He remains standing across from me, near the door, his arms folded across his chest. He fixes me with a steady gaze that makes me want to fidget in my seat. "Officer Malloy, Officer Gannon will be the one taking notes during this interview, while I ask the questions," he says in that no-nonsense tone. "Do you have a problem with that?"

I shake my head. "None whatsoever," I tell him, trying to hide my nervousness. I pull from my breast pocket the folded diagram and two pages of notes that Jerry Miller gave me back at the scene. I unfold it, smoothing it flat on the table. I slide it across to Bill Gannon. "You'll need these," I tell him. "Sergeant Miller drew them up at the scene. It's a layout of the basement where the shooting occurred."

Gannon picks the notes up, handing them to Friday. He glances at them. "Yeah, we've already been out to the scene," he tells me shortly, tossing the sheets of paper back onto the table, where they land fluttering in front of Mac. "We were there shortly after you left, Officer Malloy. We're also aware that Officer Reed has been taken to Central Receiving for treatment of the injuries he incurred at the scene."

"That's right, Sergeant Friday," Mac tells him. "I'm sure when Officer Reed is released from the ICU, he'll be able to give a statement to you." Even Mac seems uneasy in the daunting presence of Sergeant Joe Friday...and it's quite understandable. The man is known for his hard-hitting interrogation techniques. Someone once likened him to a rabid bulldog hopped up on speed. He can make even the most innocent person want to cop to committing crimes, just to get him off of their case.

"Yes, I intend to question Officer Reed as soon as I can," Friday says, his gaze still fixed on me. "Okay, Officer Malloy. Let's start with your name, serial number, and time on the job."

"Peter Joseph Malloy, serial 10743. It'll be twelve years on November 15th."

"What time did you get the call to go to 2510 Briarcliff Road to perform a welfare check?" he asks.

I hesitate, a little bit confused. "Wait a second, don't you need to know what time we started our watch, what we were doing in the time period leading up to the call?"

Friday steps forward and unlatches the briefcase. He pulls something out, tossing it onto the table, where it lands with a slap in front of me. "That your logbook for this shift?" he asks, pointing to it.

Startled, I look down at it. "Yeah, it is."

"Is that your partner's handwriting in the logbook?" he asks.

I study it. "That's Reed's handwriting, yeah." I look up at him. "How'd you get this anyway?" I [ask](#). "It's supposed to stay with the squad car."

"It'll be returned to the car when we get done here," he tells me briskly. "After I get the information I need from it. Now, approximately what time were you dispatched to go do a welfare check at 2510 Briarcliff Road?"

"Around 11:40. Dispatch sent us to 2500 Briarcliff, the neighbor lady's residence. Her name's Mrs. Timmons. She'd heard a loud disturbance coming from the house next door about three hours earlier and grew concerned when she spotted the soon-to-be ex-husband leaving the residence. So she called us."

"Who lived in the residence that you were going to check?"

"A woman by the name of Melissa Walters, plus her three young children, Natalie, Andrew, and Matthew."

"What did Mrs. Timmons tell you when you spoke with her?"

"Well, she told us about the disturbance, said she'd heard yelling and screaming, the sound of things being broken. But she didn't decide to call us until she saw Stuart Walters, Melissa's soon-to-be ex, leaving the house. She was worried because Melissa had an order of protection against him. According to Mrs. Timmons, he used to beat her and her kids pretty bad. After Officer Reed and I took the information from her, we went over to the residence to try and make contact."

"Did you confirm that Melissa Walters had an order of protection against her husband?"

I shake my head. "No, we didn't. We took the neighbor lady at her word."

He cocks his head, looking at me with a frown. "You didn't radio your dispatch, ask them if there was indeed a valid order of protection against the ex-husband?"

"No, we didn't," I say, frowning back. "We didn't think it was necessary."

"Did you radio your dispatch and ask them if there was any kind of history at that house, any previous calls such as domestic disturbances?" he asks.

"No. As far as we knew, it was just a routine welfare check we were being sent on," I tell him. "Nothing more."

"And even given the scant background history related to you by a next-door neighbor, you still didn't think to ask dispatch to run a call history check?"

"It's not standard procedure, Sergeant, on something as routine as a welfare check request," I tell him with irritation. "If it were, the radio waves would be tied up with officers calling in asking for address histories all the time."

"Don't be glib, Officer Malloy," he warns me. "It's too bad you and Officer Reed *didn't* contact your dispatcher for an address history. If you had, you would have learned that there were eight previous calls to that residence in just the last eight months. All of those calls were domestic abuse calls, and two of them were handled by you and Officer Reed."

I look at Mac. "I don't remember getting called to that residence at all, Sergeant Friday. I'm sure I would've have, especially if it involved a domestic disturbance."

Friday pulls a manila folder from the briefcase. He opens it, looking at some papers tucked inside. "Your badge number is 744, right?" he asks.

"Yes, it is."

"And Officer Reed's is 2430, correct?"

"Yeah, but I don't remember getting called to that residence before," I say.

Friday slaps a piece of paper on the table in front of me. "Two calls, Officer Malloy. Two separate incidents, both handled by you and Officer Reed." He jabs a finger at the paper. "There. You can read it with your very own eyes."

I pick up the piece of paper and scan it. There's a list of eight calls that he must have pulled from Records and Information. Two of them, their dates from just this past summer, were handled by Jim and I. None of them ring a bell with me. I shove the paper back to him. "I'm sorry, Sergeant, but I don't remember either of those calls. They evidently weren't serious enough for me to recall them," I tell him.

He scowls. "You don't think domestic disputes are serious, Officer Malloy?"

I sigh. *This is gonna be a looong interview.* "No, they're serious, but if you read the notations under the calls, you'll see why they evidently didn't make much of an impression on me." I point to the paper. "See? One says that the wife declined to press charges against her husband and we could see no signs of physical abuse. The other call, she was happy to just have us escort him from the premises for the evening. A lot of domestics end that way. The wife doesn't want the husband arrested and taken to jail because he's the major breadwinner in the family," I say. "And if we couldn't detect any signs of physical abuse to her, there wasn't much we could do. More often than not, it winds up being a case of her word against his, and we can't very well arrest anyone on just a verbal spat. The wife is often just happy if we get him to leave the house for the night, letting things cool down. Surely you've answered calls like that yourself, Sergeant," I tell him. "It's frustrating, yes, but there's little that we can do about it, unless she's willing to sign a complaint against him."

Friday picks up the piece of paper, tucking it back into the manila folder. "So, without confirming with your dispatch that there was *indeed* a valid protective order against Stuart Walters, you and Officer Reed proceeded to attempt to make contact at the residence, am I right?"

"Yes, that's right. We rang the doorbell but no one answered. We checked around the house and tried to look in through the windows to see if we could see anything amiss inside. Officer Reed took the rear of the house, while I took the front. I was only able to see in through the picture window, while Officer Reed was only able to see in through the kitchen windows. From what both of us could visualize just from the outside, there appeared to be a lot of damage done to the interior of the house, in both the kitchen and the living room areas."

"You couldn't see in any of the other windows?" he asks.

"No, they had blinds pulled down over them. After we discovered the damage, we decided to attempt making contact again, this time by knocking on the interior door, just in case the doorbell wasn't working or that no one inside the house heard it. I opened the outside screen door and knocked. When I did, the door swung open a little bit. It wasn't locked at all, or even latched shut. And Officer Reed discovered what appeared to be a spot of blood on the doorframe, as if someone with blood on their hands touched the wood on their way out of the house."

"Did you back out and call for assistance?"

I shake my head. "No, we didn't."

Friday stares at me. "Why not? It's proper protocol in situations like that, especially in a possibly violent domestic situation."

"Given the scenario and the history relayed to us by the neighbor lady, plus the blood stain on the doorframe, and the fact that the door wasn't locked, greatly concerned me. I felt that there might have been a chance that someone was lying critically injured inside that house and if we remained outside and called for back-up, the time spent waiting for our back-up to arrive might have cost an innocent life. Time was of the essence, I believed. I was ultimately the one who made the final decision to enter the residence without calling for assistance."

"And Officer Reed was of the same opinion you were, that time was of the essence, and that waiting around for another car to arrive might cost someone inside that house their life?"

I hesitate, remembering Reed's reluctance to enter the house. "Uh...no, Officer Reed wanted to request another unit and remain outside the residence until that unit arrived." I meet Mac's eyes briefly and he looks away from me, his mouth set in a grim line. "I told him that he could go ahead and remain outside, but I was going to go ahead and enter the house, with or without him."

Friday's eyebrows quirk up in surprise. "You mean that you were willing to enter that house *alone* if your partner didn't go along with you?"

"I wasn't afraid, Sergeant, if that's what you're implying." My tone is cool.

He shakes his head in amazement. "Afraid, no. Foolhardy, yes. For all you knew, Stuart Walters could've been hiding somewhere in that house with a shotgun, just waiting for you to enter. In committing such a foolish action, you very well could of cost you or your partner your lives."

"I am fully aware of that, Sergeant. But what would have been the greater cost? My life or that of an innocent person?" I offer him a small chilly smile. "Besides, I was pretty sure Stuart Walters had already cleared out by the time we arrived. His car wasn't in the driveway, and Mrs. Timmons from next door reported seeing him leave."

Sergeant Friday eyes me. "He easily could've parked it somewhere else and walked back without anyone seeing him."

"Even if he had been there, Stuart Walters didn't know that the police had been called to the house. We responded code two, not three."

"But you rang the doorbell and knocked, announcing both times that you were police officers, did you not?"

I nod. "We did. Both times. But neither Officer Reed nor myself noticed anyone moving around in the residence when we looked in."

"But you readily admit that you were limited in viewing into the residence due to the fact that the only windows accessible to you two were the kitchen and the living room windows, correct?"

"Yes, but..." I begin.

Friday interrupts me. "Stuart Walters could've been hiding in a room outside of your limited range of vision. He could've picked both of you off quite easily, and without the chance for either of you to even return fire."

"But he wasn't *in* the house!" I say, getting annoyed. "I was operating under the assumption that Mrs. Timmons statement to us was true, that Stuart Walters *had* left the residence prior to our arrival!"

"Assumptions on the part of a police officer can be dangerous, Officer Malloy," Friday reminds me. "When you start assuming things, you're letting your guard down, thereby losing a bit of control over a scene. It can cost you or your partner your life."

I sigh in exasperation. "Yes, I *am* aware of that, Sergeant Friday. I was taught at school that to assume something, was to make an ass out of you and me."

Mac chuckles a bit. "I thought the nuns at Catholic schools were pretty strict, Pete. I thought they didn't believe in swearing."

I shrug. "I think they let that one slip past them in the name of education," I tell him.

Friday looks at Mac. "Sergeant MacDonald, I must ask you to refrain from interrupting this interview with inane remarks like that," he tells him coldly.

Mac's face reddens with embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Sergeant Friday. I'm just used to kidding around with Pete." When Friday still glares at him, Mac holds up his hand. "It won't happen again, I assure you."

"Good," Friday says, his voice terse. "See that it doesn't." He turns back to me. "So, you and Officer Reed decide to go ahead and enter the residence, without requesting back-up, right?"

I stop him. "Let me clarify something for you right now, Sergeant. At *no* time were *any* of the decisions in this entire incident made by Officer Reed. They were all made by me, as the senior man in the car. Officer Reed merely followed my command."

Friday regards me with a sour smile. "And if you continue to make such foolhardy decisions like the one you made last night, Officer Malloy, it's a wonder you or your partner will ever manage to stay alive."

Mac clears his throat. "Sergeant Friday, Officer Malloy's decisions and his ability to make them is not in question here. I put my complete faith and that of my department in the fact that Officer Malloy is fully capable of making trusted judgments in any kind of circumstances he might face." Mac looks up at Friday, his eyes flashing angrily.

Friday shoots Mac a dark glare. "Duly noted," he says.

I look at Mac. "Should there be any disciplinary measures that arise from the handling of this incident, let me state, for the record, that I should be the one who must face any sanctions, and not Officer Reed. He, at no time, was *ever* in command of this situation. I was. Officer Reed went along with me unwillingly."

"Do you usually override your partner on calls?" Friday asks.

"No, I don't. Reed and I share an equal partnership in the car. If he has an opinion or a feeling about something, he is always free to air it. Likewise me. You don't survive a five-year partnership with a fellow officer without learning to trust each other's opinions and gut instincts. Quite often, Officer Reed may pick up a vibe from someone or something that I don't pick up on, and vice versa. He trusts me, I trust him." I nod to Bill Gannon. "I'm sure that the same could be said about the partnership between you and Officer Gannon. You have to learn to rely on each other, put your faith in each other. Otherwise, it's a very poor partnership."

Friday regards me coolly. "Officer Malloy, let me remind you that Officer Gannon and I are *not* the ones who shot and killed a man tonight. You are." He points to me. "So, you and Officer Reed go ahead and enter the residence, correct?"

I nod. "Yes, I thought I made that *quite* clear, Sergeant." I keep my tone cool too, just like his. "How many times must I repeat it for you? Had we not entered the residence and discovered the crime scene, we would..."

"You would not be sitting here, being interrogated," he says, interrupting me.

Startled, I look at him. "Interrogated?" I ask. "I thought this was just an interview."

Friday smiles a small smile. "Did I say interrogation? I'm sorry, I meant interview." He looks over at Bill Gannon. "Are we going too fast for you, Bill?"

Gannon shakes his head. "No, you're doing fine, Joe."

Friday turns back to me. "You and Officer Reed entered the house. What did you notice first?"

"Well, we could see that there was an awful lot of physical destruction inside the living room alone. There were pictures ripped off of the walls and thrown about, their frames bent and smashed. There was a hole in the tv screen. A curio cabinet and the knickknacks inside of it were shattered and tossed around. Plants were overturned and dumped upon the carpeting. It looked like a tornado had gone through."

"Did either of you announce your presence to anyone inside the house? In case there had been someone alive in there?"

"Yes, I did. I announced that we were police officers, and asked if everything was all right."

"Did you get any kind of a response?"

"No, I didn't."

"So why didn't you leave the residence at that point? If you got no response from anyone within the house?"

I hesitate. "I can't explain it..."

Friday fixes me with a hard glare. "You'd better *try*, Officer Malloy. You and Officer Reed entered a private dwelling without a formal search warrant."

I glare right back at him. "We had reasonable cause to enter that house, based on the information obtained from Mrs. Timmons and from what we saw ourselves. We weren't entering it to search for any evidence, the commission of a crime, or to place anyone under arrest. We entered it *solely* to perform a welfare check on the residents inside."

Friday studies me. "Officer Malloy, let me ask you this. How many welfare check calls do you and Officer Reed generally handle in a week's time?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Anywhere from three to ten, I suppose. Sometimes it's more, sometimes it's less."

"And when you respond to these welfare checks, what is the very first thing you do?"

"We try to make contact with the people whose welfare we are checking on."

"And if you can't make contact?"

"We attempt to find a neighbor or a relative who might have a key to let us in. If there isn't a key to be had, we try to get in through an open window or an unlocked door. If all else fails, we either kick the door or break a window to gain access to the place."

"And say that you do find someone that has a key, what is the first thing you do when you enter the residence?"

"We announce our presence."

"It's standard protocol, right?" he asks. "You're taught that at the academy, correct?"

"Yes, it's standard protocol," I tell him. "And we *did* announce our presence, Sergeant. I'm not sure why that's such an issue."

"And yet, despite it being protocol, despite being taught how to handle such situations at the academy, you and Officer Reed, after announcing your presence once you entered a private residence and got no response, decided to remain within the house? I find that astonishing. As twelve-year veteran of the police force, Officer Malloy, you shouldn't be making such rookie-assed mistakes."

I sigh. "Point taken, Sergeant Friday. And you can be sure it will never happen again. Officer Reed and I will make *certain* we follow the little blue book right down to the exact letter the next time we get dispatched on a welfare check call."

"Officer Malloy, might I remind you once more that I don't appreciate you being so flip about this incident? A man is dead this morning, gunned down by you, a sworn police officer. I intend to get to the bottom of this, and investigate it thoroughly."

"So, a thorough investigation on your part includes the minute rehashing of minor details?" I ask, rather flippily, I think. "You don't need to hammer home the point here, Sergeant. I'm certainly not dense."

"Pete," Mac warns.

I shoot him a look. "What? He's hung up on minor details, Mac. It's silly."

"Is violating a person's Constitutional rights a minor detail or silly to you, Officer Malloy?" Friday asks sharply. "Because I was taught at the academy to uphold a citizen's Constitutional rights."

"And so was I," I fire back. "A simple welfare check does *not* require a search warrant, Sergeant. If it did, the courts would be tied up all day. And the Constitutional rights of the citizens you seek to protect would be thrown by the wayside in the pursuit of bureaucratic red tape."

Friday eyeballs me. "You think you're pretty smart, do you?"

I shrug. "Not necessarily smart, Sergeant. I've probably been on patrol work longer than you ever were. I call it as I see it. And believe me, the last thing we were concerned about with this call was Constitutional rights."

He smiles thinly. "Obviously, Officer Malloy. Had this turned out to be a routine call...say the mother and children were sound asleep and didn't hear the doorbell or your subsequent knocking, you and

Officer Reed violated their rights to enjoy security and privacy in their home, without having police officers barging in. And a court might just agree with that."

I drum my fingers on the top of the table. "It was a *welfare check*, Sergeant. Not a criminal case. It will never come before a court of law."

"But it *is* a criminal case," Friday argues. "A man is lying dead in the basement of 2510 Briarcliff Road, a bullet fired from *your* weapon, *by* you, blowing the top of his head off."

I look at him with narrowed eyes. "If it's a criminal case then, Sergeant, am I under arrest?" I ask. "You haven't read me my rights."

Bill Gannon sighs. "Look, Joe, just get on with the interview. You've brought the point home to Officer Malloy, and I'm sure he understands clearly what you're getting at." He rubs his temples with his fingers. "You're beginning to give me a migraine, Joe."

Friday glances at him, then looks back at me. "All right, Officer Malloy. You and your partner have entered the house, saw the destruction within, and, *despite protocol*, the two of you continued through the house. Why?"

"Since we had already made entry, I felt it prudent to perform a quick walk-through of the residence, checking for any signs of a live victim." I study my hands. "I wasn't about to leave that house, just in case there might have actually been someone who was still alive inside, but maybe unable to call out for help."

"Did Officer Reed share that opinion with you?" he asks.

I hesitate. "No, he felt that either the family had been kidnapped by Stuart Walters, or that they were dead."

"Did you feel the same way?"

"I didn't believe that they'd been kidnapped, no. I believed that Melissa Walters and her three young children were still inside the house." I cough. "Dead."

"Really!" he says in mock astonishment. "Why Officer Malloy, you must be a veritable soothsayer! You can walk into a house and immediately determine that there are either live people or dead people within the dwelling, just by looking around the living room? Tell me, can you also conjure up the spirit of my great-aunt Gertrude? I'd like to talk to her if you can."

"We didn't just look around the living room," I snap. "And I'm not a soothsayer, Sergeant. It was a gut feeling that I had, that no one was left alive in that house."

"Why'd you continue through it, then?"

"I needed to reassure myself that we weren't overlooking a live victim," I tell him.

Friday takes off his grey suit jacket, draping it over the back of a chair. He sits down in the other chair across from me. He steepled his fingers in front of him, his dark eyes boring into mine. "What next?" he asks.

"What next what?" I ask him.

"What did you and Officer Reed do next?" he asks.

"We passed by the kitchen. Like the living room, it was a disaster area also. The kitchen table had been upended, the chairs scattered about. There were canned goods, dishes, pots and pans on the floor. Silverware was tossed around. The refrigerator was half-open, the stuff inside of it dumped out onto the floor. It was a mess."

"Did you and Officer Reed split up at this point to search the premises?"

I shake my head. "No, we didn't."

He raises an eyebrow. "It's standard protocol," he says.

"That may be," I say. "But this call was far from standard protocol. Besides, there's safety in numbers."

"So you were afraid, Officer Malloy, of being inside that house alone?" he asks with a smirk.

"No, not afraid, Sergeant. Just nervous. Which would be a normal reaction, considering the type of call we were on, and the state of the house."

"Are you normally nervous on welfare checks?"

"No."

"But you were nervous on this one, right?"

"Yes. So was Officer Reed." I flick a glance over at Mac. "The atmosphere of the house was rather spooky, to say the least. It was enough to raise my hackles, that's for sure. Had you gone through it yourself, with only the beam of a flashlight to guide your way, you would've felt the same."

"No, Officer Malloy, I have to disagree with you. I wouldn't have been foolish enough to enter that house without back-up."

I rub my forehead. "Look, Sergeant Friday. We've already gone over this rather thoroughly. You've made your point about the fact that I failed to follow protocol, and I've admitted that I made a mistake in not adhering to proper procedures. If there are any disciplinary actions to be taken against me, I will abide by them. Can we please continue the interview *without* returning to the matter of protocol, or my lack of following it thereof?" I ask. "You're beginning to give *me* a migraine, Sergeant."

"Did you voice your unease to Officer Reed? Ask him if he felt the same way?" he asks.

"I know Officer Reed well enough to be aware of what his reactions in a situation like this would be. He was probably as nervous as I was."

"So why didn't you swallow your unease and split up?" he asks. "Seems prudent to me. It would've gotten you out of that 'spooky' house a lot sooner."

I stare at him for a long moment, my mind racing, searching for the term I am thinking of. Then it comes to me. "Folie á deux," I finally say.

Sergeant Friday is caught completely off-guard, along with Mac and Officer Gannon. "What?" Friday asks in confusion. The three of them stare at me as if I were speaking in tongues.

"Folie á deux," I repeat slowly, as if I were talking to a small child. I lean back in my chair, arms folded across my chest, with a satisfied smirk plastered across my face. *Thank you, Abnormal Psychology 101!*

"Folie á deux? What's that?" he asks with a dour frown.

"A madness shared by two," I tell him rather smartly. "Officer Reed and I were understandably nervous about surveying the premises separately, so we stuck together. Whatever I'd see, he'd see, and vice versa. Neither one of us would witness the horrors inside that house alone. We'd bear witness to it together."

Friday chuckles humorlessly. "Now I've heard everything, Officer Malloy. Do you expect me to believe that there's truly a term such as folie á deux?"

"Look it up in a dictionary," I tell him. "That is, if you can manage to spell it right, Sergeant."

Mac clears his throat. "Where'd you learn that word at anyway, Pete? I've never heard of it myself."

"I learned it in one of my psychology classes," I tell him. "Abnormal psych, to be exact."

Friday glares at Mac. "Officer MacDonald, I must remind you, you are only sitting in on this interview as Officer Malloy's commanding officer. Please refrain from speaking to him, otherwise I will have to request that you step out of the proceedings. Do I make myself clear?"

Mac glares back. "And if *that* happens, I'm taking Pete with me," he says. "I will *not* allow one of my officers to be hounded by you, Sergeant. As far as I'm concerned, Officer Malloy has done nothing wrong in regards to this incident, save for his lack of following protocol." He meets Friday's glower with his own icy gaze.

"We're not here to engage in a pissing match, Joe," Bill Gannon reminds him. "It's an interview only. And Sergeant MacDonald is required to remain with Officer Malloy throughout the proceedings, whether you like it or not." He smiles a bit. "After all, it *is* standard protocol."

I let out a snort of laughter. "He who lives by the protocol, dies by the protocol," I say.

Friday shoots his partner a dangerous look, then he turns his gaze back to me. "I don't suffer fools lightly, Officer Malloy," he tells me sharply.

"Neither do I, Sergeant," I snap back. "The interview?"

He sighs. "The living room and kitchen area were scouted by you and Officer Reed. What next?"

"We started down the hallway that led to the bedrooms and the bathroom." I fidget a bit. "Look, do you really have to go over the entire incident with me? I'm sure Jerry Miller will give you his full report as soon as possible. After all, he was the one who conducted the formal walk-through of the house with me."

Friday nods. "I've spoken with Sergeant Miller while I was at the scene," he says. "I'm aware of what you've told him already. But I have to find out for myself what your mindset was when you shot and killed Stuart Walters. I cannot take just his word alone what you did at that house. I have to hear it from you."

Sighing, I pick up the empty styrofoam cup that had held coffee not too long ago. I tap it against the top of the table. "We started down the hallway. Even it was not untouched by disaster. Family portraits that had hung on the walls were yanked down, their frames broken, the glass inside of them crushed." I tap the cup on the table once more, as rote of memory comes back to me, like a wisp of smoke. "We came to what was the master bedroom first. The door was pulled only partially shut, so I nudged it open with the edge of my flashlight. It was in there that we found Melissa Walters dead, tied up to the bed, a pair of black nylons knotted around her neck. She'd been strangled, and from the looks of it, probably raped." I keep my voice even and measured. "I entered the bedroom just long enough to check her for a pulse. There was none, so I backed immediately out of the room."

"Did Officer Reed enter the room with you?"

I shake my head. "No, just me. He remained out in the hallway."

"You now obviously have a murder on your hands, Officer Malloy, with the discovery of that woman's body. You should've backed out and called for the homicide team."

I rub my forehead. "Yes, I know that."

"So why didn't you?"

"We had three other victims to search for," I tell him. "Melissa Walters' two little boys and her little girl. We needed to check on their well-being before we exited the house to call for homicide."

"What room did the two of you enter next, the nursery?"

"No, we glanced inside the bathroom that was across the hall from the master bedroom. There was damage inside of it as well, the shower curtain had been ripped down and there were bloody towels on the floor. There was a red ring in the sink, evidence that someone had tried to wash blood off of their hands." I pick at the edge of the styrofoam cup, tearing off a little piece and tossing it down next to the other little pieces I've picked off.

"You entered the nursery next then?" Friday asks, eyeing the pieces of styrofoam I've torn loose. He points to them. "Is there a reason why you're doing that, Officer Malloy?"

I look at him, my eyes meeting his. "This isn't easy, Sergeant Friday, for me to continue to retell my story, especially given what horrors I witnessed inside that house. The ghastly sights fail to dim with each rehashing." I nod at the pieces of styrofoam. "I guess you could say it helps me collect my thoughts." *And it keeps my hands busy, so I don't leap across the table and strangle you with your own tie.* I smile thinly at him. "If it bothers you, Sergeant, by all means tell me. I'll stop it."

He shakes his head. "No, it's just usually a sign of nervousness. It's also a good indicator of guilt." He smiles thinly back at me. "Are you feeling guilt, Officer Malloy?"

I set the cup down, folding my arms across my chest. "Nope, none at all," I white-lie to him. "Should I be?"

He looks down at his hands, still clasped in front of him. "I presume you entered the nursery next, since it was the next room you would pass by in the hallway."

"Yes, we entered the nursery. Again, the door was left slightly ajar, so I nudged it open with the flashlight once more. Before we entered, though, we noticed a bloody palm print on the door itself. Officer Reed was understandably reluctant to enter the nursery, so I instructed him to wait outside in the hallway while I entered the room to check on the two little boys."

Friday cocks his head. "Why was Officer Reed reluctant to enter the nursery? Was there a problem?"

I exchange a look with Mac. "Officer Reed has a young son of his own, Sergeant. I imagine the idea of what horrors lay behind that door would make him consider his own child."

"You knew at that point what was going on inside of Officer Reed's head? How very perceptive of you," Friday remarks dryly.

I glare at him, a faint flicker of anger igniting in my blood. "No, not perceptive, Sergeant Friday. I've known Jim Reed since he came on to the force. I was his training officer, and I've been his partner for the last five years. I know him well enough to figure out what was going through his mind at that time. Any police officer with a family would have had the same reaction Jim did."

"You say 'any officer'. So why didn't you have the same kind of reaction?"

"For one thing, I don't have kids. For another, I'm a little bit more experienced in handling the sights of a crime scene than Officer Reed is."

"So...what you're saying, Officer Malloy, this was just another crime scene for you, is that it?"

"No, it wasn't!" I tell him sharply. "It was ghastly and nightmarish, horrific. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't shaken by what I saw. I just didn't personalize it like Officer Reed did."

"So, knowing that he might have a bad reaction to what he would see in the nursery, you ordered him to remain outside in the hallway while you entered the room yourself?" he asks.

"Yes, I told him to stay in the hall, I'd go in and check on the little boys."

"Did he?"

I shake my head. "No, he followed me inside, anyway." I shoot Friday a sour look. "And don't ask me *why* he did it, I have no clue. You'd have to take that up with him."

"Did you discover the two little boys?" he asks, taking out his notebook and looking at it. "Andrew and Matthew?"

I swallow hard as the nightmarish images in the nursery comes back to me. "Yeah," I tell him softly. "I did. I found three-year-old Andrew on his bed, with a butcher knife rammed through his chest. The baby, Matthew, was beaten to death in his crib by a hammer."

"Jesus," Mac breathes, as Gannon shakes his head. Both of them seem genuinely shocked by just the simple description of the scene. "How gruesome," Mac says.

Friday ignores them. "Did you check for pulses on either of them?"

I nod. "I did on Andrew. I didn't find one. On Matthew, it wouldn't have made any difference whether I checked for a pulse or not."

"How so?"

I clear my throat. "Because he was beaten beyond recognition, Sergeant Friday. You couldn't even tell it was a baby lying there in that crib." I hesitate, trying to maintain control of my thoughts. "At that point, we were both rather shocked and horrified by what we saw. Officer Reed had to leave the residence in order to get sick."

"Did you leave the residence with him?"

"No. There was one more child to check for, six-year-old Natalie. I found her room at the end of the hall, but she wasn't in it. That left only one more area inside the house that we hadn't checked, and that was the down in the basement. While Officer Reed was still outside, I went ahead and went down to the basement alone." I halt again, clearing my throat around the combination of emotions and images that well up inside of me. When I manage to speak again, my voice is soft; so soft, in fact, all three men have to lean forward in order to hear me. "That's where I found Natalie hanging from an overhead pipe, her throat slashed. Again, I checked her for a pulse, but found none."

"Why didn't you leave the residence at that point to go check on your partner's well-being?"

"Officer Reed is fully capable of taking care of himself. He didn't need me to hold his hand for him. Besides, I was just getting ready to leave the basement anyway, when he re-entered the residence to inform me that he'd gone ahead and radioed for Homicide. He asked if I'd found the other Walters child, and I told him that I did, and instructed him not to come down to the basement."

"Why not?"

"I didn't want him to see Natalie hanging there like that. He'd seen enough as it was."

"But you forced him to witness the rest of the horrors, as you put it. What was one more?"

"I didn't *'force'* Officer Reed to witness anything. He stayed in that house on his own volition." The anger begins to rise in my veins. I fidget in the wooden seat. "Officer Reed had ample opportunity to leave the residence at any time. Instead, he chose to stay with me. Why he did so, I don't know. You'd have to take that up with him, like I told you before."

Friday continues to hammer away at that one single point. "But you're the senior man in the car, Officer Malloy, did you not think that he stayed with you out of respect for your position, or for fear of being reprimanded by you?"

Eyes narrowed, I glare at Friday. "He stayed out of respect for our friendship. And I would never reprimand Officer Reed for anything like that," I bite out. "If he felt it necessary to leave the residence at any time, I certainly would not have gotten angry at him for it. He knows that, too."

"You've never had to reprimand your junior partner, even as his training officer?" Friday asks. "I'm amazed. Is he some sort of supercop?"

"No, he's just a damned good officer," I snap. "In the few times that he *has* made mistakes, I correct him without writing him up. Sometimes a well-placed word spoken verbally can make a bigger impression than the threat of being written up on paper."

Friday steepled his hands again. "So Officer Reed is now...where at inside the house?" He frowns at me.

I clear my throat, playing with the empty coffee cup again. I'm pleased to see Friday's scowl deepen as I toy with the cup. *What the hell, I think. At least it soothes my irritated energy a bit...plus it seems to piss him off.* "Officer Reed remained at the top of the steps, maybe one or two steps down on the stairwell. He informed me that he'd already gone ahead and requested Homicide out to our scene. It was nearly right after he'd told me that, that he thought he'd heard a vehicle pull into the driveway. Thinking it was Homicide already there, he went to check."

"Did you go with him?"

"No, I remained in the basement a moment longer."

"Why? There obviously was nothing more for you to do down there."

I hesitate, trying to think of what I want to say. "I...I...took a moment to gather my thoughts before we dealt with the detectives." I know it's a lie, but I am not about to tell ANYONE in this room that I made the sign of the cross over myself in order to protect my soul from the pure evil that I felt inside that house. THAT I'm keeping to myself.

"What thoughts did you feel you needed to gather? It was a murder scene, plain and simple. All you needed to do now was tell the detectives what you and Officer Reed had found."

I am irked that he'd water what we'd seen inside that house down to a 'plain and simple' murder scene. I cough. "I beg your pardon, Sergeant, but it is NOT that 'plain and simple,' as you so callously put it. We had walked into a graphic, gruesome scene, involving a brutally slaughtered young family, and we were understandably shocked and horrified by what we discovered. And I'm not sure that my private thoughts, nor those of Officer Reed are anyone's business but our own."

"They are when you shoot and kill a man." Friday gives me a small cool smile.

I am silent, my gaze locked onto the scarred surface of the table in front of me. *How the hell do you describe to your fellow officers that you felt the need to cross yourself, in fear of losing your mortal soul to evil? You can't, at least not so they'd understand.* I feel Mac's eyes, Gannon's eyes, Friday's eyes, all staring at me, waiting for me to answer. I do not look up. I keep my eyes focused on the table in front of me.

"Officer Malloy, please answer the question. What thoughts did you feel you needed to gather?" Friday asks in that clipped tone.

I shake my head, deciding to just wing it. "I guess you could say I felt sorrow for Melissa Walters and her children. I wanted to make sure that I was prepared to face the Homicide detectives and go through the whole ghastly scene again with them." I hope to God he accepts that for an answer.

"That's not exactly a good answer, Officer Malloy."

I raise my head sharply. "It'll have to be, Sergeant Friday. Unless I am on a witness stand before a judge and jury, my private thoughts are my own, and I refuse to divulge them to anyone, especially you." My tone is as cool as his.

He studies me for a second. "You weren't thinking to yourself how much you'd like to kill the bastard who did this horrific crime?" he asks.

"That thought wasn't even in my mind, Sergeant," I tell him. "I had figured that Stuart Walters had already gone on the lam from the scene and wasn't returning." I tap the cup against the table. "My thoughts are my own, Sergeant. And you are not privy to them."

He sighs. "Fine," he says, a smidgen of defeat echoing in his voice. "Now then, this car that Officer Reed heard pull into the driveway...it wasn't the Homicide team, was it?"

I shake my head. "No, it was Stuart Walters. He'd returned to the residence, ostensibly to set fire to the house, destroying the scene of the crime."

"My, my!" Friday says in mock amazement. "You KNEW for a fact that Stuart Walters had returned to the residence to torch the place and cover up his crime?"

"He brought in a can of gasoline, Sergeant. Why else would he have done that?"

"Maybe he was going to cut the lawn." He gives me an amused look.

I stare at Sergeant Friday in utter disbelief. "I doubt that very much, Sergeant," I manage to sputter.

"Why not? For all you knew, he was returning home from work, stopped by to get a can of gas for the lawn mower, and walked into his house, only to find you and Officer Reed inside, with his family brutally murdered. It's a long shot, but it's plausible." He shrugs nonchalantly.

I snort derisively. "If you believe *that*, Sergeant, then I have a bridge in Brooklyn that I'd like to sell you. Besides, according to the neighbor lady, Stuart Walters had been kicked out of the residence by his wife two months ago. He would have had no business there."

"Are you sure of that? Maybe they affected a reconciliation."

"Like I stated before, she had an order of protection against him...an active order of protection."

"But you didn't *see* it, did you? You didn't call into your dispatch and confirm if there was indeed an order of protection against Stuart Walters in existence?"

I grit my teeth. "No, we did not."

"So, for all you knew, Officer Malloy, Melissa and Stuart Walters had possibly reconciled, and he had every right to be in his own residence, with his wife and children, right?"

"WRONG!" I snap. "According to the neighbor lady, Melissa Walters had the order of protection still in place! It remained in place until the moment of her death!"

Friday exchanges a look with Bill Gannon. "So, you're taking the simple word of the neighbor lady as the gospel truth, is that it, Officer Malloy?"

"No, that's not it at all!" I snarl. "Mrs. Timmons statement to us was based on events that she'd witnessed transpire at that residence in the past! I took her statement as fact, and put my trust in it that it was *true*! I am not going to doubt the testimony of a long-time neighbor. Neighbors see and hear things that go on around them, and can often provide a firm background into a call!" I jab the top of the table with my index finger. "Besides, what reason would she have to lie? Tell me that, Sergeant Friday!"

He shrugs. "Out of spite, maybe? Who knows?"

I rub my forehead. "Oh Jesus," I mutter under my breath.

"Pete," Mac warns softly.

Friday continues. "Alright, let's just say that Stuart Walters has returned to the residence to set fire to the house, thereby covering up his crime. How exactly did he end up attacking Officer Reed? Or were you still down in the basement with your *thoughts* while this transpired?"

I don't answer him. I fold my arms across my chest and lean back in my chair, the image of a sulking child.

"Officer Malloy? Where were you at when your partner was attacked by Stuart Walters?" Friday asks again.

"I was still in the basement," I mutter, cutting my eyes away, gazing down at the floor.

"What was that? I didn't quite hear you, Officer Malloy." Friday leans towards me.

"I WAS STILL IN THE DAMNED BASEMENT!" I shout, heated anger rising to my face.

"So you weren't in any position to come to Officer Reed's assistance, were you?"

I clench my teeth. "Sergeant, he attacked my partner almost immediately after he entered the residence. Even if I had been there..."

"But the point is, Officer Malloy, you *weren't* there to help your partner. Had you been, the two of you most likely could've subdued Stuart Walters. But you weren't, were you? You were still down in the basement." He smirks. "With your *thoughts*," he adds snarkily.

"Yes," I whisper, my eyes closed. "And I shouldn't have been. I should have stayed with my partner. I admit I was wrong on that. Because of it, I unwittingly placed Officer Reed's life in extreme danger." I opened my eyes to look at him. "Is that what you want me to say, Sergeant Friday?" I ask him bitterly.

He smiles thinly. "I never like to hear a police officer admit that they've made a mistake, especially when it comes to their safety, or that of their partner. But I'm glad you told me that."

I laugh harshly. "Great. I know I'll sleep better at night knowing that my admitting to a mistake makes you happy."

"How did you become aware that Officer Reed was in danger?" he continues.

Pete, I need help! Reed's voice echoes in my brain. "He called out to me that he needed help, and I could hear the sound of a scuffle upstairs. I hurried up the steps to go to his aid, but when I reached the top, Stuart Walters kicked me in the stomach, sending me falling back down the steps."

"Did you see Officer Reed and Stuart Walters struggling?"

"Yes, just briefly. Stuart Walters broke free from Reed's grasp long enough to kick me. That's where my view of the fight ended. I couldn't see much from where I landed at on the basement floor."

"Were you knocked out by the fall down the steps?"

I shake my head. "No. I was mostly just dazed, had the wind knocked out of me." I pick up the coffee cup again, toying with it. "It took me a few moments to get my bearings back."

"Then what?"

I hesitate, the memory still oh so clear. "I heard a single gunshot. Officer Reed yelled. There was a heavy thud, like a body falling to the floor. Then there was silence."

"Did you attempt to go back upstairs, see what happened?"

I look at him in amazement. "Are you kidding me, Sergeant? I could've walked right into his line of fire."

"Maybe it was your partner that fired that shot, you didn't know. Perhaps he'd shot and wounded or killed Stuart Walters himself."

"If it had been Officer Reed that fired that shot, he'd of called out to me, telling me it was him. Trust me, I knew it wasn't him, and I was *not* about to put myself into any further danger if I could help it."

"But it seems to me, Officer Malloy, that you *could've* helped it, by not entering the residence in the first place, remaining outside and waiting for back-up, am I right?"

My temper flares once more. "Are we back on that old song and dance, Sergeant Friday? About protocol, proper procedures, stuff like that?" I snort. "Well, a nickel is a nickel, a dime is a dime, I'd sing another chorus, but I don't have the time."

Friday regards me with a glimmer of amusement. "Is that so, Officer Malloy? It seems to me that you do have the time...all the time in the world."

I sigh, exasperated. "Look, Sergeant, I've already admitted that I made mistakes in how we approached and handled this call. Can we just please skip the double back and get on with the interview?"

But Friday is not satisfied. "But it's due to your mistakes that you now find yourself in this mess, Officer Malloy. You've left bloody trail behind you, a crime scene discovered without a search warrant, an injured partner, a man dead in the basement of a house, killed by you."

"Yeah, so?" I ask, my anger burning hot. Mac tries to catch my eye but I look away, ignoring him.

"So, if you'd followed proper protocol, none of this likely would've happened," Friday gloats.

"So what do you want me to do, crucify myself on the cross of my mistakes?" I snap. "Or maybe you'd like my badge back!"

"Pete!" Mac tells me sharply. "Cool it!"

Bill Gannon clears his throat. "Look, Joe, I think he gets it. We *all* get it. Why don't you just drop the crap about protocol, and let's finish the interview." He rubs his forehead wearily.

Sergeant Friday is quiet a moment. Then he nods. "Alright. I think I've covered that pretty well..."

"Yeah, you THINK?" I growl. "For Christ's sake, you've beaten it into the damned ground already!"

"Pete, enough of that!" Mac warns me.

I continue. "It seems that this is beginning to look more like an interrogation than an interview regarding the shooting! If I'm under arrest for something, then read me my rights and let me call my lawyer! If not, then just get to the damned shooting and let it be!" I snarl.

Friday studies me dispassionately. "Are you always this quick to anger, Officer Malloy?"

Mac steps in on my behalf. "Officer Malloy is usually even-tempered. But even the most mild-mannered police officer would snap under these heavy-handed interview techniques..."

Sergeant Friday cuts him off with a wave of his hand. "I appreciate your input, Sergeant MacDonald, but I have to have an idea of Officer Malloy's emotional status, especially in regards to the events leading up to the shooting. You understand, don't you?"

"No, I don't," Mac tells him, and for the first time, I see that Mac is quite angry himself. "I repeat, Officer Malloy is known for his ability to maintain his composure even in the most stressful situations. It seems to me that you are goading him, Sergeant, into responding to your questions in anger."

Bill Gannon speaks. "He's right, Joe. You are pushing pretty hard. You need to back off."

Friday ignores him. "I can pull your package and see if you've ever been reprimanded for your temper, Officer Malloy," he tells me.

Sighing, I tilt my head back, looking up at the ceiling. "Fine, go ahead. I've never received any written reprimand in regards to my temperament on the job."

"But you have received verbal reprimands?"

"I'm not going to answer that, Sergeant. It has no bearing whatsoever on what happened tonight."

"But it does, you see. If you're quick to anger in a desperate situation, perhaps it was your anger that drove you to shoot and kill Stuart Walters tonight," he persists. When I still don't answer, he looks to Mac.

Mac shakes his head. "I don't recall ever verbally reprimanding Officer Malloy for anything regarding his attitude. And even if I had, I would not release any of the details about it to you, Sergeant. I agree, it has no bearing on what happened tonight."

"Joe, drop it," Gannon says. "You aren't going to get anywhere."

Friday's face flushes with anger. "But don't any of you understand? I'm *not* going to tolerate a rogue cop appointing himself judge, jury, and executioner, acting like he's Dirty Harry! The Los Angeles Police Department does not need a vigilante!"

That does it! I slam my fists onto the table, making everyone jump in startlement. "But I'm NOT a rogue cop!" I shout. "I am NOT Dirty Harry! I wasn't even *thinking* in those kinds of terms when I shot Stuart Walters! And if you'd let me finish explaining what happened, you'd understand WHY Stuart Walters ended up with my bullet in his brain!"

Mac jumps in. "Officer Malloy is quite far from Dirty Harry Callahan, Sergeant. He has an excellent record with the department, and that alone should speak for itself!"

Scowling, visibly gritting his teeth, Friday turns back to me. "Okay, Officer Malloy. Your partner is lying shot in the house upstairs, and the man who shot him is...where?"

"Stuart Walters had started down the steps in search of me, Officer Reed's service revolver in his hand."

"How sure were you that it was Walters?"

"He was the same guy in the family pictures upstairs."

"Did you call out to him to halt or stop, that you'd shoot?"

I shake my head. "No, I didn't. I wanted the element of surprise on my side, so I turned off the light in the basement and hid under the stairs, waiting for him."

"You WAITED for him?" Friday asks in astonishment.

"Sergeant, I knew he was coming down to the basement to find me. I was not about to give him the chance to shoot me like he did Officer Reed. I took the means necessary to protect myself, and that's all. I didn't intend to shoot him down in cold blood as he came down the steps. I fully planned on placing him under arrest once he got into the basement...which I attempted to do."

"Did he know you were hiding in the basement waiting for him?"

"He knew I was down there, if that's what you mean. He just didn't know where."

"You took a big chance on him not turning the basement light on from the upstairs switch, you realize that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. But the stairwell leading down to the basement was not an enclosed staircase. From where I was positioned at underneath it, I had a full, unobstructed view of him descending the steps. Had he tried anything funny, I would've shot him immediately, thus neutralizing the threat he posed."

"But you didn't shoot him as he came down the steps."

I draw in a deep breath. "Despite what you might think, Sergeant, I did not *want* to shoot and kill him, not at all." *Oh yeah you did, Pete.* "I merely wanted to gain control over him in order to place him under arrest. And that is what I tried to do."

"Did he say anything to you, call out to you as he was coming downstairs?"

"Like what?"

"Anything! Did he taunt you, did he make any sort of threat?"

"He said, 'Come out, come out, wherever you are.'"

"He didn't identify himself to you?"

"No, he didn't. And I wasn't about to ask him who he was until I had gotten him into custody."

"So he comes down the steps into a darkened basement, in search of you, and then what?"

"He turned on the light. When he did, I was right behind him with my revolver pressed to the base of his skull."

"Did you identify yourself as a police officer?"

I roll my eyes and sigh. "No, Sergeant Friday, I did not identify myself. But you can be sure that the NEXT time I'm faced with an armed subject, I'll make sure and show them my badge AND my birth certificate before I place them in cuffs."

He eyes me sourly. "There's no need for sarcasm, Officer Malloy. I'm just trying to conduct a thorough interview into an officer-involved shooting that happened tonight that includes you. I have to make sure that the shooting was completely justified. If not, you could face serious legal charges, including murder."

I hold my hands out, my wrists together. "If that's the road you're going to take, Sergeant, then go ahead and arrest me. And if you do, I'm invoking my right to silence." I meet him in the eyes and don't look away. "Otherwise, Sergeant, let me remind you that Stuart Walters is the vicious criminal here, not me. I wasn't the one who slaughtered his entire family and shot an LAPD officer, Walters was. And he came down to that basement with the intention of shooting and killing me, too. So if you're going to ask me if I went completely by the book in regards to this case, I would have to say no, that I didn't, and I'm willing to face whatever disciplinary actions that might be sanctioned against me for not following protocol. But if you're thinking I was going to follow protocol while facing down an armed killer, you've got another think coming, Sergeant. Following protocol might have cost me my life."

"And not following it might have cost your partner his," Friday tells me.

Mac clears his throat. "For the record, Sergeant Friday, Officer Reed's injuries are not considered life-threatening. He received a concussion and a minor bullet wound to the side, and that's it."

I still maintain Friday's gaze. "You would've done the same damned thing, had you been in my shoes, Sergeant Friday."

"But I wouldn't have been in your shoes, Officer Malloy, because I would've followed protocol from the start."

I look over at Mac. "This is it, Mac. If this line of questioning doesn't stop right now, I'm through. I'm not answering anymore questions if I'm going to be repeatedly reminded that I didn't follow protocol." I look back to Friday. "I'm not going to have what I did wrong rammed down my throat anymore. If you persist in harassing me about it, I *will* leave this interview and request that another interviewer be brought in."

Friday stares at me for a moment. "That's not your right, Officer Malloy."

"Then I'm invoking my Fifth Amendment rights." I meet Mac's eyes. He looks a bit surprised. "I will continue to invoke them for every question you ask me from here on out."

"Pete, you don't want to do that," Mac tells me softly. "It makes it look like you have something to hide."

I shrug. "I don't have anything to hide, Mac, but I'm beginning to feel like *I'm* the bad guy here, and not Stuart Walters." I pin Friday down with my gaze. "Either you ease up on reminding me what I did wrong, or I walk."

"You can't do that, Officer Malloy," Sergeant Friday tells me. "You are the subject of an investigation into a shooting incident."

I unpin my badge and lay it on the table. I spin it around so that the numbers face Mac. I slide it over to him. "There, you can have this back."

Mac closes his hand over it. "Pete, I'm not going to take it. If I do, you can be arrested for murder."

"So arrest me." I stand up, looking at Friday with an icy gaze. I turn around, putting my hands behind my back. "Put the cuffs on me, Sergeant. I get the feeling you'd enjoy doing it."

Bill Gannon coughs, clears his throat. "Joe, if you place him under arrest, I'm going to go before the Chief of Detectives and inform him of your conduct here this morning, then I'm also going to take it before the Chief of Police. And after that, you can find yourself a new partner, because I will no longer want to be paired with you."

Mac speaks, too. "And don't think that I won't take this before my Captain, either, Sergeant Friday. I'll be *damned* if I'm going to let one of my finest men walk off of this job or be arrested because of your heavy-handed interrogation tactics. Officer Malloy is a sworn police officer, not a blood-thirsty killer. Maybe if you'd back off and give him a chance to explain and describe what happened tonight, you'd understand."

Friday looks at both of them. Then he looks back at Mac. "You must really think a lot of Officer Malloy, Sergeant MacDonald, to be willing to do that for him."

"I do." Mac gives Sergeant Friday a hard gaze. "I would do that for any of my men, if I felt justified, but in particular for Officer Malloy. You are badgering him, Sergeant, and I suggest you stop, or I'll terminate the interview myself."

I shoot both Mac and Gannon a grateful look.

Friday looks around at the three of us. "Sit back down, Officer Malloy. Let's get the interview done." He sighs heavily, as if he were being denied the privilege of questioning Charles Manson himself.

I drop back into my chair, picking up my badge and pinning it back onto my uniform. "Continue, Sergeant," I tell him coolly.

"So when Stuart Walters came down to the basement, how could you see him in the darkness?"

"My eyes adjusted pretty fast to the dimness. And it was lightning out, so that helped, too."

"You said you had your revolver pointed at the base of his skull when he turned on the light?"

"Yes, I did. He didn't hear my approach."

"Did you say anything to him?"

"I ordered him to drop his weapon, Officer Reed's service revolver."

"Did he comply?"

"No, not at first. He tried to get a rise out of me by informing me that he'd already shot Officer Reed upstairs. I failed to take the bait, instead ordering him to drop the weapon once more. That was my final warning to him."

"Did you make any sort of threat to him?" Friday asks.

"Threat? What kind of a threat?" I put on my best choir-boy innocent face to him.

"Like did you tell him you'd shoot him if he didn't follow your orders?"

I smile thinly. "I don't recall making any sort of a threat or statement along those lines, Sergeant." *Oh no, Pete, you only told Walters you'd blow his brains six ways to Sunday, all over the basement. That's not a threat...that was actually more of a promise, and one that you kept, too.* "I merely ordered him to drop the weapon."

Friday stares at me, trying to see if I'm lying, but my face is totally impassive. "Did he comply then?" he asks.

"Yes. He laid the weapon down on the floor. I kicked it out of his immediate reach."

"Why didn't you bend down and pick it up?" he asks. "Tuck it into your belt?"

"I didn't want to leave myself vulnerable to an attack by him. I didn't trust his attitude, and I felt that he could've tried something, had I let down my guard at any time."

"Then what?"

"I instructed him to move over to a nearby tool bench, where I told him to put his hands behind his head."

"A tool bench?" Friday says, somewhat surprised. "Weren't you afraid that he might grab something off of the bench and use it as a weapon against you?"

"No, I think the gun pointed at the base of his skull kept that urge in check. After he was up against the tool bench, I proceeded to try and place him in handcuffs."

"Did you Miranda-ize him prior to placing him in cuffs?" I see a bit of a gleam in Friday's eyes.

I shake my head. "No. Like I said, I didn't quite trust his attitude. He seemed to have given up pretty fast, considering what hell he'd wrought upstairs. I was on high alert, looking for any clues that he was either going to fight or try to rabbit."

"You should have read him his Miranda rights prior to placing him in cuffs, Officer Malloy."

"I realize that, Sergeant, but he's dead now, so it's not like it's really going to matter all that much."

"Had he lived, though, a defense attorney could've brought that up before the judge, possibly resulting in getting the entire case thrown out and the charges completely dismissed." Friday smirks. "If that's the way you operate, Officer Malloy, then I'm surprised that any of your court cases ever end in convictions."

"Sergeant, what did we just go over about your interrogation techniques?" Mac asks him icily. "I am going to have to ask you to quit denigrating Officer Malloy's work performance and character."

Friday nods. "All right. So you get him cuffed up, now what?"

"I only *started* to get Stuart Walters cuffed up. I managed to snap one bracelet onto his left wrist, and that's when he made his move."

"What did he try to do?"

"He tried to get away from me. He slipped free from my grasp, swinging the open edge of the cuff bracelet at me. He caught me on the cheek, as you can see." I point to the cut on my cheek.

"I take it he punched you, also?" Friday asks, gesturing to my split bottom lip.

I exchange a look with Mac. "No, that was another affair," I reply. "Not in relation to this incident." I see Mac smile briefly. *Smooth answer, Pete.*

"Did you attempt to regain control over him?"

"Yes, I did. He was quite a strong fighter, and I was rapidly finding myself on the losing end of the battle. So I found the string for the light in the basement and turned it off. I then headed back to my spot under the stairs."

"To wait for him in order to shoot and kill him?"

"No, to wait for a better opportunity to regain control of the situation. If that included shooting and wounding Stuart Walters, then so be it. I repeat what I've told you before, Sergeant. I did *not*, nor did I *ever*, intend to shoot and kill Stuart Walters tonight." *Like hell you didn't, Pete.*

"How could you see him in the darkness, Officer Malloy?"

"Once again, my eyes adjusted rapidly to the darkness. Stuart Walters helped things along by using a lighter to try and see his way around the basement."

"Why didn't he just turn the light on by the string again?"

"It had come off in my hands. I dropped it to the floor."

"Why was Walters using the lighter to see? Was he looking for you?"

"No, at first he was looking for Officer Reed's service revolver. He found it. That's when he came looking for me."

"I thought you said you kicked the gun across the floor," Friday says.

"I did."

"But he still managed to find it."

"Yes."

"Were you thinking at this point in terms of shooting and killing him, or just shooting and injuring him?"

"I was thinking strictly in terms of my own welfare, Sergeant."

"Did you make any attempt to step out of your spot under the stairs?"

"No, I didn't want to reveal my location to him. Once again, I wanted the element of surprise on my side."

"So you mean to tell me that you just waited under those basement stairs for the best moment to regain control over Stuart Walters?"

"Something like that, Sergeant."

"But it's quite obvious, even to me, that you didn't have control of this situation, Officer Malloy. Not at all."

"Yes, I'm aware of that." I clear my throat. "I realize I didn't have a good handle on the situation. But like they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty."

"Were you formulating any kind of a plan, any kind of tactic that *would* help you regain control of this incident?" he asks.

I study the scarred tabletop in front of me. "I was waiting for the best opportunity to present itself. Unfortunately, that never happened."

"Did you have a clear visual on him at all times, even in the darkness?"

I nod. "Yes, I did. He was stupid enough to keep illuminating himself with the lighter as he was trying to search for me. Plus, as I mentioned before, there was the lightning from the thunderstorm."

"May I see your service revolver, Officer Malloy?" Friday asks, holding out his hand.

I slip the gun out of the holster and hand it to him.

He breaks the cylinder open. "You fired one shot, is that right?"

"Yes, one to the head. I wasn't taking a chance on missing."

"You didn't reload after firing?"

"No."

"What kind of ammo are you using?"

"Department issued, .30 grain Smith and Wesson."

He nods, clicking the cylinder shut. "Ballistics will need you to test-fire this for them, in order to compare slugs." He hands the revolver back to me. "We'll go there after this interview is finished."

I take it back, sliding it back into my holster. "I understand, Sergeant."

Friday sits back in his chair, regarding me steadily. "So, you don't recall to even the *best* of your knowledge, that there had been previous domestic disturbance calls to that residence, including two that were handled by you and Officer Reed?"

I shake my head. "As I stated before, Sergeant, I don't recall either of them."

"The reason I ask that, is if you had remembered any of the previous calls, you might have been prejudiced by what you saw, and therefore more inclined to shoot Stuart Walters."

"Now wait just a damned minute!" I say hotly. "I would never allow myself to be prejudiced by what I see on any type of call, no matter what it is! I would not let any kind of statements or injuries I witness during a previous domestic call cloud my judgment on a current call!"

"You wouldn't have been even the littlest bit sympathetic towards a wife who is claiming abuse at the hands of her husband?"

"Sergeant, the first rule of police work, the *very first rule*, is to never allow yourself to get emotionally involved with a case! I abide and uphold that ethic, and I make sure that Officer Reed does, too!" I tell him. "No one, least of all me, likes to see a woman or a child abused at the hands of someone else, but believe me, I am not going to let my emotions come into play! It's clearly unprofessional and downright dangerous!"

"So you wouldn't have let anything you saw or heard from a previous call influence you in any way?"

"No. Even if I *could* remember any of those calls, I would not let them interfere with my judgment tonight." I glare at him.

Friday studies me for a moment, a small smile playing about his lips. "What about what you saw in that house tonight?" he asks.

I am silent for a minute, then I speak. "No, Sergeant, not even what I saw in that house tonight influenced the outcome. Stuart Walters is dead because..."

Sergeant Friday cuts me off with a wave of his hand. "You see, I know *I'd* be upset by what was in the house upstairs. It was nothing short of a gruesome mass slaughter. Seeing a young mother and her three innocent children brutally snuffed out would upset me, that's for sure."

I look at him grimly. "Yeah, well, you're not me, Sergeant Friday."

"You're a fairly young man yet, Officer Malloy. I presume that sometime in the future you plan on starting a family?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Maybe. So what?"

"Well, now I can *understand* Officer Reed possibly reacting to Stuart Walters in the manner you did, shooting and killing him, simply because the man wiped out his entire family without any apparent remorse. If Officer Reed has a young family at home, I can see where he might personalize what he saw and not hesitate to pull the trigger on Stuart Walters." He smiles. "But now you, Officer Malloy, you profess to have no family. So why is it you reacted in the fashion I'd expect from a family man like Officer Reed?"

I slap an open palm against the tabletop, the sound ringing throughout the room like the crack of a gun. "Because Stuart Walters intended to shoot and kill me in that basement with no regrets! I was not about to let that happen!"

"So you lay in wait for him, is that correct?"

I jab my finger at the diagram Jerry Miller drew up. "There's the layout of the basement, if you don't remember it yourself, from when you were out there earlier. It's not like we had an entire city block down there. It was a fairly small area to play cat and mouse in."

Friday glances at the diagram and nods. "Yes, I can recall the basement quite clearly, Officer Malloy. I also recall that there was a fairly short distance between where you were at under the steps and the deceased Stuart Walters. I believe Jerry Miller measured it out at just a little over seven feet. It was close range, almost as if you waited under those steps for him to step into your range and then you fired. Is that what you did?" He gets up out of his chair, coming around the edge of the table to stand in front of me, his arms crossed against his chest.

I don't answer him, instead staring at the table. Thoughts race around in my mind. How can I keep from telling them that's just exactly what I did?

"Is that true, Pete?" Mac asks me softly. "Did you lie in wait for him and shoot him down in cold blood?"

"It wasn't cold blood," I say, a dull tone to my voice. "Stuart Walters searched that basement for me, calling out to me, trying to get me to give away my location."

"Calling out to you?" Friday asks.

"He kept calling me 'pig', saying 'come out, come out, wherever you are', stuff like that. I think he figured I'd get angry at what he was saying and step out of my hiding spot, giving him a chance to shoot me."

"And his words didn't anger you, rile you?"

"I've been called 'pig' before, Sergeant. It's not exactly a new term to me."

"So you weren't angry at Stuart Walters when you shot him?"

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "No," I lie.

He looks at the notes that Jerry Miller made. "According to Sergeant Miller, Officer Reed turned the basement light on from the upstairs switch, and that's when you fired."

I nod. "That's right."

"Were you aware prior to shooting Walters that Officer Reed was merely wounded and not killed?"

"I wasn't, no. I had figured that Stuart Walters shot and killed him upstairs."

"Sergeant Miller said you used the momentary diversion of the light coming on to fire, is that true?"

I nod. "Yes. Walters' attention was briefly distracted by the light coming on, and I just used that to my advantage."

"Why weren't you distracted yourself?"

"I kept my attention focused on Walters. I could hear Officer Reed in the background about 15 seconds or so before he turned on the light."

"How so? Did he call out to you?"

"Yes. He came to the top of the stairwell, asking if I was okay down there in the basement."

"If you could see Stuart Walters so well in the dark as you claim, Officer Malloy, then tell me, how was he holding the gun in regards to you? Did he hold it straight out from him, at his waist, what?"

"At his waist, Sergeant, in one hand. He had the lighter in the other."

"How about you? How were you holding your weapon?"

"I was backed up against the cement wall, my service revolver in my hands in a standard firing grip."

He is quiet for a moment, as if he's gathering his thoughts. Clearing his throat, he begins to speak. "Sergeant Miller measured the distance between you and Stuart Walters in that basement, when you fired at him, killing him. That distance measured out to just a little over seven feet."

"Yes, Sergeant Friday, I *am* aware of how far the distance was," I tell him with irritation.

He flicks his eyes down to meet my, his gaze hard and icy. "Seven feet is pretty close range, I'd say. If he was illuminating himself with the lighter, and the lightning from the thunderstorm was also an aid, then why didn't you act prior to him stepping into your line of fire and shoot him just to wound him? It sounds to me like you had ample opportunity to do that."

I shake my head. "I knew that if I shot him and just wounded him, he could get a fix on my location and return fire. I wasn't going to give him that chance. I was *not* about to be forced into an even worse standoff in that basement, especially one that may have ended with my death."

"Approximately how long were you down there in the basement with Stuart Walters?"

"From when? From when he started down the steps in the first place, or from when I ended up fighting for my life?" I ask.

"From start to finish, Officer Malloy."

"I don't know. I didn't exactly look at my watch and time out how long we were in that damned basement." I say. "I was more concerned with staying alive."

"I need a bit firmer answer than that."

I sigh, rolling my eyes. "About seven, maybe ten minutes or so."

"So you watched this man wandering around the basement, your partner's revolver in his hands, for ten minutes or so, am I right?"

"No, you're not, Sergeant. He was not 'wandering around the basement', as you put it, for ten minutes. That part was more like three, maybe four minutes," I say.

Friday studies me intently. "And you are not lying to me, are you Officer Malloy, about anything that happened down in that basement in that time period?"

I scowl. "Why would I lie about something like that? It was a life or death fight, it's as simple as that, Sergeant."

"So you didn't just lie in wait under those steps for Stuart Walters to cross into your line of fire and gun him down when he did?" Friday asks, his eyes narrowed.

I glare at him. "How many times are you going to ask me that same damned question, Sergeant?"

"Until I get the truth."

I look at Mac, shaking my head. "That *is* the truth, Sergeant. If you want to bring a Bible in; hell, bring a whole stack of them, and I'll swear on them...I am telling you the truth." I smirk slightly. "What more do you want me to do, Sergeant? Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye?"

Mac snorts with laughter, and Gannon chuckles. Both of them stop when Friday shoots them a deadly glare. He turns back to me. "You can cut the smartass remarks, Officer Malloy. It's been a long morning for me, and I'm in no mood to put up with any foolishness."

"Yeah, well right back at you, pal," I snap. "Do you think this is a walk in the park for me? I've been getting the third degree since this interview started."

He regards me for a second, his head tilted back as he gazes at me. "You know, Officer Malloy, I don't really like you. Not at all."

I meet his gaze. "Rest assured, Sergeant, you aren't winning any popularity contests with me, either." I tap the empty coffee cup against the tabletop once more.

He scowls at me as he continues. "You strike me as too damned self-assured, too cocky. And I dislike cocky men. They have a tendency to get themselves and others hurt as they stride foolhardily through life." He leans on the table. "I've seen plenty of innocent people lose their lives due to silly, vain men like you."

I laugh, the sound bubbling up past my throat. "Trust me, Sergeant, I am *far* from vain. And far from cocky, for that matter." I tip the coffee cup upside down, the uneven edges from where I've torn pieces of the styrofoam lip tilting the cup sideways. "But it sounds to me like you need a little lesson in humility yourself, Sergeant." I slide my eyes up to meet his once more, and I smirk again. "Maybe someone with more rank than you needs to teach you that. Bust you back down to a patrolman. Then we'll see how you like being a small fish in a big pond again." I widen the smirk, seeing anger flash in his eyes, as a muscle works in his jaw. "You'll have plenty of bad-ass criminals to roast over the fire. Hell, you might even manage to catch yourself a genuine jaywalker, that is, if you can move that fast." I toss a glance at an unsmiling Mac, as he shakes his head in warning that I choose to ignore, then I lean back in my chair, regarding Sergeant Friday through half-closed eyes. "On the other hand, maybe metermaid would be better suited for you. You can write all the angry little parking tickets you want." I sneer contemptuously. "And the outfits are just darling!" *Uh-oh, I don't think I should've said that...* flickers through my brain as I realize, much too late, that I've underestimated Sergeant Friday quite gravely. I managed to push all the wrong buttons, and now I'm going to receive my comeuppance, as his face grows darker with rage.

Friday suddenly grabs me by the front of my uniform, yanking me forward a little bit, and then slamming me hard back against the wooden chair. He jerks me forward again, as I shove at his hands, trying to break his grip on me. "Why you little punk bastard!" he snarls, his face inches from mine.

I jump to my feet, throwing his hands off of me. "You have no right to put your damned hands on me, Sergeant!" I snarl back. "I'm not a criminal!" I give him a small shove, making him stumble back. "You wanna try that again, I'll land you on your ass, rank or no rank!" I draw my fist back.

Bill Gannon has leapt up and so has Mac. Gannon grabs Friday's elbow. "Come on, Joe," he says. "Settle down!"

Friday shakes him off. He jabs me hard in the chest with his index finger. "I order you to sit down, Officer Malloy!" he barks.

Mac has grabbed me by the upper arms. He pulls me back as I struggle against his grasp. "Let me go!" I growl. "I am not going to sit here and be assaulted by some two-bit junior G-man wannabe!"

Gannon has grabbed ahold of Friday once more. "Joe, you need to settle down! If you don't, I'm going to escort you from this room myself!"

At the idea of the much-smaller Bill Gannon hauling the much-larger Sergeant Friday forcibly out of the interrogation room, I laugh. "Better listen to your partner, Joe," I say venomously. "Sounds to me like he's the brighter bulb of the bunch."

Mac has succeeded in pulling me back along the row of filing cabinets on the side of the room. Hands still on my shoulders, he moves around in front of me. "Pete, you need to calm down. He's only trying to rile you. It's his job to rattle your cage, find out if you are telling the truth." His voice is low, warning.

I scowl. "But I am telling the truth, Mac! And *no one* is listening to me!" I shoot a glance around his shoulder at Gannon trying to calm Friday down. "I shouldn't have to sit here and take this kind of crap! I'm not some lowlife scummy criminal you picked up out of the gutter, I'm a sworn police officer!"

Mac gives me a small shake. "I know it, Pete, but you have to keep your cool! If you don't, he's going to think you have something to hide!"

"But that's the THING!" I tell him. "I don't have anything to hide! I've been aboveboard and honest about what went on down in that basement! To hear him tell it, I mowed down Santa freakin' Claus!"

"Pete, just try and get through it, okay?" Mac asks softly. "Do you want to take a break, maybe regroup your thoughts?"

I shake my head. "No," I say, sighing heavily. "I just want to get this over with and get the hell out of here." I move around Mac. "Sergeant Friday," I say. "Can we finish this interview?"

He shrugs Bill Gannon off. "I am ready to finish it if you are," he says, glaring.

I slide wearily back into my chair. I rub my forehead. "Let's get it done," I say, my voice sounding dull. "I'd like to get out of here sometime yet in this decade."

Friday goes to stand over by Bill Gannon as Gannon sits down, taking up his pen once more. Friday is quiet for a moment, studying the tile floor in front of him. Then he looks back up at me. "Are you sure, Officer Malloy, that you did not let your emotions color the outcome of this incident?" He folds his arms across his chest, staring at me.

"No, I didn't. I swear I did not let what I'd seen upstairs in that house influence me in any way." *Sure you didn't, Pete. But it made pulling that old trigger just a little bit easier, didn't it?* I stare at the table in front of me.

He clears his throat. "Well, it's been known to happen, especially after a particularly gruesome and tragic scene like this one was tonight." He shrugs. "Your emotions get caught up, and you want to see the villain dead. It's certainly not unusual, nor is it not understandable. A young mother and her three small children brutally slain by their father, well, it's enough to tug at my emotions."

I look up at him. "Let me remind you once again, Sergeant, you and I are two different people. What bothers you may not bother me."

"Oh, so you admit that killing another human being doesn't bother you?" he asks, smiling slightly. "Tell me, Officer Malloy, does vigilante justice sound good to you?" He strides toward me, putting his hands flat on the table next to me and leaning forward. He looks like he expects me to flinch, but I don't, so he continues. "Because it sounds to me like that's exactly what you did tonight. You punished Stuart Walters with your own brand of justice, placing a bullet right between his eyes." He picks the diagram up from the table once more and waves it under my nose again. "Seven feet is close range, Officer Malloy. You can't deny that. You have no witnesses to back you up, since Officer Reed was lying injured upstairs and only reached the basement after you killed Walters. His testimony will be sketchy, at best."

"Reed saw how Walters was lying on the basement floor," I say through gritted teeth. I refuse to be intimidated by him. "He could see that Walters had his weapon in his hand. He knows that I would not have fired without provocation. He can provide that much testimony, at least." I narrow my own eyes

at him. "Why are you so intent on trying to pin a cold-blooded killing on me anyway, Sergeant? Do you have a few skeletons of your own in your closet?"

Friday chuckles mirthlessly, shaking his head. "I've honestly only fired my service weapon a few times, and only once in my own self-defense." He gives me a pointed look. "And I didn't kill the man I was shooting at, either, at least not at the scene. He died later from his injuries he received. We found his body in a car. And it certainly wasn't vigilante justice on my part, he was robbing a laundromat and I walked in on him. He fired first, not me."

"And Stuart Walters fired first, too, shooting and injuring my partner," I tell him coolly. "He obviously was not going to let either Officer Reed or myself live, Sergeant. This shooting is a clear-cut case of self-defense, and nothing more. It's not the result of an emotional reaction to what I saw upstairs, nor is it frontier justice on my part. Self-defense, plain and simple," I say. "And you can quit waving that damned diagram in my face. I can see it quite well without having you shove it under my nose," I tell him, my eyes now quite dangerously narrowed.

But he, like Ed Wells, doesn't read the warning signs. Tauntingly, Friday waves the sheet of paper under my nose once more. "Seven feet, Officer Malloy. Close range, one shot to the head. It's a pretty fine line between self-defense and murder. Maybe you crossed over that line and didn't even realize it." He smiles. "I think that's exactly what you did, Officer Malloy."

I snatch the diagram out of his hand and crumple it up into a ball. I throw it onto the table with contempt. I stand up suddenly, the chair I was sitting in falling over backwards behind me. I lean towards him, my eyes now slits. "Now look here, Sergeant Friday," I snarl, my face just inches from his. "I don't give a rat's ass about what *you* think I did. I know that I acted only on self-preservation down in that basement. I shot and killed Stuart Walters in self-defense, and self-defense only. I did *not* let my feelings for what I saw upstairs influence what happened in any way. Stuart Walters was the one who decided to try and kill me in that basement, and there was no way in HELL, I was going to let that happen." I jab my index finger at him. "And furthermore, even if I did let my emotions rule me tonight, they *weren't* in control of me when I pulled that trigger. Only my instinct to survive did that, Sergeant. *I did not kill Stuart Walters in cold blood.* He was coming at me with a gun, and I knew that he was going to shoot me. I was not going to fire at him just to wound him and risk having him line up on me. Now if you don't want to believe me, that's your problem. You were not in that basement, facing down an armed killer. *I was.* I acted on my instinct and on my training. Nothing more, nothing less. That does not make me a vigilante. I did not cross any lines!"

Friday, to his credit, doesn't flinch. His eyes meet mine, and I see a little glimmer of respect in them. "That's the truth, Officer Malloy?" he asks with that small cool smile.

"The truth, Sergeant. I am not leaving anything out, I assure you. I did NOT lie in wait for Stuart Walters, nor did I shoot him out of anger for what he'd done upstairs. I am NOT that kind of an officer. I couldn't live with myself if I were." I step back then, my arms folded across my chest, glaring angrily at Sergeant Friday.

He stands up. "Well, I guess that's it," he says, looking at Officer Bill Gannon. "Did you get all of that down, Bill?"

Gannon nods. "Sure did, Joe."

Friday turns back to me. He picks up the wadded-up diagram from where I tossed it on the table. He gently un-wads it, smoothing it down with his palm. He tucks it into the opened briefcase, along with the two pages of notes that Jerry Miller made. "Let's go down to Ballistics now, get that test-fire done."

I run a hand through my hair, letting out a weary sigh. "Fine by me," I say. The four of us leave the interrogation room, Sergeant Friday walking right by my side down the hallway, as if I'm a prisoner. Mac and Bill Gannon trail us.

"Sergeant MacDonald, Bill, you two wait out here while we get the test slug," Friday tells them as he pushes the door to the lab open.

The Ballistics technician on duty is Tesla Downing, a tall, thin gentleman with graying hair and horn-rimmed glasses. He looks up from a microscope as we enter the lab. "Hello, Pete," he says with a smile. "What can I do for you this fine morning?"

"We need a test slug from Officer Malloy's service revolver," Friday tells him in that clipped tone of voice. "I'd appreciate it if we could get this done as soon as possible."

Tesla stares at him for a second, then he looks at me. "Better do what the good Sergeant ordered," I tell him, a grim smile on my face. I gesture to the slug barrel. "Is it ready to use?" I ask.

Tesla nods. "Sure, Pete, whenever you're ready." He scratches his head. "What's this about, anyway?" he asks, with avid curiosity.

Friday glares at him. "It's about an officer-involved shooting that happened earlier."

"Involving you, Pete?" Tesla asks.

I nod. "Yeah." I jerk my thumb at Sergeant Friday. "Oh, and this charming gentleman is Sergeant Joe Friday," I tell him sarcastically. I go over to the slug barrel, a metal barrel like oil comes in. Only the slug barrel isn't filled with oil, it's filled with dirt. There's a hole cut in the side of it, just big enough for the muzzle of a weapon to fit in, with a tray in the bottom of the barrel to catch the spent slug.

Tesla hands each of us a pair of hearing protectors, and he also hands me a pair of safety goggles. I slip them on first, and the headphones second. I make sure that both Sergeant Friday and Tesla also have their hearing protectors on, then I remove my service revolver from the holster at my side. Slipping the safety off, I position the muzzle into the hole in the barrel, and pull the trigger. The gun leaps a bit in my hands. Putting the safety back on, I slide it back into the holster, snapping the holster guard back into place. I pull the protectors and the goggles off, handing them to Tesla.

He lays them on a nearby table. "I'll get the slug for you in a second, Sergeant Friday," he says. Plucking a small manila evidence envelope from the table, he writes down the date, the time of the test-fire, and his own serial number. He looks at me. "What's your serial, Pete?" he asks.

"10743," I tell him.

He goes over to the slug barrel, sliding the tray out from underneath. Slipping on a white cotton glove, he gingerly picks up the slug from the tray, dropping it into the open envelope. He seals it, handing it to Sergeant Friday. "There you go, Sergeant," he tells him. "All ready to be processed at Headquarters."

Friday gives him a curt nod. "Thank you," he says. As we step back out into the hallway, where Mac and Bill Gannon are patiently waiting, he turns to me. "I intend to leave no stone unturned in this matter, Officer Malloy," he says. "An officer-involved shooting is a very serious matter. A man is dead this morning because of you, and I intend to find out if your shooting of him is entirely justifiable."

"That's certainly your right," I tell him icily. "I'm sure that you'll find that the shooting of Stuart Walters was completely justifiable."

"You'd better hope so," he growls, poking me in the chest with his index finger. "Because if I find out that it's not, Officer Malloy, so help me God, I will make sure that *I* am the one to *personally* strip that badge off of you and place your ass under arrest for murder." He jabs me again for emphasis. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," I snap, grabbing his finger in my fist before he can poke me again. I brusquely shove his hand away from me. "Are we through here?" I ask.

"You're on paid leave pending the outcome of the investigation, Officer Malloy," he says. "There will be a shooting review board convened within the next day or so. You will be expected to attend."

"I am fully aware of that, Sergeant," I tell him. "I've been before a shooting review board in the past. It's nothing new to me."

"That means no leaving town. Paid leave is not the same as vacation," he warns.

I glare at him. "I'm not stupid, Sergeant. Now, are we done here?"

Sergeant Friday nods curtly. "Yes, the interview is finished. You are free to leave, Officer Malloy."

"Fine," I say, starting to walk away.

Friday stops me, a hand on my arm. "Officer Malloy, I certainly hope that you realize I am only doing my job. It's my duty to investigate this incident fully and find out if you are covering anything up. You do understand that, don't you?"

I don't answer him, I just keep staring at him with that narrow-eyed gaze.

"It would be a sad situation for the LAPD if a cop with a taste for vigilante justice is allowed to wield that justice behind the shield of the badge." He looks back at Mac. "I certainly don't wish to incur any hard feelings for what I've done here this morning, Sergeant MacDonald and Officer Malloy, but I am bound by my duty to find out the truth. It may not be pretty or nice, but someone has to do it."

Mac clears his throat. "It sounds to me like you're trying to railroad an innocent officer, Sergeant. This whole interview has left a very bad taste in my mouth, and I assure you, I intend to let my superiors know about your actions and your attitude here this morning."

Friday cocks his head. "That is, of course, your prerogative, Sergeant. And if Officer Malloy is truly innocent, then he will be vindicated by my investigation. If not, he will be arrested and brought to justice."

I snort. "Yeah, vigilante justice is more like it. You're on a witch-hunt, Friday, but instead, it's only going to turn into a snipe hunt for you. And I sincerely hope that you end up looking like the jackass that you are." I smile coldly.

"You may not like me right now, Officer Malloy, but I feel that we can at least remain professional towards one another." He then holds out his hand for me to shake.

I look down at his hand. "Go to hell, Sergeant Friday," I tell him, a sneer of icy contempt on my lips. Then I turn my back on him. I can feel his eyes boring into me as I stalk angrily down the hall towards the locker room, but right now? I really don't give a damn.

CHAPTER FIVE

The locker room is mercifully deserted when I enter. I open my locker, un-noosing the tie from around my neck with tired fingers and tossing it in on the top shelf. I unbuckle the leather gunbelt from around my waist, hanging it on the inside of my locker door, and then I begin changing out of my uniform. Slipping the uniform shirt off and replacing it on a metal hanger inside my locker, I feel a slight catch in my shoulder. I rub it, easing the knot out with my tightened knuckles. Whether it's an injury I received from the fall down the steps at the Walters' residence, or whether it's just a stress-knot, I don't know. It finally dissipates. Undoing my belt, I step out of my uniform pants and step into my jeans, transferring my wallet from my uniform trousers to the jeans. I snag my off-duty weapon from the top shelf of my locker, securing it and the holster it's in to my belt; then I pull my grey LAPD sweatshirt on over my head, smoothing it down and making sure it covers the off-duty weapon. Sliding my feet into my loafers, I grab my yellow windbreaker from the hook inside my locker.

Suddenly, a wave of crushing, bone-aching weariness hits me hard, and I find that I have to sit down on the wooden bench for a minute or two. The bumps and bruises that I received earlier are starting to really flare up, rearing their ugly aches and pains. Tiredly, I rub my eyes, trying to will myself into gathering enough strength to haul myself to my feet. I yawn, looking at my watch. Christ, it's nearly six a.m. I feel like I've lived an entire lifetime in just this single shift alone. But then again, sometimes we have shifts like that. I'm still sitting there on the bench when Mac walks in.

"You'd better hope Sergeant Friday doesn't decide to write you up for insubordination regarding the last comment you said to him, Pete," he tells me dryly. "It's not wise to piss off the man who's investigating you."

I look up at him, his weariness and fatigue clearly matching my own. "Mac, I really don't give a damn *what* the good sergeant does," I tell him, my voice a dull rasp from all the talking I've been doing in the last few hours. "He can drum me out of the department for all I care right now." I shrug. "He's going to try to oust me anyway, so why not add some more fuel to the fire, huh?"

Mac comes over to me. He stands there, leaning against the row of green-painted lockers, his arms folded across his chest. He regards me solemnly. "You know, Pete, maybe you should consider taking some vacation time when this is all over with. It sounds to me like you could use a change of scenery, a different perspective. You might come back to work with a better attitude."

I rub my forehead wearily. "Mac, you're going to be running shorthanded as it is right now, with Reed off-duty until he's released by the doctors to come back to work, and with me being off until the investigation into the shooting is finished. I'm not going to take vacation days when I'm needed here. I'm coming back to duty as soon as the investigation is over, provided that Sergeant Friday doesn't uncover anything that he feels I'm lying about."

"Are you?" he asks.

"Am I what?" I ask, shooting him a look.

"Lying about what happened out there at the Walters' house."

I scowl. "I'm not sure what you're implying, Mac," I tell him, heaving myself to my feet.

"Look, Pete, is that really how it all went down?" he asks, still leaning against the lockers. "What happened in the basement?"

I look at him, my eyes narrowed. "Are you accusing me of killing Stuart Walters in cold blood?" I stand up, meeting him eye to eye. "If so, why don't you just come right out and ask me if that's what I did?"

He cocks his head. "Did you?"

I shake my head with disgust. "You know, that's really rich, Mac, you asking me if I committed murder this morning...especially after you were all friendly advice and sympathy for me earlier," I tell him angrily. "Well, guess what! I don't need your sympathy OR your advice, Sergeant!" I slam my locker door so hard that it makes the whole row shake violently. "What the hell are you doing, Mac? Are you trying to help Sergeant Friday pound the nails through me on that damned cross he's wanting so hard to crucify me on? Do you want to see a good officer go down in flames, just for the whimsical notion of an utter fool?" My voice is sharp and bitter.

"Pete, listen, I'm just asking you," he tells me. "I have to know if you're telling the truth in order to help you." His eyes flick briefly away from mine, and I know now that he doubts me.

"What I told Sergeant Friday *is* the truth," I growl. "Now if you don't want to believe that, then I guess that's *your* problem, not mine. You weren't in that basement with me, so don't you *dare* second-guess the decisions that I made, that I had to make, in the matter of a split-second."

"But you just as much admitted that you didn't regret shooting him."

I hesitate just for a moment, wondering if I should tell Mac the truth. Then I reply. "No, I don't. Would you?"

He shrugs. "Well, I guess I'd rather have some regret in the end, for taking the life of a fellow human being, than have the blot of committing murder like a cold-blooded killer on my soul. That's a pretty heavy burden for the spirit to take."

I glare at him. "So worry about your own soul, Sergeant. Mine is just fine." *Yeah, sure it is, Pete.* I pick up my jacket from the bench and put it on.

"Is it, Pete?" he asks, grabbing my arm as I shove past him to get out of the locker room. "Are you sure it's alright?"

I whip around in fury. "Get your damned hands off of me!" I snarl, jerking my arm out of his grasp. "I have *seen* enough, and *been* through enough HELL in the last few hours to sicken *anyone's* soul, let alone mine! So don't you stand there and preach to *me*, Mac, about committing cold-blooded murder! Stuart Walters was an A-number-one scumbag who richly deserved whatever he got coming to him! And if you think, *for one single minute*, that I'm going to weep bitter tears over the loss of an asshole like him, then you've got another think coming!" I stalk angrily towards the door. Then I turn back around, pointing my finger at him. "I did *not* gun down Stuart Walters in cold blood this morning! I acted purely in self-defense, and self-defense alone! And if you don't want to believe that, Sergeant, then you can go to hell, too, along with Sergeant Friday!" I yank the door open and start to walk out. "The two of you can keep each other company!"

"Malloy, don't you turn your back on me!" Mac yells.

"I'll be damned if I'm going to stand here any longer and be called a murderer by someone who is supposed to be my friend!" I snap. Then I walk away, the door swinging shut on Mac's voice. When I get outside to my Mustang, I climb in and sit there for a moment, trying to collect my thoughts. *Damn it, damn it, damn it!* I pound the steering wheel with my fists in heated frustration. Why in the hell doesn't anyone believe me that I didn't intentionally kill Stuart Walters? I lean my head against the steering wheel. *Worse yet, why don't I even believe it myself?*

The sun is starting to pinken the edges of the eastern horizon when I pull out of the station parking lot. As completely wiped out as I am right now, I really should go home, but there's one place I need to go first before I start back to my apartment. And while I don't expect the place where I'm headed to have all the answers for me, I can at least maybe get a different perspective from someone whose judgment I trust.

I stifle a yawn as I walk up the corridor of Central Receiving Hospital's intensive care unit. There's not a lot of activity yet in the hospital, they haven't hit that seven a.m. rush of patient care and rounds of breakfast yet. I start to walk past the nurses' station when I am stopped by a crisp starched nurse with iron-grey hair pulled back into a tight bun beneath her cap. She looks like she could've tended wounded soldiers on the battlefield during the Civil War...no, hell, the Revolutionary War. I give her a long-suffering smile as she bustles briskly around the edge of the desk to meet me.

"I'm sorry, sir, but visiting hours are over with," she tells me. "You'll have to wait and come back a little later."

"I know visiting hours are over with," I say. "But I'm here to sit with Officer Jim Reed's family. I'm his partner."

"There's already a police officer sitting with his family. We certainly don't need any more cluttering up the hallways." She gives me a dour frown.

"I'm sorry, did you say 'cluttering up the hallways'?" I ask in shock. "Since when do police officers sitting duty with one of their own constitute cluttering up the halls?"

She flaps her hands in frustration. "I don't care for having uniformed men thronging about in my ICU! The way that you boys act, you'd think that officer was some sort of celebrity or something!"

I blink in amazement. "You have *got* to be kidding me, right? Because I cannot *believe* that you'd go so far as to disrespect an injured LAPD officer or his brethren who have come to sit with him."

She folds her arms across her ample bosom. "I am not disrespecting the LAPD! I am just stating that there were far too many of you in here earlier, and that the presence of so many police officers disrupted the entire floor!" She glares at me. "Now you'll have to leave and come back later on, when visiting hours are open!"

I fold my arms across my own chest and match her glare for glare. "Listen, lady," I snarl, my voice like a rasp of steel. "I am *not* leaving this floor until I see how my partner is doing. And if you know what's good for you, you won't try and stop me." I edge past her. "Now, if you'll excuse me..."

She darts in front of me, putting her hands on my chest. "Oh no you don't!" she threatens, waving her index finger in my face. "One more step and I'll call security on you and have you thrown out of this hospital! I won't have you disturbing Officer Reed while he's on this floor!"

I grit my teeth. "Look, lady. I'm not going to get him up to do the freakin' limbo, alright? I just want to check on his well-being!" I start to edge past her again.

She stops me once more. "You can do that during regular visiting hours!" She points to the elevators. "Now I suggest you leave!"

I glare down at her with that narrowed-eye glare I have perfected. "If you don't step aside and let me through," I hiss through still-gritted teeth, "I will stick that starched hat of yours in a place where the sun doesn't shine." I don't usually threaten women like that, but I've had it...*truly* had it this morning. I've nearly met my death in a dank basement, killed a man because of it, been jerked around and interrogated like I was a common criminal by an over-zealous Sergeant Friday, been accused as a liar by Mac, and now this. It's just too much. I shove past her once more.

"I'm calling security!" she hollers at me as I make my way down the hall.

"So call security, you old bat!" I yell back. "And when you do, tell Frank Snyder that Pete Malloy says hello!" Smirking, I continue down the hall. Frank Snyder used to be a patrolman in our division until a car accident ended his career on the force. He's now head of security for Central Receiving. He knows who I am, so I seriously doubt he'll come up here and roust me out.

Since I don't know what room Jim Reed is in, I just look for the presence of one of my fellow officers outside a room. I hit the jackpot when I spot Ed Wells dozing in a chair outside of Jim's room, a two-year old issue of *Sports Illustrated* flopped open on his stomach. He snores lightly, his head thrown back against the puke-green wall, a thin line of drool coming from one corner of his slacked-open mouth.

I study him for a moment. You know, asleep, he looks half-way pleasant...it's too bad it's during his *conscious* hours that his true personality shines through. I glance at the magazine...damn, it's not the

swimsuit edition of *Sports Illustrated*, but one extolling the virtues of ice hockey. I can see why ol' Ed fell asleep, I think ruefully. Well, it's time to wake Sleeping Ugly and send him on his way for a while. I lean over him a bit, my hands on the wooden armrests of the chair. "Ed..." I call softly. "Ed, it's time for wakey-wakey," I singsong.

He shifts slightly, but doesn't wake up. "Honey, tell the gerbils to go away," he mumbles, smacking his lips. "I don't wanna buy any sunflowers right now."

I bite back hard the laughter that bubbles up inside of me. *Hmm, how best to have fun with THIS?* I ask myself. Grinning wickedly, and seriously wishing Jim Reed were here to witness this, I lean over the snoozing Ed once more. "But Ed, the gerbils will cry if you don't buy their sunflowers," I say gently. "You'll break their little itty-bitty hearts."

"So let 'em cry," he mumbles again. "There'll be rainbows again tomorrow. 'Sides, I don't have a gyrocopter to fly them away in. Tell 'em they'll have to light the sparklers on their own."

I step back, my hand over my mouth to muffle my snort of laughter. This is just waaaayyy too delightful to pass up. So I lean over Ed once more. "Ed, the poor gerbils don't have any matches to light the sparklers with," I whisper.

"Give 'em some from the kitchen drawer," he murmurs. "And tell 'em not to blow up my garage this time. I don't want to have to go hunt down wherever my lawn mower landed again." Then, with a snort and a start, he comes awake. "Hey, how long have you been standing there, Pete?" he asks me, an accusatory tone in his voice.

I stand back, the wicked grin still on my face. "Long enough, Ed," I tell him with a laugh. "Tell me, why would you want to buy sunflowers from gerbils who blew up your garage?"

"Huh?" he asks, looking puzzled. "What in the hell are you talking about, Malloy?"

"That must have been *some* dream you were having there, Ed. You were muttering about buying sunflowers from gerbils, but you didn't have a gyrocopter to fly them away in..."

"Oh yeah, that," he says, interrupting me with a blush. He looks around, obviously embarrassed. "It was just a dream I was having."

"What did you do, swipe some of Reed's pain medications?" I ask. "Because it sounded like you were having one *helluva* dream there, Ed."

He rubs a hand across his face. "Yeah, well, a dream is a dream," he says. He clears his throat, studying the floor at his feet. "Look...uh...Pete, I'd like to apologize for the way I acted out there at the scene. I shouldn't have needled you like that, especially with Reed being hurt as bad as he was. I'm really sorry."

I shake my head. "Don't worry about it, Ed. I was pretty keyed up. I needed to lash out at someone, and you just happened to be a convenient target. I shouldn't have taken my anger out on you. So I'm sorry, too."

"Well," he says with a small rueful chuckle. "It wasn't like I wasn't asking for it. You know me, open mouth, insert foot. Betty says someday I'm going to get athlete's mouth." He holds his hand out for me to shake. "No hard feelings?"

"No hard feelings," I say, shaking his hand.

"Pretty bad scene tonight, huh?"

"Yeah, pretty bad. One of the worst I've ever witnessed."

Ed rubs his chin thoughtfully. "You know, Pete, we took a couple of domestic disturbance calls out there ourselves, earlier this year. Each time, the wife declined to press charges against her husband, so all we could do was make him leave the residence for the night."

"Really?" I ask, deciding not to tell him that Reed and I apparently handled a couple of calls at that address, too, but I couldn't recall them.

Ed shakes his head. "Yeah, she never had any visible injuries that we could see, so we couldn't do too much. It's sad, really. She never let on that there their fights were anything more than verbal. Maybe if she had said he was abusing her, we could've done something about it."

"But if she wasn't willing to sign a complaint against him, your hands were tied."

"Exactly. Which is why it's all the more tragic."

"Well, she did have an order of protection signed out against him, but a lot of good it did her and her kids tonight." I pinch the bridge of my nose wearily. "What good's an order of protection when you're already dead, huh?"

Ed peers closely at me. "Jesus, Malloy, you look like you've been run through the wringer and hung up to dry. Who conducted the shooting interview, Attila the Hun?"

"Worse," I tell him dryly. "Sergeant Joe Friday."

He snorts. "And you're already *done*? God, I'm surprised he didn't question you for at least another twelve hours. The man is *known* for his very thorough interrogation techniques."

I rub the back of my neck. "Yeah, tell me about it. I half-expected him to pull the old bright-lights and rubber-hose trick, but evidently he must have left them at home. Thank God for small favors, huh?"

"I guess," he says. "You here to see Reed?"

I nod. "How's he been doing?"

"He got settled into his room okay. He didn't have any more seizures after they brought him in, so that's a good sign." He jerks his thumb at the door marked 515. "Jean's in there with him now. They brought a cot in for her to sleep on."

"Well, that was mighty nice of them," I remark. "And here I thought maybe the milk of human kindness had dried up. Nurse Ratched at the desk was going to toss me out on my ear."

He grins. "She threaten to call security on you?"

"Yeah, why?"

"She tried that with Brink and Walters. I guess she even landed on Mac, read him the riot act. Me too, after I got up here. Said we were disrupting the peace and quiet for the other patients on the floor." He shakes his head. "Like we were all out here in the hallway having a noisy frat party or something. Frank Snyder came up once, told the old biddy to mind her own business, that anyone from the police force had the right to sit here outside of Reed's hospital room. It didn't make her happy, but she backed off."

"Good old Frank, always our ace in the hole," I say. "Ed, why don't you go grab a cup of coffee, maybe something to eat, huh?"

He yawns and stretches, then he stands up. "Yeah, I think I will," he says. He rubs the side of his face where I clipped him with my fist. "Man, you sure swing a mean right, Malloy. I thought for a moment there you'd broke my cheekbone." He scowls. "Where in the hell did you learn to fight like that, anyway?"

I shrug. "When I was a kid, my hair was a much darker red than it is now. I had to learn to fight or get the crap kicked out of me every single day of my tender young life."

"Yeah, well, I hope I'm never on the receiving end of your fist again," he says ruefully.

"Then don't piss me off, Ed." I slip into the chair that he just vacated. "That's the best advice I can give you."

He nods, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "You on leave until the investigation is through?"

"Yep."

"Gonna have to go before a shooting review board?"

"Yep." I yawn. "Go on, Ed. Go snag you a cup of coffee, maybe a doughnut or two. I'll stand watch outside of Jim's door until you get back."

He regards me skeptically. "Are you sure, Pete? You're not exactly in uniform."

"I have my departmental ID with me. If anyone wants to know, all they have to do is place a call to Central Division, and find out who I am." I nod in the direction of the cafeteria. "I'm sure the doughnuts are nice and fresh, Ed. Go and enjoy them while they're hot." I yawn again. "And remember now, don't buy any sunflowers from garage-exploding gerbils."

He snorts. "Sure, Pete." He starts down the hallway. "See you in a bit."

I settle back into the hard wooden chair as well as I can. As I shift around, trying to get comfortable, I wonder to myself how in the hell Ed managed to sleep in the damned thing. I take off my coat and fold it up, putting it behind my head. I lean back, closing my eyes. I may not sleep, but at least I'll look like I am.

Then the next thing I know, someone is shaking me gently by the shoulders. I open my eyes to see Jean, Jim's wife, standing in front of me. I rub my eyes. "Hey, Jean. What time is it?" I ask sleepily. I stand up from the chair, stretching. My back is killing me from sitting slouched in that chair, but I'm not worried about that right now.

"It's time for you to go home, Pete," she tells me softly, smiling a wan little smile. "You definitely look like you need your sleep."

"Yeah, well, I'll sleep when I'm dead," I tell her. "How's Jim?"

"He's awake, so that's a good sign."

"He up to talking to me?" I ask. "If he's not, I'll just pop in and see him, then come back a little later on, when he's feeling better."

She shakes her head. "No, he'll talk. He's been bugging me for the last half-hour, asking me where you were at." She squints at me. "You really look like hell, Pete."

"Yeah, it's a new look I'm trying out. It's called death warmed over." I give her a small smile. "Don't you know? All the fashionable people are copying this very same look."

She shakes her head. "Really, Pete. Only you'd joke about looking like..." and here her lower lip begins to tremble as tears fill her eyes, running down her cheeks. "D-d-death..."

I don't let her finish the sentence, as I grab her up in a huge bear hug. "Shh, it's okay, Jean," I murmur into her auburn hair. "Jim's going to be fine, don't worry." I kiss the top of her head. "He's been through a lot worse and come out okay." I've comforted my best friend's wife like this more times than I care to count.

"I thought he was going to die," she sobs against my chest, her arms wrapped tightly around me. "They kept running all these tests on him to make sure he didn't have brain damage."

"You mean he *doesn't* have brain damage?" I ask lightly. "I thought he came that way."

She looks up at me with tear-dampened eyes. "How can you joke about something like that at a time like this?"

I shrug. "Eh, somebody has to liven the joint up a little," I tell her. *I joke, my dear Jean, because if I don't, I'll fall truly and utterly to pieces, right here in this hospital hallway.* "Didn't the doctors say that Jim only had a concussion? Nothing worse than that?"

She nods, snuffling wetly into my shirt. "Yeah, but he really worried me. He kept throwing up. They finally ended up giving him a shot for the nausea. They also gave him a shot for the pain, but they didn't want to give him too much, because of the head injury."

"Concussions can make you do that, Jean," I tell her gently. "As many times as Jim's been hurt like that, you should know by now what happens."

She nods. "I know it. But Mac told me he'd suffered a seizure before they brought him in. And when I got here, he was pretty combative. He kept asking for you, Pete. He was worried for you. I don't think he realized you were alright."

Sudden emotion hits me, hard and heavy, and tears prickle behind my eyelids just like they did earlier, when the ambulance left with Reed. I rapidly blink them away. It won't do for me to cry in front of my partner's wife. "I know he was worried about me. I was worried about him. And I couldn't leave the scene and go with him to the hospital. Mac wouldn't let me." My voice sounds raspy as I talk around the lump in my throat.

"Pete, he told me you killed a man this morning...the same man who shot him," she says, pushing away from me and looking up at me. "Is that true?"

I nod. "Yeah, it is. It's why I couldn't get here any sooner. I had to do a walk-through at the scene with homicide, then I had to go through an interview at the station."

She gently touches the cut on my cheek. "That looks like it hurts. Did the man that hurt Jim do that to you?"

"Yeah. I tried to cuff him up, but he got away from me, catching me with the open edge of the handcuff." I grin. "It looks worse than it really is, trust me."

Jean's eyes fill up with tears again, and she leans into me once more, sniffing. "I'm sorry, Pete, it's just that I...I...I can't bear the thought of losing Jim. I really wish sometimes that he would quit this damned job and find something safer. It would make me a lot happier knowing that my husband was going to come home every day still in one piece."

"It may make you happier, Jean, but would it make Jim happy?" I ask her softly. "This is really a discussion you should be having with him, not me."

"I know it," she says, pulling a handkerchief out of her sleeve and wiping her nose with it. "But I just get so tired of worrying about him each shift. I'm just afraid some day that either you or Mac is going to show up on my doorstep and tell me that he's dead." She dabs at her eyes as she slips out of my arms.

"Hey, relax now, " I try and soothe her. "I keep a close eye on him, Jean. I watch out for him. I try and keep him from harm."

She is quiet for a moment, looking down at the grey tile floor. Then she looks up at me, her brown eyes flashing angrily, a sharp emotion that startles me. "But you *didn't* watch out for him this morning, did you?" she asks heatedly. "You *didn't* keep him from getting hurt by that man, Pete." She runs a hand through her hair. "You can't always make sure Jim comes to no harm. I wish I could believe you when you say that you try to protect Jim, but this time you didn't. And I'm getting sick and tired of worrying if he's going to make it home after each shift, all because I can't count on *you* to watch out for him." Her tone is accusatory and harsh.

Stunned by her sudden change in attitude, I step back from her, her words hitting my heart and stinging me into silence. I don't know what to say to her. It really *is* my fault that Jim Reed got hurt the way he did. And her comments start up the Greek chorus of 'if onllys' up in my tired brain once more. It's bad enough that I blame myself for what happened, I don't need her pointing that blatant fact out to me anymore than I need to get kicked in the head. Finally I find my voice. "I know it, Jean. This morning was one time that I failed Jim, and I'm really and truly sorry. I wish to God it had been me that had gotten hurt instead of him. If I could take his place in that hospital bed, I would. I'd move heaven and earth to make that happen."

She sighs, shaking her head. "Yeah, I've heard that one before, Pete."

"You're only telling me the same thing I've been telling myself ever since this happened," I say. "It's just in your voice this time, not my own." I drop my gaze to my feet. "And I can't say I'm sorry enough times to make it any better. I wish I could, but I can't."

She moves away from me and begins pacing a bit. "It's always the same old song and dance with you, isn't it, Pete?" she asks bitterly. "And when is the song and dance going to end? Can you tell me that?" she says, her voice rising slightly. "Is it going to end when my husband is permanently disabled or worse, dead?" She jabs me with her index finger. "Then what, Pete? Are you going to swoop in and take care of Jimmy and I, like some heroic white knight on his charger, riding in straight out of a fairy tale? Well, let me tell you *this*, Pete Malloy. You're a knight with tarnished armor and it's no damned wonder you won't settle down and get married. No female in her right mind would want you for her husband," she hisses at me. She's the angriest that I've ever seen her before. "Least of all me."

Her heated vitriol shakes me and I take another step back from her. "Whoa, hey now, Jean. No one's talking about Jim getting hurt or dying just yet," I say, putting my hands up in an attempt to calm her down. "And while if anything would happen to Jim, God forbid, yes, I'd make sure you and Jimmy were well-taken care of. But that doesn't mean I'd marry you just because Jim died." I frown at her. "And the reasons I don't want to get married are my own, not anyone else's. I've had plenty of hints and downright offers from women to get married. I just don't want to tie myself down yet."

She snorts, looking away from me. "Yeah, I've heard *that* song and dance from you too, Pete. You're like a broken record. Or worse, a toy that says the same patented phrases, over and over again, whenever you pull the string." Her eyes narrow. "Let's face it, Pete, I think sometimes that *you're* the only reason Jim stays on this stupid job, anyway, just because of your friendship. And it'll be because of *you* that he ends up getting injured or killed, either because he was trying to protect *you* from harm, or you weren't protecting him *enough* from harm." She pokes me again with her index finger. "Maybe if *you* had a wife to worry about you all the time, you wouldn't be so damned cavalier with Jim's safety!"

Anger rises in my blood. I don't need this, not right now. I don't need to be shown as imminently flawed to the entire world, when I already know that I am. "Well, you're not exactly a walking billboard for a loving wife and marriage right now yourself, Jean," I snap. "If this is the way all wives act when their husbands get hurt, I don't want to get married...not ever." She is silent, still staring at me through those narrowed eyes, so I take a deep breath and continue. "I couldn't bear the thought that someone I loved was treating another person the way you're treating me right now." I gesture to Jim's room. "Do you not *think* that I'm beating myself up over what happened to him? That I've got it bouncing around in my brain that *I'm* the reason he's in this damned hospital in the first place? That *I* broke the cardinal rule of partnership of always making sure that your partner is safe if you can?" My voice is a sharp growl. "His blood, his *innocent* blood, is on my hands, on my conscience, and it *will* be until the day I die! I know that it's my fault, I realize that completely, and I accept full blame for it, for all of it! But I'll be *damned* if I'm going to stand here and let you condemn me for something I'm already condemning myself for! I don't need your sharp little voice added to the chorus!"

Shocked, she looks at me, her eyes wide, her mouth hanging a bit open in surprise. Yeah, I forget, she's never really seen me mad at anyone, especially not her. "I...I..." she sputters, not knowing whether to get even angrier or cry.

Suddenly woefully ashamed of myself for losing my temper at her, I close my eyes, shaking my head wearily. "Look, Jean, I'm sorry. It's been a rough past few hours for me. I'll just stop in really quick and see how Jim is doing, and then I'll leave." I open my eyes, looking at her. "And I promise I won't come back anymore, okay?" I edge past her to get to the door of Jim's room.

She catches my arm. "Pete, look, I'm really sorry I snapped at you just now. I said things I shouldn't have. I didn't mean them, not at all." She dabs at her eyes again and sniffles. "It's just been a long night, you know? I'm worn to a frazzle with tiredness and fear. Right now I probably don't know half of what I'm saying."

I rest my head for a second against the white door. "Just forget it, Jean. You only said things that were very true." I give her a tired glance over my shoulder. "And what stings more bitterly than the cold, harsh truth?" I open the door to Jim's room and step inside without a backward look. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness of Jim's hospital room, especially after leaving the bright hallway just outside his door. I approach his bed slowly. "Hey, Mister Ordinary Brains," I whisper, leaning on the bed rail at the side of his bed. "You asleep?"

Jim is propped up in bed with the aid of several pillows, the whole right side of his head black and purple, his right eye swelled shut. He opens his good eye at the sound of my voice. "Ordinary brains, ha-ha, Pete. Very funny. Mac musta told you, huh?" he asks in a raspy voice. "No, I'm not asleep." He looks at me, a tired grin on his face. "What the hell took you so long anyway?"

I shrug, stuffing my hands into the pockets of my jacket. "A little of this, a little of that. You know how it goes. How do you feel? "

Wincing, he rubs the side of his head. "Like Bobo the Wonder Elephant sat on me," he says.

I smile. "Yeah, well, you *look* like Bobo the Wonder Elephant sat on you."

"Thanks, Pete. I knew you'd cheer me up," he says dryly. He waves a hand at me. "You aren't going to win any beauty contests there yourself, pal. You look like Scrooge's ghost."

"Which one? Christmas Past, Christmas Present, or Christmas Future?"

He studies me for a moment. "All three," he says with a smirk.

I grimace. "Watch it there, Junior. I may have to have Bobo and a few of her friends come do a fandango on your head for you again."

"Would you, please? It sure beats the all-monkey fife and bugle drum corps that I've got marching around in my head." He massages his temples with his fingers.

"All-monkey fife and bugle drum corps, huh?" I ask. "What exactly did they give you for painkillers, Reed? Sounds pretty potent."

He shakes his head, then winces again. "Dunno what it was. But it wasn't enough. My head is splitting, from the inside out."

I tap the bed rail with my knuckle. "I'll leave, Jim. I'll come back when you're feeling more up to it. I'll get Jean on my way out, have her ask the nurse if you can have another shot of pain medicine." It's a lie about me coming back, but he doesn't have to know that. I can't tell him the truth right now, I don't want to make him feel any worse than he already does. I start to turn and walk away.

He reaches out and grabs my arm. "No, Pete, please don't leave. Not yet, anyway." He looks at me with pleading eyes, or eye, since the other one is puffed shut. "Please stay."

I gaze at him wearily. "I told Jean I wouldn't stay long, just long enough to see how you were doing, then I'd leave."

"I also heard you tell her that you wouldn't come back, either," he says softly. "I heard the two of you outside my room. It sounded like you were arguing. What was that all about?"

"That? Oh, that was just Jean, wanting to leave you and run away with her own true love," I tell him, with a gaiety I don't feel. "Said she wanted someone much better-looking than you."

He smiles a bit. "So she ran off with Ed Wells, right? Or Boom-Boom Brinkman? 'Cuz if you tell me that she wants to run off with you, I'd have to laugh, partner. You certainly are no catch, Malloy, especially not looking the way you do right now."

I scowl. "Hey, you're one to talk, Jim. You aren't much of a prize yourself. Your head looks like it should be entered in a pumpkin contest at the county fair, while the color is such a *lovely* shade of bruised eggplant," I tell him snarkily.

"Seriously, Pete, what was that all about?" he asks again. "Were you and Jean having a fight?"

I rub my forehead, sighing heavily. "It was nothing, Jim. Just drop it."

"You aren't going to tell me, are you?"

"Nope. If Jean wants to tell you, that's up to her."

"Maybe I can worm it out of her," he muses. "She doesn't like to keep things from me."

"She's your wife," I say. "What she tells you is her business, not mine."

He points to the cut on my cheek, frowning thoughtfully. "Now, I *remember* the cut, but what about the split lip? Stuart Walters didn't hit you in the mouth, did he?"

I shake my head. "Uh...no...partner, he didn't. That's from something else."

"What? Did you fall or something?"

"No, I didn't fall. And if you're going to play twenty questions asking me how I got the split lip, I'm leaving."

Dawning begins to glimmer in his good eye. "Wells had a suspicious bruise on his cheek when he was in here earlier, one that he didn't have on yesterday's shift. Now either his wife clocked him one, or you and him got into a fistfight this morning. Did you and him get into it, Pete?" He shakes a finger at me. "And I want the honest truth, Malloy."

I heave a sigh, knowing he won't let this go until I answer him. "Wells started needling me after the ambulance with you left the scene. So I finally got tired of it and simply introduced his backside to Mac's station wagon." I smile. "And hard, too, I might add."

Reed gasps in horror. "You went after him in front of *Mac*?"

"Yeah, I did. Mac was the one who pulled me off of him. Otherwise, there'd be an Ed Wells-shaped dent in the passenger side door of his car." I point to my lip. "When Mac pulled me off, Ed took advantage of the situation and punched me. So I punched him back. Then Mac hauled me off again, ordered Wells to go to his own car, and that was it. The fight was over." I shrug. "It wasn't much."

He gazes at me in shock. "Did Mac write you the two of you up for fighting? It's cue-bow, you know."

I shake my head. "No, he gave me a break. I think he realized I was pretty stressed at that point, plus he had heard Wells needling me. You would've done the same thing, probably, had you been in my place."

He shakes his head vigorously, then winces from the evident onslaught of pain thundering through his brain. "Nuh-uh, Pete. I'd never fight with a fellow officer in front of Mac." His voice is hoarse and he rubs his temples once more.

I eye him tiredly. "Oh yeah, I have to keep remembering that everyone else is not me," I tell him. "Knowing you, you'd probably offer Ed tea and cookies."

He grins wickedly. "Now, I didn't say that, did I? What I said was 'I wouldn't fight with a fellow officer in front of Mac'. I wouldn't do that at all. I'd wait until Mac cleared out of the area and then pound the ever-lovin' crap outta Wells." He winks his good eye at me. "No witnesses. And Ed would be crying and begging for mercy when I got done with him. He'd be lucky if I even *consented* to offer him tea and cookies."

"Gee, you have such heart, Jim," I tell him. "And who knew that underneath that heart lies a little bit of a dark side, huh?"

He smirks. "Yeah, I picked that up from you, Malloy."

That pings at me, yet another arrow to lodge deep inside my soul. "Yeah, I forget you were the one who was worried about the dark side of your personality. Looks like you were right, huh, Junior? About both of us getting burned out on the job and having dark sides," I say sourly. The memory of Jim's pro-and-con list surfaces in my mind like bitter gall. But I keep my mouth shut about it. No need to make him upset over it.

He sits up a little straighter in bed, his brow furrowed in a frown. "Hey, I was just joking about that, Pete. I wasn't serious about any of that at all, not even the conversation we were having before we got the welfare check call."

"Yeah, well, you only spoke the truth, pal." I put my hands up, palms facing the ceiling. I tilt my head heavenward, closing my eyes. "And yea, verily, the truth shall set you free...and yea, verily, what a bitter truth it is." My voice sounds unnaturally harsh in my ears.

"Pete, why are you doing that?" he asks, worry in his voice. "What in the world are you talking about?"

I shake my head. "It's nothing, Jim. Just something Mac said to me earlier."

He narrows that good eye of his at me. "You've got an awful lot of 'it's nothing, Jim' answers, Pete. It's *not* nothing. What is it? Something bugging you?"

"Yeah," I say, with a sharp bark of laughter. "Life itself is bugging me, partner. What do you suggest I do about it, hmmm?" I lean forward towards him a little bit, my eyes narrowed. "A nice little vacation away from here to rest my weary spirits and return me to the world reborn? A different job that I could go to every day from here on out; a job that doesn't have death and destruction, or horrible cruelty, or never-ending sorrow in the course of a single shift? Is that what I need, Jim?" I ask, my voice rising a bit. "Tell me what I need, Jim, because I am damned *sick* and *tired* of people offering me fortune-cookie platitudes to soothe my soul! They don't work for me, they never have and they never will. I don't seek comfort in the cozy blanket of words, of...of...Psalms and prayers, of warm little homilies and beloved proverbs from time's age of wise men. I don't seek comfort from that at all!" I spit angrily.

Reed, to his credit, doesn't recoil from my verbal onslaught. "So what *do* you seek comfort from, Pete?" he asks me softly, his eye meeting mine. "What *will* soothe your soul for you?" He puts his hand on my arm. "Tell me what *will* comfort you, Pete, and I'll do everything in my power to help you get it, I promise."

I look away from him. "I don't know," I say miserably. His obvious pity chokes me with a combination of sorrow and anger. I dislike being felt sorry for, being pitied. "I just don't know, Jim," I rasp hoarsely.

"You must have some idea," he says, his hand still on my arm. "Is it faith that you need right now, Pete? Trust me, you have a lot more faith than I do sometimes. It's something I can always count on you for, even in the worst of situations." He shakes my arm gently. "Is it forgiveness that you need, Pete? Because believe me, you have done nothing, absolutely *nothing* wrong to be forgiven for. You've committed no sin, no transgression that I know of."

I hang my head, closing my eyes. "Yes, I have, Jim," I tell him softly. "I *have* committed a sin, a transgression. I've broken the most important of the Ten Commandments."

"What's that, Pete?" he asks, his voice quiet.

"I killed a man this morning...in cold blood," I tell him dully. "I shot and killed Stuart Walters in cold blood, Jim." The unburdening of my soul to him does little to dispel the strange combination of self-anger and self-sorrow that I feel. I half-expect Reed to recoil away from me in horror, as the pure blackness of my sin is revealed in the light of day.

Instead, he frowns. "No, you didn't, Pete. He was going to kill you down in that basement. You killed him in self-defense."

"Yeah, that's the technical term for it, Jim. And that's what the investigation will ultimately find, unless Sergeant Friday has his way." I go over to the window, peering out through the vertical blinds at the sunny morning.

"But I don't understand, Pete," Reed says, sounding confused. "Why do you think that you gunned him down on purpose? If you hadn't of killed him when you did, he would have found you and shot you first. And it seems kinda silly for you to think otherwise. I would have done the same thing."

I look over my shoulder at him. "Would you have, Jim? Would you have really done that?" I ask, bitterness thick as bile in my voice.

He hesitates. "Well, yeah. I would've shot him, just the same as you."

"Ah, but therein lies the point, my friend. You probably would have shot and killed him, yes. But you would've *also* regretted pulling the trigger and taking another man's life. That's where you're different from me, Jim."

"How do you figure that?" he asks, frowning again.

I look back out the window once more, silent. *How the hell do I tell him that I looked into the eyes of the man I killed, right before I pulled the trigger on him...and that what I saw reflected back to me bothers me oh so much? That I'm afraid I'm doomed to Hell for all eternity, simply because Stuart Walters wouldn't have regretted killing me anymore than I regret killing him? And that I'm just damned glad I was the one who got the drop on him before he got the drop on me? How do I admit to my partner and friend that that's some of the things that's eating away at my very soul right now? HOW?*

"Pete, why does that make me different from you? I don't understand," Reed asks quietly.

Still staring out the window, I finally speak. "You would deeply regret ending someone's life...even someone like Stuart Walters. It's in your fundamental makeup, in your conscience. It worries at your heart, at your soul. I know, because I saw you get upset and remain upset for a long time after you shot that kid that tried to sniper-shoot us during your first year on the force. I honestly thought a few times you were going to resign after that happened. But you didn't. You stuck with it."

"Pete, I still don't understand what you're trying to tell me," he says, irritation creeping into his voice. "Yeah, I'd regret shooting someone and killing them, even a scumbag like Stuart Walters. So would you. What's that got to do with whatever's bugging you?"

I sigh heavily. "That's just *it*, Jim. I *don't* regret killing him, I really and truly don't. I don't feel any remorse at all for pulling the trigger on him, just a profound sense of relief that an asshole like him is forever wiped off of the face of this earth. And since I don't regret killing him, that makes what I did an act of cold-blooded murder. It makes me no better than him." I keep my eyes focused on the world outside the window. I can't bring myself to look at him. "Now do you understand?"

He is quiet for a long moment, then he speaks. "No, Pete, really I don't. It sounds to me like you're beating yourself up, punishing yourself for something you couldn't prevent. Whether or not you regret killing Stuart Walters doesn't matter to anyone. It's not part of the big picture, Pete. Not at all."

"It matters to me, Jim," I tell him softly. "It matters to me. And that's what really counts, isn't it? Everyone else's opinion of me doesn't really bother me in the end. It's what I think of *myself* that is the most important of all. If I can't meet my eyes in the mirror every morning, then how can I expect to face the rest of the world?" I finally turn and look at him. "Tell me that, Jim."

He gazes away from me, his fingers picking nervously at the grey blanket that covers him. "I can't answer that for you, Pete. You have to find that answer for yourself."

"Yeah, I know. Like Mac said, the self-truths I am not willing to face are the hardest self-truths of all." I start towards the door, suddenly feeling like I'm a million years old, a slow-footed dinosaur stomping around in a world full of zippy little rocket ships.

"Wait a minute, Pete, you aren't leaving, are you?" he asks.

"Yeah, I am," I tell him. "You need your rest." I put my hand on the metal handle of the door. "I'm leaving so that Jean can come back in and be with you."

"Hey, wait!" he says. "Pete, you aren't going to do anything foolish, are you? Promise me that you're not!"

I stop, my hand still on the door. I look over at him. "Define foolish, my friend."

"Well...uh...like quitting the job or...or..." he hedges, picking at the blanket once more. "Or killing yourself. Something stupid like that," he says with a nervous laugh.

I give him a small weary smile and a tired shrug. "Maybe that'd be the best thing for me to do, Jim. After all, the Bible says an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

He looks horrified, his face turning white with fear. "But PETE! Suicide isn't the answer and you know that!" He leans forward on the bed with a wince, brushing his hand across the bandage that covers his bullet wound. "Please tell me that that's *not* what you're going to do!" He pounds the bedcovers hard with his fists. "Swear to *God* for me, Pete, that you aren't going to kill yourself, PLEASE!" His voice sounds hysterical, frantic. "Please, Pete! You *can't* kill yourself over some jackass like Stuart Walters! It's just not right!" His one good eye pleads with me, begs to me. When I don't respond, he falls silent, staring worriedly at me, trying to read me, trying to read my mood. Then he speaks again, his voice so low I have to strain to hear it. "I don't want to hear from Mac that you've killed yourself, Pete. I don't want to come over to your apartment some day and find you dead, your brains splattered all over, your revolver clutched in your cold hands." He looks away, closing his eye. "I couldn't bear it, I just couldn't. I buried Stenzler, I don't want to bury you, Pete," he whispers, his voice choked with emotion. He shakes his head. "Not in that way, at least. Please don't make me go through something as awful as that. Please, Pete," he rasps. "Don't do that to me."

I study him for a moment. I shake my head. "No, Jim. I won't kill myself," I tell him, just to settle him down.

He sags back onto the nest of pillows with visible relief. "Jesus, Pete, don't ever scare me like that!" he says shakily. "Promise me you won't ever do that again."

I ignore his request for my promise. "You take it easy, Jim. I'll be back later on to see how you're doing, okay?" I tell him, the lie easily slipping once more from my lips.

He nods wearily. "Sure, Pete. I'll catch you later."

I open the door and step out into the hall. Jean is sitting in the chair I'd been sitting in earlier. She looks up as I exit the room, and starts to get up. "Don't worry," I tell her. "I'm leaving."

"Pete, about what I said earlier, I'm really sorry." She stands, smoothing down her blouse. "Like I told you, I didn't mean it. None of it."

"Just forget it, Jean." I jerk my thumb in the direction of the cafeteria. "Ed Wells is down in the cafeteria getting coffee and something to eat. He should be back here soon to sit with you."

She looks a bit startled. "Wait a second, aren't you going to sit with Jim and I?"

I shake my head. "No, I told you I was leaving, and I meant it." I point to Jim's door. "There's no reason for me to stick around now. He's doing better." I feign a yawn, and it isn't too hard to do. "Besides, I need to get home and catch some sleep if I can. It looks like the next couple of days are going to be rather busy for me."

"But you usually sit with us, with me, whenever Jim has been hurt before," she says.

"I know it," I tell her. "But now...well, maybe now is the time for a change, okay?" I shrug. "If Jim ever takes the investigator's exam, he'll be partnered with someone else, so you'd better get used to me not being the one to sit with you, Jean, if he should ever get hurt in the line of duty." I narrow my eyes at her a little bit. "But, on the other hand, Jim just might get paired up with someone who can watch out for him a helluva lot better than I evidently can. Maybe the old hospital routine will fall by the wayside." I can't resist that one spiteful little jab at her.

Her lower lip quivers a bit. "Pete, I said I was sorry," she says in a tiny voice.

I run a hand through my hair. "I know it, Jean." I sigh. "Look, it's been a *really* long shift for me these last few hours. All I want to do right now is go home and crawl into bed, alright?"

She looks up at me with big brown eyes, tears glistening in them. "Will you come back later, Pete?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

"Jim will wonder where you're at if you don't," she says.

"Yeah, okay, I'll try to get back here sometime later on today," I tell her, just to soothe her.

"You promise?" she asks, a quiver in her voice. "Please don't let what I said to you earlier keep you from coming to see Jim, okay?"

I look back over my shoulder at her. "Yeah, whatever," I tell her, then continue walking. I don't look back, not even when I reach the elevators. I'm not making promises to anyone right now, especially ones that I may not be able to keep.

Because what Jim Reed doesn't know; what no one actually knows, is the idea of committing suicide, of ending my life for good, holds a slight glimmer of appeal to me. After all, what better way to soothe a dark and tormented soul than to put it out of its eternal misery forever?

The thought worries itself around in my brain like a drug-addled ferret all the way home from the hospital. I catch sight of my eyes in the rearview mirror of the Mustang. They gaze back at me, cold and hard, like chips of pure jade. I shudder involuntarily, remember the eyes of Stuart Walters peering into my soul. Parked in the lot of my apartment house, I rest my aching head for a moment on the steering wheel. *God grant me the serenity...* I begin, but the words of the prayer get muddled and twisted in my tired brain. Taking a deep breath, I try again. *God grant me the serenity to...to...oh, to hell with it!* Wearily, I climb out of the car, my entire body feeling like I've been run over by several Mack trucks. As I climb the stairs to my apartment, I glance up once at the bright blue sky overhead. "You know, if you're up there, I could really use some help right now," I mutter. I don't see Mrs. O'Brien, my landlady coming down the steps in front of me. We nearly collide. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. O'Brien," I tell her hastily. "I didn't see you there. Are you alright?"

She smiles as she eyes me, a ninety-eight pound fireball blessed with an Irish heart, humor, and temper to match. "Shouldn't be you askin' me that question, Pete, but the other way around," she says, a bit of a brogue still tickling around her words.

I stare at her, confused. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mrs. O'Brien. I'm fine."

She cocks her head at me. "Are you really? Because it looked to me like you were doin' a bit o' prayin' there, Pete."

"That? Oh...uh...no, that wasn't a prayer, Mrs. O'Brien," I stammer, embarrassed. "I was just...uh...watching an interesting cloud that I saw up in the sky." I wince inwardly at the completely lame excuse I just gave her, but I hope that she'll believe me.

Her eyes twinkle at me. "A cloud, eh? You'll have to think o' somethin' better than that, Peter Malloy." She nudges me. "C'mon, you were askin' our Heavenly Father for a bit o' advice now, weren't you?"

I can't help but smile back at her. "And what if I was, Mrs. O'Brien? Believe it or not, I *do* pray once in a while."

She shakes her head with a chuckle. "Oh, there's no harm in it a'tall, Pete. Just as long as you watch where you're goin' before you decide to say a few words to our Heavenly Father. You don't mind your step there, you're liable to find yourself in a wee speck o' trouble, one that even prayer can't help you out of."

I laugh. "Like what, Mrs. O'Brien?"

She touches my arm. "Like fallin' down in a deep, deep hole, Pete. Or walkin' right into a telephone pole. Might get pretty painful for you."

"I'll keep that in mind," I tell her. "Next time I'll remember to pray with my eyes wide open, okay?" I slip past her, climbing the few remaining steps to the upper walkway leading to my apartment.

She nods. "Oh, and Pete?" she calls to me.

I look over the edge of the railing at her. "Yes, Mrs. O'Brien?"

She shakes her finger at me. "Never underestimate the power of prayer. It can work wonders and miracles for you. Our Heavenly Father always hears us, even when we don't think he does." She nods again. "Yes, you'd be mighty surprised at what He can do. It may not seem like much at first, but He'll always come through in the long run." She points to me. "You just remember that, Pete."

I nod. "I will, Mrs. O'Brien. Thanks." I unlock the door to my apartment and go inside. I shut it behind me, locking it. I slip off my jacket, hanging it up on the coat hook next to my door. Trudging wearily back to my bedroom, I shed my shoes and my off-duty weapon, laying it on the nightstand next to my bed. I yank the shades down against the morning sunlight and pull back the bedcovers, slipping my tired and beaten body between the sheets. I don't care that I'm sleeping in my clothes right now, I just want to close my eyes and drift off on a soundless dreamy wave. Things always look brighter and better to me with a good snooze under my belt. Eyelids heavy, I feel my breathing begin to take on a slower, easier rhythm. The words of the forgotten prayer come back to me finally, in that soft netherworld between dreams and reality. I let it slip over me, a gentle balm to soothe my troubled soul.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.

Ah yes. A much better solution than that of suicide. Never underestimate the power of prayer, a wise woman once said to me. It can work wonders and miracles for even you, Peter Malloy.

And who knows? Maybe it will...

Suddenly, a shocking thought jolts me awake. Startled, I sit up in bed, as the thought races around in my tired brain. Shaking my head to get rid of it, I settle back onto the bed uneasily, pulling the pillow over my head, blotting out the bright daylight. But as my weary bones give up the ghost for good, sweeping me off into an ether-dreamworld of sleep, the thought about the power of prayer helping me bobs around in my mind like a wayward buoy, set adrift upon a stormy sea.

And then again, maybe it won't help even a dark soul such as mine.

A sharp noise awakens me from my nap. What the hell? I think to myself as I groggily try to pull myself out of the deep sleep I've slipped into. Cobwebs fog my brain, my mouth is dry and horrible tasting. I turn drowsy eyes towards my clock. It's one in the afternoon, but I don't feel like I've been asleep that long. My body tries to lure me back into sleep. The noise starts up again, a pounding...oh crap, it's someone at my door. "Just a sec!" I yell, throwing the covers back and padding out to the living room. The pounding does not cease and desist at my shout. "Hold your horses, I'm coming!" I yell again. Whoever is knocking on my door had better have a damned good reason. Unlocking it, I yank the door open. "What!" I demand of my visitor.

It's Mac, in his civilian clothes. He looks me up and down, a glimmer of amusement flickering in his eyes. "Do you always sleep in your clothes, Malloy?" he asks. "You...uh...are fairly wrinkly and disheveled."

"Do you always awaken innocent sleeping people just to give them a fashion critique?" I fire back.

He shrugs. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up."

"So what brings you by...other than the burning need to comment on the current state of my wardrobe?" I ask. "It had better be something mighty damned important, Mac, for you to come over here and interrupt my beauty sleep," I grouse.

He snorts. "Ha! Beauty sleep, eh? Is that what you call it? Your hair is standing on end and you have crease marks on your face from the pillowcase. I'd hate to see what the opposite of beauty sleep is for you."

"Everyone's a comedian," I grumble. Then remembering something, I brighten. "Hey, if you get a chance, ask Ed Wells about buying sunflowers from garage-exploding gerbils."

Mac looks puzzled. "Huh? What in the world are you talking about, Pete?"

"Just ask him, okay? See what he tells you." I yawn. "Seriously, what's up? I'd like to get back to sleep if I can."

"Can I come in, Pete?" he asks. "I need to talk to you."

I shrug, yawning again. "It's a free country, I guess." I open the door to let him in. "Can I get you anything? Coffee or something?"

He shakes his head. "No thanks, Pete. I'm fine."

I gesture to the couch. "Have a seat, Mac. I'm going to get a drink of water. I'll be right back." In the kitchen, I down a glass of water to wash the horrid taste out of my mouth. It does little to dispel the acrid taste, but at least my mouth isn't so dry. I come back into the living room. "What's on your mind?" I ask, as I plunk down in my recliner.

"I wanted to stop by and tell you that there's going to be a shooting review board convened on Wednesday at 10:00 a.m. at Police Headquarters, in room 5B."

I nod. "I figured as much. Anything I should know?"

"Well...uh...yeah. You should know that the interview conducted this morning by Sergeant Friday is going to be entered into testimony."

"Yeah, so? That's only normal. He and Bill Gannon are the ones leading the investigation into the shooting."

He clears his throat. "Well, I got a copy of the interview, Pete. It's pretty inflammatory. Friday really went after you and it's evident in the text of the interview. He hammers home the issue of your failure to follow protocol, and then the fact that you hid under the basement steps and waited for Stuart Walters to step into your line of fire."

"I'm a big boy, Mac. So the interview paints me in a bad light. I'm not worried. The text and my spoken testimony are two different things."

"That's the thing," he says. "I feel that you need to have someone, either a civilian or someone from the department, step in as an advisor, a representative, if you will."

"Will the board allow it?"

"Dunno. I've asked them, and they're supposed to let me know sometime tomorrow if they'll allow it or not."

I stare at him. "You've already asked the board if I could have a representative with me?"

"I had to, Pete. I'm not going to stand by and let you get railroaded by an overzealous detective."

"Overzealous is putting it nicely, Mac. Sergeant Friday was more like a rabid bulldog."

"I know. And that's why I want a representative to be with you during the review. If you don't feel comfortable answering a certain question, you can call on the advisor for an assist."

I study the coffee table in front of me. "I dunno, Mac. I think I can handle myself in there. I've gone before the review board before. They don't scare me."

He leans forward. "But don't you understand, Pete? Your career with the police department is on the line here, not to mention your credibility and your integrity. Just because the good Sergeant Friday has a yen to destroy your job and your character along with it doesn't mean that you should just roll over and take it."

I sigh with irritation. "I won't, Mac. But I think I can handle whatever they throw at me."

He shakes his head. "I hope they okay the representative, Pete. I think you're going to need them."

"If you're that concerned, why don't you take it yourself?" I ask. "You were there in the room with me during the interview, why can't you testify to the board how Sergeant Friday was hound-dogging me?"

"I can't, Pete. It has to be an impartial observer. Should the board okay it, I have a couple of guys in mind that I'm going to ask to do the job. One is a civilian lawyer who does some casework for the police department, the other is someone within the department itself."

"Who?" I ask.

"I can't tell you that, Pete, due to the fact that if I do, the board could claim impropriety on my part. It's just two guys that I have in mind."

I frown. "Do I need to get a lawyer, Mac? I mean, if you think that the board is going to come down on me that hard, would I be wise to seek some legal advice?"

"Not at this point, no. I really don't think that a lawyer is necessary right now. Besides, if you hire a lawyer, it'll make the board think that you have something to hide. You don't want to give them that idea."

"But that's the *point*, Mac. I don't have anything to hide, at least not in the way most of the incident was handled by me. I didn't intend to kill Stuart Walters in the basement. It just turned out that way. Had I been able to take him alive, I would've, believe me." Then I remember the earlier scene in the locker room. "Oh yeah. I forgot. You *don't* believe me, do you?"

"Now, I never said that, Pete, so don't you go putting words in my mouth," Mac says. "I just needed to make sure you were telling me the gospel truth back at the station."

"By how? By calling me a liar?" I ask. "I *did* tell you the gospel truth, Mac, and I'll tell you it again. I am *not* lying about what happened in that basement. Not at all."

Mac sighs heavily. "Look, Pete. I'm sorry about the way I reacted in the locker room. I had no right to even doubt you of all people."

"But you did doubt me, didn't you?" My voice is quiet. "Someone who's supposed to be my friend...and you doubted me...after Sergeant Friday vilified and crucified me on the cross of protocol and cold-blooded killing." I close my eyes, shaking my head. "I really needed that at that point in time. I thought you'd stand behind me and back me up, but instead, you went along with Sergeant Friday and helped drive the nails right through me into the cross." I open my eyes, looking at him, my gaze bitter and angry. "Some friend *you* turned out to be. Thanks, Mac."

He is quiet for a moment. "Pete, I really am sorry for what I said to you. I had no right to second-guess your situation in that basement...but it was your words from the conversation we had before the interview started that got me worried. You said you didn't regret killing Stuart Walters. That's not like you."

I laugh bitterly. "Yeah, well, welcome to the new and improved me."

He fidgets uncomfortably, studying his hands. "I...uh...stopped by the hospital on my way over here to see how Reed was doing."

"Yeah? He feeling any better?"

He shakes his head. "No, Pete, he's not feeling any better. In fact, he's really worried about you. Said you didn't seem like yourself when you were there with him earlier."

"Mac, I was tired when I spoke to Jim. I'd just been run through the wringer by Sergeant Friday, and I wasn't my usual witty self."

He coughs. "Yeah, well, Jim said that he was concerned that you might do something foolish. And after talking with him, quite frankly, I am too."

I narrow my eyes. "Foolish like what? Like quit the force? Not likely. I don't know what I'd do with myself if I quit."

"He's afraid you're going to commit suicide." He looks at me intently. "Are you, Pete? Are you going to kill yourself?"

I sigh, exasperated. "Look, Mac. Like I said, I was tired when I spoke with Jim. I was talking out of my head when I made that comment. Besides, I didn't come right out and say that I was going to do that. Jim took it the wrong way. He read more into my meaning than he should have."

"But he said..."

I interrupt. "Mac, it doesn't matter what Jim says. I am not going to kill myself, trust me. It was just a brief thought, a *really* brief thought, conjured out of a moment of temporary insanity. I am not the suicidal type and you should know that. I've been through worse situations in my life before, I'm not going to let one jackass detective, a dead man in a basement, and a shooting review board make me decide to end my life." I gesture around to my apartment. "If I was going to kill myself...if I was *ever* going to kill myself, wouldn't you have thought that I would've done it right after Baker's death? I was sure as hell more a lot more depressed then than I am now."

"I just don't want to come over here and find you dead, Pete."

I stand up. "Just a second," I say, heading into the bedroom for something. I come back out, my off-duty weapon and its holster in my hand. I thrust it at him. "Here. Take this if you don't trust me to not off myself in a moment of sorrow."

"No, I don't want it, Pete."

I lay it on the coffee table. "If it will assuage your conscience, take it from me. Make sure that I have no weapon in my apartment."

He eyes me. "That doesn't matter even if I did take it. You could find another way to kill yourself."

I roll my eyes. "Oh yes, let's not forget pills or razor blades or the noose. Using the car exhaust to asphyxiate myself isn't an option, since I don't have a garage. But let me go gather up all the pills in my apartment, all the razor blades, anything that can be fashioned into a makeshift noose. You can remove them from my place. Then that way you can rest assured that Pete Malloy can't commit suicide, alright?" My voice is heavy with sarcasm.

He smiles slightly. "You could always throw yourself in front of a bus. Or jump off of a building."

"Oh, puh-lease," I say with another eye-roll. "I wouldn't want to injure anyone on the bus or on the pavement below the building I jump from." I shake my head.

"You could always tie a rock around your waist and jump into the river and drown," he points out, smiling even wider.

"I don't get you. Are you *actively* trying to encourage me to off myself?"

He starts chuckling. "No," he says, shaking his head. "I'm not trying to encourage to to kill yourself. I'm just picturing you stoically carrying out each of the suicide scenarios and failing miserably, thinking to yourself, 'well try, try again.'"

Seeing his point, I begin to smile. "What makes you think I'd fail at any of them?"

"Just the fact that you are one of the unlikeliest people I know to plan something like that out. You'd be so worried over leaving a mess for everyone to find, that it would make you nitpick it out to the finest detail. And by that time, your depression would've passed. So then where would you be?"

"With a suicide plan but no reason to carry it out," I say. "Kinda silly, huh?"

He snorts. "Yeah, you think?" He runs his hand through his hair. "So...I don't need to worry about you, Pete?"

"Not at all. I'm fine."

He eyes me. "But what's this about you thinking that you're a cold-blooded killer like Stuart Walters? You're far from that, Pete, I can tell you that for certain."

I shrug. "It's just a private worry, Mac. Nothing to concern yourself with. I'll deal with it on my own."

"Do you think you need to talk to someone about it? A therapist maybe?"

I stare at him. "You're kidding me, right? You expect me to walk into some stranger's office and unburden my very private emotions for an hour, then get shuttled out and scheduled for the following week?"

"Yeah, why not? Especially if it helps. I could check into it and see if the department would be willing to cover some of the cost for you."

I shake my head. "No thanks, Mac. I don't need my head shrunk."

"But if this whole Walters incident is really bothering you, maybe you *should* seek some help of some sort. Like I said, I can check and see if the department..."

"No, Mac, I said I don't want any help and I mean it!" I snap. "Now just let it drop, okay?"

He is quiet, his eyes studying me with obvious concern. "I don't think this is something you're going to be able to handle on your own, Pete. And I don't think it would be wise for you to try and do so, either."

I rub my forehead. "Look, you know me. I am not one to trot out my emotions like they're chorus line girls...here's happiness, here's sadness, here's anger, here's deep dark depression, here's the memory of my mother slapping my hand when I was five and tried to get into the cookie jar. I am just not that kind of person. I prefer to handle my own problems myself, in my own way. Got it?"

"By how?" he asks quietly. "By going after your fellow officers like you did Ed Wells this morning? By picking a fight with Sergeant Friday? By arguing with Jean Reed?" He shakes his head. "I don't think that's handling it, Pete."

I sigh. "Wells was needling me at the scene and you heard him doing it yourself. Friday was trying to bait me into a fight and he got it. Jean Reed landed on me first, accusing me of not watching out for Jim. I didn't get angry with any of them until they attacked me first. I refuse to be a verbal punching bag for somebody else's anger."

"You could've turned the other cheek. Let their comments just roll off of you like water off of a duck's back."

"Quack quack," I say sarcastically. "I'm not going to be freight-trained by other people's emotions."

"How about your own? Sounds to me like you've got a bit of an anger problem here, Pete."

"Mac, once again, let me reiterate for you. I was tired, I was worried about Jim, and I was still on edge from what happened in the basement. It was nothing more than an adrenaline-fueled, heat-of-the-moment anger, a lapse in my judgment, if you will."

He stands up. "Well, you'd better get that temper of yours reigned in, Pete, and pretty damned fast. Because if you're still acting this way after the shooting review board, I *will* go before the Captain and request that you be placed on medical leave, pending the outcome of a psychiatric evaluation."

I stare at him in horror. "You wouldn't!" I gasp.

"Try me, Pete." He points at me. "Change your attitude or be forced into getting help. And if you don't want to change your attitude or get some help, then you can start looking for another job. I'm not going to have an angry cop in my station, and I won't hesitate to recommend your firing, should it come down to that." Mac gives me a sorrowful look. "But I hope to God it *doesn't* come down to that, Malloy. I hate to see you give up your long career with the force over something as fixable as an attitude problem."

I study the floor at my feet. "Alright, Mac, I'll reign in the attitude."

"You'd better," he says, starting towards the door. "Don't forget, the SRB is Wednesday at 10:00 a.m. It's in room 5B. I'll let you know what they decide about allowing you an advisor."

I stand up myself. "Do you think the board will determine a favorable outcome?"

"They should. I don't see any reason why not. But that's why I want an advisor to sit in with you, just to be on the safe side. Never trust politicians or bureaucrats, I say." He smiles.

"Aren't they pretty much one and the same?" I say.

"Slight difference. Politicians are elected to their office, bureaucrats are hired by the politicians elected to office. One hand washes the other, as my dad always used to say." He opens the door to my apartment. "Oh, and Pete?"

"Yeah, Mac?"

"Who are you going to call when the nightmares get too bad?"

I scoff. "What nightmares are you talking about?"

"The nightmares you are sure to have after experiencing the Walters' hell this morning. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about, Pete. You'll have them. I always did, after bad scenes that I witnessed."

"I'm not worried about nightmares, Mac. They don't bother me at all." I shrug. "They go away after a while anyway." I look at him. "Don't they?"

"Sure, Pete, they do. Time has a way of eventually erasing the worst of the horror." He starts to pull my door shut. "I'll let you know about what the board decides in regards to the advisor. For now, I'd

suggest you try and get some more of your," he chuckles, "beauty sleep." The door shuts on his snorts of laughter.

I lock it. "Everyone's a comedian," I mutter again, to the empty apartment. I yawn, looking at the clock. If I go back to sleep now, I won't be able to get to sleep tonight. I debate it for a second, then decide to stay up. I'd rather be drowsy in the afternoon than wide awake at 1 a.m. I head off to change my clothes and take a shower. *Nightmares*, I think to myself, as the water from the showerhead pounds my bare skin. Sure, I've had nightmares after some gruesome scenes too, not to mention the ones that I had after Steve Baker's death. So what? I'm not afraid of them. They're just dreams, after all. Bad dreams, yes, but they will go away...

Won't they?

I push the thought of them to the back of my mind as I get dressed. Casting an eye about my bedroom, I decide to take my dirty laundry to the laundromat and do the wash. I grab a paperback mystery to read while my socks and underwear romance my pants and shirts in one dryer, and the towels chase the sheets in another. It's a collection of short stories by Raymond Chandler, and I usually can get into his stories any other time, but today, for some reason, I just can't focus on the printed words in front of me. I lay the book down and people-watch for a little bit, while waiting for the dryers to stop. Sometimes the laundromat is a good place to meet pretty and eligible females, but the only female that's in there today is an elderly lady washing a gigantic down comforter. A couple of college-age kids are doing their laundry, and while they're waiting for it to finish, they're busy studying. When mine gets done, I tote it out to the Mustang with little fanfare. I stop by a local deli to get a turkey sandwich to take home for my supper. I eat it in front of the tv, watching the evening news. I turn it off before it gets to the local news. I don't want to hear about the Walters' tragedy, which, by now, has likely caught the media's attention.

I hear the thud of the *Los Angeles Times* being dropped on my doorstep and I go retrieve it. When I unfold it, the headline blazes **QUADRUPLE HOMICIDE STUNS NEIGHBORS, MURDER SUSPECT SHOT AND KILLED IN BASEMENT BY LOS ANGELES POLICE OFFICER**. Morbid curiosity forces me to read the story.

LOS ANGELES—The discovery of a gruesome quadruple homicide in this quiet, tree-lined neighborhood of Briarcliff Road has area neighbors shocked and stunned. Even more disturbing are the incidents that took place after the discovery of the four murder victims inside the tidy grey ranch house located at 2510 Briarcliff Rd.

According to police reports, around 11:40 last night, police officers were sent to that address to check on the welfare of Melissa Walters, 30, and her three small children, Natalie (6), Andrew (3), and Matthew (1). A next door neighbor grew concerned for their safety after hearing a loud disturbance at the residence earlier in the evening. When police officers arrived, they made entry into the residence and discovered Mrs. Walters and her three children brutally murdered. While they were still in the residence, Mrs. Walters' estranged husband, Stuart Walters, 35, returned to the house and confronted the officers inside. One of the officers, James A. Reed, 28, was seriously injured in the attack, after Stuart Walters apparently hit him over the head with an unknown object and shot him in the left abdomen.

The other officer, identified as Peter J. Malloy, a twelve-year veteran with the Los Angeles police force, was attacked by Stuart Walters in the basement of the house. It was there that Officer Malloy was forced to draw his weapon in order to defend himself, shooting and killing Walters, after Walters threatened him with the same gun used to shoot Officer Reed.

Neighbors in the area recall the young family as quiet, and tending to keep mostly to themselves. "Those little ones were just as precious as can be," remembers next-door neighbor, Dorothy Timmons. "They loved to help me in the garden. I was teaching dear little Natalie the names of the flowers just this past summer. She always liked the pink ones best. And Andrew, he liked to help me weed the vegetable patch, even though he'd pull up the vegetables more often than not." Other neighbors reported that the Walters' home life was apparently not a stable one. One neighbor, who refused to be identified, stated that the police had been called to the residence on numerous occasions in the past. A search of police records turned up several calls to the house in the last eight months, mostly involving domestic disturbances between Melissa Walters and her estranged husband, Stuart.

Little else is known about the family right now. Melissa Walters apparently held a job at Custom Cabinet Designs , a local business that manufactures custom-made kitchen and bathroom cabinets. She was employed as a bookkeeper there. Stuart Walters was reportedly out-of-work at this time, although he had been employed as a janitor at a local office building in the past. According to court documents released to the media, Melissa Walters had filed for divorce back at the end of this past July, citing spousal abuse. She had also filed an order of protection against Stuart Walters, barring him from having any contact with her or their three young children. It was still in effect at the time of the murders.

Police decline to speculate on a motive for the gruesome killings, citing the ongoing investigation. However, an unidentified police spokesman reported to the media that Stuart Walters was currently being investigated by police for possible sexual abuse of a minor child. The spokesman declined to identify the minor child involved. Police have stated that, at this time, Stuart Walters is the only suspect in the murders of his wife and children.

The bodies of all five victims were removed from the residence and taken to the office of the Los Angeles coroner, where autopsies will be performed on all five to determine the exact cause of death. The results of those autopsies will be released to the public as soon as they are available. Funeral arrangements for all five family members have not been made yet.

Officer James Reed, injured in the attack by Stuart Walters, is listed in good condition at Central Receiving Hospital, recovering from a concussion and a bullet wound to the abdomen. Officer Peter Malloy has been placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of an investigation into the shooting of Walters. Police officials wish to point out that it is not indicative of any wrong-doing on Officer Malloy's part, it is simply a routine procedure after such incidents to place the officer involved on leave, until the investigation is complete. Officials do not expect any charges to be filed in this case at this time.

A picture of the house, with crime scene tape strung up around it, is below the headline. On the inside page is a photo of the family, the Christmas picture, with all of them except Natalie smiling. Reed's official departmental picture, along with mine, are also included. I re-read the line of the story

regarding the investigation of Stuart Walters sexually abusing a minor child. I study the family photo. And now I know why Natalie is not smiling...she was the one being abused by her father. I close my eyes, shaking my head with disgust. *Sonofabitch*...I fold up the newspaper and toss it onto the coffee table.

I try to take my mind off of the case by watching an movie on tv. It's a horror story, and a kind of cheesy one at that, called *13 Ghosts*. I don't usually watch horror flicks, but it was entertaining enough to be at least enjoyable. And the bad guy got it in the end of the movie, receiving his comeuppance by being squashed by a large, ornate, four-poster bed. By the time the movie is over, I'm tired enough to go to bed myself. Mac's warning about the nightmares flickers through my mind as I turn off the light on my nightstand. But I'm not afraid. After all, big tough cops aren't supposed to be afraid of their own bad dreams...are they?

And in nightmares come what may...

THE VISION IN THE BEDROOM

The storm rages mightily overhead, the lightning splitting the sky in bright forked fingers, the thunder cracking and rolling in deep growling grumbles, and there is the rain...always the ice cold rain that drenches and soaks me, chilling me to the very core. The beams of our flashlights play across the torrential downpour as we approach the darkened house. I open the screen door to knock on the interior door. It swings open with a melancholy creak the minute my knuckles touch the wood. I turn and look at my partner. "Wouldn't you think that door would be locked?" I ask him.

He shrugs, his face half-hidden by the deep brim of his hat. "I guess," he says, his voice completely without any tone or inflection.

"I'm going in," I tell him. "Make sure everyone's okay inside."

"I wouldn't," he says in that odd monotone.

"Then stay out here," I say. "I'll go in."

He shrugs again and turns away from me. "Suit yourself," he tells me.

I step across the threshold into the dark house. All at once, fear prickles across my neck, raising my hackles, and I shiver. I look to see if my partner is behind me, but he isn't. "Reed," I call. "Reed!" He doesn't answer me and I turn back to the door to see where he's at. He's not on the front steps anymore, so I peer through the driving rain to see if he's returned to the squad car. In a flash of lightning, I see his dark shape sitting there inside the car. "Damned fool," I mutter to myself. I turn back to the silent, spooky house.

The living room is in wild disarray, pictures and knickknacks are broken, plants are overturned and dumped on the carpeting, a tv set blindly stares out with a cracked screen. I glance at the tv, a brand-new 24-inch Zenith cabinet tv with a color picture and stereophonic sound. I know exactly what it is, because I want one just like it. I shake my head. "What a waste of a perfectly good television," I say to the silent four walls. Only the muted ticking of a grandfather clock answers me. I shine the beam of my flashlight around the room, the shards of broken glass and china winking and glittering at me like cat's eyes watching me in the dark. A bunch of black vinyl record albums lay smashed in a pile near a stereo cabinet. I wander over to take a look, nudging the pile with my foot. They slide forward, revealing their bright circular labels. Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, Frank Sinatra, the Mamas and the Papas, the Beatles. One record is on the turntable tucked inside the cabinet, the turntable still spinning, the tone arm and needle stopped in mid-air. I carefully reach in and move the tone arm back to its normal position and the record stops spinning. I shine the flashlight on the label. The Beatles' White Album...Helter Skelter. I shudder and move on.

I pass by the kitchen, shining the light inside to get a glimpse of the ruins that reside in there. A heavy wooden table is toppled over, the tablecloth draping it like a drunken ghost. The matching chairs are scattered about on their sides, some of them with their legs broken off like toothpicks. Dishes, pots and pans, silverware all reflect back the beam of the flashlight. The refrigerator stands partly open, the items inside are all spilled into a gooey mess on the floor; milk, eggs, syrup, ketchup. Small white mountains of flour and sugar dot the black-and-white checkerboard tile. Canned goods lay haphazardly

around, Del Monte peas, corn, green beans, peaches. Feeling slightly nauseated, I turn and start down the beige-carpeted hallway.

The hallway is littered with broken pictures, a trio of baby photos, a studio shot of three children, a black and white wedding picture of a couple. None of the people in the pictures have faces, they are just pale ovals atop bright clothes. I feel that same prickle of fear, but I wave it off. I'm a cop. I'm not supposed to be afraid of the things that go bump in the night.

Somewhere in this quiet house I hear the delicate plinking of a music box. I didn't notice it when I first came in, but now, standing in the hallway, the tiny notes play across my ears. I listen for a moment, the tune somehow oddly familiar to me.

...If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise...

...If you go down to the woods today, you'd better go in disguise...

I recognize the tune from my childhood, the Teddy Bears' Picnic. I am momentarily transported back to my old home in Seattle, standing at the window, watching white flakes of snow drift lazily down from a grey sky, as my mother plays the song for me on our piano. I loved it then, but now, here in this still, silent house, it seems eerily out of place.

BONG! BONG! BONG! I jump nearly out of my skin, as the grandfather clock chimes out the midnight hour. I take an unsteady breath. "Relax, Pete, it's just a clock," I tell myself. "Chiming out the witching hour." When my heart quits pounding out the cha-cha, I swing the flashlight beam around, shining it on the bedroom doors. I look once over my shoulder to see if Reed has re-entered the house, but he's evidently still sitting outside in the car. "Idiot," I say. I put my hand on the door that leads to the master bedroom. "Well, here goes," I mumble, shoving the door open with my palm.

She is lying atop the full-sized bed, her arms tucked languidly behind her head, her long chestnut hair fanning out across the feather pillows in a dark silky veil. She is wearing a delicate white nightgown embroidered with lace, and she seductively reaches out an arm, beckoning to me slowly with her index finger. "Come," she rasps in a sexy, throaty whisper. "Come to me, Pete."

I hesitate, quite stunned by the beautiful sight before me. I blink. Am I imagining things? I rub my eyes, but when I look again, she is still there, gazing at me with what can only be described as unabashed hunger and white-hot lust. I smile. Oh yes, what a truly delightful surprise I've discovered...and it's mine, ALL mine! Looking back over my shoulder to make sure Reed HASN'T decided to enter the residence, I step into the bedroom, thoroughly entranced and utterly enchanted by this lovely creature lying on the bed, just waiting for me. "I've never been one to refuse a pretty lady's command," I say huskily, approaching the bed slowly. "That would be just downright wrong of me." My pulse quickens in sudden anticipation, my breath catches in my throat.

She glides the palms of her hands down the silhouette of her gorgeous body, her fingers gently outlining her each and every delightful curve. She smiles, a slow, sexy smile that makes me grow dizzy with heat and wanton desire, the tip of her pink tongue peeking out between her luscious red lips. She stretches luxuriously, sensuously, like a jungle cat waking up from a drowsy nap. "Mmmm," she purrs deeply in her throat, her dark blue eyes flicking lazily over my body. "You're just what I wanted, Pete," she

whispers, regarding me through long inky lashes. Putting her hands on the bed behind her and rising to a half-sitting position, she slowly leans toward me, one satin strap of her nightgown sliding casually off of her shoulder, revealing a perfect alabaster breast. She regards me coyly, peeking up at me through those lashes that go on forever. "You want me, don't you, Pete?" she asks softly, a throaty laugh teasing along the edges of her voice, like honey dripped over sandpaper. "I can see it in your eyes. You want me."

I close my eyes. My God, I've died and gone to heaven. "Yes," I whisper back, my voice thick with wild hunger. I long to possess this beautiful vision before me, take her into my arms, crush her to my chest, capture those delightful lips with my own, trace those gentle curves with lazy fingertips, kissing and tasting every inch of that creamy velvet skin...until she is begging for sweet, sweet mercy...then I will take her, tame her, make her my own, over and over again, her voice crying out my name as she runs wild fingers through my hair, trailing long nails down my naked back, the two of us exploding in delicious ecstasy together. "Yes," I whisper again. "I want you." Never taking my eyes off of her, I slowly unbuckle my leather gunbelt, letting it slide out of my fingers to the floor.

She holds her hand out to me and I take it in my own, the heat throbbing in my veins. She kisses my open palm gently, her lips caressing my skin like a butterfly's dance. I shiver with pure delight. "You like that, don't you, Pete?" she asks, gazing up at me through drowsy half-closed eyes.

"Yes," I rasp hoarsely.

She rises up on her knees, throwing delicate arms around my neck, pulling me gently towards her. "Kiss me," she commands in a soft whisper. "Kiss me, Pete." She tilts her head back, looking up at me with those blue, blue eyes; eyes that a man could get lost in...and never want to be found. Her fingers dance lightly about in my hair, nails tickling and caressing my neck, driving me nearly insane with wicked hot lust. "What's the matter, are you afraid to kiss me, Pete?" she asks with that honeyed laugh.

"No," I say, bending my head, not to her lips that are just begging for me to capture them, but to the hollow of her neck, where I press my lips to the faint pulse that beats there. I feel it quicken with my touch, and I play my tongue delicately about her throbbing pulse, seeking out her very lifeblood with that of my own. Her breathing becomes rapid, ragged, panting as I gently nip the delicate skin nestled within that silky hollow with my teeth. I tease, I tantalize, and she laughs, a deep throaty sound that sends fireworks rocketing through my senses, exploding into my very core. She slides her hands down my uniform shirt, gently tugging it free from my pants, slipping inquisitive fingers between the cloth of the uniform shirt and the cotton fabric of my t-shirt underneath. She strokes her nails along the t-shirt at my back, scratching with such delicate tension that it sets me afire. Who knew that simple cotton could be used for such exquisite torture? I bury my face in her neck, my fingers seeking the silky tendrils of her chestnut hair and I moan, closing my eyes in sheer ecstasy. I twine my fingers in her long, dark strands of satiny hair, pulling her head back oh so gently, revealing that intensely sensitive area on her swan-like neck, just behind her pink seashell ear. I nibble there, tickling my lips and my tongue slowly down her neck to her shoulder, a feather-light caress that I know my previous lovers have always liked.

And she is no different. She gasps, a breathy little catch that drives me wild. "Oh yes, Pete," she gasps again, moaning softly, a sound that I find quite pleasing, and she tugs on my hair with a gentle grip, her fingers pulling me away from my slow exploration of her neck, drawing my face to hers. Demandingly, she claims my lips with her own, her tongue darting sensuously between them to meet mine, and I taste her, a sweet essence that tingles through me, heightening my senses, intoxicating me like a powerful drug. I've never felt quite like this before. My blood pounds in my brain, a strange heat rushes sparking in my veins, and I feel myself sway slowly, dizzily, as hunger, lust, and desire course through me as one. I must have this woman, I must possess her with every fiber of my being. And I will.

We come up for air with a deep gasp, unwillingly, unwantingly breaking off the kiss in order to draw much-needed oxygen into our lungs. "Take me, Pete," she whispers, pleading, begging, her breath panting like fire against my neck. "I want you to make love to me." It is a lush, breathy command that I am only more than happy to obey. Tugging on my uniform collar, she pulls me down on the bed with her, her body swaying gently under mine. Her white nightgown slips between my fingers, the material a satin river gliding smoothly beneath my palms. Now she is naked beneath me, and I pause, my eyes thirstily drinking in all of her glorious, unabashed, unashamed nudity. No painting that has ever hung in a museum can compare to this lovely being. She is at home in her skin, and I long to join her. If this is a dream, I don't want to wake up, not now, not ever.

My eyes lock with hers, and they reflect back to me in those deep blue pools our mutual want, our mutual desire...the languorous heat setting both of us aflame with unbridled passion. But there is no reason to rush. Lovemaking is an art very few actually perfect. It is meant to be a slow, sensuous dance between two people, who have all the time in the world to learn one another's rhythm, merging that rhythm into a single throbbing heartbeat of one. It is not meant to be a swift race to the finish, to the victor the spoils of yet another notch on the headboard. No, it is not that at all. View lovemaking that way and you strip away the complete joy of discovering the sweet mystery of another being, their secrets, their desires, their longings. The act of lovemaking in that form is just merely sex. And I simply don't operate that way. I never have. After all, pleasure is the most exquisitely intense when it is equally shared by two.

Taking her wrists in my hands, I slowly raise her arms above her head, pinning them gently against the downy pillows. She is my prisoner now. I trail tiny kisses along her neck and bare shoulders, the soft creamy skin fever-hot beneath my searching lips and tongue. She moans and thrashes against me as I seek out the deep hollow between her alabaster breasts. I linger there a moment, then I slowly continue my gentle downward exploration of her luscious, velvet body. With my lips, with my tongue, I follow the sweet, taut concave of her stomach, sliding my palms and lazy trailing fingers along her exquisite perfect curves. She tugs on my hair once more, pushing, pulling, kneading, urging me lower. And I obey... for I am her prisoner, too. I caress the insides of her smooth satiny thighs with my fingertips, stroking, brushing oh so lightly that I feel her quiver in delighted response. "Oh yes, Pete," she whispers. "Oh yes." It excites me to no end, this beautiful exploration, this lovely seeking out. I want to know every single inch of her, I want to feel her with me as we become one. I crave this woman like I crave the very air that I breathe.

She traces my jaw with soft, gentle fingers, caressing my brow, closing my eyes beneath her butterfly fingertips. With my eyes still closed, I feel her lightly trace my mouth, her touch dancing across my lips like a feather. She presses two of her fingers to my lips for a kiss and I obey; however, when she starts to take her delicate fingers away, I quickly dart my head, catching them in my mouth with a lightning-fast, but soft, snap of my teeth. She gasps in shock, then she throws her head back, laughing that delightful laugh. Capturing her imprisoned palm in my hand, I suck gently on her jailed fingers, running my tongue across the tips, while stroking the smooth inside of her palm slowly with my thumb. I nip down, not hard, and she giggles throatily, leaning forward. "Don't bite, Pete," she tells me, shaking her free index finger at me in a naughty-naughty motion. "Don't bite."

I release her fingers. "I bite," I growl, my eyes flashing wickedly. I force her back onto the bed as she laughs beneath me, pulling me encouragingly towards her, her hands gripping my shoulders tightly. I seek out that soft hollow at the base of her pale throat once more. "I bite," I murmur, nibbling the tender flesh there. "But don't worry, I'm not dangerous," I whisper against her neck. "Not dangerous at all."

She plays lightly with my hair, then suddenly, she grips it tightly in her fingers, tugging and pulling on it until it hurts. "Ow!" I yelp, jerking my head back to look at her. "That hurts! Can't you play nice?" I ask, frowning, my eyes narrowed. She swiftly draws her hand back, her open palm delivering a sharp stinging slap to my left cheek. The sound cracks across the room like a gunshot. Astonished, I stare at her. "What the hell's that for?" I demand, rubbing my face with my hand, the blood rising hotly to the spot where she slapped me. The skin throbs beneath my touch. "Damn it, that hurt even worse!" I snarl. "Where do you get off slapping me?"

She regards me with a narrow-eyed gaze of her own, then she flicks the tip of her tongue across her lips. She closes her eyes. "Now me, I'm dangerous." She opens her eyes, the deep blue irises nearly swallowed up by the dilation of her dark pupils. "You'd better watch yourself, Pete. I may be too dangerous for you after all." She smiles languidly at me. "You might meet your death making love to me, I'm that damned dangerous." She laughs huskily, winking at me quite naughtily.

I laugh too, catching her hands in mine, intertwining our fingers together. I press her arms back onto the bed once more, keeping them pinned down with my forearms. "We'll just see about that, shall we?" I ask, my words tickling her neck. Releasing her arms, I slide my fingers into her hair, pulling on it, gently tilting her head back. I am careful not to pull too hard, like she did to me, for the last thing on this earth that I want to do is cause this exquisite creature any kind of pain...at least not the bad kind, anyway. "Maybe I should fight fire with fire, hmm?" I purr. I kiss that delicate hollow once more, drawing the velvety skin between my teeth, nipping it gently.

"Pete," she moans. "Don't bite."

So, wickedly I do...not hard enough to draw blood or even break the creamy skin, but just hard enough to let her know I'm not one to be trifled with. For when cornered, I can be just as dangerous as she, if not more.

Putting her hands to my chest, she thrusts me back away from her, looking deeply into my eyes with a frown. "Don't hurt me," she says, her blue eyes flashing angrily at me.

"Then don't hurt me," I reply, my own green eyes flaming back.

She pouts briefly, then she smiles again. "So why'd you stop?" she laughs. "I didn't tell you to stop, Pete."

Growling, I shake my head. "Just what exactly do you want me to do?" I ask.

She places her palms against the sides of my face, drawing me urgently back to her lips, capturing my mouth with hers. "Make love to me," she whispers, taking my lower lip between her teeth. She runs her tongue delicately along my lip, the sensation sending waves of delight through my body. "Just make love to me, Pete," she says, her mouth against mine.

"Whatever the lady desires," I tell her, my voice a throbbing rasp in my throat. I kiss her deeply again. "So sweet," I murmur as her tongue flicks against mine. 'So sweet.'"

She unbuttons the buttons on my uniform shirt, slipping it gently off over my shoulders. It falls to the floor with a shadowy hush. The t-shirt is next, as she tugs it off over my head, her bare skin brushes mine, causing me to ignite in pure liquid fire. I growl deep within my throat, a pleasurable purr that I cannot hide. She tickles my back and chest with her long fingernails, scratching me so gently, so lightly, that I nearly scream with ecstasy. She buries her face in the hollow of my neck and shoulders, her lips and tongue darting against my skin, tasting me, teasing me. I tremble, weak with longing and desire. This beautiful woman is as skilled at lovemaking as I am...I think I have finally met my match in this department.

Palms against my chest, she pushes me over onto my back, her long hair draping me with its dark silky veil. She rains slow, gentle kisses down my chest and stomach, her tongue flicking lazily over me, her fingers stroking and tracing the contours of my body, fingernails scratching delicately upon my bare skin. I grab two handfuls of her hair, letting it slide softly through my fingers like a velvet rope. It grazes tickling along my naked chest, following her head as she glides her mouth and tongue down ever so slowly lower. I feel my skin tingle with each delicious touch, each delicate stroke. Truly I have died and gone to heaven! She stops when she reaches my belt buckle and she looks at me with a wicked gleam in her blue eyes, her dark hair splayed across my stomach. She begins to work the buckle loose with her fingers, but I stop her. "No," I say, the word a breathy groan escaping between my lips. I close my eyes, fighting against the hunger and desire that courses through my body, ordering me to just take this beautiful woman...and take her now, her own pleasure be damned. Heat fevering my skin, I shake my head. "Not yet."

She runs the pink tip of her tongue over her sweet lips. She smiles that slow, sexy smile that drives me quite mad. "Yes," she says with a purr. "Yes, Pete." She begins to undo the belt buckle again.

I grab her wrists, imprisoning them with my hands. "No," I growl deep within my throat, pulling her down on top of me. I pin her to me, her firm breasts pressed gently to my chest; the soft, sweeping contact of our naked skin brushing together causing me to moan in sheer, sweet agony and ecstasy. I am careful not to hurt her. "No," I whisper against her neck, my lips grazing that tender hollow again. "Not yet." I glide my hands along her back, my fingertips dancing like butterfly feet along her spine. Kissing her deeply, I lazily trace the contours of her body, from her soft shoulders to her smooth, firm derriere. I press her to me, our tongues intertwining and dancing together. She draws my lower lip into

her mouth, sucking gently on it, running her tongue over it once more. And of course, I must return the delightful favor, pulling her luscious lower lip into my mouth with my teeth, sucking and sliding my tongue over it as she did me, tasting the honey-sweet inside of her mouth. I release her lips, my own feeling quite swollen, throbbing with blood. I have never been kissed quite like this before, and I fear I will never be kissed like this again...and it's such a shame. Our eyes meet again, green against deep blue, deep blue against green. "Pete," she murmurs huskily, her eyes closing under my gaze. She opens them, her pupils dilated hugely once more. I never take my gaze from hers. "Pete?" she asks, a slight tremor of fear in her voice.

"What?" I reply, laughter tickling my voice. Then, with an animal suddenness, I push her off of me, forcing her back onto the bed. After all, she must be taught a lesson for slapping me. I can give just as good as I get. And I know just how to delicately discipline her, with soft kisses and skimming fingertips across her bare skin my instruments of pleasant torture.

Startled, she lets out a yelp, then just as quickly begins to laugh that deep throaty laugh. Her eyes lock with mine once again, trading sparks and embers, and if we are aflame, then the whole damned room must be an inferno. She rakes my back with her fingernails, scratching deep enough this time to draw blood. Raising her head, she delivers a swift, savage bite to the flesh of my shoulder; then, just as swiftly, she encircles the bite with her lips, flicking her tongue wickedly across the wounded area. Pinning her body to the bed with my own, I begin once again the sensual exploration of her body, tickling my tongue and lips, and soft gentle fingers across those perfect alabaster breasts, tantalizing her, stroking her, as I drink in the sweet musky scent of her being. She wraps long silky legs around my waist, locking me to her in an embrace I don't ever wish to escape. I lightly sweep my lips and tongue across her neck and shoulders as she shudders deeply with waves of pure delight, her shivers making me do the same. "Oh yes, Pete, please don't stop," she begs me with a purr, her voice exciting me, teasing and torturing my senses until I feel like I'm drowning.

And I don't care, not one damned bit. I don't mind drowning in this woman forever, in her touch, her scent, her taste, her feel...capturing me with white-feathered wings, locking me forever away in a soft golden prison, her long chestnut hair the sweet ropes that bind me to her. No, I don't mind this at all. I forget about everything, the call I was dispatched on, Jim Reed out in the squad car, the busted up house...none of that matters to me right now. As far as I'm concerned, it can all go to hell and stay there. All I care about, all I want to do, is to fall deep into this beautiful woman, melding her to me with the fire that races through my body, the hot flame bending her to my every will. I take a deep breath, her sweet musky scent tickling my nose, filtering through my brain, sweeping me away on a dizzying wave of wanton lust and desire. I close my eyes in pure ecstasy...how in the hell did I get so damned lucky? I cannot answer that question, nor do I want to, as I bend my head to hers, once again taking her lips with mine. There is a flash of lightning as she arcs up against me, our skin making wicked blazing contact, the lightning lending a dreamy, surreal quality to the scene. "Pete," she whispers, her lips brushing mine, driving me mad with hunger. I groan softly, closing my eyes in wild abandon and thirsty anticipation...if I wait any longer to possess this gorgeous woman, I will go truly and utterly insane.

She writhes against me, our bare skin frictioning together like soft heated silk. If I don't take her now, I will perish...but it will be a death oh so very much worth dying. She moans again, that deep-throated purring throb. "Yes, Pete, now." She reaches once more for my belt buckle and this time I don't stop her, her delicate fingers grazing the sensitive skin of my stomach. I tremble as I feel the buckle loosen, my breathing quickens as she undoes the top button of my uniform pants, the zipper gliding gently downward; and it is soon followed by first my pants, then my boxers. The fabric scratches against my hypersensitive skin and I pause just long enough to slip out of them, kicking them to the floor next to my shoes and the rest of my clothes. She guides me back to her, her hands and fingertips skimming along my bare hips and derriere as I return, her skin like fire beneath mine. Her hand glides between our stomachs, sliding lower and lower, and I draw in my breath with a deep gasp as she finds what she's searching for, taking me into her smooth palm. She caresses me so softly, so gently, and with a moan, I bury my face once more in her neck and shoulders, cupping her to me as she arcs up against me, pressing us together. My blood pounds and throbs in my brain, flowing underneath my skin like molten lava.

Hungrily, I seek out her lips with my own. She dances her fingernails across my back as I lift her to me, her long legs wrapped around my waist. The sensation is delicious agony. I am on fire, and she will burn with me. I pull my head back, the forever question written in my eyes. Her eyes gaze back at me with the answer that I want, that we both want, reflecting back to me. She guides my head down to hers, devouring my lips with her own, her tongue flicking wickedly against mine. Then there are no more words spoken between us as I lift her up once more, finally joining us together in a soft, silky-sweet meld that sends sparks shooting like heaven's fireworks through my entire body. She moans, the sound purring deep in her throat. "Oh, Pete," she whispers against my lips as we begin our slow, gentle rhythm together, moving so perfectly in sync with one another that it is like words to a beautiful melody. "Oh, Pete, YES!" she rasps, clutching me tightly to her with her delicate arms, her long silky legs... her very self. I am her, she is me, we are now one. "Don't stop, Pete," she moans, writhing up against me. "Please don't stop."

"I won't," I murmur, gently kissing her eyes, her brow, her nose, her chin. I rub my cheek, the very one she slapped not too long ago, against the fever-hot, velvet softness of hers, the blood still throbbing beneath my stinging skin. The touch soothes me, the pain slipping slowly away. She moves beneath me, matching me stroke for stroke, rhythm for rhythm, our lover's ballet an intricate, complicated dance perfected over time by each of us. Oh, I have well and truly met my equal in this beautiful woman! Her nails scratch and release, scratch and release along my naked back, then she trails them through my hair, tugging and pulling gently on the strands as they slip through her fingers. She buries her face in my neck, her breath panting hot against my own fevered skin. "Oh, Pete, please don't stop," she whispers, her lips tickling my neck. "Yes, please don't stop!" Her voice rises in pitch and she trembles hard beneath me. She throws her head back, exposing her delicate white throat to me once more.

I seek it out with my lips and tongue. "I won't stop," I murmur against that creamy skin. "I won't stop." I feel a moan purring deep in her throat and she trembles again, shaking like a tiny leaf against a hurricane wind. She grips my hair tight in her fingers, frantically pulling me back to her mouth. "Pete," she gasps between deep, hard kisses. "PETE!" I tremble with her, her gasps and breathy moans of exquisite delight becoming my own. I will die right here, right now, buried deep within this soft gorgeous woman whose name I don't even know. Her long nails rake my back furiously and we can't get enough of each other's mouths as our tempo increases. The lightning from the storm outside flickers rapidly through the window, as if in sync with us. Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, I've waited an entire lifetime for such an exquisite dream like this...

"Ohhh, PETE!" she moans, the moan sliding into a scream as we reach our crescendo together, a very bright and vivid flash of lightning streaking across the room, capturing the exact moment of climax in a photoflash finish. She shudders hard beneath me, her body giving in to mine. She clutches me to her as I collapse against her, my breath heaving and panting, just like hers. "Oh yes," she says, smiling that slow, sexy smile, tracing my mouth with her fingers. "Oh yes," she murmurs as I bury my face in her neck and dark silky hair, trying to slow my rapid breathing and pounding heart down to a non-lethal level. I feel shaky, weary, as if I've come through both Heaven and Hell and emerged triumphant and unscathed. She strokes my back with her palms, the spots where she dug and raked her fingernails into my bare skin tingling with the gentle contact. She cups her hand to the back of my neck as I raise my head to look at her. My eyes lock onto her. She smiles, running the tip of her tongue over her lips. "Could we go again, please?" she asks, laughing throatily.

Smiling, I shake my head, chuckling. "Sure, whatever you want, sweetheart." She kisses me once more, her lips taking mine. I close my eyes. Yes, this is Heaven for me. There is another flash of lightning and...

...she suddenly grows still underneath me, her warm creamy skin now cold to my touch. Startled, I open my eyes as her lips become icy beneath mine. In confusion, I raise my head back to look at her, her deep blue eyes now sightless and staring, the spark of life gone in a fleeting instant. I heave myself quickly off of the bed with a terrified shout, as the lightning flashes wickedly, showing me in dizzying bright light the horror that lies before me on the bed. I gasp with shock.

No longer beautiful, she is tethered to the bed with clothesline rope, tightly imprisoning her hands and wrists against the iron headboard. The fingers that had run teasingly, tantalizingly through my hair and trailed along my neck and back are now curled into thin claws, the long nails split and broken, the fingertips bloody from a violent struggle. Her white satin nightgown is pushed up past splayed thighs, baring her most secret parts to the world, parts that only a lover has the right to know. Her long chestnut hair that had slipped like silk through my fingers, is now matted and knotted across the downy pillows, her head thrown back in exquisite death-agony. Black nylons are tied tightly around her delicate white neck, the sweet hollow I'd been kissing moments ago now crushed under the strangling force of the black noose that is tied around her throat like a gruesome gift bow.

The lightning gleams and winks across her pale body, as I stare in pure horror at her. Fear and nausea fight for dominion over me as I rapidly get myself redressed. I've gotta get the hell out of here, I've gotta flee from the wicked sight before me. Grabbing up my uniform shirt, I quickly slip shaking arms into the sleeves, buttoning it with clumsy fingers. I pick up my gunbelt from the floor, rebuckling it around my waist as fast as I can. Spotting my white t-shirt, I pick it up, wadding it into my fist, then I

snatch up my flashlight, the beam flickering a bit, growing weaker. I whack it hard against my hip...dear God, please don't let it go out now, I pray. The beam restrengthens itself and I start to back away from the gruesome spectacle on the bed, my feet slow and ponderous on the polished wooden floor. I am not moving as fast as I'd like and I glance down with dismay, trying to find out what is keeping me from escaping this ungodly sight. I can see nothing that keeps me in place, so why can't I move? Unwillingly, I glance once more at the woman on the bed, and what I see there freezes me in sudden shock and horror. Fear grips me tight within its claws. I am truly frightened by what I see.

A pearl necklace with no end to it snakes out of her gaping mouth, slipping off of the bed with a crisp rattle, gliding across the polished wood, the pearls dancing sinuously in the beam of my flashlight. Terrified, I turn to run, but the necklace whips out, catching me tightly in its grasp. It winds itself slowly up my ankle sylph-like, sliding across my pant leg like a serpent. Sheer stark fright growls and grumbles through me like the thunder overhead, racing and roaring around inside of me, igniting my blood like a bright inferno. I cannot move, I cannot move, I cannot move...I am frozen where I'm at, horror and terror pounding heavily in my veins, as the necklace slips across my chest, slithering around my neck, where it coils and coils itself; squeezing tight, squeezing tight the breath right out of me, crushing me, strangling me in mute mirror reflection just like the figure on the bed. I fall hard to my knees, gasping and panting, crying in great choking sobs, tears running hotly down my face and splashing into puddles on the wooden floor. The flashlight clatters from my hand, hitting the floor with a thud, the beam dancing crazily across the walls. I groan, twisting and jerking my head in sharp agony, my fingers clawing at the torture around my neck, struggling for a useless hold on the vise that is choking me, gagging me. The lightning strobes out my fight, the thunder rolling dimly through my brain. I weep hard, the tears sliding down my cheeks like a silver trail. Oh dear God, what have I done to deserve this? I ask, but God turns a deaf ear to my question. Darkness flickers across my vision as the necklace tightens oh so tight. There is a sound from the figure on the bed and I turn frightened pleading eyes to her, as she sits up, her sightless eyes boring deep into my very soul. They glow pure blood red in the darkness. I've never seen eyes like that before in my life; I never want to see them again.

"Help me," I whimper. "Please help me!"

She points a bloody finger at me. "You did this to me, you bastard," she hisses in a guttural growl. "Go to hell!" Then she crumples back onto the bed, as the lighting licks wicked forked tongues through the windowpane, and the pearls grasp me tightly, the pool of inviting blackness sliding across my vision once more. Oh! but dying is such an exquisite pleasure...

The pearls grab my last breath as it whispers between my lips and I close my eyes, diving deeply into the blank pool of darkness before me, where I drown...

I wake up with a gasp, drenched in icy sweat. I try to sit up, but something is wound tightly around me, around my neck, nearly suffocating me in its grasp. With a frightened whine escaping from my lips, I dig shaking frantic fingers into whatever is noosed about me, tugging on it until it is loose enough to allow me to breathe. And I do, pulling the stuffy air back into my lungs with great heaving gulps. I claw my way across the disheveled bed to flick on the light on my nightstand. The light floods my darkened bedroom with brightness, chasing away the spooky shadows, and showing me what I'm wrapped up in...the damned bedsheets. I'm tangled up in them tighter than an Egyptian mummy in a museum. I thrash and kick my way free of them, angrily shoving them down to the foot of my bed into a great big

wad. I sit atop my bed, trembling and weak, as waves of relief wash over me. I put my hands in front of my face, my eyes seeking out the fine bones that run through them, reassuring myself that I am still very much alive. I run shaking fingers through my damp, sweaty hair. I drop my head into my hands, trying to take deep, calming breaths. My ragged breathing and pounding heart gradually return to normal. *It was only a dream*, I soothe myself...*it was only a dream*, Pete. I look at the time on the clock radio on my nightstand. 12:30 a.m. Christ, I hope I can get back to sleep.

I open the drawer of my nightstand, rummaging through the contents in search of a pack of cigarettes that I know is still stashed within. They are at first elusive to me, but my fingers finally close around the comforting square pack, and I pull them free with a relieved chuckle. I shake one out of the pack, placing it between my lips. I search next for the gold Zippo lighter, finding it quickly among the cluttered debris of the nightstand drawer. I flick the lid open with an expert twist of my wrist, the wheel rasping softly against my thumb as I set the cigarette alight. Closing my eyes, I pull the smoke deep into my lungs. I gave up smoking a while ago, but like riding a bicycle, the habit returns quite easily to me. I drop the lighter back onto the nightstand next to the pack of cigarettes. Hmm...I think the cigarette requires a certain something to go along with it, and I know just exactly what it needs.

I slide off of the bed, going into the kitchen. I turn the light on, heading straight to the cupboard door where I know the treasure lies. My hand closes around the neck of the bottle and I pull it down, grabbing a glass with my other hand along the way. Mac had brought the whiskey to one of our monthly poker sessions a while ago, and some of it remained. Cigarette hanging from my lips, I twist the cap off, pouring some into the glass, then I down it with a quick flick of my wrist. It burns smoothly going down. I pour myself another and put the cap back on the bottle, replacing the bottle back in the cupboard. I turn off the kitchen light. Glass in hand, I return to the bedroom.

Climbing back into bed, I set the glass of whiskey on my nightstand, punching the pillows up against the headboard. I reach over and flick on the clock radio. Usually I don't listen to much music at night, but maybe a soft song or two will help settle my nerves. The radio dial faintly winks amber, dimming as the antenna struggles to pull in the signal. With a frown, I fiddle with the tuner. There is the sharp hiss and pop of static, then the dial glows brightly as the signal is pulled in. It's a rock and roll station, but I don't mind. Mindless music to ease my mind. I settle back against the pillows, the glass of whiskey in one hand, the cigarette between the fingers of the other. I've evidently tuned in to the radio station during the middle of a song, but I don't care. An eerie voice throbs out the song against a spooky backdrop of minor-chord music. I listen.

Girl ya gotta love your man

Girl ya gotta love your man

Take him by the hand

Make him understand

The world on you depends

Our life will never end

Gotta love your man

Riders on the storm...

A chill chases itself down my spine, but I shake it off. It's just a stupid song, I tell myself. A silly, spooky song. I close my eyes for a moment, letting the chords wash over me. An aching thrum of loneliness vibrates across my soul, and now, of all times, I find myself without the company of a fine woman. Jean Reed's sharp words play back to me in my brain. *"You're a knight with tarnished armor and it's no damned wonder you won't settle down and get married...no woman in her right mind would want you!"* I take a sip of the whiskey, eyeing the amber liquid in the shot glass. Jean's probably right. No woman in her right mind would want me for her husband. Not now, anyway.

A line from a Raymond Chandler story comes to my mind, and I muse it over. *"But down these mean streets a man must go who is not mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid."* I swirl the whiskey in the glass. "Well, Chandler, I'm not mean or afraid, but I am pretty tarnished. Not to mention jaded and bitter." I toast the ceiling overhead with the glass. "So I guess that'd make me a good private eye, huh? Maybe a more modernesque Philip Marlowe?" I smile grimly, then down the rest of the whiskey in a neat gulp. I drop the glass back onto the nightstand. I could go get another shot, but two's my limit for right now. I don't like drinking hard liquor on an empty stomach, but I'm hoping that it will settle me down enough to let me go back to sleep. Propping my left arm behind my head, I take a drag on the cigarette, watching the smoke drift upwards in lazy flight to the ceiling.

I pick up the gold Zippo, running my thumb across the elegant script that's engraved upon it. *Peter Joseph Malloy*, it says, in flowing cursive letters. I tilt it towards the light, the reflection of the gold metal bouncing across the wall and dancing up to the ceiling. I study the small light-beam reflection on the ceiling, twisting the lighter back and forth between my fingers to make the little beam dance. I play it over the smoke from my cigarette, like a tiny searchlight skimming across fog. The gold metal warms in my palm and I close my fingers over it. My talisman, my token, my good luck charm, I used to carry it faithfully with me wherever I went. It's a reminder to me of when a time when I was quite young and naïve, thinking that everything in my life would just turn out right, if only I believed long enough, if I only believed hard enough. I think of Mac's words from our first conversation before the interview with Sergeant Friday. I chuckle to myself. *Yeah, Mac, I used to be quite the idealist and the optimist, even more so before you ever met me. But time and experience took it's toll on me, and I had to learn to live in a world that is not firmly black or white, but subtle shades of grey. But just push back the curtain and expose the Wizard for what he truly is: a carefully crafted illusion of smoke and mirrors, presenting an omnipotent being who can grant anyone's wish but his own...and that is the forever broken-hearted longing of a lonely little man to return to his home, but can't quite figure out exactly how to get there. And knock down these brick-and-steel walls I've built up around me and that's what you'll find...a man who's searching for something that is forever beyond his grasp, longing for something that he doesn't quite know what it is, but he'll recognize it if he should ever find it.*

Stubbing out my cigarette in the dusty ashtray on my nightstand, I think of Jean's words once more. They shouldn't mean anything to me, I should just let them roll off of me, since she spoke them in the heat of anger. But they ping at me, pricking my heart, the one that's buried so deeply inside of me. *Huh, if she only knew...* I close my eyes for a moment, rubbing the ring finger of my left hand between the thumb and forefinger of my right hand. That spot is bare now, the base of that finger just plain flesh. But it wasn't always that way, it wasn't always that bare and naked. No...a ring once sat there on that finger; a simple, ordinary circle of plain solid gold, placed there by a beautiful young woman who vowed to love and honor, cherish and obey me, until death do us part. And I think she truly *did* love me ...for a while, anyway.

But life and cold harsh reality have an awfully funny way of intruding upon the fluffy, rainbow dreams of the young and foolish, and love alone is not always enough to sustain such gauzy, sweet-spun dreams. For solemn promises made before God and man can always find a way to be broken by the whims of a fickle, childish heart. Sometimes we are not quite ready to take that giant leap of faith, that whatever life throws at you, you can handle it as long as you have someone that you love standing by your side through it all. I gathered all of my windswept courage and made the leap, bravely flinging myself off of the cliff into the vastness of the great unknown...and she didn't, leaving me to crash and burn upon the hard ground all by myself. I flew to Reno to obtain a quickie divorce, came home to Seattle long enough to say goodbye to my folks, and then enlisted in the Army. And I never looked back, not even once. For when I burn the bridges to my past, I burn them clear down to the waterline.

When I got out of the service, I wound up in Los Angeles, working nights at a freight-shipping warehouse, working weekends tending bar at a dive on Sunset Strip, working my ass off during the days taking classes at the Police Academy. And when I finished up the top recruit out of ALL the other recruits in my class, I was mighty damned proud of myself. Out of the ashes of a failed and broken marriage, like a phoenix I did rise, reborn to the world freshly minted in the vagaries of life and cold harsh reality, taking flight with stronger wings than I'd had before...but leaving my heart buried deep within me, keeping it safe from the slings and arrows of life...keeping it safe from love. I've had my heart served up to me on a silver platter once before; I don't intend to let it get served up again. Bitter, I know, but it's much simpler this way. Never mind the *it's better to have loved and lost, than to never have loved at all* crap. That's just junk for the sad-eyed poets and starry-eyed dreamers. Me, I'm a pessimist and a realist now.

And no one knows that I was ever even married at all, not Jim Reed, not Mac, not even Val Moore, my training officer. I've never told anyone, nor do I want to. I don't believe in unburdening the ghosts of my past to my friends. They are my friends in the here and now, not the there and then. For if I told them, I'd have to explain exactly what happened, and I don't particularly wish to reopen old scars, especially if they're around my heart. No, it's best to leave that buried where it belongs, in the ancient history scripts of a foolish young man.

Peter Joseph Malloy the elegant curved script reads on the gold Zippo lighter. My one last link to the past; my talisman, my token, my good luck charm...given to me by my beautiful young wife on our first Christmas together as a married couple. I suppose most people wouldn't consider it lucky at all, but it is. Because if I hadn't of followed the curious chain of events that led up to me getting the lighter, if I hadn't of run across the twists and turns of secrets and lies, I never would've wound up where I'm at now. For that little nugget of bright, blindsiding fate, I'm eternally grateful.

Sighing, I lay the lighter on the nightstand next to the pack of cigarettes. I reach over and start to turn off the radio. The signal is fading in and out, and I don't feel like searching for another station. Then I hesitate, leaving the radio on. Maybe the static will soothe me back to sleep. I flick off the light on the nightstand, pulling the sheets up around me once more. The fabric slides whispering across my skin and I shiver at the touch, recalling the nightmare that originally woke me up. My eyes scan the darkness of my room, the faint light that creeps in through my window from the street below sending shadows scurrying across my walls. I roll over onto my side, pulling the pillow over my head. I close my eyes, willing sleep to return to me. It remains elusive at first, but then it starts to settle in on me. A thought flits through my drowsy brain, a phrase that spins around and around like a record on a turntable. *Haunted*, it whispers enticingly to me, a lover's caress tickling my ear. *You're haunted, Pete...*

I can't be. Not me.

THE KNIFE THROUGH THE HEART

The storm rages mightily overhead, the lightning splitting the sky in bright forked fingers, the thunder cracking and rolling in deep growling grumbles, and there is the rain...always the ice cold rain that drenches and soaks me, chilling me to the very core. The beams of our flashlights play across the torrential downpour as we approach the darkened house. I open the screen door to knock on the interior door. It swings open with a melancholy creak the minute my knuckles touch the wood. I turn and look at my partner. "Wouldn't you think that door would be locked?" I ask him.

He shrugs, his face half-hidden by the deep brim of his hat. "I guess," he says, his voice completely without tone or inflection.

"I'm going in," I tell him. "Make sure everyone's okay inside."

"I wouldn't," he says in that odd monotone.

"Then stay out here," I say. "I'll go in."

He shrugs again and turns away from me. "Suit yourself," he tells me.

I step across the threshold into the dark house. All at once, fear prickles across my neck, raising my hackles, and I shiver. I look to see if my partner is behind me, but he isn't. "Reed," I call. "Reed!" He doesn't answer me and I turn back to the door to see where he's at. He's not on the front steps anymore, so I peer through the driving rain to see if he's returned to the squad car. In a flash of lightning, I see his dark shape sitting there inside the car. "Damned idiot," I mutter to myself. I turn back to the silent, spooky house.

The living room is completely trashed. It looks like Hurricane Camille has gone through it, whipping forces of devastation within the four walls. Pictures and knickknacks lay smashed and broken across the beige carpeting, plants are overturned and dumped, their black dirt spilling out over the sides of their pots. A tv sits along one wall, its screen cracked, the grey glass staring sightlessly out over the wanton destruction. Playing my flashlight across the room, I notice something in the corner. I pick my way across the litter to examine it closer. It is a brand-new, graphite Penn fishing rod and reel, oh so beautiful and sleek, a deep maroon color that fairly glows in the light of my flashlight. It is also quite broken, the gorgeous rod snapped in two, the lines hanging down in sad filaments from the points. A black tackle box lies nearby, the lid opened, the trays pulled up, revealing an array of delightful lures, all glistening and gleaming before my very eyes. But they, too, are damaged, someone has taken a hammer to them, smashing the larger ones to pieces, bending the hooks on the smaller ones, rendering the whole display utterly useless. I shake my head. "What a waste of some perfectly good fishing gear," I say to the silent four walls. Only the muted ticking of a grandfather clock answers me. I shudder and move on.

"Hi!" says a tiny voice behind me, and I jump, swinging the flashlight around to see a small boy standing there, dressed in yellow footie pajamas, a teddy bear with a red bow around its neck clasped tightly in his chubby little fist. He has a mop of riotous blonde curls, and he smiles up at me quite charmingly. "Hi!" he says again. "I'm Andrew! Who are you?"

"I'm Pete Malloy," I tell him. "I'm a police officer." I study him a moment. "Can you tell me where your parents are, Andrew?"

He giggles, shaking his head. "Mommy asleep," he tells me, walking across the living room floor, deftly avoiding the shards of glass. He plops down in front of the broken tv set, teddy bear on his lap. "Uh-oh," he says with a tiny frown. "Tv went bye-bye." He waves at the tv, then he places a small hand on the shattered screen. "No tv?" he asks, looking up at me.

"Uh, no...no tv, Andrew," I tell him. "Where's your mommy at, honey? Maybe we should try and wake her up, okay?"

He looks at me with wide brown eyes. "No, mommy asleep. Not wake her up. She get mad." He turns back to the tv with a heavy sorrowful sigh. "No more tv." He looks up at me again, a hopeful expression on his tiny face. "You fix, Petey?" he asks.

I shake my head with a chuckle. I haven't been called Petey since I was five. "No, Andrew, I can't fix it for you. Sorry."

He gives me a great big grin. "I this many!" he tells me happily, holding up three fingers.

"You're three, huh? That's a pretty big age," I tell him.

He nods sagely. "Yuh-huh." He peers at me. "How old are you?"

I cough, clear my throat. "Um...this many and then some," I say, holding up my hands. "I've gotcha beat, kid, by quite a few years."

He gets up off of the floor and toddles over to me. He touches the nightstick in the ring on my belt. "What dat?" he asks, just oozing with curiosity.

"That's my nightstick, Andrew."

Running small fingers around the edge of the nightstick, he ponders it as if it is a matter of great importance. "For what?"

"Uh, for convincing people who don't want to follow my orders, to follow my orders, if they know what's good for them." I tell him.

He toddles around me, eyeing the equipment on my gunbelt. He brushes a small hand across my gun holster. "Bang, bang?" he asks.

"Yeah, bang-bang," I tell him with a chuckle. Honestly, I've come before shooting review boards that are less intent on questioning me than this kid is.

He wraps tiny arms around my legs, looking up at me with the apple-cheeked face of a cherub. "Pick me up?" he asks hopefully. "I want up, Petey."

I grin. How can I resist such an adorable tyke? "Sure, okay, kiddo." I bend down and pick him up, teddy bear and all. "Does your bear have a name, Andrew?" I ask.

"His name is Petey!" he tells me with a joyful smile. "Petey Bear!"

"So his name is the same as mine, huh? I'm honored to be named after such a handsome bear."

He nods. "Yep." Bear clutched in one fist, he grabs at my badge with the other. "Mine?" he asks.

"No, that's mine," I tell him gently.

He tugs on my badge with tiny insistent fingers. "Mine!" he demands. "I want!"

"No, sweetie, that's mine. That's Petey's," I tell him. "It shows that I'm police officer."

He tugs on my badge once more. "P'lice ossifer."

BONG! BONG! BONG! the grandfather clock chimes out the midnight hour, the witching hour, and I jump, startled by the sudden sound in this spooky, quiet house.

"HA!" he giggles, burying his face in my shoulder. "Bong, bong, bong," he says, imitating the clock.

"Yeah, kid, it's the clock," I say with a shaky chuckle. I try to will my heart to stop pounding out the rhumba. "How about we put you back to bed, okay, Andrew?"

"Tell me a story?" he asks.

I shrug. "Sure, why not?" I pick my way back across the destroyed living room, glass and dirt crunching beneath my feet.

"Someone made messy," Andrew says sagely, waving a fat little hand at the disastrous room. "Big messy."

"They sure did, didn't they?" I say. "I'd hate to have to clean it up."

He nods against my shoulder. "Yuh-huh, me TOO!"

We pass by the kitchen area and I hesitate, shining my flashlight on the destruction that lies within. The heavy kitchen table is overturned, a white table cloth draping it like a pale mourning shroud; the matching chairs are upended and scattered about, some of them with their legs broken like matchsticks. The refrigerator is partly opened, the pale light within shining down on the disgusting mess below; eggs, milk, syrup, ketchup all congeal together in a vomit-inducing mess. Pots and pans, dishes, glasses, silverware, all wink up at me in the beam of my light, looking like cat's eyes staring at me in the dark. Flour and sugar are spilled in white mountains on the checkerboard floor, the canisters that once contained them tipped over onto their sides. Canned goods are thrown about haphazardly, Del Monte peas, corn, green beans, peaches. Feeling slightly queasy, I turn away.

"I hungry, Petey!" Andrew says. "I want a peebee samwich with grape jelly!"

I glance at the damaged kitchen. "Well, Andrew, I think I'd be pretty hard-pressed to find you something to eat in that disaster area. How about I try and round up a glass of water for you instead, okay?"

"Okay," he says happily. "Water fine."

I give the kitchen one more look. I decide I am not wading through that mess to try and find an unbroken glass. I head down the hallway to the bathroom instead. I find a plastic drinking cup on the bathroom sink and fill it with cool water from the tap. I hand it to Andrew. "Here's looking at you, kid."

Tipping the cup up to his lips, he giggles, then he drinks. "Here lookin' at you, kid," he repeats back to me. He hands the plastic cup back to me, then he wipes his mouth on the shoulder of my uniform. Ah, well, it'll wash out. I put the cup back on the sink. I step back out into the hallway, my eyes passing over damaged pictures that once hung in the hall. There's a trio of baby pictures, a studio shot of three children, a black and white wedding portrait of a smiling couple.

I hear the faint plinking of music from somewhere inside this still house, and my ears strain to make out the dainty melody. It sounds oddly familiar to me.

...For every bear that ever there was, will gather there for certain because...

...Today's the day the teddy bears have their picnic...

I remember the tune from my childhood, and a faint snatch of memory comes floating back through my mind. I'm sitting on our couch in our Seattle home, listening to my mother play the song for me on our piano, as I clutch a teddy bear that's nearly as big as me to my tiny chest, small fingers playing with the red bow he has tied around his neck. Then, with a flash, the memory is gone. "The Teddy Bears' Picnic," I murmur to myself.

"Teddy bear!" Andrew screams in my ear, nearly deafening me. "Petey Bear!" he shouts again in delight, promptly whacking me up alongside the head with the love-worn teddy bear he still clutches in his chubby fist. Before I can stop him, he clobbers me again with a giggle, this time his fist smacking my cheek. Pete Malloy, KO'd by a three-year-old in yellow footie pajamas. Oh, brother!

"Hey, watch it, kid!" I say. "Petey doesn't want to be beaten up by Petey Bear, okay?" I grab his fist before he can swing again. "Stop it, Andrew. It's not nice to hit people."

His lips tremble in a quavery pout and silvery tears begin to spill from his eyes. He buries his face in my shoulder, sobbing like the world just swiped his animal crackers. "Petey mad!" he blubbers, his tiny shoulders shaking with each wracking sob. "Petey mad at Andrew!" Lightning flickers down the hallway and thunder grumbles overhead in accompaniment with his sobs. Kid and nature, acting as one.

I bounce him a bit in my arm, trying to soothe him. I rub his back. "No, no, I'm not mad at you, Andrew. I just don't want you to hit me, okay?" That only serves to make him weep harder, shuddering and clutching a fistful of my uniform shirt in his small hand. "Hey, c'mon, kid, settle down now. It's not the end of the world." I bounce him again. "What say we go get that story read, huh?" I give him my best Pete Malloy smile, guaranteed to win the heart of any sobbing tot.

He raises a tear-soaked face to look at me. "Petey not mad anymore?" he asks timidly.

I wipe a teardrop away from his cheek with my thumb. "No, I'm not mad. Just don't hit anymore, okay?"

"K," he snuffles, wiping a generous amount of snot on my uniform shirt. I try to repress a shudder, reminding myself, once again, that it WILL wash out. "Story?" he asks hopefully.

"Yeah, story," I say, walking down the hallway to what I presume is the nursery. It's behind a white-painted door, with the names 'Andrew' and 'Matthew' stenciled out in bright primary colors. I nudge the door open with the palm of my hand and am greeted by colorful wallpaper depicting Mother Goose's nursery rhymes. "Here we are, Andrew," I tell him. "Let's get you settled into bed first, and then I'll tell you a story, okay?"

He nods. "Okay." He points to a small toddler-sized bed. "That mine!" he tells me proudly. "I no sleep in crib! I a big boy now!" He wriggles in my arms and I set him down, watching as he toddles over and crawls into bed. I pull the covers up to his chin as he tucks the love-worn teddy bear to his chest.

I look over at the blue-painted wooden crib that shares Andrew's room. "Is that your baby brother in there, Andrew?" I ask, pointing to the crib.

Slipping a thumb between his lips, he nods. "Matthew," he says simply. "Baby Matthew."

Quietly I slip over to the crib to look upon the sleeping bundle inside. A plump bald infant resides within, snoozing on his back, chubby little arms and legs splayed out to his sides. He snuffles in his sleep, smacking his tiny lips...aww, how cute!.. and I smile. Someday I wouldn't mind having a few little rugrats of my own, but not right now. I start to turn back towards Andrew when my head bumps the mobile of ducks that hang over the crib. One of the ducks jabs me sharply in the skull with a wicked webbed foot. "OUCH! Damn it!" I hiss through clenched teeth as I rub the back of my head. The mobile clatters and shakes violently from the collision.

SNUFFLESNORT! the baby awakens with a sudden jolt and promptly begins to wail.

"Oh, CRAP!" I hiss again, reaching into the crib with my hand, trying to pat the baby back to sleep. "Shh, it's okay, Matthew. It was just clumsy ol' Petey, running into your ducks," I try to soothe. "Go back to sleep, honey."

"AHHHH-Ha-ha-ha-ha!" Matthew screams, his face turning bright red with his efforts. "WAHHHHH-Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Jesus, if this isn't an effective ad for birth control, I don't know what is," I mutter under my breath. "Please, baby, go back to sleep," I plead frantically, fearing that I will go deaf long before this child stops bawling. "Pretty please, Matthew?" I cajole.

"BWAAAAA-Ha-ha-ha-ha!" Matthew shrieks at the top of his tiny lungs as crystal teardrops ooze out of his squinched-up eyes. He looks rather like a turnip, or perhaps a small red cabbage. "AAAAHH-ha-ha-ha-ha!" He shakes tiny balled-up fists in infant anger.

"Good lord, who knew such a tiny thing could be so freakin' loud?" I shout over the din.

"You hafta pick him up, Petey," Andrew says solemnly from his bed.

"Huh?" I ask, trying to hear over the klaxon-strength wails emanating from the blue wooden crib. Christ, I could stick this kid on top of Adam-12 and be heard all the way to San Diego.

"You hafta pick Matthew up, Petey. Den he will stop cryin'," Andrew tells me.

"Pick him up?" I ask.

Andrew nods. "Uh-huh. Dat what Mommy do."

I look back at the squalling red-faced bundle in the crib. Pick him up? Umm...okay. I set my flashlight on top of a white-painted dresser. Sure, I can do this. I picked up James Reed, Jr., my godson, when he was a tiny baby. Granted, either Jim or Jean usually HANDED him to me first, but c'mon, how hard can it be? I take a deep breath. "Well, here goes," I mumble, gently lifting Matthew out of the crib, as the lightning illuminates my effort. I can't hear the thunder over the baby's cries. "There we go!" I exclaim, happy that I managed to pick the kid up without dropping him on his head. That would NOT be good. I start to settle him into my arms. "Now how about that, Matthew?" I ask the squirmy, bellowing tyke. "Ol' Petey managed to pick you up and..." Suddenly a realization hits me rather fast. Horrified, I look down at the baby in my arms. "Eww, you're WET!" I say with a grimace, as baby pee dampens my uniform. I shudder. "Ugh, I definitely hope this washes out, because I may have to burn this shirt if it doesn't. Otherwise, Ed Wells is liable to start calling me 'Wee-Wee Malloy'."

Andrew giggles from his bed. "Wee-Wee Malloy," he chortles happily.

"AHHH-Ha-ha-hic-hic-hic," Matthew cries in my arms. I sway slowly from side to side, his tiny body cradled close to me, trying to comfort him. He looks up at me with damp blue eyes. "HIC-hic-hic-hic," he hiccups, then he sneezes mightily, blowing snot out of his little nose. It lands squarely on my shirt. I close my eyes. Can this get any worse? I ask myself.

Uh, bad question, Pete. Because it CAN get worse...and it does. Matthew stiffens in my arms with a grunt, then he farts...and then the smell hits me. "Um, did you just do what I think you just did?" I ask the tiny infant as I try not to gag.

"He POOPED!" Andrew cries gleefully from his bed.

My eyes tear up from the odor. I've hauled in drunks that have smelled better than this. I hold the squirming baby away from me with a squint. His diaper fairly droops with the load. "Uh, I think I'm going to have to call for some reinforcements, here," I say, eyeballing Matthew. "They don't teach diaper-changing at the Academy." I go over to the nursery window which looks out onto the street. I pull the vinyl shade aside and I gaze through the still-pouring rain at the black-and-white squad car still parked at the curb. I rap my knuckles on the glass, trying to catch my partner's attention. "Hey, Reed!" I yell, hoping he'll hear me. I rap the glass again. "I need some expert help in here!" But Reed ignores me, and in a flash of the lightning, I see him still sitting in the car, unmoving. He doesn't even glance at me. "Thanks a lot, Jim," I mutter. "I'll remember this the next time you want to drive Adam-12." I turn my attention back to Matthew, who has discovered my shooting brass and is presently trying to eat it. "Hey, don't eat that!" I say, quickly removing the now-baby-slimed medal out of his mouth. He smiles a gummy smile at me and promptly latches onto my badge, smearing it with sticky baby spit. "Eww, ick," I say, shifting him around so he's away from my hardware. "I'll have to get those sterilized before I wear them again."

Andrew is holding his nose. "You gotta change him, Petey," he says in a tiny nasal tone. "He STINKS!"

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, well, tell me something I DON'T know, kid." I go over to the light switch on the nursery wall, flicking it on. Unfortunately, the light fails to come on, and I'm stuck in the darkness, with only the beam of my flashlight and the flickers of lightning to guide me. "Damn it, the power must be out from the storm," I mutter.

"NAMIT!" Andrew yells happily. "NAMIT, NAMIT, NAMIT!" He looks up at me with a giggle.

"Don't let your mom hear you saying that, kid. It's a good way to get your mouth washed out with soap. And trust me, Lifebuoy doesn't taste all that great. I know from much personal experience," I tell him. And as the faint memory of Lifebuoy graces the inside of my mouth, I grimace and nearly spit. "Yuck, ptoeey."

"Yuck, patootie!" Andrew says, imitating me. "NAMIT!"

I sigh, looking around the nursery. "Well, I guess I'll have to go it alone," I say. C'mon Malloy, you're a big tough cop, I chide myself. Don't tell me you're afraid of a single poopy diaper. I grab up my flashlight from where I set it atop the dresser when I picked up Matthew. Carrying it and a wriggly baby over to the changing table, I plop the baby down first, then angle the flashlight so it shines on what I'm doing. And there is, at least, the frequent flashes of lightning through the window to help, too. I can do this, I tell myself, as I pick up a clean cloth diaper from a stack folded in the corner of the table. Pete Malloy has faced down armed crooks and vicious thugs, surely I can handle changing one small infant. How hard can it be? I pause, looking at Matthew. "Now don't think you're going to try any funny stuff with me, kid, just because I've never done this before." I start to unpin the safety pins from the soiled diaper. I try to recall how I saw Jim Reed change Jimmy Jr. "Let's see..." I mumble. "Pins off first, next the diaper..." I grab Matthew's tiny ankles, lifting his wee little butt off of the dirty diaper. I quickly whisk it off of the changing table, depositing it into a nearby diaper pail. And I manage to keep from barfing while doing it. Way to go, Pete! Too bad they don't give out medals for completing hazardous diaper duty!

"Mommy washes poopy diapers out in the potty," Andrew tells me.

"Yeah, well, Mommy isn't doing this, I am," I tell him. I pull a baby wipe out of the blue canister on top of the changing table and wipe Matthew's butt as best I can. Suddenly, it seems that the tiny tot has sprouted eight legs, and they're all wriggling and wriggling in constant quick motion, as I try to clean him up. I grab one leg, another one pops up in its place. "What are you, an octopus?" I ask him.

"Oddapuss," Andrew says.

"Yeah, I think your baby brother here is an octopus," I tell him as I toss the baby wipe into the trashcan. Picking up the can of baby powder, I tap on it, trying to sprinkle some onto the still-eight-legs-a-movin' baby. I pound a bit harder, with no luck. I release my grip on at least five of Matthew's legs to give the canister a good whack with my palm. POOOOOFFFFF! Ooops, too hard. It comes out in a dusty white cloud, coating Matthew's butt, Matthew, the changing table, the floor, and me. "Oh cra..AH-CHOO!" I sneeze. "AH-CHOO!" And, just like little monkeys imitating the daddy monkey, both Andrew and Matthew sneeze, too. Sniffing, I wipe my nose on the sleeve of my uniform shirt that is currently baby-ick free. What the hell, I gotta get it laundered anyway, I think to myself. What's a little more gunk on my shirt? I position the clean diaper under Matthew the way I think it should go...hmm...no, that doesn't look right. I slide it around another way. "That's gotta be it," I mumble. "Now, let's see, how do I do this?" I ask myself, squinting at the squirming Matthew, who regards me with a one-toothed grin. Then I learn WHY he's grinning as he takes aim and lets go...a tiny little firehose of pee, right on the front of my shirt. "Oh, STOP THAT!" I shout, quickly flipping a fold of the diaper up over the tiny little firehose itself. "Now that wasn't very nice!" I say with a scowl. He just continues to grin at me, chuckling at my dismay, grabbing his fat little feet in his hands. I shake my head. "I'll bet Jim Reed never has this problem," I mutter. I grab up the diaper pins, sticking myself in the finger with the open end of one of them. "Ouch, DAMN IT!" I snap, as a small bead of bright red blood wells up from the skin.

"NAMIT!" Andrew sings from his bed.

I turn to him, pointing an index finger at him. "You'd better watch that language, young man, or you'll have your mouth washed out with soap so many times, that you'll fart bubbles!"

"BubbleFart!" he shouts gleefully.

I groan. As God is my witness, I am NOT having children until I'm dead. I turn back to the white-powdered baby still on the changing table. He regards me thoughtfully. "You aren't going to do something else nasty, are you?" I ask him warily. "Because if you are, I'd like a little more warning this time." Not wanting to discover if he has any more surprises in store for me, I quickly pin the diaper up as best I can. I study my work with a critical eye. "Well, it's definitely not Dr. Spock, but it'll have to do," I say, lifting the baby with the lumpy, oddly folded-up diaper from the changing table. I lay him gently back into the crib. He sighs contentedly and begins sucking on a powdery thumb. "I sure hope that powder is baby-digestible," I say.

"Petey?" Andrew asks from his bed.

"Yeah, Andrew?" I turn to look at him.

"Wanna glass a water," he says. "I thirsty."

"Okay," I sigh. "One glass of water, coming right up." I go back into the bathroom, turning on the cold-water tap. As I fill the plastic cup up, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. I'm white, wet, and covered in ick. Maybe I should just avoid going into the station at end-of-watch, and have Reed drop me off at home instead. I really don't relish going in and facing Ed Wells and Bob Brinkman. Hell, it'll be bad enough facing Jim Reed!

"PETEY!" Andrew yells. "I want water!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming," I sigh, turning the tap off. There is a very bright flash of lightning as I step out of the bathroom back into the hallway, followed by another white-bright flash. It blinds me momentarily and I stop, as the thunder roars threateningly overhead. "Jesus, that was close," I mutter. "Musta hit something nearby." I continue down the hall to the nursery. Something on the door catches my eye and I pause, kneeling down to see what it is. It's a palmprint in red...blood? I wonder. Nah, it can't be. Gotta be paint or something. I must not have noticed it before. I step into the nursery, cup of water in my hand. "Here you go, Andrew, here's your...OH MY GOD!" I gasp in shock, the cup slipping from my hand and falling to the floor, where the cool water splashes my pant leg. I ignore it as I stare in horror at the sight before me.

Andrew, the toddler with the riotous blonde curls and big brown eyes, is pinned firmly to his bed by a huge butcher knife that sticks menacingly out of his tiny chest, the blade driven into his small body nearly up to the hilt. Blood drains out of the corners of his gaping mouth, and his yellow footie pajamas are soaked in crimson. The mattress around him is soaked with it, too, and it drips slowly onto the polished wood floor with solid wet splats. He still clutches his love-worn teddy bear with the big red bow in a chubby fist, but not even the bear couldn't protect him from this ghastly death. Then I remember the baby, Matthew. Unwillingly, I turn from the gruesome sight on the bed to look inside the crib.

And then I wish to God that I hadn't. There, in the blue wooden crib with its handmade baby quilt with brightly colored squares thrown over the side, lies Matthew, his head bashed in, beaten unrecognizable under the vicious blows of a hammer. The hammer that rained the blows down upon his wee head is thrown in next to his tiny body, oh so callously, blood and gore still clinging to it. The duck mobile that I ran into has been ripped from the ceiling and tossed into the crib with him, nearly atop him, and bits of the ceiling and plaster dust coat his body in a gruesome display. Slowly backing away from the horrific sight, I swallow back the saliva that rapidly fills my mouth. I will myself not to vomit.

"Petey," Andrew whispers from the bed.

Startled, I whip around, as the lightning flashes across my face. I can't answer him, my voice is rendered mute in fear. Instead, I just stare, with wide, horror-stricken eyes. Surely I am imagining this, I tell myself. There's no way in HELL that kid could've survived such a hideous death. I will wake up and this will all be over.

"Petey," he whispers again, the blood sputtering from his lips. He beckons to me with a tiny bloody finger.

An unseen force stronger than my own will draws me unwillingly to the side of his bed, where my knees buckle and I kneel. I still don't speak, not trusting my voice. I just stare at the poor kid in fear. Finally, I manage to muster up enough strength to reply. "Yeah, kid?" I ask, my voice a shaky whisper in my throat.

"Can you take this out?" he asks, pointing to the knife that is shoved into his chest. "It hurts."

I try not to gag. "I...I...I can't, Andrew. I can't take it out for you," I stammer.

"Why not?" he whispers.

"I...I...I just can't." I close my eyes, looking away.

"Don't you love me anymore, Daddy?" he asks, a melancholy note to his voice.

I jerk my head back. "What did you just say?" I ask softly.

He coughs, the blood trickling rapidly from his lips. "Why did you do this to me, Daddy? Don't you love me anymore?" His brown eyes meet mine sorrowfully.

"Andrew, I'm not your daddy, honey. I'm Pete." Instinctively, I lay one of my big hands over his tiny one, then quickly pull it back. I gaze at my hand that is now stickily covered in his blood. "Oh my God," I mumble under my breath, staring in mute horror at my crimson palm. Lightning dances across the room, turning the blood on my hand a deep maroon. Then, there is a sudden movement from the blonde toddler pinned to the bed. My attention is drawn back to him, and my mouth drops in shock as what I see next freezes me.

He casually grabs the blood-slickened handle of the butcher knife with his tiny hands, tugging on it once. It doesn't budge. He tugs on it again, a scowl of pure determination crossing his face, and this time he easily pulls it free from his chest. It makes a vicious sucking sound as it comes loose, and I shudder violently. He sits up slowly, turning to look at me, his brown eyes locking unseeing onto mine. He fingers the blade of the knife thoughtfully, as blood drips down his chin and apple cheeks. A flash of vivid lightning bolts through the room, and his soft brown eyes turn a pure blood red. I've never seen eyes like that before, and I never want to see them again. A shudder runs through me again as I gape at him. He smiles at me, a ruthless smile of sheer genuine evil. Gripping the knife handle in his hands, he studies it intently, then gazes at me once more with those blood-red eyes. "That hurt Andrew," he says in an odd voice that sounds more like an adult's voice than a toddler's. He turns his attention back to the bloody knife in his hands. He smiles that wicked smile again. There is another bright flash of lightning. "You did this to me, you bastard!" he rasps in an unearthly growl. "Go to hell!" Thoroughly frightened, I scabble backwards on the polished wood floor, my feet slipping in the viscous pool of blood near Andrew's bed. I fall hard on my ass, and quickly try to regain my footing in order to flee this ungodly death-child. But I'm not fast enough, and I watch in terror as he raises the knife high above his tiny blonde head, then he plunges it downward in a vicious thrust and...

The razor-sharp silver blade snicks cleanly between my ribs, slicing easily through my uniform shirt and t-shirt underneath. With a horrified gasp, I clutch at the unwieldy blade stuck firmly in my chest. I struggle hard to breathe as fiery, white-hot pain lances through me. With a groan, I tug on the blood-slick handle, pulling and pulling with my frantic strength, until I finally succeed in wrenching it free from my body. It clatters to the floor as I stagger drunkenly to my feet. I press my bloody hands to my chest as my warm lifeblood rapidly darkens my uniform to black. I glance once at the toddler on the bed; he has collapsed back onto his pillow, teddy bear clutched once more in his hand, those glowing red eyes now sightless and staring at the ceiling. I slide my eyes back to the doorway as I sway very unsteadily on my feet. I focus on the hallway, I must get out of here if I can. I summon my rapidly-depleting reserves of strength. I stumble dizzily out of the nursery into the hallway, crashing hard into the far wall and nearly toppling over. I rest a moment, one bloody palm against the wall. I close my eyes, my breath panting raspily in my throat, my blood pounding fuzzily in my brain. C'mon, Pete, keep moving, I urge myself. Pressing my back up against the wall, I slide my heavy body into a semi-standing position. I inch my way down the hallway, leaving a smear of my bright red blood against the white paint to mark my heroic efforts. Spots dance on my peripheral vision. Gotta get help, gotta get out of here, my brain repeats in a never-ending loop. A name flashes through my dim brain. REED! Oh yes, he'll help me, Jim will save me...if only I can get him in here to do just that. "Reed," I moan, the thick taste of copper on my lips. I gag, coughing up blood. I spit it out onto the beige carpeting. "Reed," I whisper, as I inch and claw my way down that hallway on rubberband legs. "Help me." The spots dance merrily before my eyes, and a wisp of blackness veils them for a second. I close my eyes, shaking my head. I have got to get out of here...I don't want this to be the place where I make my last valiant stand.

Suddenly, I run out of wall to support me, and I half-fall into the bathroom, where I stumble heavily into the white pedestal sink, stopping myself hard with a groan. I clutch at the sides with blood-slick hands. The inviting blackness sways me, and I go to my knees, resting my sweating head against the cool porcelain sink edge. I must get up, I must get out of here. I fumble woozily for the cold water tap on the sink. Maybe cool water will help revive me, at least enough so that I can get out of this damned house. I put a bloodied hand under the chilly stream flowing from the tap, and bring my wet hand to my forehead, rubbing the water over my face and forehead. Yes, yes, that feels good. I dabble my shaking fingers in the water again. Once more oughta do it. I bring my hand to my face again, nearly crying with the comfort it brings me. Who knew cold water could be such a reviver of life? Panting heavily, I haul myself back to my feet, my legs feeling like cement blocks. Fire races through my chest with each breath I take. I try to take a step, but I can't. Willing my feet and legs to move, I try once more, but to no avail. I am stuck in this stupid bathroom. I sob, the catching breath sending molten lava shooting through me. I am going to die here, all alone, on this cold, unforgiving bathroom floor, with no one to witness my sad passing. I always imagined my life ending with a bang, instead of a whimper. And whimper I do, the moaning whine tickling past my blood-thickened throat. I gag again, spitting a mouthful of blood into the sink.

I lean over the white sink with the last vestiges of my strength, watching mutely as vermilion droplets fall from my chest onto the porcelain, sliding down the sides where they turn the clear water a pale pink before it swirls away. I sway unsteadily. Queasily, I look up at my ghostly reflection in the mirror, a chilly sweat beading my forehead, green eyes wide with shock. I look back at the water running in a stream from the taps, as pain courses through me, making me shudder violently, my fingers slicking against the porcelain, nearly making me lose my grip. Another sharp pain wrenches me, this one ever worse than the previous one, and I throw my head back in agony, my eyes tightly shut, hot tears streaming down

my face. Oh dear God, what have I done to deserve this? I ask, but God ignores me, turning a deaf ear to my question. Lightning lights up the insides of my eyelids, and I force my eyes open, staring at my heaving, panting reflection in the silver mirror once more. "Oh God," I murmur through the thick taste of copper. A wave of blackness washes over me and I feel my tenuous grip on the sink giving way. I slide to the floor in a shivering, shuddering heap. "Reed," I whimper. "Please help me."

Then, in a sudden flash of the lightning, I sense that someone is there standing over me. I squint through the darkness, trying to puzzle out who it is. Another flash illuminates the figure...a man in a blue uniform, his face half-hidden by the deep brim of his hat. I gasp with untold relief, stretching a shaking hand covered in my crimson out to the figure in a plea. "Reed!" I groan. "Help me!"

He kneels over me without saying a word. I cannot see his eyes in the shadow of his hat. He laughs once, a short, sharp barking laugh that I've never heard Jim Reed make before. I feel his eyes boring into me. I squirm uncomfortably under the unforgiving gaze, as fear prickles along my sweating neck.

"Reed?" I ask, a quaver in my voice.

He doesn't answer me, he just kneels over me, staring at me in those flashes of lightning. If this is Jim Reed, why in the hell does he just SIT there, staring at me? Why doesn't he move, try to help me? Can't he see that I'm dying right before his eyes?

I clutch vainly at the front of his uniform, scrabbling with a bloody hand. "Reed, help me," I moan around the bloody froth that bubbles chokingly past my lips.

Then finally he moves, slowly pulling something from behind his back and I struggle to make out what it is. A flash of lightning dances along the edges of the object he holds in his hand, and with sudden stark horror, I realize what it is...

The butcher knife.

"Oh dear God, no," I plead. "Please don't!" I grab weakly at his wrist. "Jim, it's ME! PETE!" I rasp, coughing.

"I know," he says in a spooky monotone. Running caressing fingers along the blood-spattered silver edge, he hefts the knife first in one hand, then in the other. He lovingly fondles the slick wooden handle like it was the body of his pretty little wife, Jean. He raises the knife over his head, and now I can finally see his eyes; they are pure blood red in the darkness. Lightning dancing along the knife's edge turns it a white-hot silver as he grips the knife firmly in his hands. He regards me with a smile full of pure evil malice as he raises the knife over his head in a two-handed grasp.

"C'mon, Jim," I pant. "You don't wanna do this." I cough once more, the coppery froth choking me, gagging me. I grab his wrist again, but he flicks my grip off like I'm just a mere bug. "PLEASE, JIM!" I beg with a sob. Oh my God, this cannot be happening to me!

With a sudden savage downward thrust, he plunges the knife clean into my chest, pinning me to the bathroom floor. "No!" I gasp, as shock and searing pain shoot wickedly through my entire body. I writhe beneath the knife's hold, but it's no use, I'm too damned weak. I try to grip the handle, but my hands slide away, falling back to my sides. I thrash my head from side to side, feeling the blood drip from my lips. "No," I moan, and the moan slides into a shrieking, howling scream that echoes throughout the silent house. Lightning licks about us in a wicked, photoflash frenzy. It seems quite pleased to bear witness to my impending death. The thunder roars in my ears, as my pounding pulse begins to weaken, slowly becoming a distant throb within my head. "Why?" I whisper with a weak shudder.

"Because I can," he tells me. "Because I can."

"No," I murmur, as I feel my heart begin to slow. Darkness dances on the edge of my vision and I close my eyes. Suddenly, it's too much of an effort to fight anymore, and I find myself longing for the gentle, swooping shadows. I sigh...maybe Death won't be so bad after all. "Yes," I whisper. "Death." Lightning flickers across my eyelids and I open them once more. I hold my hands out to the dark figure standing just beyond my reach, as a cozy blanket of black slowly begins to settle across me. I feel at peace, calm and serene, and a slow, lazy smile forms upon my bloody lips. "Yes," I murmur once more. I am ready to leave my life on this earth behind. The vivid lightning strobes out across the bathroom, outlining the man dressed in blue kneeling over me, his eyes glowing blood red in the darkness, an evil, wicked grin fixed firmly on his face as he watches me die.

And that is the last thing I see, before I close my eyes forever, the gentle darkness swallowing me completely up in its soft, oh so soft embrace, whisking me floating away, my spirit following behind, while the lightning steals the last breath from between my bloody lips. Oh! but dying is such an exquisite pleasure...

Yes.

No...

"NO!" I shriek, coming awake with a jolt. Sweat drips off of me as I thrash wildly about in the bedclothes. My stomach gives a sickening whirl and I realize that I'm going to be sick. Clamping a hand over my mouth, I stumble out of bed, half-falling on my way to the bathroom. I just barely make it, hanging heaving and gagging over the toilet, as my guts empty themselves in a bitter-gall rush. When the spell passes, I flush the toilet, slumping weakly back against the cool porcelain tub, the smooth surface feeling rather comforting against my fevered skin. I clasp my knees to my chest, resting my sweaty head upon them. I sit there on the floor, huddled up in a shaking, quivering ball. *What in the world is happening to me?* I wonder. *I've never gotten sick like this before, let alone twice now from the same damned scene. You usually pride yourself in not letting what you see in your job bother you. So what happened to the ol' cast-iron stomach, Pete?* I chide myself for having such a weakish reaction. Hell, it was probably just my stomach rebelling against the double-shot of whiskey I poured down it earlier. Yeah, that's it. You never want to drink on an empty stomach. When I feel that it's safe for me to stand up, I slowly haul myself to my feet quite shakily, using the sink for support.

I turn on the cool water tap, bending my face down to splash myself with the cold water. It tingles against my hot skin and I begin to feel better. I cup my hands, catching some of the water in them in order to rinse my mouth out. I rinse and spit a couple of times, then I catch some more water, swallowing it to ease my scratched throat. It slides easily down, then with a flash, I recall the scene in my nightmare where I was watching my own blood swirl pinkishly down the drain. My stomach lurches again, and I throw the water back up. Like in my dream, I clutch the sides of the sink for support as I gag again and again, until my sides are sore and aching and nothing more is coming up. I catch sight of my reflection in the mirror. My hair is plastered to my head with sweat, my face is pale and drawn, with dark raccoon circles under my eyes.

I crawl shivering back into bed, my body on fire with a deep-seated fever. I pull the blankets and bedsheets up to my chin, closing my eyes as my teeth chatter with chill. There's a hiss and a pop of static from the radio, then a song begins, that same spooky song from before. I reach a weak hand to turn it off, but my hand drops back to the bed, and I pull the pillow over my head instead. But it doesn't blot out the music, it still drifts in around the edges.

There's a killer on the road

His brain is squirmin' like a toad

Take a long holiday

Let your children play

If ya give this man a ride

Sweet memory will die

Killer on the road

Riders on the storm...

I close my eyes with a shudder. God, that song is awful, I think in my fevered brain. Who in their right mind would write an evil song like that? I curl myself into a tiny ball, shaking and shivering with chills. And then, a thought crosses my mind, the same thought from before, but I'm too tired to fight it. Instead, I let it slip through the edges of my consciousness. It throbs in unison to the spooky music. *Haunted*, it whispers in a minor-chord thrum. *You're haunted, Pete.*

I can't be...can I?

Chapter Eight

Vicious bright sunlight stabs in through my bedroom window from underneath the vinyl pull-down shade. Ugh. Morning. I bury my head deeper in my nest of pillows, yanking the sheets and blankets up over me. Dimly I hear the sound of something shrilling, and in my half-asleep, half-awake state, I realize that it's my phone ringing. I ignore it, trying to drift back into the uneasy sleep that I have been in since the second nightmare. The phone quits after a few more rings, and I heave a grateful sigh. Whoever it is, I am not in any mood to talk right now. Then, to my dismay, the damned thing starts shrilling again, and I groan. I'm gonna have to answer it, or unplug the damned thing. I decide answering is probably the lesser of the two evils, so, with the pillow still over my head, I unbury an arm from beneath the covers and reach failingly across the bed to the phone on my nightstand. Closing fumbling fingers around the receiver, I lift it deftly from the hook. *Step right up, ladies and gentlemen! See the fabulous Pete Malloy, the man who can answer the phone while STILL half-asleep!* I slip it underneath the pillow over my head, pressing it to my ear. "Yeah?" I mumble. "Talk."

"I'm sorry, did I wake you up, Pete?" asks Jim Reed's voice.

I roll over onto my back, shoving the pillow off of my head. The sudden movement sends sharp darts of pain shooting through my skull. "Yeah, but that's okay," I yawn, looking at the clock. It's ten a.m. "What's up?" I press my thumb and forefinger to my forehead, trying to scour the pain away. It doesn't work. My head still pounds out jungle drum signals to the rest of my sore, aching body.

"I...uh...just wanted to call and see how you were doing," he says, embarrassment creeping into his voice.

"You wanted to call and make sure I hadn't decided to kill myself, didn't you?" I accuse.

He hesitates. "Well, yeah, I did. You really had me worried yesterday morning, Pete. I've never heard you talk like that before. It kind of scared me, to be honest."

I rub my face wearily. "Don't worry, I was just talking out of my head. I was tired when I said all that crap. Don't read too much into it, Jim." My voice sounds hoarse and raspy.

"Are you sure you're alright, Pete? You sound funny," he says with concern.

"I'm fine," I tell him, even though I really feel like crap. "I just did so much talking over the last twenty-four hours that I've nearly lost my voice."

He is quiet for a moment. "How come you didn't come back to see me yesterday afternoon? I thought maybe you would."

"Sorry," I tell him. "I came home and fell asleep until Mac stopped by and woke me up around one. Then I had to do some errands. I figured you'd probably be tired and not up to company just yet."

"You mean your errands were more important than me?" he asks, and even over the phone lines, I can hear the plaintive hurt in his voice.

"No," I hedge. "They weren't more important than you. But I myself wasn't really good company yesterday. I didn't want to inflict my crappy attitude on you."

He snorts. "Why? You do it all the time at work."

"I DO not inflict my crappy attitude on you at work, Reed. My attitude only becomes crappy when you ruin the shift by whining about something," I snap, then I start coughing, as the harshness in my voice irritates my sore throat. "And if you called to complain about my attitude, I'm hanging up."

"No, I called to see if you were planning on stopping by anytime today to see me," he says. "I'm not in the ICU anymore, I'm down on a regular floor. The room number is 308."

"Well...I don't know. I'll try." I cough again, trying clear my throat. "Is...uh...Jean going to be there or will she be gone at any particular time?"

"She's going to go home at noon to be with Jimmy for a while," he says, irritation creeping into his voice. "Her parents are watching him right now. She wants to give them a break and spend some time with him. She hasn't seen much of him since yesterday." He hesitates. "You know, Pete, she told me about what she said to you outside my room yesterday. She's really sorry. She'd like to make it up to you somehow. It's really bothering her that she hurt you."

I sigh heavily. "She didn't hurt me, Jim. She just spoke some hard-to-swallow truths." I look at my clock again. "I'll tell you what, I'll stop by and see you after she leaves, okay? I don't really want to face her right now."

"Why? She's offered to make it up to you, and she'll be hurt if you don't let her do that."

"Look, Jim, I'm dealing with my own problems right now. I don't need to carry the burdens of someone else's soul along with my own. I'm not a priest taking confessions, you know." My voice sounds harder, harsher than I intend.

"Well, fine." I can hear the exasperation in his voice. "I guess if you want to be that way. But you can't stay that way forever, you know. You're going to have to forgive her eventually."

"I realize that, Jim. But I just can't do it, not right now. I know you don't understand why, nor do I really expect you to. It's my own private battle. Got it?"

"A battle, huh?" he asks. "So who's your army, Pete?"

I close my eyes, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "I don't have an army, Jim," I tell him. "It's a solo battle."

"But you can't fight a battle without an army, Pete. Maybe you should let your friends be your army, huh?" he asks quietly.

I snort. "I think you've had too many painkillers, Jim. I don't need an army of friends to help me out. I can do this myself. I've faced my demons before, and I can sure as hell face them again. Now,

goodbye," I say, replacing the receiver with a click. I yawn and stretch, rubbing my head with my hands. I feel like I'm coming down with something, a cold or the flu maybe. My chest feels heavy and I shiver slightly, wondering if I'm still feverish. My head pounds and my stomach is still unsettled from earlier. But, I've fought through illnesses before. With a sigh, I throw back the covers. I might as well get up and start my day.

I run into Mac as he's getting on the elevator at Central Receiving. He has a bouquet of flowers freshly cut from Mary's garden. "For me?" I joke, as he pushes the elevator button to take us to the third floor. "You shouldn't have."

Mac scowls. "No, you idiot, they're for Jim. They're from Mary and the kids." He studies me intently. "You certainly don't look like you feel very well this morning. Your voice sounds hoarse. Are you coming down with something, Pete?"

I shrug. "Maybe. I know that if I am, I'm not getting too close to Jim. He doesn't need my germs right now."

He continues to give me the hairy eyeball as he edges ever-so-slightly away from me and my germs. "Yeah, you're right. And neither do I." The elevator stops on the third floor and we get out. "Is it that, or is it the nightmares?" he asks as we walk up the hallway.

I stop. "What nightmares are you talking about?" I ask him warily.

"I warned you yesterday about the nightmares you're sure to have after this incident," he says as he stops too. "Don't you remember?"

I nod. "Yeah, I remember." I shake my head and tell him a lie. "No, Mac. It's not nightmares that are making me feel this way. I just don't feel that hot today." I start down the hallway again, with Mac following behind me. "It's nothing that I can't handle."

"Maybe you need a good night's sleep," he tells me as he shoves the door to Jim's room open. "Better yet, a good week's worth of sleep."

"Ha-ha," I grumble. "Very funny." I follow Mac into Jim's room, hoping that Jean Reed is not within. To my relief, she's gone.

Jim is sitting up in bed, a lunch tray parked in front of him. He stops in the middle of spooning soup up to his mouth. "Hey!" he grins. "Mac, Pete! Great to see you guys!" He drops the soup spoon back into the bowl and some of the liquid splashes up on his hospital gown.

Mac lays the flowers on a table near his bed. "These are from Mary and the kids. They send their love."

Jim picks up the bouquet. "Thanks, I'll have Jean take them home and put them in some water for me. Tell Mary and the kids I appreciate the thought." He looks quizzically at the two of us. "Who needs a week's worth of sleep, Mac?" he asks, evidently having caught the last bit of our conversation.

Mac jerks a thumb at me. "Pete does."

Jim pushes the lunch tray away from him. "Why? Did you have a hard time getting to sleep last night, Pete?"

I shoot Mac a glare. "No, I didn't," I lie to him, too. What the hell, I might as well make lying a habit. "I just don't feel all that great." I approach the foot of his bed. "So I'm not going to stay long to see you. I don't want you getting whatever I've got."

"Has Sergeant Friday been in to interview you yet, Jim?" Mac asks.

"Yeah, he was here last night, after they moved me back to the regular floor." Jim looks at Mac, then at me. "Why? Shouldn't he have been? I thought he was the one conducting the shooting investigation."

"Yeah, he is," Mac tells him. "I think he's out to sink Pete. He got pretty harsh with Pete during his interview at the station. I think he believes Pete shot Walters in cold blood."

Jim stares at him. "You're kidding, right? Pete killed Walters because Walters was going to shoot him. Didn't Sergeant Friday understand that?"

"Yeah, to a certain degree," I say hesitantly. "I think he feels I let my emotions get in the way of the trigger. Plus, he's pretty insistent on the fact that I didn't follow protocol and didn't have good control of the situation from the very start."

Mac clears his throat. "I obtained a copy of the interview with Pete, along with Sergeant Friday's report that he'll submit to the shooting review board for tomorrow. It's pretty critical of Pete's whole handling of the incident, from start to finish."

Jim looks at me. "I didn't think you handled it wrong, Pete. You handled it the same way I would've."

I shake my head. "No, you wanted to back out and call for assistance, remember? You didn't even want to go into that damned house in the first place. I should've listened to you and kept us out of there until our back-up arrived. If I had, none of this would've happened in the first place. And that's Friday's bone of contention. That I failed to follow protocol and because of it, the situation ended up getting out of my control, resulting in you getting hurt and in me shooting a man. And, like I said, he's under the impression that I allowed my emotions to rule the outcome."

Jim frowns. "Well, then that would explain why he was so interested in what we were doing in the house prior to Stuart Walters entering."

Mac nods. "Yeah, I'm going to get a transcript of your interview, too, Jim."

Jim picks at the blanket. "I didn't tell him anything that wasn't true, Pete, and I hope you realize that."

"I know you did," I tell him. "I would *expect* you to tell the truth. I'd be mighty disappointed if you lied in any of your statement, Jim."

Jim shrugs. "There wasn't much to tell from my standpoint, anyway. I was only in the house with you up until the time I left to go get sick outside. Then, when Stuart Walters came back, I only struggled with him for a minute or so, until he grabbed that statue and brained me with it. After I fell down to the floor, he grabbed my revolver and shot me. That's the last thing I remember, is the bullet hitting me in the side. Then I passed out. When I came to, I could hear him talking down in the basement, Pete. That's when I managed to get to my feet and go to the top of the stairs, turning on the light. I heard the gunshot, and when I got down the steps, you were standing over him with your gun. I could see my revolver still clutched in Walters' hand. And that's it. That's all I told Sergeant Friday." He looks at Mac. "He has to believe that Pete only killed Walters in self-defense, Mac."

Mac exchanges a look with me. "Well, Friday's went after Pete with a vengeance. In fact, it's bad enough that I've asked the shooting review board if they'd allow Pete to have an advisor sit with him during the hearing."

"Who?" Jim asks. "You?"

He shakes his head. "No, I can't do it. I was privy to the interview with Pete, so that counts me out. If the review board allows it, I've got two guys in mind. One's a civilian lawyer, the other is someone from within the department."

"But I don't understand. Why would Pete need an advisor? All he has to do is tell the board the truth. That should be good enough, shouldn't it?" Jim asks.

"In most cases, yes, it would be," Mac tells him. "But with the cloud of vindictiveness hanging over this investigation, courtesy of Sergeant Friday, I think I'd feel a helluva lot better if I knew Pete had an advisor to lean on during the review." He looks at his watch. "And speaking of which, I best be going. I need to get back home and wait for one of the review board members to call me. They're supposed to let me know sometime today if they've approved the advisor request. If they do, I'll have to get ahold of whichever one of my guys I asked to take the advisory role, see if they'll still do it." He starts towards the door. Then he turns around and looks at me. "Oh, and Pete?"

I look back at him. "Yeah, Mac?"

"Two years," he says, pointing at me. "Remember. Two years. I've got it marked on my calendar. I'm holding you to it." With a smile, he opens the door and leaves.

Jim studies me. "What was that all about?"

I shake my head, remembering the discussion I'd had with Mac about taking the sergeants' exam in two years. "Nothing. It was nothing." I continue to stand at the foot of Jim's bed. "So, do you need me to get you anything? Magazines? Books? A cute little nurse?"

He grins. "Nah, I think Jean would put the kibosh on the cute little nurse. Besides, I think they're gonna release me by tomorrow, if not sooner."

"Why? Are they that sick of you already?" I joke.

"Nope. The concussion is healing, and the wound in my side is, too. It looks a lot worse than it really is." He studies me. "You know, you really don't look so good, Pete. Are you sick?" he asks with concern.

I shake my head. "I dunno. I feel like I'm coming down with something. Maybe that's it."

"Or maybe it's the hell you've been through in the last twenty-four hours, huh?"

"Maybe," I tell him, my voice non-committal.

Reed is quiet for a moment, then he speaks. "Hey, Pete, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, what is it?"

He picks at the blanket again. "I don't know if it was a result of the medication they gave me or what, but I've been having some rather hellish nightmares whenever I go to sleep." He looks up at me. "Nightmares about that house...and what we saw inside of it. Is that normal?"

I nod. "Yeah, sometimes it is."

"Have you had any nightmares?" he asks.

I evade the question, going over to gaze out the window. It looks out over the parking lot of Central Receiving. I watch the cars coming and going for a minute before I speak. "No, I haven't had any," I lie.

"You haven't?" he asks, sounding somewhat shocked.

I turn back around to face him, but I keep my eyes from meeting his, for fear that he will know that I'm not being honest with him. "No, Jim. I haven't."

He stares at me. "I'm surprised, Pete. Usually something like this is bound to trigger nightmares in anyone." He narrows that one good eye of his, studying me intently. "Are you SURE you aren't having nightmares?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" I snap with irritation. "I'm fine, Jim! I just don't feel the greatest today, that's all." I look at my watch. "I should get going. Jean will be coming back in a little bit, and I don't want to be here when she gets here."

He sighs, rolling his eye. "Look, Pete, I wish you'd meet with her and talk to her. She's really upset over this, and she's feeling pretty low about what she said to you."

I look at my hands. "Jim, I'm not really angry with her or anything, I just don't want to see her right now."

"So that tells me that you ARE angry at her," he says, his tone flat.

"No, I'm not," I tell him. "I'm just not in the mood right now to deal with her, okay?"

"No, it's not okay!" he snaps. "Pete, she's my WIFE! And you're my best friend! In an ideal world, my wife and my best friend would get along famously!"

"This isn't an ideal world, Jim, in case you haven't noticed," I tell him quietly.

"I realize that," he says in exasperation. "But I don't want you two fighting with each other. I don't want any bad blood between the two of you."

"There's no bad blood between us, Jim..."

"Have you stopped to think that she's beating herself up over this?" he interrupts. "She was in tears when she told me what had happened, and she can't understand why you won't talk with her, Pete. Won't you at least consider her feelings?" he asks.

"Maybe she shoulda considered mine, Jim. I went through hell yesterday, and I certainly didn't need her jumping down my throat about my not keeping you from harm," I tell him sharply.

"But she's sorry, Pete," he says.

I start towards the door, ignoring him. I put my hand on the knob and open it.

"Look, Pete, she's really sorry," he calls to me. "Believe me, she is!"

I glance back at him, my mouth set in a grim line. "Yeah, me too," I tell him.

"Pete!" he yells once more.

I stop. "What?" I ask in annoyance, turning around to face him again.

He looks at me, his gaze quite clear and readable in even his one good eye. "Don't make me choose between my wife and my best friend," he warns coolly. "I can guarantee that you won't come out the winner, Pete."

"I never expected to come out the winner," I tell him, my tone just as cool as his. With that, I step out of his room.

Jean Reed is coming down the hallway as I head towards the elevators. She grabs my arm as I pass her. "Pete," she says. "Please stop. I want to talk with you." Her brown eyes plead with me.

I stop, looking down at her, my gaze impassive. "I'm a little busy, Jean. Can't it wait?" I ask. "I've got other things to do."

She studies my face. "Well, yeah, I guess," she says tentatively. "Why don't you stop by the house after Jim gets released?" she says. "We'll talk then, okay?"

"We'll see," I tell her, brushing past her in order to get to the elevators. I don't look back at her, nor does she call to me. When the doors to the elevator open, I step inside, punching the button for the

ground floor. I raise my head just long enough to see her still standing there in the hallway, looking at me, an expression of dismay and sorrow upon her face.

I look away, and then the elevator doors slide shut, closing my view of her off for good.

As I sit in the parking lot of Central Receiving, a strange, restless energy takes hold of me. I start the Mustang up and head out, not sure of where I'm really going. I still feel crappy, but right now, home is the LAST place I want to be. I reach over and flick on the radio, something that I usually don't listen to in the car that much. It's still tuned to a local rock-and-roll station. Jim Reed dialed it to that station the last time we went fishing together. I try to remember when that was...was it in August? July? I think hard. It had to be July. *God, has it really been that long?* I think to myself. Usually Jim and I would try to go fishing at least once or twice a month. But, more and more, he's spending his time with his young family, which is only right. I have no monopoly on his free time. But it used to be, the two of us would get the hell out of Dodge for a day, recharge our batteries with some relaxing fishing. It didn't matter that we didn't always catch anything, it was just getting away from the city and out into the fresh air that did us good. Well, it did *me* good, anyway. I can't speak for him.

Then, the memory of Jim's pro-and-con list flashes in front of me, and I feel a sharp little ping of betrayal. I would never let on that I saw his list, or even that it hurt me, but I can't help feeling like I'm being sold down the river somehow. While I've always known that Jim wanted to go into the detectives' division eventually, I figured he'd take the exam the same time I took the sergeants' exam. That way, we'd make the leap together. I never figured he'd take the jump before me, and the thought of him advancing in his career before I do makes me feel forlorn, left behind. I was the one who trained him, took the impetuous young rookie that he was, and fed him my knowledge, my skills, eventually shaping him up into one of the best cops in the division. So if he leaves patrol work now, in pursuit of a higher calling with the detectives, where does that put me? Probably in charge of another impetuous rookie, and I'll have to teach *that* kid my skills and knowledge, starting all over again on a blank sheet of paper. I shake my head. *Crap, I'm getting too old to be training a new kid now.* A wave of self-pity and anger washes over me. *Where in the hell does Jim Reed get off dumping me for the lure of a detective's shield? He should be damned grateful for all that I've taught him. Hell, he should be damned grateful that I didn't follow through with my original intention of leaving the job on his very first night! If I had, he might not have gotten a good of teacher as I am.* Then I chide myself for thinking such selfish thoughts. After all, whatever Jim Reed chooses to do with his life, I have no choice but to accept it. Like Mac pointed out, he knows what's best for him. I don't. But I can't help but wonder just how much of his wanting to pursue detective work is really Jean's doing.

I reach over and turn off the radio. The disc jockey's yammering is getting on my nerves. Now I know why I don't listen to rock-and-roll all that much; it's not the songs themselves that I don't like, it's the stupid disc jockeys and their silly prattling. My stomach gives a rumble, and I suddenly realize that I'm hungry. I haven't eaten anything since this morning, when I had a half-a-slice of unbuttered toast and black coffee. If I were on a diet, that would be fine, but I'm not. I spot an eatery, Dinah's Kitchen, and the cutesy name, plus my ever-increasing pangs of hunger force me to pull in. It's busy, but not too busy, that I'll die of starvation before I get served. And the best thing about it is, it's not in my normal home district, nor that of Central Division. No one here knows me, or what I do for a living, and that's just fine by me.

A cheery, pink-cheeked waitress with an enormous blonde beehive smiles at me as I enter the diner. "Hi, hon! Counter or booth?" she asks, her grin revealing perfect white teeth. She bats heavily-mascaraed brown eyes at me. Her nametag on her lime-green polyester waitress uniform reads "Jolene."

I scan the diner. Four businessmen in dark suits sit at the counter, while a family of four occupy one booth, and a starry-eyed couple occupy another. A trio of young women sit in a third booth. I don't relish sitting at the counter. "Booth," I say.

"Just for one?" the waitress asks, cocking her head. "What's the matter, hon? You shy or somethin'?" A faint southern drawl colors her words.

I shake my head. "No, not shy," I tell her. "I just want to sit and watch the world go by."

"Alrighty, then," she says, grabbing a laminated menu from a rack near the cash register. "I've got the perfect spot for you, hon." She leads me across the diner to a corner booth, plate glass windows on my left and to my front. She gestures to the booth. It's right in back of the three young women, who glance up at me and then lean towards one another, giggling and whispering. "Best spot in the house," she says. "Perfect for watching the world go by."

"Thanks," I say, sliding into the brown vinyl booth. I peruse the menu she plops in front of me. She leaves and goes to get a glass of ice water to accompany my lunch. "What's the specials?" I ask, when she returns and sets the glass of water in front of me.

She pulls a pencil from behind her ear, and an order pad from her apron pocket. "Well," she draws. "We've got homemade chicken noodle soup, along with a club sandwich and a side salad. Then there's the meatloaf sandwich special. You get a meatloaf sandwich, an order of homefries, and a side salad." She taps her order pad with the pencil. "Do either of those sound good to you, hon?"

I nod. "I'll take the chicken noodle soup special," I tell her, handing her back the menu.

"Good choice," she whispers. "The meatloaf sandwich is Arnie's way of getting rid of leftovers," she says. "The soup was made fresh this morning." She smiles at me again. "What would you like to drink with that, hon?"

"Coffee is fine," I tell her.

"Cream or sugar?"

"No, black."

She tucks the pencil back behind her ear. "I'll be right back with your coffee, hon," she says. "Your lunch should be ready in a few minutes."

"Okay, thanks," I tell her, surreptitiously watching the entrancing wiggle in her walk as she heads behind the counter. But, she peppered her conversation with way too many "hons" for me to be anything more than mildly interested. She hands the order to a white-hatted cook, then picks up a pot of hot coffee from a double burner, along with a white ceramic mug, and returns back to me. She sets the mug in front of me, pouring the coffee with another big grin at me. I smile back, but I know it doesn't reach my eyes. I don't exactly feel like turning on the Malloy charm right now.

"There ya go," she chirps. "Can I get you anything while you wait?"

I shake my head. "No, this is just fine, thanks."

"Sure thing," she says, then bustles off to wait on one of the gesturing businessmen seated at the counter.

The family of four is seated across the way from me. The parents look tired and wrung out, while their two little boys dance around in the booth with frantic energy. They shoot straw wrappers at each other, ignoring their mother's repeated requests to sit down. One of the little boys, a tiny towhead around the age of four, slides out of the booth and scampers down the aisle. He stops at my booth. "Hi!" he exclaims with a wave of his hand. "I'm Donnie! Who are you?"

I look at him with a half-grin. "Hi, Donnie. I'm Pete," I say. I turn my attention back to my coffee, hoping that he'll return to his parents.

Instead, he climbs into the booth across from me. His brother, another towhead about six years old, has also left the family booth and joined him. "I'm Stevie," he announces brightly. He plops a toy cap gun on the table. "I'm the sheriff of this here town," he says in a fierce little growl. "And I'm gonna clean it up from all the bad guys."

"I'm his depity," his younger brother tells me, fingering a tiny plastic badge pinned to his t-shirt. "I'm gonna help Stevie." He nods affirmatively.

Stevie points the cap gun at me. "Are you a bad guy or a good guy?" he asks.

I look across the diner to the weary parents for help. I'm not exactly in the mood to deal with little kids right now, especially rambunctious ones. The mother catches my eye, then looks away from me, staring out the window. She runs a hand tiredly through her dishwater blonde hair. Her husband completely ignores me.

Stevie jabs the cap gun at me once more. "I asked you once, you dirty varmint. Are you a good guy or a bad guy?"

I sigh. "Good guy, I guess." I point to his mom and dad. "Shouldn't you two head back to your parents now?"

Donnie shakes his head. "Nope." He picks up a straw from the holder on the table. He aims it at his brother, shooting the paper off in a huff of air. He laughs as it hits Stevie in the face.

Stevie swings the cap gun around to him. "Stop that!" he demands. "Or I'll take away your badge, Deputy Donnie!"

Donnie's lower lip quivers and tears fill his blue eyes. He draws in a breath, then commences screaming at the top of his lungs. He swats at his brother with his palm, smacking him on the arm.

Stevie swats back, and the two of them trade tiny-fisted blows, their shoes squeaking on the vinyl booth seat. I move my cup of coffee out of smacking range, and look over at the parents again. They continue to ignore their fighting offspring.

I reach across the table and grab both of them by their arms. "Hey, now, stop it!" I tell them sharply. "It's not nice to hit other people!" Normally, I don't take it upon myself to discipline other people's kids, but this is ridiculous. I came in here to eat, not play referee for a pair of squalling children.

The mother slides out of the booth when she sees me grab her kids by the arms. She scurries over to me. *At last, she's going to remove them from my booth*, I think to myself. Instead, she lands on me with the fury of a momma bear. "Get your hands off of my sons!" she snaps.

Her husband comes up behind her, a dark glower plastered across his moon face. "What kind of person are you?" he demands angrily. "Punishing kids that aren't your own!"

I sit back in my seat. "Maybe if you'd discipline them yourselves, you wouldn't have to worry about others doing it for you," I tell them coolly. "I came in here to have lunch, not be accosted by a pair of rambunctious kids." I look around at the other diners, all of whom have fallen silent, their eyes focused on the mini-drama playing out in front of them. Great. Now I'm dinner theater. I turn back towards the parents. "I don't want any trouble," I tell them. "I just want to eat my lunch in peace."

The mother yanks her offspring out of the booth. Both of them let loose with ear-piercing shrieks loud enough to shatter the hardest of crystal. "Why the NERVE!" she snarls at me. "They just wanted to visit with you! Couldn't you be nice to them?"

I gaze at her wearily. "Lady, allowing your sons to 'visit' with strangers is a good way to get them kidnapped or molested. As much as you'd like to believe that there are decent people in the world who wouldn't harm a hair on a child's head, you also need to realize that there are folks out there who would...even to the point of killing a child, just for their own sick purposes." I turn my gaze back towards the window. "You need to teach your sons not to approach strangers so readily. That is, if you want to see them grow up safely."

She stares at me, open-mouthed. "Well, I NEVER!" she snaps, giving the two bellowing brats a good yank on their arms. She drags them down the aisle to the exit, their shrieks and screams echoing throughout the diner. The father huffs up to the cash register to pay their lunch tab. He leaves the diner, giving me one last baleful look over his shoulder. The other diner customers resume eating their meals, much to my relief. The last thing I need right now is a riot on my hands, just because I decided to discipline someone else's kids. That would cap this whole experience quite nicely, to have to deal with a riot on top of the shooting review board. Mac is liable to put me under house arrest.

I rub my forehead. The headache that was circling this morning has landed full-bore behind my eyes. I fumble in my pockets for the tin of aspirin I picked up before I left my apartment. I don't normally have the need to carry aspirin with me on a regular basis, but the last couple of days has been rough. I find the tin, pop it open, and take two aspirin out. I wash them down with a swig of coffee, putting the tin back into my pocket. I look back out the plate glass windows at the world passing by.

Jolene comes out of the kitchen, my lunch balanced neatly on a tray in the crook of her arm. She grabs the pot of coffee on her way past the double burners. She sets the food down in front of me with a small flourish. "Here you go, hon," she tells me. "Sorry about those darned kids. I warned their parents to keep 'em under control, but they told me to mind my own business." She freshens up my coffee.

"Yeah," I say. "And those are the kind of parents that wonder why their kids get kidnapped or molested."

She shakes her head. "Don't I know it," she says, clucking her tongue. "I always told my kids never to approach strangers at all. A good whomp on the butt a time or two drove that lesson home, I'll tell you that." She smiles at me. "You enjoy your lunch now, okay? I'll be back in a little bit to see if you need anything."

"Sure, thanks," I tell her, with a small smile of my own. The smell of the hot soup wafts past my nose, and my stomach rumbles loudly. I guess I didn't realize exactly *how* hungry I was until just now. I unwrap my silverware from the paper napkin and dig in gratefully. The chicken noodle soup is indeed homemade, with fat curly egg noodles, and large chunks of chicken floating around. Diced carrots and celery swim in the steaming broth. I take a tiny bite of it, catching an egg noodle on the edge of my spoon, along with a piece of chicken. It tastes rather good going down, so I set about enjoying my lunch.

The three girls in the booth behind me are whispering. I have them pegged as secretaries or shopgirls, as evidenced by their stylish, yet demure skirt-and-sweater sets, sensible heels, and pervasive cloud of Jean Nate. I didn't pay them much mind when I entered, but their hushed and heated tones catch my ears. They're seated to the back of me, so it isn't too hard to hear their conversation. I try not to eavesdrop as I eat, but their voices carry.

"I think he's cute," says one of them.

"Not cute, sexy," says another one. *"Really, really sexy."*

"I shouldn't be looking at another man anyway, I'm engaged to be married, you know," says the third.

"Oh, puh-leese! Just because you've got a ring on your finger doesn't mean you can't enjoy a look now and then, Debbie!" admonishes the first girl. "Do you think that David is going to stop ogling pretty women once you two get married? I think not!"

"Oh, be quiet! David does not ogle pretty women even now! He thinks it's just like cheating," says the engaged girl self-righteously.

"Yeah, he says that to your face, Deb, but you can bet that he does it himself when you're not with him. All men do."

"And that's probably not ALL he does by himself, if you know what I mean!" says the first girl archly.

"Okay, just for that, Janet, I am NOT speaking to you anymore today!" the girl called Debbie replies in a huff.

"I wonder what he's like in bed?" asks the second girl.

"Who, David? He's probably a grade-a-number-one dud!" snorts the one named Janet.

"No, I mean HIM!" the second girl giggles softly.

"That's all you think about, Kim, is what a man is like in bed," the girl called Debbie says haughtily.

"Well, can I help it?" the second girl hisses. "Just because you went and got yourself engaged to David the Dud doesn't mean the rest of us can't wonder about a man as sexy as he is, is like between the sheets."

"Yeah, Deb. We're free to wonder, while you're tied down to David the Ironing Board," giggles the girl called Janet. "You told us last week that he needed help in the boudoir area."

Their rather frank discussion makes me turn a bit red in embarrassment for the poor schmuck named David and the guy that they're currently talking about. I take a bite of my club sandwich and try to ignore their conversation again, but it drifts past my ears.

"He's probably married, Janet. A good-looking specimen like that is bound to be taken," Debbie says.

"I didn't see a ring on his finger," says the girl named Kim. "And believe me, I looked."

"That doesn't mean anything. Some guys don't like to wear wedding rings," the girl named Debbie points out.

"Oh my god, I just realized who he looks like!" says Janet excitedly. There is a hushed conference, but I can't make out any discernible words. I turn my attention back to my sandwich. I push the empty soup bowl away from me.

"Should I ask him if that's who he is?" asks the girl named Janet.

"Really now, Janet. Why would a movie star like him be in a diner like this?" asks the haughty Debbie.

I glance towards the businessmen at the counter. None of them are paying any attention to the girls, either, but I scan them as best I can out of curiosity, wondering if any of them looks like a particular movie star. I can see no resemblance at all, but that doesn't mean anything.

"Oh god, look at the time!" Debbie says with a gasp. *"We've gotta get going, or Miss Primrose will have our heads on a platter!"* There is a flurry of activity behind me as the three girls scramble to divvy up the check.

"Here, Deb, you pay the check," says the one named Janet. *"I'm going to ask him if that's who he is."*

"You AREN'T!" the one called Kim giggles. The three of them slide out of the booth, Debbie's heels clicking on the tile floor as she approaches the cash register.

With a grin, I watch out of the corner of my eye to see which of the unsuspecting businessmen the other two girls walk up to. I am mighty surprised when they stop at my table.

"Excuse me, sir?" one of them asks shyly.

I clear my throat. "Yes?" I ask, looking up at them with a small frown.

"Are you Martin Milner?" she asks, as the other girl giggles and buries her face in the first girl's shoulder. "You know, the guy that used to play on 'Route 66'?"

I shake my head. "Nope, sorry. I'm just an ordinary joe."

Both of them look slightly disappointed, then the first girl speaks. "You sure look like him," she continues. "You could be his twin." She shrugs. "Well, we had to ask. Sorry if we bothered you."

"Yeah," says the second girl. "It's really uncanny how much you look like him."

I smile at them a bit. Doesn't hurt to turn on the Malloy charm, especially when I'm faced with two attractive brunettes. "It's not a problem," I tell them with a wink.

Debbie whistles at them from the door of the diner. "Come ON!" she yells. "We're gonna be late!"

The two of them hustle across the diner, giggling and whispering like schoolgirls. I grin into my coffee. That's the first time I've ever been mistaken for a movie star.

Jolene the waitress returns with the pot of coffee to freshen up my cup. She begins removing my lunch dishes. "Can I get you anything else, hon?" she asks. "We've got some fresh-baked apple pie for dessert. Just took it out of the oven not more'n five minutes ago."

"Sure," I say. "I'll have a slice."

"Anything on the top?" she asks. "Whipped cream or vanilla ice cream?"

"Vanilla ice cream will be fine," I tell her.

"Be right back with it, hon," she says with a wink. She looks up as a lanky blonde girl enters the diner, dressed in an identical waitress uniform. The girl sashays up to Jolene, a smirk on her face. "Where in the hell have you been, Randa?" Jolene hisses at her. "You were supposed to be here at ELEVEN!" She points to the clock, which now reads 1:30. "Can't you tell time, girl?"

The girl yawns. "I overslept," she tells her. "I was out late last night." She smirks again, and I can tell that she's pushing Jolene's buttons deliberately.

Jolene shoves the lunch tray containing my dirty dishes at her. "Well, see if you can manage to take these back to the dishwasher, Randa, without breakin' any of 'em!" she snaps. The girl takes the tray with a roll of her eyes, and sashays back behind the counter. Jolene turns to me. "I swear, good help is hard to find nowadays," she says, shaking her head. She pats my shoulder. "I'll be right back with your pie, hon."

I resume watching out the window while waiting for my pie. I don't have too long of a wait, since Jolene returns shortly with a huge slice of crisp apple pie, a generous scoop of vanilla ice cream on top, melting down the sides of the still-hot pie. She sets it in front of me. "Here ya go, hon," she says. "Enjoy." She goes over to the cash register to wait on two of the businessmen who have left the counter in order to pay for their lunch.

I dig into the dessert. It's definitely homemade, just like my mom used make. The combination of the tart apples against the sweetness of the ice cream is like heaven to my taste buds. I make a mental note to think about coming back to this diner in the future. I'm nearly done with my dessert when Jolene approaches my table.

"Randa!" she yells over her shoulder. "Get out here! I'm takin' my break, so it's your turn to wait on the customers!" She looks at me with a grin. "Care if I join ya?"

I shrug. "Guess not," I tell her.

She slides into the booth across from me. She takes out a pack of cigarettes from her apron pocket, along with a disposable lighter. She removes a cigarette from the pack and lights it, blowing the smoke up towards the ceiling. She holds the pack out to me. "You want one?" she asks.

I shake my head. "No, thanks." I lean towards her. "Are all the waitresses this friendly in Dinah's Kitchen, or is it just you?" I ask, with a smile.

She chuckles. "No, it's just me. I figger everyone's entitled to good customer service, whether it's in a ten-cent diner or a million-dollar store." She gives me the once-over. "Now, you look like a fella with an interesting story to tell," she says. "Do you?"

I laugh a little. "Have an interesting story to tell? No, I'm just your average, ordinary guy. Not interesting at all. I'm pretty boring, to be honest."

She squints at me. "Funny, but you don't look boring to me. Or average." She taps the tabletop with her fingernail, leaning across to me with a conspiratorial whisper. "I saw the gun underneath your jacket," she says slyly. "So that tells me you're either a cop, a bodyguard, or a private eye. Which is it?"

I stare at her. "Maybe it's none," I tell her.

Jolene cocks her head. "I think you're a cop," she says, leaning back and taking a puff on her cigarette. She smiles again, revealing those even, white teeth. "But I know all the regular cops in this area," she says. "So either you're new or you're visiting."

I cut my gaze to the window. "You figure it out," I tell her, my tone short.

She cups her chin in her palm, her brown eyes studying me intently. "Visiting," she says firmly. "You're too old to be a rookie here."

"Maybe I'm a transfer," I say, still staring out the window.

Frowning, she scans me intently once more, like I'm a bug under a microscope. "No, now I've seen you somewhere," she says. "You look somewhat familiar to me. Have you ever been in here before?"

"Nope, I've never set foot in here before in my life."

"I *know* I've seen you somewhere," she states. She taps a fingernail against her lower lip. Then she slides out of the booth and goes over to the counter, picking up a newspaper that one of the businessmen discarded. She slides back into the booth, flicking through the black-and-white pages of the newspaper rapidly. "Ah-HA!" she says, folding the paper down to an article. She shoves the article across the table at me. "There!" She points to a story concerning the Walters' tragedy. "That's you!" she says. "You're that cop that shot that guy!"

I rub my forehead. "Maybe I'm not," I tell her wearily. "Maybe I'm Martin Milner, not Pete Malloy."

She laughs. "I doubt that Martin Milner would stroll into this diner anyway, let alone with a gun by his side."

"Will you keep your voice *down*?" I hiss. "There's no need to broadcast to everyone who I am!"

She stubs her cigarette out in the ashtray. "So, tell me. What was that scene *really* like?" Her eyes probe me with avid curiosity, like an insect reaching out inquisitive feelers. "Out there at that house."

I look at her coolly. "I'm not at liberty to tell you," I inform her. "It's a police matter." What is it about the average, ordinary, everyday Joes that makes them think police work is glamorous and exciting; a thrill-a-minute job that is constantly fraught with shootouts and car chases...when in cold, harsh reality, daily police work is quite boring. It's hours of dullness and routine, occasionally interspersed with on-the-edge-of-your-seat moments that leave your heart racing and the blood pounding in your skull.

"I heard that her estranged husband gutted them all like they were deer, and then cut their heads off, and put them on the mantle like they were hunting trophies."

I slide out of the booth. "I'd like to pay my tab, please," I tell her.

She catches my arm. "What's it like to shoot a man?" she asks. The eagerness in her eyes sickens me.

I pull my arm away. "What?" I ask in icy horror. "Why would you ask me a question like that?"

She shrugs. "Well, you cops are trained to kill, aren't you? So does taking a life like that bother you, or is it just another notch on your gun?" She slides out of the booth, smoothing down her green polyester uniform. She cocks her head, staring at me. "So? What's it like, pulling the trigger on a fellow human being?"

Anger flashes through me at such a personal question. "You wanna know what it's like to kill someone?" I snarl, my voice a low growl. I lean towards her slightly, adopting the pose that I use to convince criminals that it would not be in their best interests to tangle with me.

Jolene nods eagerly.

"It feels like *hell*," I say. "Watching some guy's head explode into a million little pieces from a bullet you put there." I step back a bit. "Now, I'd like to pay my check and leave," I tell her angrily.

Her big smile wavers a bit as she turns rather pale at my description. "Sure thing, hon," she says quickly, strutting up to the cash register. "You're not going to go away mad just 'cuz I asked you a question like that, are you?" she asks with a small pout as she takes my money for my lunch tab, plus her tip.

"It's a question you shouldn't have asked," I tell her as she hands me my change. "You have no right to ask something like that of a police officer." With that, I leave the diner and head back to my Mustang. I climb in and sit there for a moment, marveling at the utter audacity of some people. I hate it when I'm asked questions like that. They bother me. What am I supposed to answer? Yeah, I enjoyed pulling the trigger on that guy?

But you did, Pete, a voice whispers in my brain. *You enjoyed pulling the trigger on Stuart Walters, didn't you?*

With a disgusted sigh, I put the car into gear and leave the diner parking lot. I'm not sure where I'm headed, but I know I'm not going home just yet. I can't stand to be there alone, with just my thoughts to keep me company.

While driving, I reach over and flick the radio back on, hoping to take my mind off of the minor disaster that happened in the diner. A song, an old one by the Mamas and the Papas comes in. I tap my fingers on the steering wheel, keeping time with the beat. I turn the song up a little bit, since it was one that I liked.

Stopped into a church,

I passed along the way

Well, I got down on my knees

And I pretend to pray

You know the preacher likes the cold

He knows I'm gonna stay

California Dreamin'

On such a winter's day...

A tall steeple looms ahead of me on my right. *Is it forgiveness you need, Pete?* Jim Reed's voice whispers in my head. *Because you've done nothing, absolutely nothing, that you need to be forgiven for. You've committed no sin, no transgression that I know of.* Sitting at a stoplight, I close my eyes for a brief moment. *But I killed a man, another human being, in cold blood,* I argue with Reed's voice. *I hid under those steps and just waited for him to cross into my line of fire...then I pulled the trigger on him just as easily as if I were hooking a fish on a line. And he looked into my eyes right before I blew his head apart, realizing that we were the same under the skin. Both of us murderers, plain and simple.* The stoplight changes to green and I start up. The drive for the church is coming up to me, and after a split-second of hesitation, I pull into the gravel parking lot. I sit there for a moment, the Mustang idling, then I put the car into park and get out, locking the car behind me. I approach the imposing church warily, my feet crunching on the gravel. I glance at the marquee. *St. Matthew's Catholic Church* it reads in red letters against a brown background. *Father Jonathon O'Donnell presiding.* The white announcement sign below gives the topic of the upcoming Sunday sermon. *Unburden your soul!* it says. *Ask for forgiveness and uplift your spirits to Heaven above!*

Well, now, that's definitely something I could use, I think wryly to myself as I climb the steps to the heavy oaken doors. I pause, my fingers around the gold door handle. I look up at the ornate rose window over the entrance. Then I tug on the door, stepping across the threshold to the vestibule inside. Immediately, the sweet smell of incense and commingled perfume from the noon Mass drifts past me in the cool air currents inside the church. I take a few hesitant steps across the floor, pausing again by the font of holy water. I lean over it, catching sight of my reflection in the clear water beneath me. *Christ, I look like hell,* I muse. I look towards the enormous sanctuary, a cool marble aisle leading up to the altar up front. The interior of the church is ornate, with plenty of religious icons and statues standing mute attendance before me. I dip my fingers in the holy water and cross myself. Old habits die hard.

I slip into a polished wooden pew at the back of the church. While old habits drilled into me from rote lessons of childhood may die hard, I have no desire to cross that marbled aisle and have a seat at the front of the sanctuary. It's been years since I set foot in church, funerals and weddings notwithstanding; and it's been even longer since I set foot in the church of my childhood. After I escaped from Seattle, it became easier over time to just allow the excuse of work to slip into the way of my religious training. Not that I minded at all. I disliked church from an early age, the Latin phrases tripping my small tongue, the religious icons scaring me with their vivid intensity. My mother had

entertained hopes that I might enter the priesthood, but that was soon dashed, when I kept getting into trouble for talking back to the nuns. I can still feel the sting of a ruler across my knuckles, and I now rub them absentmindedly, the sharp blows coming back to my mind like it was yesterday. *Peter's not an unruly child by any means, Mrs. Malloy, Sister Mary Margaret Rose's voice rings in my ears. He just feels the need to constantly question everything. He's a little Doubting Thomas. And when he doesn't get his questions answered, he gets a little bit sassy-mouthed with us. You MUST impress upon him that it is not in our earthly powers to know the answers to everything. Only God knows all the answers. And please tell him to quit pulling Katherine Murphy's pigtails and threatening to kiss her on the playground! It's not very nice!*

I grin at the memory. Ah yes, Katie Murphy. I was pretty convinced in the third grade that I was going to marry that girl. I carried a torch for her all through grade school, junior high, and part of high school, until she moved out of Seattle and took my young heart with her. But, I was fickle then, as all kids are at that age, and another dark-haired beauty caught my eye, and we courted, all through the rest of high school. She was the one I ended up marrying, and the one that ended up breaking my heart for good.

I lean my arms on the back of the pew in front of me, resting my chin on my hands. I study the altar before me, the steps leading up to it covered in a scarlet runner. This church is much like the one from my childhood. I pick out religious icons familiar to me. Mother Mary with the Holy Infant cradled gently in her arms, a look of tenderness on her face as she gazes down at him; Virgin Mary standing alone, head bowed, her hands clasped together in silent prayer; Christ on the cross, the wicked crown of thorns atop his bowed head, and the nails driven through his body leaving tracks of crimson bleeding down his pale skin. As a kid, I used to be terrified of that image, fearing that if I looked at it long enough, He'd raise His head and look right into my soul, and know every little misdeed I'd ever done. I used to close my eyes every time I passed that crucifix, even the ones that hung in our house, superstitiously believing that if I kept my eyes firmly closed, Jesus would not see what I had done, and therefore not condemn me for it. Oh, sure, he's painted as a forgiving fellow, but who knows? Maybe he forgives just the minor sins, like pulling Katie Murphy's pigtails, and condemns you for the big ones, like stealing a swig...or two...or three...from the communal wine while acting as an altar boy. Needless to say, that was the ONE and ONLY time I ever committed that dire little act, since I couldn't get through the service without hiccupping quite loudly. Joey Donnelly, my co-altar boy, who had dared me to drink the wine in the first place, and then took a few healthy swigs himself, started giggling at my distress, and promptly fell down the steps of the altar, bloodying his nose in his ungraceful descent. The service was rushed through, with one altar boy hiccupping loudly into his hands, the other holding a bloody handkerchief to his nose, still giggling. And it was two woozy altar boys that got the bejesus beat out of them when they got home. I don't think either of us could sit down for a week. And we were promptly removed from our duties as altar boys, the priest deciding on two other youngsters, ones less likely to sample the wine before the service. I was pretty glad to get out of the altar boy role anyway. The stupid robes made me itchy and squirmy, and I could always count on Joey Donnelly to do some stupid thing to try and make me crack up into laughter.

I chuckle at the memory, the sound of my soft laughter getting swallowed up in the vastness of the church before me. But church was not all rules and dire consequences. There was often a bit of poetry and mysticism surrounding the services, and it's a loveliness that I have never seen since. I close my eyes, remembering my parents and I trudging across freshly-fallen white snow and entering the church, a blast of warm air stroking our chilled faces, to take our places among the others of the congregation, as candles flickered throughout the sanctuary, the solemn beauty and grace of Christmas Eve mass at midnight sending shivers of awe down my spine. And then, to leave the warmth and serenity of the church to return outside, following our footprints in the snow back home, looking up at the stars in the inky sky overhead, thinking that maybe...*just maybe*...there really *could* be peace on Earth and goodwill to men, if only for a day.

"You look a little lost," says a deep gentle voice behind me. "Or is it that you're found?"

I open my eyes and turn to see who's talking to me. An elderly fellow dressed in a grey sweater and dark pants stands next to the pew I'm in. He looks a bit like Spencer Tracy. "Oh," I say. "No, not exactly lost, but not exactly found, either," I tell him with a small grin. "I guess you could say I'm kind of in-between."

"It sounds like a bit of a rock and a hard place," he says, smiling back. "Is something troubling you?"

I look back at the altar. "No, I think I'm in need of some Divine Intervention right now," I say. "I don't suppose you could offer me that, could you?"

He chuckles, shaking his head. "Nope, sorry. That's a pretty big order to fill, after all." He slips into the pew ahead of me, sliding across it until he's nearly even with me. "What makes you think you need some Divine Intervention?"

I lean back in the pew with a shrug. "I dunno. Life, I guess." I gaze at the ornate stained-glass windows that cast patchworks of bright color across the church. "You know, I've always thought that the stained glass windows in a church are very beautiful," I say.

He looks at the windows, too. "I have to agree with you, son." He looks back at me. "Are you a regular church-goer, then?"

I shake my head. "No. I...uh...haven't been to church for a long time," I tell him somewhat sheepishly. "At least not the church of my childhood. I've been in a few others, mostly for funerals and weddings."

"You're Catholic, then, I take it?" he asks.

I nod. "I was. I was raised in the Catholic Church. I got my swats honestly with the rulers from some very strict nuns," I tell him wryly.

"And at an early age, too, I bet," he says with a wink. "Do you happen to have a name?"

"Pete," I tell him.

He holds his hand out for me to shake. "I'm John," he says.

"Father John," I say as I shake his hand. I jerk a thumb in the direction of the marquee outside the church. "I saw your name on the sign."

"Yeah, but you can just call me John," he chuckles. "Father John sounds so forbidding." He gestures to the church sanctuary. "Is there a reason why you haven't attended church recently?"

"My job. I don't have the time to go." I study my hands. "And, I think that I've lost my faith somewhere along the line."

"What makes you think you've lost your faith, my son?" he asks.

I am quiet for a moment, then I speak. "I...I...I have a buddy that's struggling with his conscience right now. I can't offer him any solace, because I can't find it myself." I don't tell him that it's me I'm talking about.

He studies me. "Why is your buddy having a problem with his conscience?" he asks quietly.

I look up at the crucifix hanging on the altar, then I look away, fearing that Jesus will open his eyes and gaze right at me. "He shot and killed a man, a criminal. The man had killed his family, and he attacked my friend and his partner, forcing him to shoot him in self-defense."

"I take it your buddy is a police officer then?"

"Yeah, with an area police department."

He shrugs. "Well, if he killed the man in self-defense, then it was surely justifiable, am I not right?"

"Yeah, but the thing is, he doesn't regret killing the man. He's struggling with that fact. He knows he should regret taking the life of a fellow human being, but he doesn't. And he's afraid that not being sorry for killing someone like that...well...it makes him no better than the man he shot. He's afraid he's going to Hell for it."

"I see," he says, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "And this...friend...has come to you and sought your counsel?"

"Yeah. But I don't know what to tell him, when I can't figure it out myself."

John is quiet, then he turns away from me, staring up at the altar. "I would tell you that your friend should realize that God is aware of what he did, and how he feels about it, and that God forgives him for it."

"But he can't forgive himself for it. He's beating himself up over this whole deal." I rub my forehead. "I don't know what to do. My religious teachings tell me that he broke the most important of the Ten Commandments in taking a life, and that the blot of not regretting what he did will doom him to hell for all eternity." I look at John. "What should I tell him, John? He's bearing the guilt pretty hard."

John turns back to me and studies me. "Pete, what you did was necessary to protect yourself from a very dangerous and very evil man. While you may not feel sorrow for his death, or even regret, I assure you, it is not inherently evil of you to think that way." He shrugs again. "Who knows? You may never feel regret for killing him. But God understands that, and he forgives you. Trust me."

I stare at him. "How did you know I was talking about myself?" I ask.

"I can see it in your face, son. It's evident in your eyes," he tells me gently. "The eyes are the window to the soul, you know. And it looks to me like you're carrying an awfully large weight upon your spirit."

"But I'm worried about the fate of my soul," I tell him. "I'm afraid that what I did makes me a cold-blooded killer." I look back down at my hands. "I met the eyes of the man I killed, just before I pulled the trigger, and he knew that I wasn't sorry I was going to kill him. He could see it reflected back to him." I sigh, running a hand through my hair. "In a way, it's pretty ironic. He didn't regret killing his family in the house upstairs, and I don't regret killing him."

John cocks his head. "You're the police officer who killed that Stuart Walters, aren't you?" he asks.

I drop my gaze to the floor. "Yeah, I am."

"I understand that he attacked your partner, shooting and wounding him, correct?"

I nod. "Yeah. He was in the upstairs of the house when Walters came back. I was still down in the basement of the house, and I didn't get back up in time to help my partner." I sigh heavily again. "And yet another burden upon my soul. The guilt I feel for allowing my partner to get injured."

"And God understands that, too, Pete. He forgives you for it. Has your partner done that, too?"

"Forgiven me?" I ask. "Yeah, I don't think being upset with me for allowing him to get hurt has even crossed his mind."

He gestures to the church. "Sometimes all that God requires is a leap of faith, Pete, that you believe in Him and His forgiveness for your sins."

I cough. "But it's pretty hard for me to take that blind leap of faith, John. I'm not normally a follower of such an idea. I tend to question before I jump, do you understand?" I look at him. "I'm not in the habit of just flinging myself into the great wide open and expecting something to catch me before I hit the ground."

"Maybe it's not such a great leap as you think it is, Pete. Maybe it just requires a couple of steps in the right direction."

"But what direction is that?" I ask. "I don't know which way to turn, John."

"It's not always a flashing neon sign, Pete, that tells you which way to go. Sometimes you have to listen to the map of your heart, of your soul, and let them guide you in the right direction." He points to the crucifix. "Your religious upbringing taught you that Jesus died on the cross for your sins, right?" When I nod, he continues. "It's silly then, to place yourself on a cross of your own self-making, just because you feel no remorse for killing a murderer in your own self-defense. You need to climb down from your cross, and forgive yourself, Pete. That's the most important thing you can do in the eyes of God."

"Maybe," I say quietly. "But it's a pretty hard thing to do right now, especially when I'm being condemned by my departmental superiors for not following protocol...not to mention my partner's wife, who thinks that I should have kept her husband from harm...which I should have." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I am just having a really hard time facing all of this, dealing with what happened."

John shrugs. "So it happened. It's a tragedy, to be sure, but it wasn't something you or your partner could've prevented from the start, am I right?"

I shake my head. "No, the mother and her children were already dead when we entered the house to do a welfare check on them."

"So you couldn't have stopped their deaths, unless you'd been right there in that house the moment that her husband murdered them all." He taps the pew with a knuckle. "And what transpired after the discovery of the bodies was just a strange, cruel twist of fate. If it hadn't of been you and your partner that discovered the family, it would've been another set of police officers, perhaps ones that weren't as strong as you and your partner are."

"But I'm worried that Jim is *not* as strong as I am," I tell him. "He's not faced a lot of crises like I have, and I'm afraid that this is going to bother him for a good long while, maybe even making him decide to quit the force."

"How long have you and Jim been partners?" he asks.

"Five years. I was his training officer." I hesitate, closing my eyes. "And he was the one who pulled me through a very dark period of my life," I say softly. "If he hadn't of come along when he did, if my superiors hadn't of decided to pair him as a rookie with me, I would've quit the force myself." I draw in a deep breath. "In fact, I was going to quit. His very first night on the job was supposed to be my last."

"Why? What happened that made you want to quit?" he asks.

"My partner prior to Jim got killed in an alley in back of a warehouse. We surprised the guy who was trying to break in. He shot and killed my partner...while I was still back at the squad car, radioing for help. I never quite forgave myself for letting him get killed like that. He left behind a wife and a small baby."

"Have you forgiven yourself now for it?"

I shake my head. "No, not really. It still weighs heavily on my soul, whenever something triggers the memory. I have tried to let time ease the pain of the memory, and it has to some extent, but it's still there, in the back of my mind, in the back of my heart."

"How long have you been a police officer, Pete?"

"Twelve years. Why?"

"In those twelve years, how much evil and suffering do you think that you've seen on the job?"

"More than the average person," I say. I fiddle with the collar of my jacket. "A lot. Probably a lot more than I can count."

"And how much goodness have you seen, how much have you experienced or committed yourself?"

I am quiet for a moment. "Again, a lot. More than I can count."

"So, you are inherently a good man. You've taken the burden of policing an often lawless and cruel society, without any thanks, and with very little recognition."

I shrug. "So? It's my job. I get paid to do it, and I do it well."

He smiles slightly. "In some books, that would qualify you for sainthood."

I laugh dryly, shaking my head. "Oh, I don't think I'm quite saint material, John."

"Maybe you don't think so, but what you do, what you and your partner do as police officers, day in and day out, is for the greater good of humanity. You surely can't deny that."

"Try explaining that to some angry bit of humanity that just received a speeding ticket from one of us," I tell him wryly.

"Think about it, Pete," he tells me softly. "Think about what all your job entails on a daily basis. You see people at their worst, and very rarely at their best."

I nod. "True. We're there when they want us to be, and we're there when they don't. But I don't understand how this is going to help my partner or I either one. It's all just a bit of religious mumbo-jumbo, if you ask me."

"If you were strong enough to survive seeing your first partner get shot, then you're strong enough to pull the two of you through this ordeal, trust me," he says. "If you've taught Jim how to weather such crises before, and he's learned by watching you, then I don't think I'd worry too much about him not being capable enough to handle this."

"But what do I tell Jim?" I ask. "He's bound to ask me questions I can't answer, like why did God let something like this even happen?"

John nods. "Yes, a good question it is, too. I can't give you any words of wisdom to tell him, other than God has His reasons for what He does, and it's not in our earthly rights to question those reasons."

"Sounds like a pretty pat answer to me," I tell him.

"It's the only thing I can tell you, Pete. I've often questioned the Lord myself, but his reasons for His actions are never clear to us mortals. You just have to trust that God has plans for all of us, and some of those plans may not be what we'd expect, or even like." He shrugs. "Little comfort, I know, but it's the best that I can do."

I stand up. "Yeah, well, thanks for the advice, John," I tell him, shaking his hand again.

He smiles. "I'm glad to be of help."

I start towards the exit.

"Pete?" he calls to me.

I turn back around. "Yeah Father?"

"Take the leap," he says. "It may not be as big as you think."

I smile. "I'll try." But whether I actually will or not, I don't honestly know.

The phone is ringing when I get back to my apartment. I have a bagful of groceries in my arms, so I set them down on the table and go answer the phone. "Yeah?" I ask as I pick up the receiver.

"Pete, it's Mac," says Mac's voice. "I just heard from the board. They've okayed the advisor, but there's a small hitch."

"Okay, what's that?" I ask.

"The one guy, the civilian lawyer that I had in mind, he can't do it. Something's come up in a case he's working on, and he won't be available tomorrow. So the advisor is going to be the other fella, the one from the department itself."

"And that's a problem how?" I ask. "I think I'd actually rather have someone within the department act as an advisor for me anyway."

"Well, he can't meet with you until tomorrow morning to go over the case with you."

"Great," I say sourly. "I get an advisor, but don't have time to prep for the review. It's like walking into a history exam unprepared."

"Well, now, I wouldn't think that way, Pete," he tells me. "The guy is pretty sharp, so he'll know what's going on. He's been before a board himself in the past. He's up on the rules of conduct that the board requires. He knows what kinds of questions they're going to ask you tomorrow." Mac clears his throat. "Besides, I took the liberty of taking all the information I had available to me over to him just a little bit ago. He'll have time to go over the reports on file, and plan a defense, if necessary."

"So who is this mysterious advisor I've got on my side?" I ask. "The Shadow? Dick Tracy? J. Edgar Hoover?"

Mac chuckles. "None of the above. I can't tell you who it is, Pete. That was one of the contingencies placed down by the board. You won't know who he is until tomorrow morning when you meet with him."

"Why? Sounds kinda silly that I can't meet with someone who is going to be representing me before the board meets tomorrow."

"They fear impropriety or prejudicial treatment prior to the review. If you knew who he was, you could sway him to see your side, possibly convincing him to even lie on your behalf."

"But that's ridiculous!" I say. "Why would meeting with an advisor the evening before the review be improper? He's supposed to be on my side, isn't he?"

"Yes, and he *is* on your side, Pete, trust me. He's going to go over the information I gave him with a fine-toothed comb. You needn't worry that you won't be properly represented. He'll do a damned good job, Pete, I have my faith in that."

"But I still don't understand. It's almost like a murderer going on trial without benefit of counsel, Mac."

Mac sighs. "Look, Pete, I was doing good to get them to even agree to the advisor. You know yourself that shooting reviews are always a closed session, limited to the officers on the board, the investigating detectives, and the subject of the review. Even *I* can't be in the room with you during the review. It's strict policy."

"So how many favors do I owe for this little episode?" I ask tiredly.

"No favors are owed, Pete. The advisor was willing to do it, and the board, while reluctant to allow it, agreed that it would be best to have an impartial representative, one not acquainted with this case, for you."

"What time do I have to meet with him in the morning?" I ask.

"Say an hour before the review...9:00 should be fine."

"Only an hour?" I ask. "Shouldn't I meet with him earlier than that, so he gets to know my character, my work ethic, all that crap?"

"Pete, he already knows you. So that's not a problem. And he'll go over the files yet tonight, and probably again in the morning before you meet. I wouldn't worry about anything, Pete, he's got your best interests in mind."

"But I *am* worried, Mac! This is my career that's on the line, not to mention my character! If Sergeant Friday bulldogs me like he did in the interview yesterday, I don't stand a snowball's chance in hell of retaining my badge! He'll drum me out of the force for good, and I won't be able to get a job with any police department across the nation, not even as a crossing guard!"

"Pete, relax. Yes, Friday bulldogged you, but the facts of the case stand on their own, with or without the interrogation. You shot and killed Stuart Walters in self-defense, and self-defense only. You are not a cold-blooded killer, you did not wait in that basement to shoot him, and you did not let your emotions color your response." He hesitates. "I *am* right, aren't I, Pete?" he asks me quietly. "You didn't let how you felt get in the way of the trigger, did you?"

I pause, then I speak. "No, Mac, I didn't," I tell him firmly. "And I don't appreciate being asked that again by you."

"Okay, so all you have to do tomorrow is tell the truth before the board. I have every confidence that it'll result in a favorable outcome for you. I don't think they're going to strip you of your badge."

"But what if the truth isn't good enough, Mac?" I ask quietly. "What if they decide that Friday's interpretation of the incident is the correct one, and they fire me? I'll be brought up on manslaughter charges for sure, if not murder one."

"Pete, you're worrying needlessly. Your reputation and your record with the department are spotless, and that alone speaks for itself. You don't suddenly turn rogue cop overnight. And despite what Sergeant Friday thinks, you are not Dirty Harry."

"Oh yeah?" I ask. "How do you figure?"

He snorts. "You're a far cry from Clint Eastwood, Pete. A far cry. You don't have the same squint he does. Hang on a sec," he says, then he speaks to someone in the background. It sounds like Mary. He comes back on the line. "Pete, I've gotta go. Mary needs me for a chore that has to be done before I go to work tonight. I want to impress upon you not to worry about this. Have faith. It'll turn out just fine."

"Yeah, okay," I tell him. "I'll talk to you later, Mac." I hang the phone up and go about putting away my groceries. When I get that done, I pull out a frozen pizza and pop it in the oven. While I'm waiting for it to bake, I plunk down in the recliner and turn on the tv. I watch the evening news, even the local news, noticing that the Walters' tragedy is still at the forefront. The oven timer dings about the time that I hear the newspaper drop in front of my door. Removing the pizza from the oven and letting it cool for a bit, I retrieve the paper, unfolding it to the front page. I scan the latest about the Walters' story while eating my supper. **POLICE RELEASE POSSIBLE MOTIVE FOR QUADRUPLE HOMICIDE; INVESTIGATION INTO WALTERS SHOOTING CONTINUING** the headline reads.

Los Angeles—Police investigators today released a possible motive into the gruesome quadruple slayings that happened late Sunday night in the quiet little neighborhood of Briarcliff Road.

Police officials say that Stuart Walters, 35, current address unknown, was being investigated by the department for allegations of sexual abuse involving a minor child. While police have declined to identify the minor child involved, citing privacy issues, a search of court documents reveal that Stuart Walters was charged in Sacramento three years ago for indecent contact with a child under the age of three. He was found guilty of the charge, sentenced to a year in the state prison at San Quentin, and upon his release, ordered to undergo psychiatric counseling as terms of his parole. He was barred from having any contact with the minor child involved for a year, and a search of area Sacramento telephone directories for 1970-1971, indicated that Stuart Walters maintained a separate residence from his wife, Melissa Walters, for at least a year. When asked if the minor child Walters was alleged to have abused was in fact his young daughter, police officials declined to comment.

The tragedy unfolded late Sunday night and early Monday morning. Police officers were called to the residence at 2510 Briarcliff Rd. to perform a welfare check on the young family inside. When officers arrived and made entry into the house, they discovered the bodies of Melissa Walters (30), and her three small children, Natalie (6), Andrew (3), and Matthew (1), inside the residence, all brutally murdered. While the officers were still inside the house, Stuart Walters apparently returned to the residence with a can of gasoline, evidently planning on burning the house down in order to cover up his crimes. He confronted the officers inside, seriously wounding one policeman, James A. Reed, 28, during a violent struggle. Officer Reed received a blow to the head, resulting in a concussion, and he was also shot in the side by Stuart Walters. The other officer, Peter J. Malloy, 36, was not injured in the confrontation, but he was ultimately forced to draw his weapon in his own self-defense and kill Walters in the basement of the house.

A search of police records indicate that officers had been called to the residence in the past, mostly for domestic disturbances involving Stuart Walters and his wife, Melissa. Mrs. Walters apparently filed for divorce over the summer, citing spousal abuse, and had also filed an order of protection against Stuart Walters, barring him from having any contact with either her or their three small children. The order was still in place at the time of the murders.

The Los Angeles coroner today released the causes of death for the five family members. Melissa Walters was killed by strangulation, while Natalie Walters died of a combination of a knife wound to the throat and strangulation due to hanging. Andrew Walters was found to have died from stab wounds to the chest, while his brother, Matthew, died from multiple blows to the head with a blunt instrument. Stuart Walters was determined to have died from a single gunshot to the head.

A spokesman for the police department, speaking on condition of anonymity, stated that an investigation is under way into the officer-involved shooting of Stuart Walters. The officer involved, Peter Malloy, a twelve-year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department, has been placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of the investigation. The spokesman reiterated again today that Officer Malloy is not the subject of a criminal investigation, but that it is simply proper procedure to place an officer involved in a shooting on leave until the investigation is complete. No criminal charges are expected to be filed against Officer Malloy.

Officer Reed, a five-year veteran of the force, injured in the attack by Stuart Walters, is recovering at an area hospital. He is expected to make a complete recovery, and will return to his duties as soon as he is released from medical leave.

Funeral arrangements have been made for the family members. Joint services for Melissa, Natalie, Andrew, and Matthew Walters, will be held at Calvary Baptist Church, 5000 Foothill Drive, Los Angeles, on Friday, October 22, at 11:00 a.m. Burial will follow at Rosedale Cemetery. Private family services are planned at a later date for Stuart Walters in Sacramento.

I toss the paper onto the couch when I'm finished reading it. It doesn't tell me anything that I don't already know or suspect, that Walters was abusing his daughter sexually, and that was probably one of the reasons he murdered them all. I take my supper dishes out to the sink and do them. That's the good thing about being a bachelor. I have only myself to clean up after. I'm just finishing up putting them away in the cupboards when the phone rings again. Drying my hands on a towel, I answer it. "Yeah," I say. "Malloy."

"Pete?" asks Jim Reed's voice. "Did you see the newspapers yet?"

"Yeah, I have. Why?"

"According to them, Walters was abusing his own daughter."

"Yeah, I know it," I tell him. "I suspected that an angle of abuse was at play in the killings, whether it was spousal abuse or molestation of his daughter."

"It sickens me," he says. "Doesn't it you?"

"Sure it does," I tell him. "But what could we have done about it, Jim? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Evidently it was a secret the family kept well-hidden until now."

"You know, Pete, when Sergeant Friday was interviewing me last night, he said that we'd answered a couple of domestic disturbances out there in the past." He hesitates. "I don't remember getting calls to that house, do you?"

"No, I don't. I've wracked my brain trying to remember them, but nothing comes to mind." I hear the squeal of a small boy in the background. "Are you home already?" I ask.

"Yeah, they released me late this afternoon. Everything's healing up fine, even the wound to my side. There wasn't any reason to keep me at the hospital any longer. I'm supposed to take it easy, though."

"So see that you do, Junior," I tell him. "Listen to the doctor's orders."

He is quiet for a moment, the phone line buzzing with faint static. "Hey, Pete, I'm a bit worried, though," he says finally.

"About what?"

"About you. About the shooting review tomorrow. If Friday's rabid interrogation is as hostile as Mac said it was, it doesn't bode well."

"Well, Mac called me just a little bit ago and said that they'd okayed the advisor to sit in with me. So that's a good thing, at least."

"Who is it, do you know?"

"Nope. It's evidently a state secret or something. Mac couldn't tell me. It was one of the conditions of the board. I won't know his identity until I meet with him tomorrow at Parker Center before the review."

"I sure hope it's someone who will be on your side, Pete. You're gonna need it, I think."

"Mac said it was someone I already know, so I'm not too worried."

"I'm going to try to be there at the review tomorrow, just to lend you some moral support," he says.

"Are you *kidding*?" I ask. "The last thing you need is to traipse down to police headquarters tomorrow morning, just to give me support. I'm a big boy, Jim, I can handle this on my own, trust me."

"I know, but I would just feel better somehow, knowing that I was there for you when you needed a friend."

"You won't be allowed to sit in on the review proceedings, you know," I tell him. "So that means you'd have to wait outside in the hallway, sitting in a chair, for God knows how long," I tell him in an exasperated tone. "Please Jim, don't do that just for my sake. You're better off staying at home. I'll call you when I get out of the proceedings, I promise."

"Well...we'll see," he says. "What time is the review anyway?"

"What if I gave you the wrong time?" I ask. "Then you'd show up at the wrong hour, so a trip down there would be fruitless."

"I can always call Mac and get the time from him," he says.

I rub my forehead. "It's at ten a.m., in room 5B. But I really don't need you there, Jim. I know you're behind me one hundred percent as it is."

"Pete, don't argue with me," he says, his stubborn streak rising up. "I'll be there if I can make it, okay?"

"No, it's not okay, but when you get an idea into that damned fool head of yours, you won't let it go, will you?"

"You got it," he says.

I try to stifle a yawn but am unsuccessful. "Hey, look, I'm going to let you go," I say. "I really need to get to bed if I'm going to be at my sharpest tomorrow morning."

"Yeah, okay," he says. "Hey, Pete, can I ask you something?"

"What?"

He hesitates, clearing his throat. "The nightmares," he says softly. "I'm afraid of the nightmares." When I don't respond, he plunges ahead. "I thought it was just an effect from the medicine they were giving me in the hospital yesterday. But I caught a nap this afternoon, without having had any medicine, and I still had a nightmare...a horrific one, involving the Walters family and that house."

I am quiet for a moment, at a loss for what to tell him to do. "Well, Jim, I can't really advise you what to do about that," I say finally. "Everyone has their own way of dealing with their bad dreams. What works for one person may not work for another."

"I know it," he says. "But what do you do?"

"What do I do?" I ask. "I tell myself that they'll eventually go away. And trust me, they will."

"Aren't you afraid of them, even just a little bit?" he asks somewhat timidly.

"No, not really. They're just the subconscious working out the bad memories, Jim. It's nothing to be frightened of, believe me."

"Yeah, I guess," he says, not sounding too convinced. "Well, I'll talk to you sometime tomorrow, Pete. Have a good night."

"Yeah, you too," I tell him, then I replace the receiver back into the cradle. I turn off the kitchen lights and return to the living room. I flick on the tv, but there's nothing good on, so I turn it back off. I go over to the bookshelf and pull down the mystery I was trying to read yesterday in the laundromat. I settle in with it, intending to read for a bit, just to take my mind off of everything, but it doesn't help. With a sigh, I put the book on the coffee table and get ready for bed. I've got a long day ahead of me tomorrow, and I don't need to be dragging my ass with fatigue.

Mac's words from earlier come back to me as I turn off the light on my nightstand. *Have faith. It'll turn out just fine.* Faith...something that everyone is counseling me to have lots of...and something that I seem to have in rather short supply right now. I don't trust taking that leap like Father John advised me to do. I don't know what's waiting for me in the abyss below. *Why is it so hard for me to do that?* I wonder, as I watch the shadows dance across my darkened bedroom. *Why can't I be trusting, be blind, and step off willingly, knowing that God is going to catch me somehow?* I pull the sheets up to my chin. *Because I've leapt before and gotten hurt when I crashed and burned on the ground below. And it's not a mistake I'll make again, that's for sure.* I roll over onto my side and close my eyes. Jim Reed's voiced concern about his nightmares circles in my mind. I can't tell him how to handle his bad dreams when I can't even handle my own. With a sigh, I roll back over reach out, turning on the clock radio, hoping that the hiss of static will soothe me to sleep.

Nightmares? Oh sure, I'm having them, too, Jim. But what can you do? You can't exactly run from them. You have to face them head-on, confront them, and eventually they'll go away. But be afraid of them? No, not me. They're just bad dreams, after all, nothing tangible, nothing real. Then again, why am I trying to convince myself so hard of that fact...unless I am just a little bit disturbed by my nightmares I had last night. Well, maybe I won't have any tonight, especially if I don't dwell on them...or the still-undecided and precarious fate of my soul...

THE GAME IN THE BASEMENT

The storm rages overhead, the lightning splitting the sky in bright forked fingers, the thunder cracking and rolling in deep growling grumbles, and there is the rain...always the ice cold rain that drenches and soaks me, chilling me to the very core. The beams of our flashlights play across the torrential downpour as we approach the darkened house. I open the screen door to knock on the interior door. It swings open with a melancholy creak the minute my knuckles touch the wood. I turn and look at my partner. "Wouldn't you think that door would be locked?" I ask him.

He shrugs, his face half-hidden by the deep brim of his hat. "I guess," he says, his voice completely devoid of any tone or inflection.

"I'm going in," I tell him. "Make sure everyone's okay inside."

"I wouldn't," he says in that odd monotone.

"Then stay out here," I say. "I'll go in."

He shrugs again and turns away from me. "Suit yourself," he tells me.

I step across the threshold into the dark house. All at once, fear prickles across my neck and I shiver. I look to see if my partner is behind me, but he isn't. "Reed," I call. "Reed!" He doesn't answer, so I go to the door to see where he's at. He's not on the front porch anymore, so I peer through the driving rain to see if he's returned to the squad car. In a flash of lightning, I see his dark shape sitting there inside the car. "Damned jerk," I mutter to myself. I turn back to the silent, spooky house.

The living room looks like a tornado has gone through it. Pictures, knickknacks, and record albums all lie scattered and broken across the beige carpeting, creating an unholy mess. Plants are upended and dumped on the carpet. The tv sits there with a broken screen, a dark smudge of soot trailing up the wall behind it, as if it sparked briefly before it died. I play the beam of my flashlight over the destruction, picking my way carefully across the winking shards of glass and porcelain. I notice a small pile of books lying turtled on the floor, their covers tented upwards, the spines bared to the ceiling. Some have pages ripped out of them, and the pages scatter the carpeting like pale square leaves. I walk over to the pile, shining the flashlight beam across the titles and authors. Plato, Kant, and Sartrè...for some reason, those names ping around in my brain; I've heard them somewhere before. Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross MacDonal, James M. Cain. The Long Goodbye, The Maltese Falcon, The Way Some People Die, The Postman Always Rings Twice. I recognize the titles as ones that are on my own bookshelves at home. I shake my head. "What a waste of some perfectly good books," I say to the silent four walls. Only the muted ticking of a grandfather clock answers me. There is one book that is lying face down, the title obscured from my vision. It is a small black book and curious about it, I pick it up. It has a strange drawing on the cover, a drawing that looks suspiciously like a pentagram. I trace my fingers over the engraved red symbol. It looks like a splash of crimson blood against the pure black binding. I flip open the cover...it is the Satanic bible. I quickly drop the book to the floor, my palms and fingers burning. I feel odd, as if I've stumbled upon a dark secret that was best left hidden. Something clutches briefly at my soul, an unnameable fear that I might be possessed by the Devil now, since I touched that damned book. With a kick of my foot, I shove the book into a corner of the living room. I want it as far away from me as possible. As a talisman against losing my soul, I make the sign of the

cross over myself. Then I feel foolish for doing it. After all, I'm a cop. Cops aren't supposed to be spooked by such things as one simple, stupid book. Still though, that prickle of fear dances along my neck and spine, making me uneasy. I shudder and move on.

I come to the kitchen next in my survey of the house. I shine the flashlight around it, my eyes picking out the destruction within. Pots and pans, dishes and silverware are all tossed around on the floor, and they shine up at me in the beam of the light, winking at me like cats eyes watching me in the dark. A heavy wooden table is upended, the white tablecloth draping it like a drunken ghost. The matching chairs are strewn about, some of them with broken legs that stick up like chewed toothpicks. The refrigerator door is open slightly, the faint light within shining down on the gooey mess below, a nauseating conglomeration of eggs, milk, syrup, ketchup. Small white mounds of flour and sugar spill over onto the floor, the canisters that kept them contained lay on their sides on the kitchen countertop. Canned goods have rolled haphazardly about on the checkerboard tile floor, Del Monte peas, corn, green beans, peaches. Feeling slightly sick, I turn away.

The hallway is off to my right, and I swing the flashlight that way, a sound pricking my ears. I stand listening, my ears straining to make out what it is. It sounds like a music box, the tune somehow oddly familiar to me.

...If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise...

...If you go down to the woods today, you'd better go in disguise...

...For every bear that ever there was, will gather there for certain because...

...Today's the day the teddy bears have their picnic...

I recognize it from my childhood. I used to love to hear my mother play it on our piano when I was a little kid. I close my eyes, the sweet plinking notes suddenly transporting me back to our house in Seattle, as I curl up on the sofa with a cup of cocoa and a chocolate chip cookie just fresh from the oven, listening to my mother tickle the tune out with her delicate fingers. "Play it again, Mama," I say with delight. "Play it again for me!"

"Aren't you getting tired of hearing that song, Peter?" she asks with a lilting laugh, her green eyes so much like mine twinkling merrily at me. "I sure am."

"Aren't you getting tired of hearing that song?" a thin little voice asks me, wrenching me out of my dreamy reverie. I look down to see a little girl with dark brown hair standing next to me, gazing up at me with sorrowful blue eyes framed by long, delicate lashes. Freckles dust her cheeks and nose, standing out against her pale skin. She is dressed in a long nightgown, with teddy bears big and small frolicking throughout the pattern of the cloth. "Aren't you getting tired of hearing that song, Peter?" she asks me again. "I sure am."

I stare at her. "How did you know my name?" I ask.

She shrugs. "I know everything, Peter," she replies in a matter-of-fact voice.

BONG! BONG! BONG! the grandfather clock chimes out the midnight hour, the witching hour, making me jump nearly out of my skin. I draw in a shaky breath, my heart pounding out a rapid foxtrot.

She laughs, a tinkling little laugh that reminds me of a crystal wind chime. "Relax, Peter, it's only the clock. It's not going to hurt you."

"I know that," I tell her. "It just startled me, that's all." I peer down at her. "What's your name, little one?"

"Natalie," she replies with a smile that reveals a front tooth missing. The smile does nothing to dispel the deep sadness that is reflected in her eyes. Such weighty sorrow for such a small girl. I wonder what caused it.

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Natalie," I say, holding my hand out for her to shake. "My name is Peter. I'm a police officer."

She giggles. "I know that, Peter. I told you, I know everything." She slips a tiny hand into mine, giving my fingers a delicate squeeze.

"Then you know why I'm here?" I ask her.

She nods sagely. "Yes. Because of the disturbance. Mrs. Timmons next door probably called you. She worries about us."

I kneel down to her level, so that we're eye to eye. "Natalie, is your mommy home? I'd like to speak with her."

There is a flash of lightning, a growl of thunder, and she looks away from me, fixing her gaze on the screen door. "Jim isn't coming in, is he?"

"Jim?" I ask.

She points a finger at the door. "Your partner, Jim. He's not coming inside, is he?"

I shake my head. "No, he decided to wait out in the squad car." I tap her shoulder, bringing her attention back to me. "Natalie, I need to speak with your mommy. Where is she, sweetheart?"

She smiles again at me, her smile somewhat shy. "You called me 'sweetheart', Peter." She giggles, ducking her head. Then she peeks up at me through those dark blue eyes framed by those eternity-length lashes. "Could I be your sweetheart, Peter?" she asks timidly.

I smile back at her, utterly charmed by this wee child. "Sure, Natalie. I'd be delighted to call you my sweetheart," I tell her with a chuckle.

She nods. "Thank you, I'd like that very much, Peter." Her hand still clasped in mine, she tugs on me gently. "Come with me, Peter, I want to show you something." She grins that gap-toothed grin at me once more.

"Natalie, sweetie, I need to speak with your mommy first, alright?"

She puts a finger to her lips. "Shhh," she whispers. "Mommy's asleep. We don't want to wake her." She tugs on me again, and I get to my feet, allowing myself to be pulled down the hallway like a mighty steam ship bobbing along behind a tiny tugboat. We pass by some pictures lying on the carpeted floor, their frames cracked and the glass shattered. There's a trio of baby pictures, a formal studio shot of three children, a black and white wedding photo of a happy couple. She stops in front of a pink-painted door, her name 'Natalie' spelled out in block letters that are an even more vivid pink than the door. "This is my room," she tells me proudly. "Would you like to come inside?" She doesn't bother to wait for an answer from me, tugging on my hand and pulling me into her bedroom.

The bedroom is painted in all shades of pink, it looks like an army of Barbie dolls has exploded inside. A small white four-poster bed is in the middle of the room, the overhead canopy and coverlet a pattern of pink rosebuds. Teddy bears and china dolls line handmade shelves along the pink walls. The dolls and bears gaze sightlessly, spookily at me as I shine the flashlight across them. There is a small child-sized table against the wall, a toy tea set dotted with rosy flowers is placed on the table, awaiting imaginative play. A small white music box stands open on the floor. I light it up with my flashlight, seeing that the tiny figure dancing on a spindle in the middle of the box is a teddy bear with a red bow around its neck. "That's a pretty music box, Natalie," I tell her.

"Yeah," she says, gazing at it with a rather rueful glance. "But I can't get it to stop playing that song."

I kneel down and pick the box up in my hands. "Did you maybe wind it up too tight?" I ask her.

"No," she says, shaking her head. "I wish it would stop. I don't like that song anymore."

I close the lid to the music box and latch it. The dainty music stops. "There," I say. "Is that better?"

She nods. "Very much. Thank you, Peter." She goes over to a two-story wooden dollhouse that stands almost as high as she does. "This is my dollhouse," she tells me, pulling the dollhouse open. "Would you like to play dolls with me?"

I chuckle. "Well, Natalie, I'm not much of a doll fan. Why don't you play and I'll watch?"

"Okay," she says. "I call this house the Haunted House."

That faint prickle of fear tickles me and I repress a shiver. "That's not a very good name for your house, Natalie. Why don't we come up with something a little bit nicer for it?"

She studies me a moment, her dark blue eyes serious. "No, I like Haunted House. I don't want to call it anything else, Peter."

I shrug. "Okay, it's your house, kiddo. Haunted House it is. Now how do you play with your Haunted House?"

She crooks her finger at me, beckoning me to lean forward. "If you stay really really quiet, the ghosts will come out and dance for you," she whispers.

"Ghosts?" I ask.

She nods knowingly. "Ghosts, Peter. I've seen them. They dance for me on nights like this."

I stare at her. "What do you mean, 'nights like this'?"

"When it storms out." She plops down on the wooden floor. "Mommy always turns the porch light on for me so I won't get scared of the thunder and lightning, but I haven't been scared of the thunder and lightning since I was five. That's been ages ago." She laughs that little wind chime laugh again. "I think Mommy's the one who's scared of the storms. She has been ever since Daddy left." She picks up a dollhouse-sized couch. "Where should I put this, Peter?"

I point to the living room area of the dollhouse. "There, in the living room." I sit down on the floor next to her. "Natalie, has your daddy been here tonight?" I ask, keeping my voice casual.

She ignores me as she sets the tiny couch inside the living room. She next picks up a small bed. "And this, Peter?"

"The bedroom." I tap her shoulder. "Natalie, please answer me. Has your daddy been here at all tonight?"

She shakes her head, her focus on the dollhouse in front of her. "My daddy's been gone for a long time now," she tells me. She picks up a tiny crib, studying it for a moment, then she sets it back down with a heavy sigh. "I don't want that in my dollhouse," she says. "Babies cry too much." She looks at me. "Peter, would you open my music box for me, please? I'd like to hear the song again."

"I thought you were tired of it," I say with a laugh.

She shrugs. "Have you ever been on a teddy bears' picnic, Peter?"

I shake my head. "No, Natalie, I can't say that I have. Have you?"

"No," she says with a serious frown. She comes over to me, wrapping her tiny arms around my neck. "Don't tell anyone, but I am just a little bit scared of the storm," she whispers, climbing into my lap..

I gather her gently into my arms. "Don't worry, Natalie, I'll protect you," I tell her. "You're safe with me."

She hugs me tightly. "I know it, Peter." She runs tiny inquisitive fingers across my badge and shooting brass. "What are these?" she asks.

"My badge and shooting medal," I explain.

She traces the badge with her fingertips. "It's pretty," she says. "What's the shooting medal for?"

"I'm a police sharpshooter, a Distinguished Expert."

"But what does that mean?" she asks, her tiny brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"It means that I'm a crack shot. I don't miss what I'm aiming at."

"Oh," she says, smiling as the medal tickles her fingers. "It's pretty, too. Will I get a medal?"

"That depends. What would you like a medal in, Natalie?"

She sighs, leaning her head against my chest. "I don't know, Peter. Maybe a medal to show my daddy that I'm a good little girl."

"Doesn't your daddy think you're a good little girl?"

She shakes her head sadly. "No. My daddy's mean to me. He hits me with his belt. And sometimes..." she hesitates, looking up at me with such weighted sorrow that anger and sadness fight for dominion over me. I could kill the sonofabitch that has hurt this tiny girl with my bare fists, and it would be a pleasure. "Sometimes he does nasty things to me." This comes out in a small whisper, as she bows her head, hiding her face from me. I feel a splash of moisture on my arms, soaking through the sleeve of my uniform shirt, and I look down to see that she's crying, her tears rolling muted down her face. "He does awful things to me, Peter, and I wish he'd stop."

I stare down at her, careful to keep the rising horror I feel inside out of my expression. "What does your daddy do to you, Natalie?" I ask, my voice light and neutral. The lightning flickers across the room.

"I can't tell you, Peter. It's a secret."

"Natalie, it's okay. You can tell your secret to me. You trust me, don't you?"

She nods against my chest. "Yes, I do. I like you, Peter. You're very nice." She points to the dollhouse. "Look, the ghosts are coming out to dance for us."

I glance at the dollhouse, then look back down at her. "Natalie, what does your daddy do to you?"

She shivers, trembling in my grasp, her tiny body wracked with waves of fear. "He gets in bed with me...like he used to with Mommy," she whispers. "He touches me all over and makes me touch him." She shudders again in my arms. "I don't like it. It's nasty."

Damn it damn it damn it, I hate child molesters like Cain hated Abel! If I had my way, they'd all be lined up and shot...but only after they were castrated slowly with a dull pocketknife and no anesthetic. The lightning flickers once more across the room, as if responding to my anger and loathing. I hug the small girl to me tightly, her tiny body feeling fragile in my clutch. "Natalie, I promise you, your daddy will never do that to you again, so help me God."

She looks up at me with those deep blue eyes. "Don't you know, Peter? There is no God," she says. "Now can we watch the ghosts dancing for us?"

"Maybe later, Natalie. How about right now you and I go find my partner? I think he's still outside." I hug her tight again. "Then we'll take you to another place, away from here, where your daddy won't hurt you anymore."

She wriggles free from my grasp. "NO!" she shouts, her wee fists balled up in anger. "I can't leave my mommy!" She stamps a small foot in dismay, then she runs from the bedroom, her tiny feet pounding against the carpet in the hallway.

I heave myself to my feet. "NATALIE!" I shout. "Come back here!" I start down the hallway in search of her. I play the flashlight beam over the destroyed living room and kitchen. I see no sign of her at all. How in the hell could one small girl disappear so fast? "Natalie? Where are you?" I call.

She giggles. "Come find me, Peter. Come find me."

I swing the flashlight around, my eyes scanning the area for her. "This isn't funny, Natalie! I'm not playing a game with you! Now where are you?" I try to keep the rising frantic fear out of my voice.

She giggles again. "You'll never find me, Peter."

I go to the screen door, opening it. "Reed, get in here!" I yell above the roar of the storm. "I need some help!"

"He's not out there," she singsongs. "Reed's not out there, Peter."

In a flash of lightning, I see that he's still sitting in Adam-12, unmoving and frozen. "Damnit, Reed!" I shout in frustration, as the wind grabs the door out of my hand, slamming it hard in my face. I push on it, but the force of the storm is too strong. I feel that same strong prickle of fear tickling along my neck and down my spine, and I fight the wicked urge to flee. But first I must find little Natalie and take her away from this awful place forever. "This isn't funny!" I shout to no one in particular. I shove on the door once more, but it refuses to budge. I'm stuck in this damned house until the storm passes. I turn around, shining the flashlight before me. "Natalie, I'm serious! Where are you?"

"I'm in the basement, Peter!" she yells joyfully. "Come and get me!"

I quickly edge past the nauseating mess in the kitchen to get to the basement. A faint light glows from within the downstairs. I start down the wooden steps. "Damnit, Natalie, this isn't funny, not at all. I want you to quit playing games and..." I stop at the foot of the stairs with a gasp. There, in front of my eyes, Natalie is hanging from an overhead pipe, a rope wrapped around her neck. "MY GOD!" I shout. "Hold on, Natalie, I'll get you down!" I start towards her, fishing in my pocket for my pocketknife.

She looks up at me, her hands grasping the rope. "I'm okay, Peter, really. It doesn't hurt at all," she tells me, matter-of-factly.

"But you're...you're...hanging there!" I say in shock.

"It's okay. It's not like I can really feel anything anyway." She tilts her small head back against the rope, revealing a garish slash across her tiny white throat. "See? This is actually worse." She looks at me with that gap-toothed smile, as crimson runs down her nightgown with the frolicking teddy bears on it, splashing into a bright vivid puddle at her feet.

I close my eyes with a shudder, swallowing back a gag. There is the sound of the screen door opening and banging shut, and I jump, startled. I turn towards the steps. "It's about damned time you got in here, Reed!" I holler.

"Peter, it's not Reed," Natalie whispers to me.

Heavy footsteps thud across the upstairs. "Hurry it up, Jim! I need help down here!" I yell.

"Peter, that's not Jim," Natalie whispers again.

I turn around. "Then who is it?" I snap in sudden anger.

She is staring at me with those sorrowful blue eyes. "It's my daddy," she tells me. "And he won't be very happy to find you down here, Peter." She nods towards a niche under the basement steps. "You'd better hide and be safe, Peter." As she says it, the light flicks off, plunging the basement into darkness. I turn on my flashlight.

"Peter, HIDE!" Natalie rasps hoarsely. "He'll KILL you!"

She doesn't need to urge me anymore. I slip into the blackness under the stairwell, turning the flashlight off and sliding it back into my pocket. I scan the darkness, my eyes adjusting quickly to the dimness. Lightning flickers through the grimy basement windows. I wait...

The footsteps pause at the top of the stairwell. Then they begin a slow, tortuous descent, creaking heavily against the wooden steps. "Natalie?" a deep male voice calls. "Are you down here? Daddy wants to play."

I shudder involuntarily at the sick image that sentence conjures up for my brain. I draw my revolver from my holster, the grip slippery in my sweaty palms. I wipe my hands on my uniform pants. My fingers close around the handle of the weapon, my index finger sliding easily over the trigger. I will myself to remain calm, fearing my ragged breathing and pounding heart will give my hiding place away. Sweat rolls down my face and my neck. I must not move, lest I reveal where I'm at. I want the element of surprise on my side, for the man on the steps above me doesn't know I'm down here. I wait...

The footsteps come down another step. "Natalie, quit hiding from me. It's not funny."

Natalie giggles. "But I think it is, Daddy. It's very funny." In a flash of lightning, I see her swinging her legs, using her noose as a macabre piece of swing set equipment. The rope creaks softly under her weight.

The footsteps come down yet another step, as lightning flashes once more, and a deep growl of thunder fairly rattles the house above my head. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," the voice singsongs, the childhood chant sounding eerily wrong in that deep voice. Time drags on oh so slowly.

I nearly cannot stand it, this tortuous madness. I close my eyes, the revolver heavy in my hands. Nearly panting, I breathe in that dank basement air. It is fetid across my nose and I swallow hard. I can hear the ticking of my watch as it passes the time in eons and eternities. The blood in my veins throbs in unison with my watch. How spooky, I think to myself. I remain focused on the wooden steps, as the lightning and thunder increases in intensity, seemingly picking up and playing off of the tension within me. I am one with the storm, vicious and pounding. I lean my head back against the cement wall, feeling the coolness caress my hair. I lick my lips. I wait...

The man has finally reached the bottom of the stairs. "Natalie?" he asks in that deep bass throb.

"Yes, Daddy?" she answers in a tiny voice.

"Where is he?"

A bolt of icy fear shoots unbidden through me and I almost gasp. He must mean me, he has to mean me! He DOES know I'm down here! Eyes wide and searching, I easily pick out his imposing figure across the jagged fingers of lightning. I take a deep breath, fighting down the wicked butterflies that dance inside my stomach. I must remain still, I must remain calm. I wait...

"Where is who, Daddy?" Natalie asks coquettishly.

"That man, that piggy cop that's here in the basement with you. And don't you lie to me, little girl. I know he's down here." The man's voice is a jungle growl cutting through the darkness.

"Oh, he's down here alright, but you'll have to guess where he's at, Daddy," Natalie giggles mischievously. "I won't tell you." Oh my god, how could she suddenly turn on me like that?

He chuckles meanly. "You wanna play a game, huh, Natalie?" In the darkness, I see him reach a finger to her face, stroking it gently like a lover's touch. The sight makes me shudder with revulsion. I fight hard not to vomit. "Okay, Natalie, we'll play a game. It's called 'make the piggy squeal!'."

"Sounds like fun, Daddy!" Natalie shouts gleefully. "You start searching for him and I'll tell you if you're getting close to him, okay, Daddy?"

"Okay, Natalie." He takes two steps to his right. "Is he here?" he asks.

"Nope, Daddy. You're not even anywhere near him."

Shut up, Natalie, shut up shut up shut up, I think, trying to will the small girl into complete silence. I keep my eyes fixed on the hulking figure, the gun clutched firmly in my hands. I swallow back fear. I wait...

He starts towards the steps. "How about here, Natalie?" he asks, looking over his shoulder at the tiny girl just hanging there. I see him smile in a vivid flicker of lightning, the smile disgustingly smarmy. I shudder. Ugh.

"You're getting warm, Daddy," she tells him happily.

He takes another couple of steps to the left. "Here, Natalie?"

"No, no, Daddy, you're getting colder. He's not there," she scolds like a vociferous little chickadee.

He takes another three steps in my direction, easing his bulky body out around the stairwell. "How about here, Natalie?" he laughs. "Am I getting close now?"

She giggles along with him. "Yes, Daddy, you are."

Jungle drums pound out a vigorous tattoo in my head and my mouth is cotton-dry. I keep my gaze locked on the slowly advancing figure. This little game of theirs is driving me slowly insane. I wait...

He stops. "Here, Natalie?" he asks, moving his head from side to side, hunting, searching. I smell his rank odor of unwashed body, stale beer, and downright evil emanating from him like a toxic cloud.

"Mmm...maybe, Daddy. What do you think?"

I bury myself even deeper in the darkness as he scans the area in the flashes of lightning. His eyes glow pure blood red in the blackness. I've never seen eyes like that before in my lifetime; I never want to see them again. I shiver. "I think I'm getting close, Natalie," he says in an amused voice. He raises something before him, his meaty hands closed tightly around the object.

In an instant, I realize what it is...a revolver...Jim Reed's revolver. My mind races as I try to figure out where and how he got it. Did he shoot and kill Jim outside? I didn't hear a shot, but that's not saying that the roar of the storm didn't drown it out. I narrow my eyes at him as hot anger flashes through me. You bastard. You evil sonofabitch. Yes, you come and get me, I'm right here. I wait...

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," he singsongs again, blood-red eyes flicking across the inky darkness. He steps closer to me. "How about now, Natalie?" he asks, looking back at her once again. He stops.

She giggles. "What do you think, Daddy?"

Ah, yes. Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly. He's stepped right into my line of fire, a mere seven feet away from me. The lightning flashes brightly, the thunder growls overhead. I tense up, my muscles inside of me coiled for action. My eyes narrow with pure hatred. My finger tightens on the trigger. In the darkness, I smile. I've got you now, you bastard. I wait...

He turns his head again from side to side, searching for me in the strobe-light frenzy of the lightning. But I will not be found. For I am a brother of the darkness, we are shadowy twins.

"Daddy?" Natalie asks.

"Yes, Natalie?" He looks back at her.

She points a tiny finger, directly at me. "He's right there, Daddy. He's right there."

The light in the basement suddenly flicks on and I fire, the revolver leaping in my hands, the man's head popping like a ghastly balloon. Natalie screams and then falls silent, as the figure topples to the cement, Jim's revolver clattering from his meaty hand to the ground. The stench of cordite is strong in my nose, and the sound of the shot ricochets around in my brain as I step forward in blood-surgingly triumphant, my eyes fixed on the dead man before me, his head nearly gone from my single shot to his brain. Blood, brain matter, and skull pieces litter the floor behind what's left of his head. But there is something wrong, something very very wrong. The man lying on the cement before me now is not the same man who was just standing in my line of fire a mere moment ago. Confusion washes over me as I struggle to realize who the figure is on the floor in front of me. Then, like a runaway freight train hurtling down the tracks, it hits me. Oh sweet Jesus. "No," I whisper hoarsely. "It can't be." I take another step towards the headless man. "No, it can't be," I repeat, the litany ringing hollow in my ears. A roaring rushes through my veins, I feel as if I might pass out. I put a sweaty palm to my eyes, blocking out the vision in front of my eyes, then, quivering, I force myself to look again.

"This isn't your night, is it, Peter?" Natalie's small voice asks me. "No, it's not your night at all. You should have played dolls with me, Peter. Then none of this would have happened."

I turn on her in white-hot fury. "SHUT UP!" I shriek. "JUST SHUT THE HELL UP, NATALIE!" I fairly vibrate with the anger that courses mightily through my blood.

"Oh my, Peter, that's not very nice, not very nice at all," she chides. "What would your mother say?" She swings herself by the noose around her neck again, the rope creaking eerily under her weight. "I wish I could get down," she muses. "I missed seeing the ghosts dance." She looks at me with those sorrowful eyes. "Are you angry with me, Peter?"

I close my eyes. "Natalie, please...just let me be right now. Just let me be." I whisper in sheer agony.

But she won't let it rest. "Am I still your sweetheart, Peter?" she asks.

I don't answer her. I stare at the dead man before me. Nausea washes over me in hot and cold waves. Bile rises in my throat, but I swallow it back.

"Peter?" she asks once more. "Am I still your sweetheart?"

I shake my head, my eyes still locked on the figure on the floor. "No, Natalie," I tell her dully. "You're nobody's sweetheart now."

"Why not?"

I whip back around, my eyes glaring and blazing in pure anger. "Because I said so, Natalie!" I shout. "Is that good enough for you?"

"Well, you don't need to get mad at me," she says in a haughty tone. "After all, you only have yourself to blame for this, Peter," she tells me mockingly. "It's all your fault."

"What?" I ask, dumbfounded. "What do you mean all this is my fault? I didn't do anything!"

She narrows her eyes at me...eyes that now glow pure blood red in the light of the basement. She points a tiny index finger at me. "You did this to me, you bastard," she rasps, growling like a tiny kitten. "Go to hell!" Then suddenly she droops, hanging limply from the noose, her body swaying softly in the dim light. She is a marionette with broken strings.

I turn away from her, horror washing over me once again. Oh, dear God, what have I done to deserve this? I ask. But God ignores me, turning a deaf ear to my question. With a groan, I sink slowly to my knees on the cold cement floor. My revolver slips from my fingers, dropping to the ground with a thud. Sweat soaks me as I stare, trembling like a leaf in the breeze. I rub my eyes with my fists, trying vainly to wipe out the sight in front of me. But when I open my eyes once more, the scene is still the same. "It can't be," I moan. "It just can't be." I drop my head into my hands and begin to sob, weeping like a motherless child. I am forever doomed for what I've just done.

For the man that lies dead on that unforgiving cement floor before me, shot and killed with my very own bullet from my very own gun, is not Natalie's father, Stuart Walters, but another man, someone oh so familiar to me.

It is my partner, Jim Reed...

There is only one thing left for me to do now. Reaching out stiff, icy fingers, I pick up my gun in shaking hands. The smooth metal barrel is cool in my grip, the weapon heavy as lead. I spin the cylinder, hearing the chambers click like dice on the craps table. I know this weapon by heart, every spare inch of it. I can unload it and reload it in my sleep. I don't have to look at it to know that there is a bullet in the chamber, it whispered that to me in my gambler's spin. It's such a wicked, fleeting game of chance; some will win, some will lose, only I don't aim to lose. And with five bullets still in the chamber, I know I won't. I slide my index finger over the trigger, my touch as gentle as a lover's sweet caress. My hands stop their trembling as I raise the gun slowly to my right temple. I close my eyes, green eyes that are still weeping crystal tears. I will go to hell for what I am about to do, but it doesn't matter, I'm already there. Oh! but dying is such an exquisite pleasure...

I pull the trigger...

Sobbing, I wake up from my dream, hot salty tears streaming down my face. My crying continues unbidden, the convulsive weeping wrenching itself from my body in great wracking heaves that make my sides ache. I haven't wept like this since the death of Steven Baker. I am ashamed of myself for having such naked emotion; I'm supposed to be a big tough cop, and big tough cops don't sit here in bed, bawling their eyes out. But I cannot stop, and for some reason, I don't want to. Burying my face in my pillow, I howl and thrash upon the bed, my anger, sorrow, and frustration mixing together as one molten lava emotion. I scream into the pillow until my voice is hoarse, raspy, nearly gone. I pound the mattress with clenched fists until my knuckles hurt, the skin across them scraped raw and bleeding from the force of my anger. Damn it all, damn it all, damn it all to hell! I do not know exactly who I'm mourning for...is it Melissa Walters and her young children? My partner, Jim Reed?

Or is it me, Peter Malloy?

That thought hits me with a sudden startlingness. Something creeps ever-so-softly into me, a black, black desolation, with a depth so deep I may never reach bottom. In sheer-struck fear, I shiver, afraid that I may have already lost my soul, the very essence of my being; my ego and id, my conscience, my sins, my integrity, my beliefs, my spirit...*me*. I whisper a litany, a lament, a token prayer of a desperate man...*oh dear God, please save me, please save me, pleasesaveme, PLEASESAVEME!* ...the words slipping gently from my shaking lips, falling so softly into the still air around me, running together like the broken record that my brain cannot stop playing. No one, nothing, not one single thing answers me in that darkness, and, all at once, I fear that I am no more. I cannot be saved. The man known as Pete Malloy is gone, a broken stranger in his place.

Beaten and thoroughly spent, I lay crumpled on my bed, the sheets all wadded and twisted around me, the pillow beneath me damp with my tears. I flip over onto my back, pulling up a corner of the sheet to wipe my face. I fumble in the dark for the box of tissues on my nightstand and I pull one out, blowing my nose. I lay there, staring sightlessly up at the darkness in front of me. I am it, it is me, we are one, the darkness and I. Blood brother kin, through and through. I laugh to myself, hysteria edging my laughter. So *this* is what it feels like to go truly insane! I look around. Strange, I don't see any men in white uniforms bearing straitjackets, coming to take me away, ha-ha! to my own padded cell in a crazy house, where they manufacture nut cases by the bushel. I laugh again. Then, with a shudder, I stop. *This isn't funny, Pete.*

There is a flash of light at my window, then another. Noiselessly, I slip out of bed, going over to the window and raising the shade up to see what it is. A rumble of thunder vibrates the glass. I undo the latch on the window, lifting it up. Heavy rain begins to fall, pounding at the screen, and I breathe in the rain-cleansed air, the sweet earthy smell tickling my nose. I lean on the wooden sill, drinking in the violent beauty of the storm. Cool rain escapes through the latticework of the screen, falling gently onto my forearms. Absently rubbing a thumb across the moisture, I am reminded of Natalie's tears in my dream. Cupping my chin in my hand, I watch the lightning rip apart the sky, the thunder growling and racing behind it. I press my face lightly to the screen, closing my eyes as a few chilly raindrops land on my cheeks. There is the hiss and pop of static from the radio, then it begins that same eerie song.

Riders on the storm

Riders on the storm

Into this house we're born

Into this world we're thrown

Like a dog without a bone

An actor all alone

Riders on the storm...

I feel the hot sting of tears once again behind my eyelids, and I let them come, sliding unchecked down my face, mixing with the cool raindrops already there. Fire and ice. Heaven and Hell. *And which one are you headed for, Peter Malloy?* I ask myself. I cannot answer, I do not know. Once always so sure of myself, I feel now like the world's rug has been pulled out from underneath my feet, leaving me hanging in the yawning blackness of an unseen netherworld. One step one way, and I'm safe on good old terra firma. One step the other way...and I fall, deep into the darkened abyss of desolation. I close my eyes. I am damned, one way or the other. And I don't know how to save myself, not at all.

The storm begins to move off into the distance, not wanting to expend its energy completely on the city alone. I watch until the lightning starts growing dimmer, the thunder more dull, the rain more gentle. With a sigh, I close the window, fastening the latch, locking it tight once again. *It's too bad I can't do that with my own emotions,* I think to myself. *I used to be able to lock everything away so well, keeping it all in a padlocked safe, deep within my soul, never letting it out to anyone, especially myself. And then this case comes along and blows that padlocked safe all to hell, and I'm left wondering what in the world happened.* I lean my head against the cool window glass. *I've got to get ahold of myself, or I WILL go insane.* I stare through the window at the pale watery light of the streetlamp below. A car whooshes past, the wheels throwing out gentle arcs of the puddled water in the street. I glance at the time. 1:30 a.m. I turn back to my urban vista, rubbing a hand across my face, feeling the faint scratchy stubble on my chin. It'll be morning soon, and the nightmares will go away...at least until darkness falls once again. And I don't relish going through another night like this, either. *Christ, what am I gonna do?*

I step back from the window, preparing to pull the shade back down. As my fingers grasp the crisp edge of the shade, I see myself reflected back in the glass of the windowpane. I pause. *The ghost of Peter Malloy.* I blink, as a now-familiar litany chases itself in circles within my brain. My eyes meet those that look back at me, green eyes that contain such deep, deep sorrow. *Haunted,* the litany whispers to me, tickling across my ears like a lover's sweet caress. *You're haunted, Pete.*

Yes, truly I am.

THE TRIAL FOR THE ALREADY CONDEMNED

The sounds of my hurried footsteps echo across the shiny marble-tiled hallway, ricocheting around and up to the high-vaulted ceiling overhead. I look at my watch...I must not be late, I must not be late, my brain reminds me, like some time-crazed white rabbit. I reach the heavy oaken double doors marked 5B with just minutes to spare. Taking a deep breath and smoothing down my uniform with sweaty palms, I prepare myself for what I am about to face. A Shooting Review Board has been convened to determine if the shooting and killing of Stuart Walters by me was wholly justified and completely unavoidable. Should it be found in my favor, I have nothing to worry about and can resume my patrol duties as soon as whenever my next shift is. Should it be found not favorable, I will most likely be stripped of my badge and summarily arrested for murder in the first degree. And the life of a killer cop in jail certainly holds no wine and roses for me, that's for sure. My shaking fingers close around the cool metal handles of the doors and I tug on them, opening them and stepping inside.

Wait a second, this isn't right! Instead of a wood-paneled meeting room in Police Headquarters, I am in a courtroom that looks like it escaped from the movie "To Kill A Mockingbird." Chocolate and ivory checkerboard tiles make up the shiny floor, slatted blinds half-cover the huge floor-to-ceiling windows, a thick wooden barrier with a swinging gate separates the courtroom from the gallery. Dust motes drift lazily on the bright sunbeams filtering in through the windows. I wouldn't be too surprised to see Clarence Darrow himself in front of the judge's bench, arguing out some crackerjack whipsaw defense for the perpetrator of a dastardly crime.

But it is not the actual room itself that catches my eye, it's the crowd of people sitting in the spectator's gallery. Men, women, and children fill each and every available seat in the audience, so many in fact, that the press is relegated to standing at the very back row. The babble of voices that had hummed around the room falls dead silent when I enter, as everyone turns bright eager faces towards me.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I must have the wrong room," I apologize. "I didn't mean to interrupt." I turn around and start to move back towards the heavy oak doors. But just as I grip the door handles, two court guards in green uniforms stop me, their meaty hands on my upper arms. "Please," I say, my gaze flicking between them. I cannot see their faces, they are half-hidden in the deep shadows of their hat brims. "I've made a mistake. I've entered the wrong room. If you'll let me go, I'll leave and find the room I'm supposed to be in."

"No, yer in the right room," one of the guards growls in a deep raspy voice.

"But I'm not," I say in protest. "I'm supposed to be in the meeting room for my shooting review board, and this quite obviously is not it."

"Heh heh," the other guard chuckles, playing to the amused crowd. "Pretty dumb, ain't he?"

Like a television studio audience, the crowd dutifully laughs along.

The guards tug on me. "I said, yer in the right room, mister!" the heavier of the two guards growls again. "This here IS yer shooting review, Officer Malloy!"

My hands drop slowly away from the metal door handles in front of me, as horror begins to dawn on me with chilly reality. Oh, that voice! I've heard it before in my life, it haunts familiar nightmares on dark spooky nights, playing in the netherworld between shadows and lines, a hoarse basso voice that still sends icy shudders down my spine. And the other man's voice, a whining dumb-Lennie counterpoint to the other man's George. He was quick with the gun, but not quick with the brains. And in the end, neither of them won anything; not the money and certainly not their freedom. That one brief mad dash, that one brief glimpse of the blue sky overhead, that one sweet taste of freedom, ended badly for them both...and not that I really gave a damn. The gas chamber would've been too good for them, I always thought. And in sitting through their two trials, I didn't change my opinion of them one damned bit. Losers, they were, born losers from the dregs of society, a Lennie and George duo for the modern age, the whiny rat and the bellowing ox. I scowl at them. Haunt MY nightmares, willya? You two didn't think you could terrorize me forever, didja?

Dropping my head, I look at them out of the corners of my eyes, formulating a quick plan in my mind. I relax, letting the muscles that are tensed up inside of me like coiled springs, suddenly go loose and easy. My non-defensive posture works, and the two of them let go of me, their iron grips around my upper arms falling away. I allow myself a small smile, as I regard them out of the corners of my eyes once more. You two never were smart, were you? I think to myself. If you were, you'd have gotten the hell outta L.A. when the gettin' was good, scuttling across the border down to Mexico like the light-scared cockroaches you are, settling down in some fleabag tequila dive in Tijuana, where you wind up married to a plump little senorita who doesn't care how or where you got the money, just as long as it comes in regular-like. Oh yes, you two were not very bright, and that sad little fact of your lack of intelligence is going to play once more to my advantage. I draw in a deep breath... aw, fellas, you shouldn't have let your guard down so soon!...and quickly make my move. I grab the smaller guard by the front of his uniform, yanking him around and slamming him hard into the heavy oak doors. His hat falls off with the impact and I slam him up against the doors again. Too late, I realize that it would have probably been more prudent for me to try and take out the larger man first, but this little weasel holds a special place in the dark of my heart. "You thought you got me once, you little punk bastard," I snarl, my face inches from his. "But guess what? You screwed up before, now you've screwed up again!" I shake him for all that he's miserably worth, as screams from the female spectators ring in my ears, the high-pitched multitudinal babble of the crowd washing over me like a dull roar.

Eyes fearful, he scratches ineffectually at my hands, fingers clawing my wrists as I continue to rattle him. He tries to twist out of my grasp, but I have him pinned too tight. "Bernie, do somethin'!" Vince Warren shrieks to his partner, Bernie Ryan. Warren was the trigger happy punk who shot me in the shoulder during a botched hold-up at Duke's Longhorn Café.

Bernie Ryan grabs me from behind, using his weight and his heft to haul me off of Warren. I kick him hard in the shins with my heels and drive my elbows forcefully into his ample gut, and with a whooshing grunt, he lets go of me. I drop my hold on Warren and swing around, punching Ryan in his pockmarked face, my fist landing quite satisfyingly on his bulbous nose, the cartilage crunching rather nicely as his nostrils bleed bright red. "And you," I growl. "You thought you were going to use me as a hostage to escape, and now look where it landed you: a life sentence in San Quentin for first-degree kidnapping!" I shove him. "How's prison life treating you, Bernie?" Ryan ALSO holds a special place in the dark of my heart. He had planned on using me as a get-out-of-Duke's-free card, a uniformed shield to get him past the police officers swarmed around the café; and had he succeeded, he'd intended on duly executing

me once he got safely away, dumping my body on a lonely, desolate stretch of road somewhere for my friends and co-workers to eventually find. Oh yeah, I know THAT little fairy tale by heart. I testified for the prosecution in both Vince Warren's and Bernie Ryan's trials. And when my testimony was done in Ryan's, I sat in the spectator's row every single day that I could, listening to the gruesome details of my intended demise, hating him even worse than I hated his little rat bastard partner. After all, Warren only shot me and wounded me...Ryan was going to put me permanently out of commission.

Vince Warren jumps on my back like he's a monkey, his sudden weight throwing me precariously off-balance. He chokes me, his hands tight around my uniform collar and tie. I cough and gag, trying to loosen the little bastard from my back. While I'm trying vainly to dislodge him, Bernie Ryan steps up to me, an evil grin on his face, and drives his fist hard into my gut. The blow drops me to my knees, my hands clutching my stomach, tears springing to my eyes from the pain. Teeth clenched, I look up at Ryan through narrowed eyes. "You sonofabitch," I hiss. "I hope you rot in..." THWOCK! Ryan has stopped my words with a blow from a wooden billy club to the back of my skull. All my motor senses reel from the electrifying hit, and I collapse like a sack of flour, my arms and legs no longer willing to follow any commands from me. Vaguely I smell the odor of something burning at the back of my nose, and I wonder if the blow fried my brains or if those are just some real pretty fireworks I'm seeing in front of my drowsy eyes. Don't these fools know it's illegal to shoot fireworks off indoors, especially in a crowded place like this courtroom? Someone could get hurt! But I don't care about that right now, let somebody else worry about it. The tile is cool beneath my cheek and ahh yes...I wouldn't mind lying down and taking a tiny nap right now...but just for a little while, okay Pete? You have something very important to attend to here. What's that you say? You can sleep when you're dead? Oh, but just one little catnap isn't going to hurt you, not at all. Might sharpen up that brain of yours some. Just a quick forty winks and then right back on that horse that seems to have thrown you clear into tomorrow. That's it...close your eyes, Malloy...

"GET UP!" Ryan screams in my ear. He kicks me in the side with what feels like a steel-toe boot. "GET UP, ASSHOLE!" He kicks me again, while his partner, Warren, kicks at my legs.

I groan. "S-s-s-top it," I mumble through the marbles in my mouth. "S-s-t-top kickin' me." I try to wade through the thick buzzing in my skull. I feel like a nest of angry hornets has been set loose within my brain. I groan again when Warren joins Ryan in kicking me in the sides. "I s-s-s-aid, s-s-s-top it!" I attempt to slide my palms under my chest in order to try to raise myself to a sitting position. Unfortunately, it's more than my motor skills can handle right now. I flop back to the tile floor like a rag doll. Closing my eyes, I try to marshal all my energy and thoughts into getting up. I succeed partly, but when Ryan kicks me again, he drives my hands out from underneath me, and I crash back to the floor once more, this time hitting my chin hard on the tile floor. The coppery tang of blood rapidly fills my mouth. I must have bitten my lip or my tongue.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Ryan growls. "Help me get him up, Vince," he orders his weaselly partner. The two of them grab me under my arms and haul me to my knees. The courtroom whirls in front of me like a cheap carnival ride and my stomach gives a sickening lurch. Without giving me a chance to recoup my woozy senses, Ryan and Warren pull me to my feet. My legs tremble underneath me, and my knees give out. I sag to the floor, my shoulders nearly wrenching from my sockets with my heavy dead-weight. The only thing that keeps me from crashing completely back to the floor is the fact that Ryan and Warren have their grips tight around my upper arms. Warren nearly trips over backwards trying to support my

sudden weight. "Damn it, stay on your feet, jackass!" Ryan snarls, and for a brief minute, I think that he's talking to Warren instead of me. But then he gives me a mean shake, causing the pounding in my skull to throb even harder. The two of the jerk and heave me to my feet, my heels scrabbling on the slick tile floor.

I sway unsteadily between them, perspiration beading my forehead. I try to focus dizzy eyes on the floor in front of me. The taste of blood is thick in my mouth. I know that if I swallow it, I'm liable to puke it back up. So, I turn my head, and spit a mouthful of crimson right on Bernie Ryan's green uniform shirt. My mother always taught me it wasn't polite to spit, let alone spit on another person, but I think my mom would let me make an exception this time. I give Ryan an unfocused smirk as he stares at the stain with horror and anger.

"You dirty sonofabitch!" he snaps. He brings his fist back and punches me hard in the side of my head, the hit ringing soundly in my ears, bright fireworks exploding once more in my peripheral vision. My skin stings where he hit me, and I feel something warm trickling down the side of my face.

I sag to my knees again, dragging Vince Warren halfway down with me. I close my eyes again, against the dizziness that swirls around me, the kaleidoscope faces of the spectators spinning before me. Bile rises in my throat and I choke it back. I'll be damned if I puke in front of these bastards. I refuse to show any sign of weakness before them. "Izzat all ya got?" I mumble thickly. "My grandma can hit harder than that, asshole." I open my eyes again and turn to look at Bernie Ryan, the bloody smirk plastered across my face.

He draws his hammy fist back again in order to strike me, but Warren stops him. "Look, Bernie, he's just trying to get you," he cautions. "Let's haul him up to the front, let the judge handle him."

Ryan gives him a piggy-eyed glare, but he reluctantly complies. Half-dragging, half-frog marching me forcibly down the row, they swing a left at the tiled intersection in the middle of the courtroom, manhandling me up to the wooden barrier that separates the main floor of the courtroom from the spectators gallery. They nearly slam me into the barrier gate, and I try to clutch it for support. Ryan yanks me sharply back. "Hey, yer Honor," he rasps. "You want 'im brought forward?"

I cannot see the face of the judge on the bench, he is wearing a black robe with a hood on it, the hood pulled up and cowed tightly around his head. "Yes," he says in a deep bass voice that sounds a bit like Barry White. "Bring the prisoner forward."

"Wait a second!" I cry. "I'm not a prisoner! I'm supposed to go before a shooting review board, not a judge!"

"SILENCE!" he roars, banging his wooden gavel hard on the desk. "It is not your turn to speak yet, Officer Malloy!" He points to Ryan and Warren on either side of me. "Bring him forward, I said!"

Ryan reaches down and opens the swinging gate of the wooden barrier. He and Warren shove me through the gate, hard. I lose my balance on my unsteady legs and fall forward, landing on my knees, throwing my hands out in front of me to catch myself. Ryan and Warren come up behind me. Grinning, Ryan puts his heavy boot over my left hand, pressing down slowly. "This is for punching me, asshole," he rasps.

I try to jerk my hand back but I'm pinned by the monster. I look up at him. "Don't," I warn. "Don't, if you know what's good for you." I narrow my eyes at him. I hear the babble of the spectators behind me.

"Smash 'em good!" someone shouts. "You get 'em, Bernie!" another voice calls. "Show 'em how we treat assholes like him!" The crowd roars approval.

He cocks his head at me. "Why, I do b'lieve you made an outright threat, mister," he says, still grinning at me as blood streams down his face from his smashed nose. "You know what we do to people who make threats?" Jeering, he leans down to me. " We squash 'em like they're cockroaches, mister!" and with that, he stomps down as hard as he can on my hand, laughing as the fine bones of my fingers and my knuckles crackle and break like dry twigs under his heavy tread. "How do you like them apples, mister?" he asks. "Guess you won't be punchin' anyone anytime soon now, willya?" He chuckles and Warren giggles. The crowd behind us claps and cheers heartily.

I draw in a sharp hiss of breath between clenched teeth, but I refuse to react any further. When Ryan moves his heavy boot off of my shattered hand, I jerk my hand back close to me as I rise up to my knees, cradling it next to my body. The pain throbs searingly through the mangled bones. Blood seeps from broken skin over my knuckles. "You sonofabitch," I mutter, my teeth still clenched. "You always knew how to hit a man when he was already down, didn't you?" I glare up at him through slitted eyes. "The Devil is stoking his fires mighty high for your arrival in Hell, Ryan," I snarl. I jerk my head at Vince Warren. "And I hope to God he makes your toady little partner here just as crispy as he burns you."

"Get him to his feet!" the judge barks. "Bring him to the witness stand right now!" He bangs his gavel once more.

Warren and Ryan haul me to my feet again, dragging me between them across the checkerboard tile floor. When they get to the raised witness stand, Ryan opens the low gate, and the two of them shove me inside the small box. Smiling evilly, Ryan closes the gate with a loud crash. He gives a salute to the judge on the bench above me. "He's all yers, yer Honor," he smirks. "Do with 'em what you will." He and Warren turn and walk away, crossing back behind the barrier gate and going to stand once more at the oak doors.

I gaze out around me. I scan the rows of spectators, searching for faces familiar to me. Jean Reed is sitting next to Bob Brinkman, little Jimmy sitting on her lap. Next to Brink is Jerry Walters, next to him is my former lieutenant, Val Moore. Behind them sits Ed Wells, Jerry Woods, Dave Russo, Sam Bingham, and Sergeant Jerry Miller. I spot Bill Gannon in the sea of faces. Christ, if everyone from the station is here, who in the hell is minding Central Division right now? All of them gaze back at me somberly. Jean dabs at her eyes with a lacy handkerchief. Jimmy smiles at me and waves. I muster a small smile back at him. I turn to the black-hooded judge. "What is this?" I ask. "I don't understand what's happening here."

"Bring in the prosecution," the judge orders. Ryan and Warren open the oaken doors, admitting two men. There are cheers from the crowd as Stuart Walters and Sergeant Joe Friday stride across the floor, both men confidently arrogant. Stuart Walters turns to the crowd before he sits down at the prosecution table, flashing a "V" for victory sign to everyone. Everyone roars their approval, whooping and shouting with glee. The only ones not cheering are my friends. They look down at the floor. The rest of the Walters family trails behind Stuart and Friday, Melissa carrying baby Matthew, little Natalie

leading toddler Andrew with one hand, a wooden box clutched tightly in her other hand. They sit directly behind Stuart. Melissa leans over and gives her husband a kiss before she takes her seat. Then she offers me a seductive smile. I shiver and look away.

"Now, bring in the defense," the judge says. Once again the doors are opened, and Jim Reed and Sergeant MacDonald enter. The crowd boos and jeers them, their hissing sounding like a thousand angry snakes. As Jim and Mac sit down at the defense table, Jim flashes me a thumbs-up sign. Mac smiles and nods his head. I smile wanly back.

The judge pounds his gavel again. "This court will now come to session," he intones. "The defendant will please raise his left hand to take the oath."

"Wait a second," I say. "Isn't there supposed to be a jury of some sort here?"

The black-robed judge points to the audience. "There. That's your jury."

I scan the crowd once more, this time picking out some of the most hated people I've run across in my career as a police officer. I spot Steve Deal and Norm Landon, the two thugs that kidnapped Jim and I and were going to kill us. They sit next to Boone Wexler, the man who left me for dead in Griffith Park, after I crashed Adam-12 during a pursuit. I see Penny Lang, the woman who wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. I look at the judge. "This isn't fair," I say. "That's not exactly a jury of my peers."

He shrugs nonchalantly. "Eh, so sue me, okay?" He laughs. "Are you ready to take your oath?"

I look around. "Hey, where's the Bible at?" I ask. "I'm supposed to swear on a Bible!"

He groans, shaking his cowed head. "Very well. Bring forth the Bible so that Officer Malloy may take his oath."

Bernie Ryan hurries forward with a small black book. He grins as I stand, putting my right hand on the cover, raising my broken left hand with a slight grimace. "D'ya swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nuthin' but the truth, so help ya Lucifer?" he rattles off.

"I...wait a minute. What do you mean Lucifer?" I ask with a scowl. "Aren't you supposed to mean God?" The judge removes the black hooded cowl from his head and my eyes widen in shock. "No, it can't be!" I gasp in horror.

Satan himself chuckles deeply, looking down at me from his perch on the high bench. "We don't believe in God here, Malloy. Only me. Now take your oath so we can get this trial underway."

The black book underneath my palm grows rather hot, and I yank my hand off of it. I look down at the cover...it's the Satanic Bible. The blood-red pentagram on the cover glows brightly. "I won't take the oath on that!" I say. "I refuse to!"

Satan sighs. "Yes, we go through this a lot," he says. "Guard Ryan, please assist Officer Malloy in placing his hand on the Bible in order to take the oath."

I try to shrink back from Ryan, but in the tiny space of the witness stand, I can't. Smirking, he reaches out a grabby hand and snags my injured left hand, slamming it hard against the Satanic Bible. An involuntary cry of pain escapes from my lips. Ryan shoves my hand back, nearly snapping my wrist. I stumble backwards and sit down hard in the wooden chair. "Sounds like an 'I do' to me, yer Honor!" he says, grinning at the Devil.

The Devil nods. "I concur, Guard Ryan. You and Guard Warren may now take your seats."

"Hey, wait a damned minute!" I shout. "I can't get a fair trial with all of them on the jury!" I point to the audience/jury. "There's no way in hell they're going to find me innocent of whatever trumped-up charges I'm being tried on! I demand a new jury!"

The Devil smiles down at me. "Officer Malloy, this is a courtroom. I will have to ask you to refrain from any further outbursts. If you persist in causing a disturbance, I will have the guards place you in restraints. Do I make myself clear?"

"No! I don't understand what I'm even being accused of!" I snap. "And this isn't a jury of my peers...it's more like a kangaroo court!"

He pounds his gavel and then points to me. "You, Officer Peter Joseph Malloy, are accused of first-degree murder in the cold-blooded killing of Stuart Thomas Walters, in the early morning hours of October 18, 1973. This trial is being held to determine if you are guilty or not."

"Wait a second!" I shout, jumping to my feet. "I didn't shoot Stuart Walters in cold..."

"OFFICER MALLOY," he roars, drowning me out. "SIT DOWN!" He points again and a small fireball shoots from the tip of his finger at me. I duck just in time and the fireball lands in front of the witness box. Ryan quickly scurries forward to stamp it out. "Guard Ryan, Guard Warren, will you please place Officer Malloy in restraints so that we may not be interrupted by any further outbursts?" he asks.

"Sure thing, Dark Lord," says Ryan, as he and Warren approach me. "Stand up!" Ryan orders me, dangling a pair of handcuffs in front of me.

"I won't," I say. I fold my arms across my chest and glare at them, cradling my injured hand gently against me.

Satan sighs. "I fear we're going to have trouble with Officer Malloy," he says. He pulls a set of shackles out from underneath his bench. He hands them to Bernie Ryan and Vince Warren. "Use these," he says. "Make sure they're nice and tight."

"With pleasure," says Ryan as he takes the shackles. He opens the gate to the witness stand. "Step down," he orders me.

"Nope." I shake my head. I know that it is futile of me to fight, but I'm certainly not going to go down without at least one HELL of an attempt.

Ryan grabs my left arm, trying to pull me out of the chair. I hang on tightly to the side rail with my right hand, shifting my weight, leaning it all away from Ryan's grasp. He nods to Warren, who takes Satan's gavel, and pounds my clenched fingers. I close my eyes against the sharp, driving pain, but I refuse to let go. Warren pounds harder, and I can feel my knuckles swelling from the blows. "It's not working," he says to Ryan. "He's not letting go."

"Oh, for Satan's sake," says Satan with dismay. He points a finger at me and I am suddenly yanked hard out of the chair by an unseen force. I am sent sprawling into an ungracious heap at the steel-toed boots of Ryan, who grins down at me. The crowd laughs heartily at my dilemma.

"Ya think you'll learn?" he asks, rattling the manacles and making them clink. "Vince, help me," he says. They haul me to my feet, and Vince grabs my upper arms and pins me in while Bernie leans down to lock the chains around my ankles. I take the open opportunity to land one hell of a kick to his chin. I break free from Vince's grasp to kick Bernie again in the gut, sending him falling ass-over-teakettle on the tile floor. "You sonofabitch!" Bernie growls at me. I start to turn to fight Vince, but he brings his nightstick up, clipping me on the side of my head with a short, sharp blow, and I reel from the hit, grabbing the rail for support. Stars float in my vision and my stomach rolls. Vince hits me again and I go down, sliding down the wooden railing limply. I taste ashes in my mouth. Dimly I am aware of Bernie locking the manacles around my ankles, the cuffs clicking tightly shut with a metallic rasp. He asks something of Satan, and I cannot make out what it is through the buzzing in my brain. He and Warren manhandle me into the witness chair, Warren shoving my wrists out for Bernie to snap the cuffs onto. He tightens them as hard as they'll go, smiling at my grimace of pain. "I don't think he'll fight now, yer honor," he says to Satan.

"Officer Malloy, are you going to behave now?" asks Satan.

I drop my head to my chin, shaking it, trying to clear it. "I have no choice, do I?" I ask thickly.

"No, not really," Satan says. "Are you prepared to continue?"

"I guess," I say dully.

He nods to Ryan and Warren who return to their seats. He picks up his gavel and bangs it. "Continuing then, if you are found guilty of the charge of first-degree murder, which you most likely will be, an appropriate sentence will be determined and passed. Then it will be carried out. Do you understand, Officer Malloy?"

"No," I say quietly. "Not that it matters."

He shakes his head. "No, it honestly doesn't." He looks at Sergeant Friday and Stuart Walters. "The prosecution will now give their opening statement."

Sergeant Friday stands up and strides around the front of the table. He turns to the avid crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I intend to prove to you today that this man," he points to me, "Officer Peter Joseph Malloy, did intentionally execute one Stuart Thomas Walters in the early morning hours of October 18, 1973. I further intend to prove that Officer Malloy has expressed no remorse at all for this heinous crime, and that he should be found guilty and duly punished for depriving Stuart Walters' poor young family of his love, support, and companionship." He waves a hand at the "poor young family" sitting directly behind him. "Look at his beautiful wife sitting here, one minute she was happy and safe in the arms of her loving husband; the next, she was made a sad, sad widow, her loving husband brutally felled by a single bullet from Officer Malloy's service revolver."

At this, Melissa Walters throws her head back in anguish, wailing loudly. The crowd murmurs and whispers its sympathy as she cries and boo-hoos, her shoulders shaking with her sobs, her long hair falling over her face as she leans forward, wracked with grief. Then she stops suddenly, looks at her watch, then she gazes at Sergeant Friday. "Two minutes, Joe. How'd I do?" When Friday nods and gives her an 'okay' sign, she turns her eyes to me. She smiles that seductive smile once more, her fingers playing with a double-strand of pearls around her delicate neck. Her skin is alabaster against her black mourning dress, her chestnut hair shines in the sunlight that creeps in around the slatted blinds at the window.

I look away, my head pounding and nausea rolling in my stomach.

Sergeant Friday goes over to the three small children sitting there. He turns once again to the jury, his hands open in supplication. "And see? Here's Stuart's sweet little children: six-year-old Natalie, three-year-old Andrew, and baby Matthew, just a little over a year old. All of these poor dear mites left fatherless by the cruel Officer Malloy."

Melissa reaches over and pinches little Natalie, who promptly bursts into tears. Her crying starts the other two wailing, Andrew throwing his head back like his mother, gasping out huge choking sobs, while baby Matthew shrieks and howls, waving his tiny fists ineffectually. The crowd oohs and awws, shaking their collective heads in sorrow. After two minutes, Melissa reaches over and pinches Natalie once more, and all three of them stop bawling. Natalie props the box she's holding up on the wooden barrier and opens it, dainty plinking tones of music echoing across the courtroom. I recognize the tune, "The Teddy Bears' Picnic." She lets it play for one verse, then, with a smile, she claps the lid shut on the box and returns it to her lap. She nudges little Andrew, who holds up his love-worn teddy bear, making it wave one little paw at me. Only baby Matthew, cradled in his mother's lap, does nothing. Then, without warning, he lets out a huge sneeze.

I close my eyes, shaking my head. This can't be happening to me...it just can't be.

Sergeant Friday points to me. "Yes, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this man you see before you, willfully and intentionally ended the life of a beloved husband and father, consigning his dear and loving family to a fate worse than death." He nods to Satan, and returns to his seat. The crowd behind him applauds loudly, then they rise to their feet and give him a standing ovation. The only ones not standing are my friends.

"The defense will now present their opening statement," Satan says in a bored tone, studying his fingernails. He blows on them, then buffs them on the front of his robe. "Not that it really matters," he adds archly.

Jim Reed stands up. Oh no, not Jim! I look desperately at Mac still seated at the table. Jim's a good man and all, but surely HE'S not going to be the one defending me! Jim stands a...a...well, a snowball's chance in hell in getting me off on this charge. The man just isn't as eloquent as Sergeant Friday. Jim strides over to me, a huge grin on his face. "Hey, Pete, how ya doin'?" he asks happily.

I hold up my manacled wrists. "How the hell do you THINK I'm doing, Jim?" I ask bitterly. "I never thought I'd see the day when I was the one placed in handcuffs."

Jim nods. "Sucks, doesn't it?" he asks. "I'm glad it's not me sitting there."

"How do you plan to defend me?" I ask. "I sure hope you've got a good defense thought out." I study him, trying to read his face. I have a bad feeling about this, especially since Jim quite often has a hard time deciding on what kind of sandwich to have for lunch.

He shakes his head. "Nope. I only got this case just this morning. I haven't looked at any of the paperwork."

"What do you MEAN you haven't looked at any of the paperwork?" I demand. I look over at Mac. "Why don't you defend me instead of him?" I ask.

Mac shakes his head. "Jim's not a rookie anymore, Pete. We've gotta let him spread his wings and fly, you know."

"But he's gonna screw up my defense, I just KNOW it!" I say.

Mac shrugs. "Sorry. Nothing I can do. Jim wanted the case, so he got it."

I drop my head for a moment, then I look up at Jim, my eyes meeting his. "Jim," I say softly. "Please, please, PLEASE don't screw this up for me, okay? I'm putting my trust and faith into you that you will clear me of this charge. Don't let me down, okay?"

He nods happily. "Okay. I thought I'd use my good looks as part of your defense," he says. "After all, I AM pretty cute."

I gape at him. "Are you KIDDING me?" I ask. "That's your DEFENSE?" I put my head into my hands, the chain of the cuffs clinking softly. "I am SO dead," I mumble.

Jim turns around to the crowd. "Don'tcha think I'm cute?" he asks. He begins to strut around like a blue-dacroned Mick Jagger. "I can't get no...satisfaction...I can't get no...good reaction..." he sings. The crowd boos and hisses, and someone chucks a huge spitwad at Jim. Instead of hitting him, it hits Satan, where it sticks to his forehead briefly, then disappears in a sizzle of smoke.

Satan points to the crowd. "Alright, enough of that!" he admonishes. "Do you all want detention after trial?"

The crowd murmurs dejectedly, and several of them look down at their feet.

"Reed!" I hiss.

He struts over to me rather flamboyantly. "Yes, Pete?"

"It's 'girlie action', you idiot, not 'good reaction'," I tell him.

He frowns. "It is? Seriously?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, seriously. Now quit singing and start my defense!"

Jim turns back to the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I intend to prove to you that this man," and with that, he throws his hand out, smacking me firmly in the head.

"Ouch!" I yelp. "Damn it, Jim, watch it!"

"Oh, sorry, Pete!" he says. "I guess I wasn't paying attention!" He laughs. "Did it hurt?"

Leaning forward over the railing of the witness stand, I quickly deliver a sharp smack to his forehead with the palm of my right hand, the handcuff chains rattling crisply. "Gee, now you can tell me yourself! Does it?" I ask snarkily.

He rubs his head, staring at me with a wounded expression on his face. "Yeah, it does."

"Hey!" Jean Reed yells, standing up and unceremoniously dumping a startled little Jimmy Reed, Jr. from her lap. "Make him stop hitting my poor husband! He's not that bright to begin with at times, and I don't want his brain damaged any further by that man!" She sits back down with a huff, gathering little Jimmy back into her arms.

Satan raps his gavel. "The defendant will please refrain from bitch-slapping his defense attorney until AFTER the proceedings are through."

"You mean I'll get a chance to smack him around after this is over?" I ask Satan.

"Well, we'll see," Satan replies. "Depends on how pressed for time I am. I'm due back at the deepest bowels of Hell for an orientation meeting around noon-ish. I've got some new imps coming on the job and I have to show them around." He nods to Jim. "Get this show on the road, pal."

Jim scratches his chin. "Now where the heck was I?" he murmurs to himself. He looks at me in confusion. "What was I saying, Pete?"

"My defense opening statement, Jim. You were getting ready to give the opening statement," I hiss.

He looks at me in astonishment. "I WAS?" he asks incredulously. "REALLY?"

"Look, Jim, I'm sure you mean well and all, but wouldn't it be better if maybe MAC defended me?" I ask. "I mean, he's a little more experienced, wouldn't you say?"

He shakes his head. "Nuh-uh, Pete. Jean promised to take me out for ice cream when I get through here. All I have to do is stand up here and make a pretty speech, looking adorable for the crowd." He turns around and waves at Jean. "Hi, honey!" he yells. "Hi, Jimmy!" He turns and looks at the Devil. "Say, are there news cameras here in this courtroom right now?" he asks.

The Devil points to the news media gathered at the back of the courtroom. "What do you think those are?" he asks snidely. "Portrait painters?"

Jim waves at news cameras, jumping up and down. "HI MOM!" he yells happily! "We're number one!" He sticks his index fingers up in the air. "We're number one!" The Devil shoots a small fireball at the back of Jim's head. It smokes briefly in his hair. "Ouch!" he says, turning back around as he rubs the burnt spot. "What'd ya do that for?"

The Devil shrugs. "I thought maybe you needed a little incentive to get this going," he says. "The next one is going to be aimed at your goody pouch."

"Ooh," Jim says, covering his goody pouch with both hands. "Not the crotch! My wife needs that for...uh...for...uh..."

"Satisfaction, dear," calls Jean. "I need it for satisfaction."

He snaps his fingers. "Yeah, that."

I drop my head into the palm of my right hand. "I am SOOOO screwed right now..." I mutter under my breath.

Jim frowns. "Hey, I CAN hear you, Pete," he says in a hurt tone. He folds his arms across his chest and looks sternly at me. "Say you're sorry, or I won't go on."

"Really?" I ask hopefully. "If I don't apologize, you won't defend me anymore? You'll let Mac do it?"

He thinks for a minute. "Well..." he hedges. "Nah, I think I'll do it anyway."

I sigh wearily. "Then I'm right, I'm screwed."

"Maybe not, Pete," he says, cocking his head. "Don't count me out just yet. I might have a few tricks up my sleeve." With that, he turns back around to the crowd, holding his arms up over his head. "Yes, ladies and gentlemen, behold! The amazing, adorable, and utterly fan-TASTIC, REMARKABLE REED!" He drops his hands down and a puff of smoke appears in front of him, while trumpets blare out a bright fanfare. Circus music begins to play. Over Jim Reed's LAPD uniform, he now wears a dark blue glittery cape and a black top hat on his head. "That's right, ladies and gentlemen! I am here to astound, confound, and delight you all! I will amaze you with my tricks of magic; every man, woman, and child,

the old and the young alike! All I need for you to do is believe in the power of magic, believe in mystical spirits, and most of all, believe in ME!" He bows with great aplomb, while the crowd murmurs and whispers amongst themselves. "Do you believe?" he asks them, pointing to them. They twitter and giggle like shy little schoolgirls. A few of them clap. "I said, do you believe?" he asks, his voice a bit more firm, more resonant. He strides forward towards the wooden barrier, waving his hands in front of him. "I SAID, DO YOU BELIEVE?" he shouts, throwing his hands up over his head, as glitter and confetti rain down on the crowd. They roar their approval, some of them standing up and clapping loudly.

"I believe I'm screwed," I mutter, slouching as low as I possibly can in my chair.

"OBJECTION!" Sergeant Friday shouts, standing up. "The defense is grandstanding!"

"Overruled," the Devil says. "I wanna see what he's gonna do next."

I look up at him. "You're kidding me, right?"

He shrugs. "Nah, I haven't been this entertained since Anne Boleyn took her head off last week and the imps found it and played a rather merry game of Head, Head, Who's Got The Head? with it."

I raise my eyebrow. "They played a CHILDREN'S game with it?"

He sighs. "Well, it's much better than playing Freeze-Tag with it. There's only so many expressions her face can freeze into, you know."

Meanwhile, Jim is still at the barrier gate, bowing and waving to the crowd. "I love ya!" he shouts, blowing kisses to them. "I love ya all!" Then he fumbles around in his left sleeve, frowning and looking concerned. The crowd grows silent. He continues fumbling, then with a great flourish, he pulls a bouquet of fake flowers from his uniform sleeve, and presents it to a smiling Jean. Some of the plastic petals fall off and flutter to the floor. He kisses the back of her hand gallantly. "For the loveliest lady of them all," he says with a small bow.

"AWWWW!" the crowd says in unison. Then they clap and cheer loudly.

"And for my darling little boy," he says, bending over the railing to tweak little Jimmy's nose. "I give you..." There is a drum roll as he removes the top hat from his head, sticking a hand down inside of the crown. He fishes around for a moment, then he pulls out a small white duck. He stares at it for a moment. "A duck?" he asks in confusion, looking into the hat. He turns to Mac. "I thought I was supposed to pull a rabbit out of the hat," he says. "Instead, I got a duck!"

Mac shrugs. "What's wrong with a duck?" he asks. "People like ducks."

QUACK! QUACK! squawks the duck, flapping its wings in Jim's face. It reaches its bill up and pinches him sharply on the nose. He drops it, both he and the duck squawking in unison. "OUCH!" he yelps, his hand over his pinched nose. "Dat hurt!" He glares at the duck waddling around on the floor. "Lousy stupid ol' duck!" he snaps at it. He looks back inside the top hat. "EWWW, it POOPED in here!" he says with obvious disgust. He tosses the top hat onto the table. "Ain't no WAY I'm wearing that now!" he says.

The duck flies up to the barrier gate, then it plops itself into Jimmy's lap. "DUCKIE!" he screams in an ear-piercing shriek. "DUCKIE MINE!" He hugs the duck tightly to him, while the ducks squawks and flaps its wings in alarm.

"Yeah, well, don't get too attached to it," Jim warns. "It's gonna be Sunday dinner." He turns his attention back to the crowd. "And now, I will present..."

"Hey, Jim," I call, interrupting him.

"Yeah, Pete?" he asks, looking over his shoulder at me.

I crook my index finger at him. "C'mere," I tell him. "I wanna talk to you a minute."

He rolls his eyes and sighs. "Can't it wait, Pete? I'm kinda busy right now."

"Noooo, it can't wait," I tell him.

"Oh for Pete's sake," he mutters, and at the mention of my name, the crowd boos soundly. He strides over to me. "Yeah, what is it?" he asks, leaning on the edge of the witness stand.

I hold my right hand up to him. "Pick two," I tell him.

"You called me over here just to ask me to do THAT?" he says with dismay. "What's so damned important about THAT?"

I smile. "It's really, really important, Jim. Especially to me, your partner." I nod to my hand. "Now pick two."

He sighs. "Oh, alright." He points to my index and middle fingers. "One, two," he says, touching them briefly. "Are you happy now?"

"Soytenly," I say, and I wave my hands in front of him for a second, his eyes following the movement, then I promptly jab him in the eyes with the two fingers he picked.

He staggers back a bit, rubbing his hands over his eyes. "WOOB, WOOB, WOOB!" he cries, as the crowd roars with laughter.

The Devil looks at me. "Now what did I warn you about bitch-slapping your defense attorney?" he asks.

"You only said I couldn't slap him," I say. "You didn't say nothin' about pulling a Moe Howard on him."

Reed approaches me. "Oh, wiseguy, eh?" he asks in a Curly-type voice.

The Devil casually zaps him with a fireball again, then he zaps me, burning a small hole in the front of my uniform, which I quickly extinguish with the palm of my hand. "I don't like the Three Stooges, gentlemen," he admonishes. "And besides, slapstick comedy like that requires all THREE stooges, not just two."

Reed pats out the wisp of flame that is emanating from his midnight blue cloak. He turns back to the crowd. "Behold! The fantastic card trick!" he shouts, pulling a deck of cards out of his shirt pocket. He holds them up. "An ordinary deck of playing cards," he says. "But I, Remarkable Reed, will use my magic powers of deduction to ascertain the exact playing card I will ask a member of the audience to remove from this deck and SHIELD, from my very eyes!" The audience applauds and he smiles magnanimously at them. "I need a volunteer from the audience," he says. "A volunteer, someone I have never ever met before in my entire life!"

"Ooh, ooh, ME!" Ed Wells shouts, standing up. "Pick me, Jim!"

Reed waves him forward. "Yes, ladies and gents, I have never ever seen this man before in my life, have I, complete and total stranger?" he asks Ed as Ed approaches him.

Ed shrugs. "Well, you haven't seen me since yesterday, does that count?" he asks.

Reed looks at Mac, who nods. "Works for me," Mac tells him.

Reed holds the deck of cards out to Ed. "Pick a card, any card at all," he says.

"Um, that one," Ed says, tugging on a card.

"No, NOT that one," Reed hisses sotto voce. He looks at the crowd and laughs nervously. "Yes, any card, I said, pick any card." He looks at Ed. "Pick the one I told you to pick, dummy!" he mutters.

Ed pulls a card out of the deck. "This one," he says. He glances at it, then he holds it to his chest. "It's hidden from your eyes, Ridiculous Reed."

Reed closes his eyes and throws his head back, one hand pressed to his forehead. "And now, using the extraordinary powers of my deduction, I will tell you what that exact card is!" he intones mightily. "Is it the...ace of diamonds?"

Ed looks at the card. He shakes his head. "Nope."

Reed frowns. "Is it the Jack of spades?"

Ed looks at the card again. "Nope, try again, Amazing Doofus."

Jim opens one eye. "I heard that," he snaps, glaring at Ed.

"Well, at least your extraordinary powers of hearing are still working," Ed says, getting a laugh from the crowd.

"I must think harder!" Reed says, his brow furrowing with concentration. "Is it the King of hearts?"

Ed flips the card over and smacks Jim on the nose with it. "No, Amazing Doofus, it's the Queen of diamonds!" He turns around. "Sheesh," he says, shaking his head. "My ten-year-old daughter can do better magic than you!" He tosses the card up into the air, where it disappears in a puff of smoke. The crowd oohs.

"Take that, non-believer!" Jim shouts, as the audience roars, stamping their feet and clapping loudly.

Ed waves a hand at him as he sits back down. "Ah, shaddup!"

I look at the Devil. "Did he really turn that card into smoke?" I ask.

The Devil grins. "No, it was me. I hate to see a lousy act tank so soon. It's not as much fun."

"You mean there's more of this to come?" I ask with dismay.

"Sho' nuff, pardner," the Devil drawls.

Reed strides over to the prosecution table. He points to the dour-faced Sergeant Friday. "Now this, ladies and gents, is a very irritated man!" he says.

"Irritated isn't the word for it," Friday growls. "I'm about ready to plant my foot in your ass, son."

Reed waves his index finger at him. "Tsk, tsk," he admonishes. "Now I believe I can do something to cheer you up, Sergeant Friday."

"What, you'll sit down and quit this ridiculous grandstanding?" Friday asks.

"I dunno, Sarge, I kinda like it," Stuart Walters says.

"QUIET!" Friday snaps at him. "Go on, Astounding Idiot, show me what you're gonna do."

Jim leans forward and pulls a cigarette from Friday's left ear. He holds it up with a huge smile. "I say this man needs a smoke!" he says.

"I say you need a muzzle," Friday tells him with a glower. Reed hands him the cigarette, which Friday puts between his lips. "So, whattaya waiting for?" he demands. "Light it, Idiot Boy."

Reed pulls his service revolver from his holster with a flourish. The crowd gasps and falls silent. He brandishes it for all to see. "And now, I will do what the good Sergeant asked! I will use my revolver to light his cigarette!" Women shriek and cover their eyes, while others clutch their small children tightly to them. Reed holds the revolver down to Friday's cigarette. He rubs his index finger over the trigger and smiles as the drums roll menacingly.

"You wouldn't," Friday says, a little bit of fear showing in his eyes.

"DO IT!" I shout. "Pull the trigger, Jim!"

Jim's finger tightens on the trigger and then he pulls it, with a dramatic wince, and there's a collective horrified gasp as...

The revolver shoots out a tiny little speck of flame, neatly lighting Sergeant Friday's cigarette. The crowd lets out the relieved intake of breath in one huge groan. They clap as Friday puffs contentedly on his smoke. "Thanks, son," he says. "That hits the spot."

"Sonofabitch," I groan, resting my head on the wooden rail. "Why couldn't it have shot him instead?"

Friday points at me. "You see?" he asks. "That's what I'm talking about! The man is obviously a cold-blooded killer!" But he isn't quite as dynamic as he was earlier, as he continues to smoke. "I say hang the bastard." He shrugs. "Or whatever."

Jim comes over to me. "You aren't helping your case, Pete, if you keep making comments like that," he whispers loudly to me.

"What, and you think your three-ring flea circus here is helping me?" I snap.

He shakes his cape out. "I don't have fleas, Pete. I got a flea bath last week, plus I'm wearing a flea collar," he says, reaching a finger under his uniform collar and pulling forth a white plastic necklace. "See?" He leans toward me to show me his Hartz three-in-one flea collar. "It keeps me free from fleas, ticks, and...and..." He frowns, turning around to look at Jean. "What's the third one, dear?"

"Mites, honey. Mites," she says.

"Yeah, those," he says with a snap of his fingers.

I reach out and grab him by his tie. "Listen, Jim..." I begin, my voice threatening. The handcuff chains dangling from my locked wrists rattle menacingly.

"ULP!" he says, as I bang his chin on the wooden rail. His eyes bulge and then go crossed. "Pete," he rasps. "That's too tight!"

The Devil sighs. "Once again, I must remind the defendant not to assault his defense attorney." He then zaps me with another fireball, which hits my pants.

Jumping up, I let go of Jim in order to put out the small inferno that is blazing dangerously close to my goody pouch. "Hey!" I snap. "Watch it, pal! That's hittin' pretty damned close!"

The Devil shrugs and cackles. "Sorry. Bad aim, I guess."

Reed laughs, pointing to me. "Hah hah, Pete! Your chestnuts almost got roasted over an open fire!" He turns to the crowd, waving his hand at me in delight. "Get it? Chestnuts? Open fire?" When the audience looks puzzled instead, he sighs. "Oh, brother." He bends down and picks up a large cue card that says 'Pun intended. LAUGH, YOU IDIOTS!' When they respond, he nods approvingly. "That's what you get for messing with me, Pete," he says. "Just like that song, 'You Don't Mess Around With Jim'." He twirls around, dropping the cue card to the floor. His cape swooshes around him and he begins singing.

"And you don't tug on Superman's cape, you don't spit into the wind, you don't pull the mask off the ol' Lone Ranger, and you don't mess around with..."

"JIM!" I snap. "Focus your attention back on the trial here!"

He turns around. "For somebody who nearly got his lumps of coal melted down, you sure are bossy, Pete."

I resume my seat, assured now that the raging inferno is now out in the vicinity of my family jewels. "Hey, YOU try being complacent when YOUR Fruit-of-the-Looms are on fire, pal!" I snarl.

Reed turns back to the crowd. "And now, I will perform for you my most AMAZING trick of them all!" he shouts.

"You make yourself disappear?" I ask. "Better yet, make ME disappear."

He turns back to me and shushes me. "Pete, quiet!" He faces the audience once more. "Now for this trick, I will require complete SILENCE!"

"Oh brother," I mutter, cupping my chin in the palm of my right hand. "This had better be good."

Reed struts back and forth in front of the captive audience. "Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I, Remarkable Reed, will make myself disappear..."

"Isn't that what I just said," I ask irritably.

"PETE!" he says. "Shut UP!" He shakes his head. "I will make myself disappear..."

OOOOH! the audience gasps.

"And I will make myself REAPPEAR!" he shouts to the fanfare of trumpets. "Possibly as a completely different person," he mutters to himself. "That is, if this trick goes right."

"Hey, where's that music coming from anyway?" I ask the Devil.

"Look behind you," he says with a smile.

I look over my shoulder to see a wicked, kick-ass, funky-down, rhythm-and-blues section seated on a stage behind me. "Wow," I say. "Somehow, I'm NOT impressed."

"And somehow, I really don't care," Satan tells me. "I borrowed them for today only, just for this trial. I'd appreciate a little respect, if not for myself, for the power of the funky MUSIC!" he roars. He points the musicians. "Hit it, boys!" he says.

The band rips into a mean version of "I Can't Turn You Loose" by Otis Redding.

Reed turns around and approaches the bench. "I can't do my act to this song," he whispers to the Devil. "It's not upbeat enough."

The Devil shrugs and snaps his fingers. The band switches to a chirpy version of "Tie A Yellow Ribbon 'Round The Ole Oak Tree." The audience starts swaying to the music as they all sing the chorus. "Tie a yellow ribbon 'round the ole oak tree, it's been three long years, don't ya still want me..."

Jim shakes his head. "No, no, no," he says with a whine. "That's too...too...top fortyish. Something else," he says. "I need something else."

The Devil sighs and snaps his fingers again. The band switches to "My Ding-A-Ling."

"How appropriate," I tell the Devil.

He nods. "I think so, too."

Jim stamps his foot. "NO, NO, NO!" he shouts. "I want...I want..." He leans forward and motions for the Devil to lean down towards him. He whispers something in the Devil's ear, but what it is, I can't hear it.

The Devil sits back in surprise. "Really!" he says, rubbing his chin. "You think you can pull it off?"

Jim nods. "I'm sure of it."

"Very well," Satan says, snapping his fingers at the band once more. They segue into a blaring version of a song I had hoped never to hear ever again, at least not in THIS lifetime.

Jim rips off his cape, tossing it to the floor. There is a puff of smoke and a microphone and stand appear in his hands. He sways towards the audience as he starts singing. "What's new, pussycat? Whoa-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh! What's new, pussycat? Whoa-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh!"

"TOM JONES!" the female members of the crowd shriek with delight. There is a flurry of movement as they start to rush the wooden barrier, but the Devil quickly zaps a few of them back with some random fireballs. They are forced be content to stand in the aisles, jumping up and down with giddy glee, as Jim sings and struts around. Then, to my surprise, there is ANOTHER flurry of movement amongst them, and suddenly Jim is being pelted with...

Underwear. All sizes, shapes, colors, of feminine undergarments. Little pink lacy ones, scanty flowered blue ones, shiny silky black ones, fire-engine red ones...every kind of panties known to the free world are thrown at him. Some of them land on the floor near his feet, while some land on him, draping his shoulders and his head like a shower of flowers. He grins and keeps singing, until a rather LARGE pair of white cotton bloomers smack him square in the face. He peels them away with disgust. "Hey, no granny panties!" he admonishes his adoring audience. He then launches into "It's Not Unusual," bringing more screams and shrieks from his female fans. Someone in the middle of the audience faints. A pair of pinstripe boxers whip through the air and land on him. He picks them off daintily. "To whoever threw these, I appreciate the thought," he says to the crowd. "But I...uh...don't swing that way."

Jean Reed stands up once more, dumping Jimmy Reed, Jr. onto the floor again. "Hey, you shameless hussies!" she screams at the adoring women. "He's MINE!" She then begins to swat and hit at the women nearest to her, pulling hanks of their hair in her hands. There are shrill screams of pain as Jean smacks and slaps with wild abandon.

"Oh dear," Satan says with a small frown. "While I thrive on utter chaos and riots are really my thing, I didn't realize it was going to get this far out of hand. It's not proper for a courtroom setting." He snaps his fingers and the band stops playing, the music shuddering to a shrieking cacophonous halt of horns, drums, and bass guitar.

The microphone disappears from Jim's hands, and he turns around, looking at the Devil with a puzzled expression on his face. "Hey, what the hell?" he asks. "I haven't done 'She's A Lady' yet!"

"Nor will you," the Devil replies. "Chaos is grand and all, but this IS a courtroom, and I must enforce some kind of decorum here." He claps his hands and the audience suddenly sits back down, quiet and stern-faced, calm once more restored. Jim's flamboyant cape and top hat have disappeared. Even the bright spots of underwear are gone from the floor, whether they were superciliously replaced back on the original wearer, I don't know.

Jim looks disappointed. "Hey, I was gonna keep some of those," he says, looking up at the Devil with dismay.

"Oh no you WEREN'T!" Jean Reed shouts.

Jim comes over to me. "Pete, I'm really sorry," he says, his eyes downcast.

"Hey, just get the trial back on track, okay?" I ask. "You were supposed to give the opening statement for my defense before you turned into a circus act," I tell him. "So why don't you go ahead and give it now? If you can start the trial with something like that, surely you can handle an opening statement. I'm putting all my trust in you, Junior. Don't let me down." I gesture to the crowd. "Go on, Jim. Wow 'em."

He shakes his head sadly. "Pete, I can't. That WAS my opening statement," he tells me.

"WHAT!" I exclaim, shocked. I look at him in astonishment. "You're kidding me, right? Please tell me you're joking with me, partner!" Icy horror washes over me.

"Nope, I'm not, Pete," he says quietly. "I wish I were."

I grab his shirt front with my right hand, yanking him towards me as I stand up. "You can't DO this to me," I hiss. "My trial depends on this, Jim!"

"I know it," he says miserably. "But I couldn't think of anything. I didn't know how to defend you, Pete."

I turn desperate eyes to Sergeant MacDonald. "Surely you've got something to say?" I ask, fear edging my voice. "An opening statement, maybe? A get-out-of-jail free card?"

Mac shakes his head. "Sorry, Pete, but I don't have anything that will help you out."

I shove Jim away from me, hard, making him stumble back. "You sonofabitch," I growl. "You...you...CHEATED me! I won't have a fair trial now, thanks to you!" I sit back into the wooden chair with a rattling clank of my binding chains.

He hangs his head. "I'm sorry, Pete. Really I am." He looks at me sorrowfully. "Can't you forgive me?" he asks. "I meant no harm."

I look into his eyes. I hold my manacled wrists out to him, forcing them apart so that the links between them are drawn taut. "See these?" I snarl.

He nods. "Yes, Pete, I do."

"This is what my life is going to be like from now on!" I tell him angrily. "I'm going to be a prisoner forever, Jim! Do you think I'll like that, being locked away forever?"

Jim shakes his head. "No, Pete, but there's nothing I can do." He looks at me again, his eyes meeting mine. "Say you forgive me, Pete, please," he begs.

"Go to hell," I snarl at him. Then I turn my face away from him.

He slouches back to his seat at the defense table. He sits down, putting his head in his hands forlornly. Mac tries to comfort him, patting him on the back.

The Devil raps his gavel. "Has the jury reached a verdict?" he asks.

"Wait just a damned minute!" I yell, coming to my feet once more. "How can they have reached a verdict when there was only the opening statement made by the prosecution? There were no witnesses presented, no evidence introduced, and I didn't get a chance to testify in my own defense!" I gesture to the silent courtroom. "What the hell kind of courtroom is this anyway?"

The Devil smiles at me. "I believe you called it a 'kangaroo court', Officer Malloy. And that is exactly what it is." He waves a hand around at the audience. "Your jury will decide your verdict, Officer Malloy."

I scan the audience, picking out the smiling enemies before me. "You're kidding me, right? The people who hate me far outweigh those that like me," I say.

He nods. "Precisely the point."

I sit back down. "So what was the reason for a trial then, anyway? If the outcome is not going to be favorable, then why bother?" I ask wearily.

The Devil shrugs. "I was bored," he says.

I stare at him. "You mean I'm on trial just because you were BORED?" I ask. "Whether or not I remain a free man is being decided by my enemies...just because you were BORED?"

"It was a slow day in Hell, what can I say?" He shrugs again. "Besides, it's not your freedom that is being decided here, Officer Malloy. It's your very fate."

"My fate?" I ask tremulously.

He laughs evilly. "Whether or not you live or die."

Suddenly the room spins a bit in front of me, and I shiver as icy dread runs a chilly finger down my back. "You...you...you mean, I could be put to death in this trial?" I gasp. "That's not right! I've done nothing that would warrant my death!"

He points to Stuart Walters. "You killed him, didn't you?"

I nod. "Yeah, but I had to! He was going to kill me first!"

The Devil shakes his head. "But you've admitted to your own conscience that you don't regret killing him. In fact, you were just waiting in that basement for him to cross into your line of fire so you could pull the trigger on him, is that not right?"

I look across the room at Stuart Walters sitting at the prosecution table, a malicious smile on his face. I look back at the Devil. "It wasn't like I laid in wait for him," I say. "I did what I had to do, and that's all."

"But you don't regret killing him, right?" he asks. "Pulling that ol' trigger was easy for you to do, especially after what you'd seen in the house upstairs, right?"

I shake my head. "No, you've got it all wrong. I didn't let my emotions rule the outcome."

"LIAR!" Satan roars, leaning across the bench, flames dancing in his eyes as he shoves his face in mine. "You are not only a cold-blooded killer, Peter Malloy, but you are also a dirty rotten liar!" He jabs me sharply with the gavel. "Admit it! You killed that man because you hated what he had done to his family and to your partner in the house upstairs!"

I jump to my feet with a clatter of my chains. "I am NOT LYING!" I shout. "I didn't intend to kill him! I was going to try to take him alive, honestly I was!" A heavy weight suddenly slams into me, forcing me back into the wooden chair. It presses hard against my chest and I struggle to breathe. I feel like I'm suffocating. "Please," I gasp. "Make it stop!"

"I can't," Satan says. "That's the weight of your own conscience pressing on you. If you'll admit you killed Stuart Walters deliberately, it'll go away, I promise."

"No," I rasp, choking for air. "I won't lie."

"Do you think that only God can see your conscience and your sins?" he asks me. "Do you think that He is the only one with the power to look into your heart, your mind, your soul, and know what you are thinking?"

I tug at my uniform tie and collar button, trying to loosen them. "I won't lie," I groan. My vision dims slightly, blackness swirling in front of my eyes. I shake it off, my eyes focusing on the faces of my friends looking at me in wide-eyed horror as I choke to death in front of them.

Satan laughs. "It's not a lie when you're telling the truth," he says. "Tell the truth and you can breathe again." He gestures to the audience. "Tell them that you killed Stuart Walters in cold blood."

"No," I choke. "I'd rather suffocate."

"SAY IT!" Satan roars. "SAY IT!" he begins chanting, and the crowd picks it up, and the courtroom echoes with "Say it!" over and over again. Then Satan waves his hand and the crowd falls silent. He eyes me. "Tell everyone the truth, Peter Malloy. You killed in cold blood. Deliberate murder. You pulled the trigger on Stuart Walters and enjoyed doing it, didn't you?"

I close my eyes. There is no more hope for me now. "Yes," I rasp hoarsely, hearing the gasps of shock from my friends. "I did." Immediately the heavy weight lifts from me and I can breathe freely again. I lean forward, trying to draw air into my grateful lungs. I keep my head bowed and my eyes firmly closed while I speak. I don't wish to look at anyone while I make my sordid little confession. "It wasn't the hardest thing in the world for me to do," I say softly. "After seeing what hell he did to his family." I open my eyes and glare at Stuart Walters. "And no, I don't regret killing him. Not one damned bit. If that condemns me to death, then so be it."

"There now, doesn't that feel much better?" the Devil asks. "Confession is good for the soul, I always say."

I look across the room, not meeting anyone's eyes. Then I glance at Jim Reed, who is looking at me with a mixture of disbelief and sorrow. "I'm sorry, Jim," I tell him. "I'm not the good person you thought I was." I look down. "I'm sorry you had to witness this," I tell him softly.

"Pete, tell me it isn't true," he says. "Please tell me what you just said isn't true!"

I shake my head, refusing to meet his eyes. "It's true, Jim. It's true."

"Pete, NO!" he says. Then he drops his head into his hands, covering his face. Mac puts a comforting hand on his shoulder, but Jim shrugs it off. Then he stands up quickly, knocking the chair he was sitting on over backwards. He strides angrily towards me. "You LIED to me, Pete," he snarls. "You LIED to ME, your partner, your best friend!" He leans over the railing of the witness stand. "How could you do that to ME, let alone yourself?" he demands. "I thought you were one of the good guys, that's why I always looked up to you. Now I find out that you're no better than the scum we pick up off the street on a daily basis!"

"I'm not without tarnish on my armor, Jim," I tell him. "I'm not infallible." I pause. "Besides, you were wanting to get out of patrol work anyway, so now here's your chance. Take the investigators' exam and you won't be partnered with me anymore."

Jim frowns. "What are you talking about, Pete?"

"I saw your little list that you made up," I say. "The pros and cons of patrol work versus the investigator's work. Not being partnered with me was on both lists." I laugh bitterly as I remember his Judas-like betrayal. "So I guess you'll get your wish, huh? You won't be stuck with me anymore after this. Maybe you'll have a perfect partner after me. One who lets you drive the squad car and one who is worthy of your admiration."

"Pete, I was pissed at you the day I wrote that list," he says. "I didn't mean for you to be hurt by it."

I shake my head, closing my eyes against the bitter sorrow I feel. "It doesn't matter anyway, Jim. Not now."

Satan clears his throat. "While I hate to interrupt a sappy and touching moment between you two, I need for the defense to return to his seat."

Jim looks at the Devil defiantly. "And if I don't?" he asks.

Satan motions to Vince Warren and Bernie Ryan. "Guards, please escort Officer Reed to his seat," he says. "And place him in restraints."

Reed whips around. "Touch me and I'll shoot both of you deader than a doornail!" he snaps, his hand going to his revolver in the holster at his side.

Ryan smirks as he and Warren approach Reed, a set of handcuffs and manacles in his hands. "Go ahead, mister. Fire away."

Reed yanks his gun loose and aims at Ryan. He pulls the trigger, but only the little lighter flame shoots out, to the laughter of the crowd. He cries out in dismay, then he turns to me. "Pete, give me your gun!" he says.

I start to make the move to get my gun, but I'm stopped by unseen hands pinning me tightly to the chair. I writhe in the grip, but can't break free. I turn muted, pleading eyes to Jim. "I can't, Jim," I cry out. "I can't."

Reed draws his nightstick and menaces Ryan and Warren with it. "I won't go without a fight," he snarls. Then, suddenly, the nightstick is yanked out of his hands and into the hands of the Devil. He looks back over his shoulder at Satan, and that his is undoing; Ryan and Warren grab his arms quickly, locking his wrists into the cuffs, then place his ankles in the restraints before he can even react. He fights the restraints, but it does no good. He's locked up like me. "You bastards," he snarls at the two guards. "I hope you rot in Hell!" They lead him back to the table, where they sit him down forcibly. They stand behind him, ready to sit him down again if he jumps up. Reed rests his forehead on the table for a moment. "I'm sorry, Pete. I really let you down," he says, looking up at me.

The ghostly grip around my arms loosen, and I slump back in the chair, suddenly drained by all the drama. I shake my head. "You tried...sorta," I tell him.

The Devil raps his gavel, scanning the crowd. "As interesting as this trial has been so far, I now need a verdict from you fine folks," he says, looking at his watch. "It's nearly time for the Imp Orientation." He raps the gavel again. "What say you in the verdict in and for the trial of Peter Malloy?" he asks the courtroom.

"GUILTY! GUILTY! GUILTY!" their voices ring out in unison.

He gestures to them magnanimously. Then he looks down at me. "The masses have spoken. You are guilty of killing Stuart Walters in cold blood."

"Pete!" Jim shouts from the prosecution table. "No! Fight for yourself!" He tries to rise but is stopped by Ryan and Warren. "Damn it, fight, Pete!"

I hold his gaze for a minute. "What's the use?" I ask quietly. "I'm already condemned."

"No, PETE!" he shouts, jumping up and getting set back in his seat once again. "Fight!"

Mac grabs his shoulders and shakes him. "Jim, there's nothing more that can be done," he says. "The jury has spoken. The verdict is final. Pete's guilty of cold-blooded murder."

The Devil bangs the gavel. "One more outburst like that, Officer Reed, and I'll have you removed from the courtroom," he tells Jim sharply. He turns to me. "Are you ready for your sentence?" he asks.

I sigh wearily. "Lay it on me, Lucifer. It's not like this can get any worse for me, that's for sure."

Steve Deal hands Bernie Ryan a slip of paper, and then Ryan approaches the bench. He gives it to the Devil. "His sentence, yer honor," he says with a smirk.

The Devil opens the piece of paper up and reads it, then he looks down at me. "Actually, I think it DID just get worse for you, Officer Malloy," he says with some surprise. "The citizens have decided on your punishment unanimously. You are to be executed..."

"What's so surprising about that?" I ask dully.

"Let me finish," he admonishes. "You are to be executed, in this very courtroom, in front of all of these witnesses, with your own service revolver, by the very man you executed yourself, Stuart Walters." He looks at me. "Do you understand that, Officer Malloy?" There is a hubbub as minor pandemonium breaks out among the crowd over the reading of my sentence. The Devil raps the gavel sharply and points to the crowd. "Order in the court!" he demands. "Order!" He looks down at me. "Truly, I am sorry," he says. "I was quite looking forward to torturing you with your guilty conscience had the jury decided to leave you alive. It's much more fun when such torture is spread out over the full course of your life." He shakes his head. "I've never seen a jury reach a verdict and a sentence so quickly." He rubs his chin. "Are you prepared to die?" he asks me. "Are your affairs in order and all that happy crap?"

I shrug. "There's nothing to put in order," I say tiredly. "I don't have much of a family, other than my parents. Someone will have to notify them, I guess. Other than that, I haven't really taken stock of my life up 'til now. I don't think there's much to set in order. I lived a pretty solitary life." I look out over the faces of my friends. "My friends," I ask. "Must they see this? Must they witness my execution?"

He nods. "I'm afraid that's part of the punishment. You must die knowing that your friends and loved ones will bear witness to your death."

I sigh heavily. "And yet another burden to lay upon my soul," I say wearily. "As if it doesn't already have enough weighting it down...now this." I stand up. "Well, let's get this over with," I say. "There's nothing more for me to say."

"Very well," says Satan. He gestures to Ryan and Warren. "Guards, please assist Officer Malloy."

Ryan and Warren start towards me, but I wave them off. "I can do it," I say. My manacles clink and rattle as I open the gate to the witness stand with my good hand. Carefully, I step down, the chains between my feet dragging along the floor. The crowd is silent as I approach the bench in front of Satan in the middle of the floor. When I reach about the midway point, I stop, looking back at the Devil. "Here okay?" I ask.

He nods. "It's just fine, Officer Malloy." He motions to Ryan and Warren. "His gun, please?" Satan says to Ryan.

Ryan removes my service revolver from the holster at my side. He hands the gun to Stuart Walters, who has gotten up from the prosecution table and strutted over to where I stand. Walters smacks me hard on the back with a meaty paw. "Now you're gonna find out what it's like, piggy," he chuckles.

"Get your damned hands off of me!" I snarl.

Satan peers down at me from his perch. "Any last words? Any thoughts, prayers, bits of wisdom you'd like to pass along before you are executed?" he asks me gravely.

I look out over the silent crowd. I allow my eyes to meet those of my friends, but only briefly. I do not wish to witness the sorrow that I see there. Jim Reed is the last one I look at, and it the sight of his face that brings the sting of tears to my eyes. He should not have to see this, not at all. I look up at Satan. "Can't you at least spare him?" I ask. "He's been through hell, and I don't want to put him through any more. Please, don't make him watch this, I beg of you."

Satan shakes his head. "I'm sorry, but that's the way it must be."

I think for a moment, then I speak. "Jim," I say, my voice soft with choked emotion. "You were a good partner, Junior, the best. You'll make a damn fine detective some day. I'm really proud of you, my friend."

"Pete," he says, tears spilling out of his eyes and rolling down his face. "Don't let them do this to you, please! You have to fight!"

"I can't," I tell him. "It's no use. I'm not going to come out a winner in this deal, Jim. I have to accept my fate."

"IT'S NOT FAIR!" he shouts, jumping up again. "I won't let them do this to you, Pete, I WON'T!"

"Guards, seat Officer Reed back into his chair," Satan orders.

Bernie Ryan and Vince Warren force Reed back into his chair, their iron grips holding him there.

"Jim," I say, catching his eyes. I keep my gaze fixed firmly on his, trying telepathically to send him a message. "Jim," I say again. "I'm sorry." I keep his gaze a moment longer, then I drop my head to my chest briefly, hoping that he'll read the signal.

"I'm sorry, too, Pete," he says softly, his eyes narrowed as he realizes what I want him to do. He lowers his head.

Good boy, Jim, I think. Keep your head down and you won't have to see this.

The Devil clucks his forked tongue. "Really now. Did you think you'd just get away with this?" he admonishes me. He points to Ryan and Warren. "Force Officer Reed's head up so that he may witness the execution of his friend."

Grabbing a handful of Reed's hair, Ryan yanks his head back. Reed promptly squeezes his eyes firmly shut. "How ya gonna keep him from closing his eyes?" he asks the Devil.

The Devil waves his hand and Reed's eyes are forced open. "That should do it," he says. "Now let's get this execution over with. My Imp Orientation is going to be late."

"Kneel, asshole," Stuart Walters says, jabbing me hard in the small of my back with my own gun.

I slowly drop to my knees, my manacled hands clasped in front of me. I feel a single teardrop slide down my face and splish upon the tiled floor in front of me. I never expected my life to end like this. I remain stone-faced, trying hard to keep my emotions in check. After all, never let them see you cry.

Walters struts around to the front of me and presses the cool metal barrel of my service revolver to the middle of my forehead. "I wanna see the expression on your face when I pull the trigger on you," he cackles delightedly. "A close-range head shot," he smirks. "Just like you did to me." His finger rubs the trigger. "Got anything to say, piggie?" he asks. "Before I send you to piggie heaven?"

Iron steel hatred shoots through my blood and I force myself look into his eyes, my gaze hard and unyielding. A cold smile graces my lips. "Go to hell, Walters," I hiss. "I'm glad I killed you, you evil sonofabitch!"

Grinning, he pulls the trigger...I hear a scream from Jim..."PETE!"...a second before the bullet slams into my brain... Oh! but dying is such an exquisite pleasure!

And I'm dead before I even hit the ground.

I come awake not with a gasp or a jolt, but with a sense of profound despair sitting heavily on my chest like a leaden weight. I stare at the unseen ceiling in the darkness, then wearily, I reach over and flick on the light on my nightstand. It floods my bedroom with a soft comforting glow, but strangely, I do not feel comforted. I slip out of bed and pad out to the kitchen in the dark, turning on the kitchen light. I find the familiar bottle of whiskey, the familiar shot glass, and pour myself a familiar snort of the amber liquid. I down it with an easy flick of my wrist, then pour myself another. I screw the cap back on the bottle and place it back in the cupboard, turning out the kitchen light, taking the second glass of whiskey back to the bedroom. I set it on the nightstand, and snag the familiar pack of cigarettes, shaking one out and lighting it with the gold Zippo. I sit on the edge of the bed, staring at the whorls in the carpeting beneath my bare feet. Drawing a lungful of smoke in, I set the cigarette in the ashtray and get up.

I go over to my closet, pulling the door open. It squeaks a little, and I make a mental note to remember to oil the hinge on it sometime. I scan the top shelf, my eyes skipping over the neat little boxes that line the metal shelves. Maybe my real life isn't in nice little compartments, like Jim Reed would like to think it is, but my tangible life certainly is. A lifelong habit of fastidiousness makes the idea of clutter unsettling to me. My eyes land on a small gunmetal grey box that's tucked in the corner. Reaching up, I gently take it down, the contents inside sliding softly around with the movement. It's locked, but I know where the key is. Going over to my dresser, I open the lid of a small, handcrafted wooden box. My eyes linger on the small tokens of jewelry that reside in there; my high school class ring, an opal the center stone, representing my birthday in October; a set of small gold cufflinks, given to me by my parents on my graduation from high school, my initials *PJM* etched into the smooth ovals; a matching tie-tack that goes with the cufflinks; a watch that has long since been broken, that I keep forgetting to take to the jeweler's to see if it can be repaired; a tiny gold replica of my badge, the numbers 744 and the word *POLICEMAN* written in dark blue across the two-inch face of the badge.

I pick the little badge up and set it atop the wooden dresser. Slipping a finger inside the wooden box, I find the hidden catch, pushing the wee button and revealing a secret drawer in the underside of the box. The craftsmanship of the box is so well-done, that it would take a magnifying glass to discover even the slightest groove that would indicate a hidden drawer. I found it while I was stationed over in Germany and bought it just for that reason. A simple wooden box to contain secrets for a highly private man. I fish the key out of the drawer and take it, the gunmetal grey box, and the replica of my badge all over to the bed.

I pick the cigarette up and take another drag on it, then I sit down on the bed, pushing the pillows up behind me against the headboard and leaning back on them. I pick up the replica badge, slipping the edges of my fingers over the fine ridges grooved into the metal. It was given to me the same time the actual badge was, on graduation day from the police academy. I aim it towards the light, and it casts merry little rays across my walls and ceiling, just like the gold Zippo did last night. But it fails to amuse me, so I lay it back onto the bed, taking a final drag on my cigarette before I stub it out in the ashtray. Jim Reed wouldn't be happy at all to know that I've started smoking again, if only temporarily, but I figure what Reed doesn't know won't hurt him.

I slide the metal box toward me, the heavy black handle clicking against the grey top. Running my fingers over the cool metal, I stroke the glossy finish with gentle fingers. The key to the box in front of me is on a silver keychain, the letters *LAPD* stamped in dark blue against a plain silver badge keycharm.

I let the chain slide through my fingers for a moment, the key clinking back onto the bed with a tiny ping, then I pick it up again, slipping it into the lock of the box. It's time to open Pandora Peter's box. The hasp of the lock clicks sharply against my fingers when I turn the key. Opening the lid slowly, I leave the key in the lock, the keychain sharply ringing metal on metal as it swings. I know what contents lie in this box; I know it like I know my very self, for what is in this box is me...my life story entombed in a cool metal casket. I gaze at what is revealed before me, then I slowly begin to remove the contents one by one, with the care of an archeologist excavating an ancient Indian village.

I take out my birth certificate first, that small white piece of paper with the Michigan state seal, and the Wayne county seal, stating in boldly typed letters that a baby boy was born on October 15, 1937 to Elizabeth Rose Malloy and Timothy Peter Malloy, both of Detroit. My mother's occupation is listed as teacher, while my father's occupation is listed as ironworker. My mom taught elementary school at Midview Elementary, and my dad worked in the Ford plant, assembling parts on the line. I don't remember anything about Detroit, we moved to Seattle when I was three, so my dad could take a job as a foreman at the Boeing plant. It was that house that I grew up in, a small, two-story house that we lived in until my dad enlisted in the Army and went overseas to fight. While he was away battling Hitler's evil, my mom and I went to stay with his folks, my grandparents Joe and Irene Malloy, in their boardinghouse. They took in boarders during the war years to make some extra, much-needed money. I trace the embossed seals on the certificate and lay it aside, taking out the next piece of memorabilia.

It's a black and white snapshot of my parents and I, standing in front of our house, my dad dressed in his Army uniform, holding a four-year old me in one arm, the other arm tucked protectively around my dainty mother. My dad was a big fellow, a strapping six-foot-two, barrel-chested man weighing in at a well-muscled 200 pounds. He had strawberry-blond hair, just like mine, that tended to go nearly pure blonde in the summer sun, and deep blue eyes that could turn almost black when he was angry. My mother was a little wisp of a gal, with auburn hair the color of a flame, hazel-green eyes that snapped with fire, and a lilting laugh that made you want to hear it again and again. It is her that I resemble most, I have her eyes and her smile, not to mention her freckles; and I also possess her joie de vivre and even temperament. On the other hand, I also possess my father's deep brooding and dark moods at times, like right now. I study the picture. My parents are both smiling and happy, my mother has her head thrown back in one of her lilting laughs, and my dad has a wide grin on his face like he's the happiest man in the world. Only I am not smiling; I gaze at the camera with such seriousness, I wonder if it was a portent or an omen of the things to come.

For while my father went away to war a robust and genial man, he came back from war a broken-down spirit, a ghost of the father I just barely knew, physically fine except for a loss of weight, but emotionally crippled and scarred by what hells he experienced over there. And it was after his homecoming that life forever changed; gone was the man who used to toss me up in the air just to hear me shriek with delight, who used to read me a bedtime story every night and then tuck me in, who used to listen to radio serials like "The Shadow" and "The F.B.I." and "Dick Tracy" with me, enjoying the stories as avidly as I did. Instead, in the place of my father, we got back a shadow of a man, given to heavy drinking and bouts of brute violence towards my mother and I. My mother's lilting laugh soon stopped, her joie de vivre replaced by a worried frown permanently creased between her brows, and always the admonition for me to hush, be quiet, Father's in one of his moods again. I learned to tiptoe around him quite quickly, and not question anything at all, at least not out loud, lest I get either his belt on my back or the back of his hand across my face. I close my eyes for a moment, my

thumb going to a small scar just under my chin, rubbing the small white ridge reflexively. I got it one night when I didn't get out of his way as fast as he'd wanted me to, and he shoved me, hard, causing me to stumble into our deep freeze out on the back porch, my chin clipping the sharp metal edge of the freezer. It hurt when the family doctor stitched it up, accepting my mother's explanation that I'd tripped and fallen, such a clumsy child! but the hurt was soon replaced by a burning anger and hatred, one that I was quite adept at keeping hidden, but flamed deeply within my soul and spirit. My mother chose to stay with him, honoring the sacred vows of her marriage, despite his abject cruelty towards her, but me...me, I got the hell out of there the day I hit eighteen, renting a meager little room with my earnings from the Boeing plant. I made sure I never worked the same shift as my bastard father, deftly avoiding any paternal brushes for quite a while. I set the picture aside and continue my survey of the contents of the box.

The next thing I pull out is my high school diploma and my graduation photo. I set the diploma aside, for all it tells me is that I graduated from St. Regis High. I give the graduation photo a cursory glance, a black and white formal portrait of an unsmiling young man, gazing somberly at the camera, his pain well hidden in the glints of his eyes. I remember the suit jacket I wore, a birthday present from my grandparents, a brown tweed affair that made me look nearly professorial when coupled with the black bow tie at the collar of my white shirt. My hair is neatly combed back and plastered down with Brylcreem, the stubborn little cowlick at my forehead temporarily tamed into submission. In that picture, my hair is longer than it is now; police departmental regulations forcing me to keep it cut short and tidy. I don't mind all that much, but I kinda miss the cowlick a little. The girls used to think it was sexy. I place the graduation photo on top of the diploma.

Next I remove is a pale pink envelope, with just my name, *Pete*, written in blue ink across the back, the letters of my name scripted out in beautiful flowing cursive handwriting. A faint whiff of rose perfume reaches my nose, and I close my eyes again, inhaling the light fragrance as if it were critical to my very being. Opening my eyes, I slip a finger under the already-opened flap of the envelope, carefully removing the handwritten missive tucked within. I unfold the fragile pages, scanning the lines with my eyes, even though they are committed to my memory, burned in there through the rote of time.

Pete, my love, the opening line reads.

I cannot believe that tomorrow we will be married...something that we seemed to have waited forever to happen, and now it is here as soon as the new day dawns on the horizon. Tomorrow I will become Mrs. Peter Malloy, wearing your ring with pride and such great love. We will speak our vows before God, our families, and our friends, forever cementing our love in the sacred bonds of holy matrimony. Then, everyone will know that I belong to you, and you belong to me, and it is something that will never be broken by anyone or anything.

I promise you this, my love: I will hold you forever in my heart, from now until the end of time, my love and devotion to you always undying. I know that you feel the same way about me, for I can feel it in your touch as your sweet lips caress mine, hear it in your voice when you gently call my name, and most of all, I can see it in your eyes whenever you gaze tenderly upon me.

And it is such great plans we have for our bright future together! I will continue working at the dime store until our first baby comes...maybe within the next year? Oh! perhaps we'll have a honeymoon baby! Wouldn't that be grand? I want a little boy for our first one, a happy little fellow with his daddy's red hair and green eyes, and twinkling smile. And then I'll stay to home in our little house with the white picket fence, caring for our little boy, keeping the home fires burning for you every day while you are at work, making sure that the house is spic-and-span, and that your supper is on the table waiting for you when you get home. We'll share a quiet dinner, the baby sound asleep in his crib, and we'll talk, just like we do now. And then, we'll curl up beside the fire, maybe listening to music on the radio or playing records on the hi-fi...maybe we'll read or maybe we'll just enjoy our quiet moments together, watching the flames die down to embers in the fireplace. Or maybe we'll play with the baby, you tossing him up into the air just to hear him giggle with glee, tucking him into bed with a bedtime story and a kiss goodnight.

And then the night belongs to us, my love, and only us. I can feel your gentle touch upon my skin, your tender lips caressing mine as we sit in front of the fire, drinking in the sweet being of one another. Then, as the fire dies down, ours is just beginning to kindle, as gentle touches and kisses lead to more, and you finally pick me up in your arms and carry me to our bedroom, where we make beautiful love until we are exhausted, curling up in one another's arms before finally drifting off to a perfect sleep.

Maybe in a couple of years, baby number two will come along, this time a little girl who looks just like me. We'll be a happy, cozy little family, our love for one another strengthening as time goes on. Perhaps by then you will be foreman at Boeing, or maybe even higher! and we can afford a nicer house with a huge lawn just perfect for the children to play in. I can plant a huge garden and bring you glasses of lemonade after you finish mowing the lawn on a hot summer's day. We will bask in our love for each other and for our children, and ours will be a perfect life, you'll see!

Oh, I cannot wait until tomorrow, my love! But I must, for it will soon be here...and we will stand together in the church before everyone, gazing into one another's eyes as we exchange our forever vows, you lifting my veil and kissing me after Father Louviere pronounces us husband and wife. I cannot wait for the joys of tomorrow night, when we are all alone, and can finally be as one, just as we should be. Never forget, sweet Peter, that I love you with all my heart, and I always will...that is my solemn promise to you. Nothing will tear us apart.

Until tomorrow, my love,

Evelyn

I carefully refold the letter, tucking it back inside the envelope. How many times had I come so close to ripping that letter into tiny shreds, forever destroying those elegantly scripted letters and eloquently flowing words. But, each time my fingers closed around it in a destructive grasp, each time that those words brought such pain to my heart, each time that I read them with the hot sting of tears in my eyes...something stopped me from destroying it. What it was each time, I do not know. Perhaps it was the memory of the young woman who wrote me such tender words of love, baring her heart and soul to me so openly in verse, proving that once again, she did love me, at least for a little while. I caress the envelope closed with my fingertips and lay it atop the diploma.

Our wedding picture is next, our formally posed black-and-white shot, the two of us standing at the altar, gazing at each other with such loving promise of a bright future in our eyes, my hands closed firmly and protectively around hers. I am quite resplendent in a white tuxedo jacket, black pants and cummerbund, black bow tie, and starched white shirt. A boutonniere of pink carnations and baby's breath is tucked into my lapel. She is gorgeous in an ivory satin gown, the sweetheart neckline and tightly-tucked bodice adorned with lace and sequins and tiny seed pearls, the long sleeves of the gown flaring a bit at her shoulders, then tapering into a delicate line at her wrists. The long skirt of the gown is quite full, with an intricate layer of lace embroidered with pearls and sequins covering the skirt, as bouffant petticoats made up of layers and layers of netting peek out coyly from underneath the satin hem. Her train cascades down the steps of the altar, a long river of ivory satin skimmed with that same intricate lace. It is so long, it nearly flows out of the picture. Her veil is a whisper of antique lace, the veil handed down to her from her mother, whose own mother had handed it down to her. Her tiny hands beneath mine clutch a small bouquet of daisies and carnations, with white satin ribbons of lover's knots tying the bouquet together.

I hold the picture close to my eyes, studying it, trying to discern if there is anything in either of our faces that holds a glimpse of what was to become of us. I can see nothing in mine; I am smiling down at her with an expression of tenderness and love, of joy and outright disbelief that this gorgeous creature is finally mine. I was truly happy that day, a happiness that I've not felt since. I carried that happiness for a long, long time, a secret locked forever away inside my heart. And, like a willo'wisp of smoke, it's hard to capture in the air. I turn my attention to her, my Evie, her long chestnut hair with its wild wild curls, tamed into reluctant submission under the cap of her wedding veil. She is looking up at me, her smile so bright and joyful, but there is something of a flash of hesitancy in her eyes. I cannot really see it in the picture, but I remember it quite well as the photographer snapped the shot, it flamed briefly; a mix of fear and uncertainty in her blue eyes, a slight wonderment if perhaps she'd maybe made a mistake in marrying me. When I saw it, it pinged across my heart, and then I ignored it, chalking it up to wedding-day jitters. I should have taken it for the warning flare that it was, but I foolishly didn't.

My glance automatically flicks to the gold Zippo lighter. I pick it up, turning it over and over in my fingers, the picture clutched tight in my hand. How easy it would be to let the tiny lick of flame destroy the photo, rendering it to mere ashes, just like our marriage ended up as. I open the lid of the lighter, my thumb rasping across the wheel, a bright little tongue of flame dancing obediently up to do my bidding. I gaze at the picture for a moment, a little voice in my head telling me to just do it, then I close the lid of the lighter, extinguishing the flame. I study the picture once more, a deep aching pang of loneliness echoing across my heart, and a small stab of sorrow jabs deep within me. Her memory should be just a ghost to me now, a bright little flash of color that I can take out and recall with fondness when I reach my doddering age. Instead, her ghost is tinged with sharp anger and recriminations, and I find that I cannot dredge up any fondness, nor forgiveness even now. After all these years passed, the sharp sting of betrayal and bitterness still remains. I cannot bring myself to destroy the photo and the letter, like burning them to grey ash and denying that that part of my life even existed; but I also cannot bring myself to admit to anyone that the Pete Malloy they know now, is not the Pete Malloy that lived back then. It's a whole other timeline, completely separate from my present. It has been for a long time...I've taken great pains to erase those awful memories, like sweeping over footprints in the snow. But still, the photo and the love letter is proof that that life of mine once existed. And in some self-sadistic way, I don't wish to destroy them. I keep them around as a

little reminder to myself to never let myself be that foolish and starry-eyed, and fall in love so completely. My mouth set in a bitter line, I lay the photo face-down on top of the love letter.

The next set of papers I take out are my divorce papers, signed by a judge in Reno, Nevada. After the marriage ended so abruptly, I flew to Reno to get a quickie divorce. I spent six long weeks there, a residency requirement for such lofty proceedings, even if the residency is only temporary. I didn't spend the time licking my wounds and drinking myself into a drunken stupor every night, either. I got a job desk-clerking at the semi-sleazy hotel I was holed up in, trying to decide what in the hell to do with my life now that this unsettling chain of events had occurred. Evie didn't contest the divorce at all, how could she? It seemed foolish to lock the barn door after the horse had already been stolen late in the night, and there wasn't any denying that it was her choice to call an end to our marriage, even if it was done in such a dastardly way. I scan the cold legal terms: irreconcilable differences, the bonds of holy matrimony are irretrievably broken, both parties agree that no further action can be taken to restore the marriage. I close my eyes for a moment, rubbing my forehead, the papers shaking slightly in my hands as I remember the scene so *vividly*, the one that brought me to Reno in the first place.

It was an icy cold shock, coming home unexpectedly early from the factory on Christmas Eve, walking into the little house that we rented, and discovering her, *my Evie*, in *our* bed, with Joey Donnelly, my best friend and former co-altar boy. He'd been my best man at my wedding, offering a toast at our wedding dinner for a long and happy marriage. I shake my head at the memory of the brutal double betrayal. Something inside of me snapped that afternoon after the discovery of my playing an unwitting cuckold in their sordid little affair; I walloped the shit out of Joey Donnelly, leaving him to run half-naked and thoroughly frightened like a scalded cat out into a Seattle winter day, clutching his clothes to him while trying to stop the blood flowing from his broken nose that I gave him. And Evie, crying and begging and pleading with me to stop, just listen, it was a mistake, it would never happen again, she was so very very sorry, could I please forgive her; in such a hysterical torrent of words, as she followed me weeping through the house, watching as I angrily threw my meager belongings into a couple of suitcases. I had paused for a moment, just a mere moment, seething and breathless in my righteous anger, to look at our wedding picture that stood on the mantle of our fireplace, beneath an ornate antique mirror that belonged to Evie's grandmother. When I caught sight of that portrait, I picked it up in my shaking fingers, studying it. Evie took the opportunity to latch onto my arm, her nails digging and clawing into my wrist and forearm as she begged for forgiveness once more. I glanced at her tear-stained face, so pale in its shock of sorrow and fear of having gotten caught, and I felt nothing but white-hot anger singing in my blood, as I raised my hand back to slap her. Then, I caught sight of my eyes in the mirror, green eyes blazing with so much fury and hatred and blinding blood lust...and suddenly, with unyielding shock and horror, I realized that I had become the man I despised the most...my own damned father. I dropped my shaking hand back to my side without ever striking Evie; instead, I heaved the wedding portrait at the antique mirror, shattering it and the glass picture frame into millions of shards of slivered glass, thus ensuring a likely run of seven years bad luck for myself. I turned my back on Evie forever, leaving that house for good and not looking back. My mother was the one who went over there a few days later to pack up the rest of my belongings, for I was already in Reno acquiring the divorce. And after the papers were signed and finalized, Evie and Joey were married in a quickie ceremony, Evie already in her fourth month of pregnancy with Joey's child.

With a small grimace, I toss the divorce papers aside. Legal mumbo jumbo can never erase the hurt and the pain, for all its lofty words. I pick up my Army discharge papers next. That's where I fled, into the Army, only returning home to Seattle just long enough to say goodbye to my mother...my father, I could care less if I bid him farewell, and I'm sure he felt much the same way. I was sent to Fort Sill, Oklahoma for basic training, then shipped over to Germany, to serve out my two-year enlistment. I didn't mind. There were plenty of pretty frauleins to chase and make me take my mind off of Evie. While in the Army, I learned how to become an expert sharpshooter, earning my fair share of ribbons to wear upon my dress uniform. I was in the Field Artillery Radar Unit of the Second Armored Division in Baumholder, which is the fancy name for manning the Big Bertha artillery over there. I set the discharge papers aside. I had no intention of ever making the Army a career, two years of it was enough for me. *Oh, I don't want no more of Army life! Gee ma, I wanna go home!* rings the refrain of the old lament in my ears, as I set the discharge papers aside. My ribbons and service medals lay at the bottom of the metal box, bright colorful reminders of a very short period of my life. I leave them where they are, I don't need to take them out to remember what they look like.

I slip out my certificate from the Los Angeles Police Academy, the one noting that I graduated at the very top of my class with the highest honors. I fell into a career in law enforcement quite by accident; having landed in Los Angeles after my discharge from the Army, I'd become friends with a police officer neighbor in the same apartment building I lived in. He was the one who encouraged me to apply to the academy, and I did, with little hesitation. I was nervous and proud and scared that day I accepted the certificate upon that stage, shaking the hand of the police chief as he congratulated me, my name only one among all the other nervous and scared and proud recruits of my class. My mother was the one who pinned my shiny new badge upon my stiff new woolen uniform dress coat, weeping the whole time. I was stunned that I had made it, having worked my ass off pulling evening shifts loading freight into railcars at a shipping warehouse, and working weekends tending bar at a seedy dump over on Sunset Boulevard. But, the next thing that I pull out, the picture that was taken of me on my graduation day from the academy, reminds me that my hard work paid off in droves. My mom stands proudly on one side of me, tucked protectively in the crook of my arm, while my father, for once stone-cold sober in his life, glares at the camera. The picture was snapped by an acquaintance from the academy, one who was not aware of the family dynamics on display in the black and white shot. While my mother was very proud of me, and somewhat fearful of the dangerousness of my newly-chosen profession, my father was harshly critical, having been forced into soberness that day by my mother. He belittled me, sneering contemptuously at me decked out in my full-dress blues, ruining my moment of shining triumph only slightly by making the snide comment that I'd probably end up getting shot someday, thus forcing the cost of my burial onto his already-low finances. I trace my mother's happy smile briefly with my finger, then I set that picture aside to pick up the next one.

It's a grainy color shot, taken by a former girlfriend oh so long ago. It's a somber photo, showing Lieutenant Val Moore, Sergeant Bill MacDonald, and me. We're all arrayed out in our woolen dress coats, white gloves, and hats perched sternly on our heads. We're spit shined down to our shoes, our badges and brass gleam in the sunlight. We could be dressed for a parade, only we're not. A thin elastic black band stripes across our badges, denoting a death on the force. The funeral was for John Randolph, a colleague who had died the week previous. The girlfriend wanted to snap the picture of the three of us, members of the honor guard, before we left the station for the funeral. I didn't know Randolph well, I was still a wet-behind-the-ears rookie in that shot. Val was my training officer and not yet a Lieutenant at that time. Mac wasn't a Sergeant yet, either. I grin a little at the rather wide-eyed

awe in which I hold my fellow officers in the picture. The other two are facing the camera eyes-forward, while I have a little bit of a glance towards a stern-faced Val, just to make sure I'm doing everything right. Christ, I was so afraid of Val when I got partnered with him. He'd gotten the reputation for being rather hard-nosed when it came to training rookies, and he certainly did not suffer fools lightly. If I screwed up, he let me know about it and then some. And Mac, I held him in much the same esteem. The two of them had been partners prior to my arrival at Central Division, and had a rather long and easy friendship between them. I lay the picture on top of the small pile of mementos and continue.

My smile fades when I take out the next photo. It's of my old partner, Howie Parker and I. I'm holding a six-month old Jennifer Baker in my arms, while Steve stands next to me, grinning widely at the two of us. We'd stopped by Steve's house so he could pick up something he'd forgotten, both of us are in uniform and Jennifer is intently exploring my badge and shooting brass with inquisitive fingers. I feel an edge of sadness wash over me, for two days after that picture was taken, Howie Parker was murdered, brutally gunned down in an alleyway on a bitter rainy night, dying right in front my horrified eyes.

I close my eyes for a moment, rubbing my forehead wearily. I look over at the clock. It's nearly 3:30 in the morning. I tip the box up a little, gently sliding the remaining meager contents out into a small pile. I skim through the meritorious commendations I've received throughout the course of my twelve years on the force; there's several for lifesaving and other heroic acts that I've committed over time. There's no Medal Of Valor, but that doesn't matter to me. I don't strive to earn bright shiny medals and meritorious commendations, I strive to do my job and do it damned good.

The last thing that I pick up is another photo. It's a Polaroid shot, taken on one of the happiest days of my current life. I study it, tapping it against my fingernail. Jim Reed stands on one side of me, smiling hugely for the camera, his arm flung around my shoulder. Jean Reed stands at the other side of me, looking sweetly up at Jim and I, bright sunlight glinting off of her auburn hair. I'm holding a tiny little bundle named James Reed, Jr. in my arms, looking at him with a mixture of awe, respect and healthy fear that the wee baby commanded. After all, I had just been asked to be his godfather, a tremendous responsibility that I was quite honored to accept. In the spot underneath the picture, reserved for a small written notation, Jim Reed's handwriting proclaims: 'Proud godfather to James Reed, Jr., Pete Malloy.'

As I study the picture, a wave of unaccountable sorrow hits me hard. What would Jim Reed think of me if he knew that I really did kill Stuart Walters in cold blood? And what would Jean think, that her husband has been partnered with a remorseless murderer? Most of all, what would little Jimmy think of his Uncle Pete committing such a dastardly crime? I feel the hot sting of tears come to my eyes, and they slip quietly down my cheeks, splashing onto my arms. I wipe them away with the heel of my hand, then I begin putting the mementos of my life back into their metal casket. I place the Polaroid picture in last, my fingers brushing the glossy finish, then I lock the grey burnished box back up with the little silver key. I slide off of the bed, carefully replacing the box back to its spot on my closet shelf. I tuck the key back into its secret drawer in the little wooden box, then I shut the drawer and the box together. I catch sight of my reflection in the mirror over the dresser. I hesitate. My green eyes are red-rimmed and bloodshot, my face is ghostly pale, dark circles lay under my eyes. "How much?" I ask myself hoarsely. "How much more of this are you gonna be able to take, Pete?"

Shaking my head, I go over to the nightstand, picking up the shot glass of whiskey and downing the rest of it in a swallow. I don't feel like hauling the glass back out to the kitchen, so I set it back on the stand. I flick the radio dial off of the rock-and-roll station that is faintly coming in. I don't wish to listen to "Riders On The Storm" again. Instead, I pull in a country station. Country music doesn't hold much appeal for me, too much cryin' and whinin' for my taste, but I hear a familiar tune playing, one that I actually enjoy.

I hear the train a comin'

It's rollin' ' round the bend,

And I ain't seen the sunshine,

Since I don't know when,

I'm stuck in Folsom Prison

And time keeps draggin' on,

But that train keeps a-rollin',

On down to San Antone.

I sit back down on the bed and listen to Johnny Cash sing about his troubles...and Lord knows The Man In Black had his fair share.

When I was just a baby,

My momma told me "Son,

Always be a good boy,

Don't ever play with guns."

But I shot a man in Reno,

Just to watch him die.

When I hear that whistle blowin',

I hang my head and cry.

The signal fades out and I fiddle with the dial, trying to get it to come back in. It does, but only as Johnny swings into the final verse of the song.

Well, if they freed me from this prison,

If that railroad train was mine,

I bet I'd move out over a little

Farther down the line,

Far from Folsom Prison,

That's where I'd want to stay,

And I'd let that lonesome whistle,

Blow my blues away.

I notice that I forgot to put the little replica badge away, so I pick it up and carry it back over to the dresser. I clutch it tightly in my palm, so tight that the edges jab sharply into my hand. I open my palm, staring at the miniature badge lying there. *I don't deserve this*, I think to myself. *I'm a disgrace to the LAPD*. Then I open the wooden box once more, slipping the piece of metal inside, closing the lid upon it. I look away from my reflection, deftly avoiding my eyes in the mirror. I slip back into bed, reaching over and turning the radio off. I lay back, my arms propped behind me, staring at the glow of light on my ceiling. A memory comes to me, one triggered by seeing the picture of myself in the honor guard for John Randolph. I hadn't known John all that well, he'd been more friends with some of the older officers on the force than he was with me. He was a good buddy of Val's and Mac's both, the three of them having some whoppers of fish stories to tell around the station. And it was with a shock that Val and I got called to Randolph's house one bright sunny day, John's wife hysterical and screaming, having come home from running errands to find her husband's dead body down in his den, his off-duty revolver still clutched in his fingers, his head blown off from the force of the bullet shattering his skull. At his feet was an old newspaper article about a young boy who had gotten hit and killed by a police car responding to an emergency...the driver of the squad car was John. He was cleared of any wrongdoing by the police department, but every year on the anniversary of the boy's death, John would take a couple of days off and disappear from sight. And now, on that year's anniversary, he chose to end his own life, not being able to live with his self-imposed guilt and condemnation. I remember Val being so shaken by finding his friend that way, that his shock and sorrow came out in a form of lashing anger directed at me, his rookie officer. I didn't understand Val's animosity and sharpness at the time, after all, suicide is one of the leading causes of death among police officers. John was no different. He stuck the gun into his mouth and pulled the trigger, blowing his head off all over the den. What I didn't realize was that Val, and later Mac, were reacting to the actual deed itself. If the specter of suicide hung so heavily and so easily over one of their own, someone so close to them, how far away were they themselves from committing such an act? It doesn't take too much sorrow, too much despair, too much inner guilt to drive a man to that.

I put my forearm across my eyes, blocking out the light. I close my eyes, remembering Stuart Walters' steely blue gaze meeting mine just before I killed him. *I shot a man in cold blood, because he deserved to die*, Johnny Cash's voice sings inside my head to the tune to "Folsom Prison Blues." I rub my eyes with the heels of my hands. Who appointed me judge, jury, and executioner to Stuart Walters? I think I knew, from the moment he started down those basement stairs, that he wasn't leaving the basement alive, at least not if I could help it. The notion should shock me in its blinding revelation, but all it does

is leave me feeling bitter and angry. Angry at the damned dispatcher for giving us that welfare check call in the first place, angry at Melissa Walters that she let this horrible thing happen to herself and her children, angry at Jim Reed for not insisting that we stay outside the residence until back-up arrived, and angry at Stuart Walters for being such an evil, malicious sonofabitch to willingly inflict such dastardly misdeeds upon his family. Most of all, I'm pissed at myself, for going against protocol and dragging Reed and I into that horrific mess. If I hadn't of done that, none of this hell would be happening right now. I wouldn't have gotten my partner injured, and I wouldn't be facing a Shooting Review this morning, forced to confront the question of whether Walters' homicide was justifiable or not. And that brings me back to the salient fact running around in my weary brain. Despite what everyone has told me, including Father John at St. Matthew's Catholic Church, I know that feeling no remorse for killing Walters condemns my soul as a cold-blooded killer. And the fact that I'm glad I pulled the trigger on the bastard condemns me even further. I'm no better than Stuart Walters. Bitterness chokes sourly in my throat at that thought.

There is a way out, a thought whispers in my mind. I shake my head. Snatches of the last two nights of horrific nightmares flickers behind my eyelids. I don't know if I can take another night of bad dreams like these last two nights have been. I assured Reed that they'd go away eventually; however, that "eventually" may drive *me* slowly crazy in the meantime. I suppose I could go talk to a shrink, like Mac suggested, but that idea doesn't appeal to me in the least. I don't believe in unburdening my secrets to anyone, let alone a complete and coldly clinical stranger. I stare at the ceiling above me. "What am I gonna do?" I ask quietly. "I can't keep this up much longer. Something's gonna break in me and I'm gonna end up doing something I regret."

So, take the easy way out...leave no regrets behind you, Pete, the voice whispers to me once more. *Relieve the burdens weighing down so heavily on your soul. Just think of how nice it would be to not have those blights upon you! You'd finally be free, free from all the nightmares, all the questions, all the eyes that accuse you...especially your own that look back at you in your haunted reflection. Wouldn't that be nice? You'd leave all these sad and bitter memories behind, the failed marriage, the drunken and abusive father, the ghost of Howie Parker.*

"I've never been one to think that way," I argue with the voice. "I'm just not the kind of guy who'd do that."

But that's the beauty of it, Pete! the voice murmurs. *No one figures you as the type of guy who'd do something like this, so imagine the surprise they'd all have, when they find out that you really and truly are! Imagine their shocked faces...Val, Mac, Ed Wells, Bob Brinkman...and Jim...what would Jim Reed think of you?*

At the thought of Jim, despair hits me hard. I think of him, his trusting and somewhat naïve personality, believing that I shot Stuart Walters simply because I had to. Yes, that's true, I did, but I certainly didn't mind pulling the trigger on him, that's for damned sure. And if Jim ever found that out, he'd be absolutely devastated. Little Jimmy pops into my mind...how frightened he'd be if he knew that his beloved Uncle Pete was nothing more than an evil murderer. I close my eyes tightly shut, so tight I see fireworks behind my lids. "No," I whisper. "I can't do this."

Oh, but you CAN, Pete! After all, the Bible sayeth, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. You'd be fulfilling that old prophecy! And just think, your soul would soar free from this prison, and you'd leave all your earthly sorrows behind!

"But Jim," I groan. "What would he think? What would his little boy think? I can't do this to them, I care too much about them."

If you care that much about them, then you'd do this. Spare them the suffering of finding out you're a cold-blooded killer. After all, which is the lesser of the two evils? Finding out the truth about you, or forever keeping it hidden from them? What kind of legacy do you wish to leave behind, Pete? The guilty conscience of a live man, or the secrets of a dead man? And you know what they say, dead men tell no tales...

I sit up in bed. "I'm not going to do this," I say angrily. "I'm just not. I can't. It goes against everything I believe in."

You can't, or you won't, because you're afraid of it? the voice taunts. Swallow the fear and just do it, Pete! For once, just do something right in your damned life!

John Randolph's headless body flashes through my memory. "No, I can't," I groan again...but my fingers reach unbidden for the off-duty weapon on my nightstand, creeping across the bedclothes with a mind of their own. Gently, I slide the snub-nosed .38 Smith and Wesson revolver out of the leather holster. Shaking hard, I snap the cylinder open, the circle of wicked bullets cruelly revealed to my eyes. I click the cylinder closed as a tsunami of sorrow hits me, making my eyes sting with tears once more. The gun in my hand blurs with the tears as they slide down my cheeks. No one should have to enter my apartment and find me like this, but someone, either Mac or Jim will. I send up a silent prayer that it's Mac who discovers me and not Jim. I fear Mac can handle it better than Jim can. Jim doesn't need any more sorrow and pain heaped upon him right now. I slip the safety off and slowly raise the gun to my right temple, my entire body trembling. My index finger glides over the smooth trigger. The metal barrel presses coolly against my skull, the weapon as heavy as lead in my sweating hands. A harsh sob escapes from between my lips. The grip is slightly slippery in my palms. Then, my resolve weakens, and I lower the weapon back to my side. "I don't want this," I choke. "I don't want it to end like this."

Oh, for God's sake, just DO IT! the voice commands in my head. You're the last person that would ever be taken for a lowly coward, Pete Malloy.

I take my hand away from the gun. "I'm not doing this," I say thickly. "I'm not going to end up like John Randolph. I can't do that to my friends."

Like they're really gonna care why you did this? I certainly don't see them sitting with you here, now, in the deepest hour of your torment. Where are these so-called friends of yours, Pete? I don't see Mac, I don't see Val, and I sure as hell don't see Jim Reed. So where are they? They're at home, with their families...while you sit here in misery, all alone, with just the little whispering in your brain to keep you company. If they gave a damn about you, Pete, they'd be here, right by your side, helping you through this.

"I haven't asked for anyone's help," I tell the voice. "They'd be here if they knew I needed them, I'm sure of it."

Oh, are you now? It seems to me that your good friend Mac is more concerned with crucifying you on that cross Sergeant Friday has you nailed to. And Reed? He's more concerned with his wife getting her feelings hurt by you, instead of the other way around. He should have stood up for you, Pete. He should have gone to bat for you when she ripped into you for not protecting him. What kind of friends are those, Pete?

"No," I whisper. "They're my friends."

And what would these...friends...think of you, a disgrace to the LAPD uniform? A ruthless killer hiding behind the badge. You said it yourself, you don't deserve the badge, for what you've done. Do you think anyone will honestly give a good damn when you're gone? They'll likely be glad to be rid of you. Trust me, you won't be missed by them. A disgusting disgrace such as yourself is best left forgotten. So do it, Pete. Put the gun against your head and pull the trigger. It'll all be over soon. Then you won't have to worry anymore what anyone thinks of you, least of all yourself. C'mon, do it, Pete.

My resolve steels once more and I grab the gun with a wrenching, choking sob, raising it quickly to my temple once more. Then, remembering a botched suicide attempt that we once handled in which the kid tried to kill himself in the same way but screwed it up, leaving him blind and paralyzed for life, I hesitate. I do not wish that kind of end for myself, so I shift the gun from my temple, placing it under my chin instead. It's a little awkward and hard to position at the right angle, but I manage. The barrel is slightly warm, from the contact with my temple, and the smell of gun oil drifts up to my nose. Gripping the revolver tight in my two hands, I ease my thumb over the trigger. As I do, the image of Jimmy, Jr. washes vividly before my streaming eyes. *How can I do this to that poor kid? He thinks the world of his Uncle Pete. I have no right to do this at all. I'm committing murder if I kill myself. And I don't want that to be his dishonorable memory of me, not at all.* "Oh God!" I rasp out, my voice choked and thick as I lower the weapon from my head. "I can't do this! I just can't!" I cry, and weeping, I snick the safety back on, sliding the gun back into the holster and replacing it quickly on the nightstand. Sitting there in my bed, I draw my knees up to my chest and clutch them tightly as I sob, rocking back and forth to try and soothe myself.

Loser, whispers the voice. You're nothing but a weak, sorry-assed loser, Peter Malloy. Sitting here weeping like a little child, just because you couldn't pull the trigger and end your life. You certainly deserve whatever hell on earth you get. And with that, the voice whisks out of my mind.

I lay back down, wiping the tears from my face with the bedsheet. I don't turn out the light, dawn will soon be breaking and I'll have to get up and get ready to face the Shooting Review Board in a few hours. I know sleep now is futile anyway. So I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, lost in thought over what I almost did, what dastardly act I came within just a hairsbreadth of committing. *Maybe I'm some kinda big-shot hero, that I just saved my own life from myself, I think bitterly. Or maybe I'm some kinda spineless, yellow coward, that I didn't have the goddamned guts to pull the trigger and end it all.*

Whatever I am, I certainly don't relish meeting my eyes in the mirror any time soon.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The overhead lights in the green-painted hallway of the fifth floor of the Parker Center seem unnaturally bright to me as I walk down the hall, the soles of my spit-shined shoes clicking sharply on the pale tile floor. The lights glint off of my gleaming badge and shooting brass, sending beams of brightness into my eyes. I wince, the sharp beams antagonizing the already-pounding bass drum inside my head. I stop outside of room 5B, the very room where my fate with the department will be decided this morning. Soon, behind that dark oaken door, I will learn if I am still a sworn police officer for the city of Los Angeles, or if I will be stripped of my badge and arrested for murder. Scanning the hallway for my board-approved advisor, I see no one, so I plunk heavily down into one of the molded grey plastic chairs that line the walls. Bone-weary and feeling a little lightheaded from my patent lack of sleep, I drop my head into my hands, massaging my temples. My eyes feel dry and gritty and my mouth is as dry as a desert. I fish out a roll of peppermints from my pocket and pop one in my mouth. It gives me something to do while I go slowly crazy with waiting.

Working the minty little disk around in my mouth, rolling it across my tongue, I let it click against my teeth as I think of what awaits me. A snippet of a song flashes through my mind, *I do not know what fate awaits me, I only know I must be brave...and I must face a man who hates me, or die a coward, a craven coward, or die a coward in my grave.* I search my memory for the name of the song. It's the title song from the Gary Cooper western, "High Noon." The irony hits me hard; Cooper plays a town marshal who is forced to face down a gang of armed killers without any help at all from the townspeople he is sworn to protect. Even his own friends turn away from him in his time of need. In the end, he gets the bad guys, but for the town's hypocritical refusal to come to his aid, he throws his badge in the dirt with thinly veiled disgust, and rides off into the proverbial sunset with Grace Kelly. Now I know how Cooper's character felt. I think I'm much in the same wagon he was, facing down a possibly hostile shooting review board, with my old pal Sergeant Friday as the lead gunslinger, with only a couple of people in my corner to help me. And I'm not even that sure about them right now, either.

Sighing, I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes. I'm so damned tired right now, I think I could fall asleep right here. Of course it wouldn't do for me to get caught napping in the hallway, but I open my eyes long enough to scan the hall for anyone other than me. Finding myself still alone, I fold my arms across my chest and close my eyes once more, the dim sound of telephones ringing and typewriters clacking in the distance lulling me into a mini-sleep. Somewhere, a door bangs shut, and I jerk awake with startlement. I look at my watch. It's nearly nine o'clock. I scout the hallway for my advisor, but still see no sign of him. Sighing again, I rest my head against the wall once more, closing my eyes, drifting on my thoughts.

I shouldn't be nervous about going before a shooting review board, I've been before them in the past and have always had a favorable outcome. But everything about this one has my nerves set on edge, scraped raw and screaming right down to the very ends. Maybe it's the good Sergeant Friday gunning for me with a vengeance, or maybe it's the knowledge that my conscience is quite overloaded right now. For the first time in my life, I'm actually afraid for my career, not to mention my sanity. I think right now I'd actually feel more comfortable facing a firing squad of drunken monkeys than this. As I ponder these thoughts, the sounds of the ringing phones and tapping typewriters play hide-and-go-seek on the edges of my consciousness and I find myself dozing once more.

"You know, I never thought I'd see the day when Peter Malloy fell asleep on the job," a rather recognizable voice says to me.

"Huh?" I jerk awake, mortally embarrassed at being caught snoozing in such an incongruous place. I feel the heat of my blush as it spreads across my face. I turn my eyes to see the familiar face of a very old friend, one that I haven't seen for quite a while, at least not since his promotion to captain of the Wilshire Division. "Val!" I exclaim to my old lieutenant, Val Moore. "How the hell are you?" I ask, a wide grin on my face.

"Can't complain, Pete," he says, smiling back at me as he sits down in one of the hard plastic chairs next to me. "How about you?"

I shrug as nonchalantly as I can muster. "Same old, same old, you know how it goes."

He points to the double-chevron and star patches on the shoulders of my uniform. "You wear the promotion well, my friend. What's next? Sergeant?"

I shake my head. "Not hardly, Val. I'm not ready to give Mac a run for his money yet." I gesture to the briefcase he's holding on his knees. "So what brings you here to Headquarters? Captain's paperwork?"

"The same thing that brings you here to Headquarters, Pete."

"You're sitting on the review board?" I ask. "Then you shouldn't be talking to me. If someone saw us, they could claim I tried to influence you into making a favorable decision on my behalf. Prejudicial misconduct, you know."

"No, I'm your review representative, Pete." He pats the briefcase. "Mac got the last of the paperwork to me yesterday evening. I've gone over the whole case twice last night and once more this morning."

"Think I stand a good chance of having a favorable outcome?" I ask. I study my hands, afraid to meet his eyes for fear of what I might see in them.

He cocks his head. "Well, there is the matter of your not following protocol, which led into this entire incident....that's one strike against you there, Pete. And the other is..."

I hold my hand up, stopping him. "Wait, let me guess. The good Sergeant Friday's insistence that I killed Stuart Walters intentionally, letting my emotions get in the way of my pulling the trigger."

He clears his throat. "Yes, there's that, too." He points down the hallway. "There's a breakroom over there. Would you like some coffee?"

I nod my head. "Sure."

He stands up and so do I. "Good," he says. "Then I can go over a few things with you before the board meets." We start walking towards the breakroom. "When Mac called me and asked me to do this, I was more than willing, Pete," he tells me. "I don't think you've gotten a fair shake in this deal."

"Nothing about this deal has been fair, Val," I tell him dryly. "Including the damned homicide case itself."

He pushes the breakroom door open. "Yes, it's quite tragic, isn't it?" he asks as he leads the way to a table in a secluded spot in the breakroom. "A young mother and her innocent children brutally slaughtered by the husband. It's too bad." He sets the briefcase down on the table and fishes in his pocket for change. "I'm buying, Pete," he says. "It's my dime. Go ahead and have a seat. You take it black, don't you?" he asks.

"Yeah, Val, thanks," I tell him as I sit down. I scan the breakroom with impersonal eyes. A few detectives are in the breakroom, along with a couple of attractive personal secretaries to the upper brass that work in the building. One's a brunette, the other a blonde. They see me glance at them and bow their heads with giggles and whispers. I manage to muster a small smile at them.

They slide out of their chairs and come over to me, their miniskirts and tight sweaters revealing rather nice figures underneath. "You're Pete Malloy, aren't you?" asks the blonde one, a dead ringer for Veronica Lake, right down to the pageboy haircut and swoop of bangs over her blue eyes. The brunette one giggles shyly, her dark brown eyes meeting mine for a moment, then dropping away as she blushes furiously.

"Yeah, I am," I say, giving them another small smile. I'm too damned tired and wrung out to do any worthwhile flirting right now...much as I'd like to, especially when presented with two such attractive females as these ladies are.

Val returns with our coffee, setting mine down in front of me. He looks at me first, then at the two pretty women, a faint grin playing out over his face as he sits down. He leans back in his chair to watch the Strawberry Fox in action.

Unfortunately, the Strawberry Fox has a little more on his mind right now than the current state of his love life. I try to muster up some enthusiasm, but it disappears in a roil of worry and exhaustion. I cast a sideways glance at the two women, giving them another small smile. "Can I help you with something?" I ask.

The blonde giggles, nudging the brunette with her arm. "See? I told you it was him," she says to the brunette. Then she turns back to me, sweeping her hair off of her face with a practiced motion of her right hand. "Your reputation *quite* precedes you, Officer Malloy."

I stare at my coffee in front of me with tired eyes. "My *good* reputation, I hope?" I ask quietly.

The blonde cocks her head. "Well, now. I guess that would depend on who you asked, wouldn't it?" She nods crisply to Val. "Hello, Captain Moore. How are you today?"

He nods back. "Just fine, Ronnie. And you?"

She smiles brightly at him. "I can't complain."

The brunette secretary leans forward, stroking the cut on my cheek gently with a forefinger, causing me to jump slightly at the light touch. "How'd you get that?" she asks huskily, her brown eyes looking right into mine. I catch a whiff of her perfume. It's Chantilly, if I'm not mistaken. "That looks downright nasty," she murmurs softly.

I clear my throat, shaking my head, a flash of gallantry surging through me for a brief instant. "It's just a war wound," I tell her, shaking my head. Maybe there's hope for the Strawberry Fox yet.

"Oh, were you in the war recently?" asks the blonde one Val called Ronnie. "When did you get back from Vietnam?"

Val chokes on his coffee as he tries to keep from laughing and fails. He slaps the tabletop with one hand, while he coughs into the other.

I shoot him a sharp-eyed dirty look. "No, I got it when a suspect I was trying to handcuff got away from me and hit me in the face with the open edge of the handcuff."

She looks puzzled. "Oh, how come you didn't duck, Officer Malloy?"

"Yeah, Pete. How come you didn't duck?" Val asks hoarsely, still coughing and hacking from his coffee inhalation.

"Uh, there wasn't time," I say, giving Val an even nastier look.

"Oh, that's too bad," she says, tilting her head to look at me. "Well, we have to be getting back to work," she tells me, with another bright smile. "But why don't you stop by and see us before you leave? I'm Ronnie, and I'm secretary to Captain Martin. This is Amy, and she's secretary to Lieutenant Dobkins. We're in the offices right across from each other. Maybe we could go to lunch."

"I'll certainly try," I tell them, trying to muster up one of my patented Pete Malloy smiles, guaranteed to win the heart of any desirable female. I hope they don't notice the smile doesn't quite reach my eyes.

"Great!" the blonde burbles. "We'll be waiting!" The two of them leave the breakroom, giving me bright smiles before the door closes shut on them and their entrancing rear views afforded by the swish of their miniskirts.

Val clears his throat. "Pete, my friend?" he asks.

I take a sip of my coffee. "Yeah, Val?"

"You're kind of off your game, aren't you?" he asks. "The legendary Strawberry Fox would've been positively *drooling* at the sight of those two attractive young women."

I give him a rueful grin. "Yeah, well, the Strawberry Fox has got a lot on his mind right now. My love life is the least of my worries for the time being."

Val shakes his head. "Good, I thought for a moment there you might've lost your touch or maybe you were sick."

I stare at my coffee. "No, I've not lost my touch, Val." I take a swallow of the rich black drink. "And I'm just tired, not sick." *Except for your soul, Pete*, the little voice inside my head whispers.

"Ah, it's just as well, Pete. Ronnie's engaged to be married and Amy is as dumb as a box of rocks. You'd best heed some advice and steer clear of those two, if you know what's good for you."

"I'm beginning to wonder if I do INDEED know what's good for me," I say, a melancholy note creeping unintentionally into my voice. "With the way things are going right now."

Val is quiet for a moment, then he speaks. "Yes, about that, Pete...your friends are rather worried about you. So am I. You don't look like you've been sleeping that well. You haven't been, have you?"

I shrug. "What's a few sleepless nights, Val?" I ask. "I'll catch it up, trust me." I am careful not to meet his eyes. "I have gone through this before and not suffered any long-term ill effects."

"It's the nightmares, isn't it?" he asks softly. "They're getting to you."

I laugh bitterly. "What nightmares? I'm not having any nightmares."

"Really. So why else aren't you sleeping, Pete?"

"Maybe the Late Late Show got really interesting all of a sudden," I tell him.

He shakes his head. "Don't lie to me, Pete. I know you pretty well. I've seen you go through this before, when Howie Parker got killed." He studies the tabletop for a moment, then he turns his gaze back onto me. "Have you started drinking again?"

I hit the top of the table hard with my fist as a sharp rush of anger washes over me. "NO!" I snap. "I haven't started drinking again! Why in the hell does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Pete, keep your voice down," Val warns glancing around at the few people left in the breakroom. "It's just that after Baker died, you hit the bottle pretty heavy for a while."

I glare at him. "I was entitled to it, Val. I saw Baker get murdered. You just don't walk away from seeing something like that without wanting to anesthetize the pain for a bit."

"And you don't walk away from something like this without having nightmares, Pete," he tells me. "Trust me, I know. I've been there before. Mac and I took a call just like this before..."

I hold my hand up, interrupting him. "Stop, Val, I know what you're going to tell me," I say. "I've already heard it from Mac. I don't need to hear the sad little story from you."

"Pete, what you and Jim Reed saw inside that house was enough to give God himself nightmares. So I can understand if you're having some yourself," Val says.

"I am *not* having nightmares, Val," I tell him through clenched teeth. "Now can we please drop it?"

He studies me. "Have you spoken to Reed about this?" he asks.

"Spoken to Reed about what?" I ask wearily.

"The nightmares. Maybe he's having them himself. Have you thought of that?"

I rub my forehead. "Look, Val," I say, taking a sip of my coffee. "Reed's said something about it, but I couldn't give him much advice. I'm not in the habit of psychoanalyzing my friends, you know. Their business is their business. I don't make it a habit to intrude. I don't like prying into private emotions."

"But isn't that what friends are supposed to do? Pry into those emotions and support each other through bad situations, especially one as hellish as this one has been?" he asks. "You and Reed need one another, Pete. You need to help each other through this."

"I don't need any help, Val. Not from Reed, not from Mac, and not from you," I tell him with a shake of my head. "And this discussion is now closed," I say with a warning tone to my voice.

"What about Jim, though, Pete?" he asks. "He's got a young family. I'm sure this has affected him quite greatly. Have you considered that at all?"

"Yes, Val, I have. I have tried to give Jim whatever advice I could in order to help him through this nightmarish ordeal. Now, does that satisfy my Boy Scout Badge requirement?" I ask sharply.

Val shakes his head. "And up go the infamous Pete Malloy walls," he says. "When are you gonna knock down those walls, Pete, and let someone inside?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Never, Val, never."

He frowns. "Ah yes, I expected such a pat answer from you, Pete. You wear the world-weary façade like a lead overcoat. And the only problem with that, my friend, is that it gets to be too heavy for you to tote around after a while."

"Val, I said drop it," I snap. "I'm not discussing my emotions with you or anyone else!"

"But what about Jim Reed? What if he wants to discuss his emotions with you?" Val asks.

"If he comes to me and wants to talk, I'll listen to him," I tell him, my voice tight. "I'll give him any kind of help I can, to any extent that I can."

"And how are you going to help him if you can't help yourself, Pete?" he asks, his eyes fixed firmly on mine.

I close my eyes, turning my face away. "Val, PLEASE, I'm begging you. Just drop this, okay?" I plead. I open my eyes, gesturing to the briefcase with a wave of my hand. "Let's go over the information about the case, all right?"

He studies me intently for a moment, trying to measure my thoughts. "Fine," he says, but by his tone I can tell it's not fine. He opens the briefcase with a sharp click of the clasp. "I've got all the information I need as far as the official reports. I've got the interviews that Sergeant Friday conducted with both you and Reed. I've got the reports from his investigation, and Jerry Miller's investigation at the scene. I've got the coroner's reports, ballistics and S.I.D.'s findings. Your personnel package is in here, along with sworn statements from Mac and Bill Gannon."

I frown. "Wait a sec, what reasons do Mac and Bill Gannon have giving statements in this case? Mac arrived on the scene after the fact, and Gannon was only writing down the interview with Friday. He didn't ask me any questions regarding the incident, Friday did."

Val smiles a little. "It seems that the tone of Sergeant Friday's interview did not set well with either Mac or Gannon. Both of them took it upon themselves to file a report with each of their commanding officers. Friday may have gone after you with a sledgehammer, but they went after him with a bulldozer. Both felt that his interview techniques were way too harsh and critical. They're fine when you're interrogating a killer, but not when you're interviewing a fellow police officer."

"But to hear Friday talk, I'm one and the same," I say. "And maybe I am, Val." The words are quickly out of my mouth before I can stop them.

He snorts. "You? *A killer?* Not likely, Pete." He falls silent, studying me again as he realizes I might be serious. "Why would you say something like that, anyway?"

I shake my head with a nervous chuckle. "It's nothing, Val. Just the way I felt when I was being interviewed by Friday. The man's tactics are enough to make even a mild-mannered grandmother confess to cold-blooded killing."

"Is that what you think you did? Killed Stuart Walters in cold blood?"

"No." I close my eyes for a moment at the lie. *God, it just gets easier and easier each time to lie to someone, doesn't it, Pete?* I think to myself. "I don't think I killed Stuart Walters in cold blood. Why should I?"

"Mac said something about that to me," Val says. "He said you seemed worried about it, that you didn't regret killing him and for some reason that makes you an ice-cold killer."

"Mac talks too much," I say sharply. "Besides, I'm past that stage of thinking."

"Are you really, Pete?" Val asks. "Because it seems to me that you are carrying an awful lot of emotional burden here."

"What, is there a huge flashing neon sign over my head, saying 'emotional baggage here'?" I ask snarkily.

"I can see it in your eyes, Pete," he says softly.

"Maybe I should start wearing sunglasses then, huh?" I ask, looking away. "Is there anything that you need to ask me before this review gets underway?"

"Did you intentionally shoot and kill Stuart Walters in that basement?" he asks.

I glance at him in surprise. "Whoa, you get right to the point, don't you, Val?"

"Did you?"

"No, Walters attacked me, like I've said in the interviews with Friday and Miller. I attempted to take him into custody after he first came down into the basement with Reed's service revolver in his hand. I had him nearly cuffed up when he broke free and started to fight. He outweighed me and outmatched me in strength, so I got the basement light turned off and hid. I had hoped to gain an advantage over him, but it was not to be. He found Reed's gun once more, and I knew at that point, I had nearly no chance at all of taking him alive." I drain the last of my coffee. "He searched for me in that basement, Val, hunting me down like I was his prey. I only used the accidental diversion Reed gave me when he turned on the light from the upstairs switch. Walters was right in front of me, only about seven feet away. He was facing me, gun in his hand. When Reed flicked on the light, I fired. If I hadn't, Walters would've. And I wouldn't be here, Val. I'd be six feet under." I shake my head. "It's not the outcome I would've hoped for, but it's the outcome that happened. I can't change it, much as I'd like to."

"Would you really, Pete?" Val asks. "Like to change it, I mean. After seeing what he'd done to his family upstairs, and knowing that he'd shot Reed and possibly killed him, weren't you infuriated?"

"Yes, but I kept my emotions in check, Val. *Firmly* in check," I tell him. "They did not play into my shooting Stuart Walters. I killed him because he was going to kill me first. That's it, plain and simple."

"Is it that plain and simple, Pete, or is there more to it?"

I narrow my eyes, glaring at him. "Are you accusing me of *lying*, Val?" I ask.

"No, I..." he begins.

"Jesus Christ," I snap. "What is it with everyone thinking I'm lying about what happened down there? First Friday, then Mac, now you."

"Hey, take it easy, Pete," Val warns. "I'm not accusing you of anything. I just need to know what really happened down there, what your frame of mind was when you pulled the trigger."

"You wanna know what my frame of mind was, Val?" I ask him hotly. "I was afraid for my life. I didn't think I was going to get out of that basement alive."

"Take it easy, Pete," Val says, holding a hand up. "Dial back the temper, pal. You want to avoid any heated outbursts like that in front of the review board, that's for damned sure. It won't play well for your case."

I sigh. "I know that, Val. I'm just getting really damned sick and tired of people thinking that I lied about what happened. What's next? Am I going to be accused of planting Reed's gun on Walters in order to make it look like I shot him in self-defense?"

"No, but you walk into that room and go before that board with *that* kind of attitude, the board will think you *are* covering something up," he tells me.

"But I'm *not* covering anything up, Val," I say. "Look, if you don't want to act as advisor on this case and you want to back out, I don't mind. I can't say that I blame you. It's complex and confusing, and I certainly don't want you to put your own job on the line just to defend me. I can go it alone. I've been before reviews in the past, I can certainly handle this one."

"I'm here because I want to be, Pete," Val tells me. "First of all, you're a good friend of mine, and I'm not going to stand by when a friend of mine is in need of support. Second of all, I don't think you've gotten a fair deal from Friday." He shakes his head. "But I can't do a good job of defending you or supporting you if I don't know one thing."

"What's that?"

"Your innocence, Pete," he says. "Can you look me in the eye and tell me that you are speaking the complete truth in this incident?"

I meet him in the eyes, my own rather cold, as I mouth the lie to him once more. "Yes, Val. I am telling you the truth. And if you don't believe me, then you have *no* business being my advisor," I tell him icily.

He holds my gaze for a moment. "But are you telling *yourself* the truth, Pete?" he asks.

"That's a matter between my conscience and I," I warn. "Not you or the board, or anyone else, for that matter. It's strictly personal."

"But if you don't believe yourself, then how do you expect everyone else to believe you?" he asks gently.

I rub my forehead tiredly. "Val, you're getting back into my emotions again. Stop it."

"Pete, what really happened in that basement?" he asks quietly.

I meet his eyes once more. "A man died. I shot and killed him in self-defense. That's it. Nothing more."

Val looks at his watch. "We'd better go see if the review board is ready. It's nearly ten o'clock. They usually like to start on time." He stands up, tossing his coffee cup into the trash.

I toss mine from where I sit, making the shot easily. Then I stand up, pushing the chair in.

"Hey, nice shot," Val tells me with a grin.

"Lucky shot," I tell him. "That's all. Let's hope it's a harbinger of my luck to come, huh?" I ask as I follow him out of the breakroom.

"Hey, there you guys are," says Sergeant MacDonald. He's sitting in one of the molded grey plastic chairs in the hallway outside of room 5B that Val and I were in just a little bit ago. Jim Reed sits next to him. "We were wondering where you were." He and Jim are both in civilian clothes.

I stare at him and Reed. "What in the hell are you two doing here?" I ask with some dismay.

Jim shrugs and offers me one of his patented Jim Reed smiles, guaranteed to disarm any anger I might have. "Well, we thought we'd come down and give you some moral support, Pete," he tells me. He grins at Val. "Hey, Captain Moore. Good to see you. I take it you're Pete's advisor?"

Val nods. "Sure am, Reed. How have you been? How's your wife and little boy?"

"Can't complain," Jim says. "And Jean and Jimmy are doing just fine, thanks."

I point to Reed. "You shouldn't be here, Jim. You're not in the greatest shape right now to be sitting out here in a stupid chair, just to lend me moral support. What are you, some sort of idiot?"

Jim's smile fades a bit, and I can tell that I've hurt him by that last comment. "No, I'm just being a friend to you, Pete. Friends support other friends when they need it, you know."

"So I've heard," I say dryly. I look at Mac. "And let me guess, you were the one who came up with this little scheme, right?"

Mac shakes his head with a frown. "No, Reed called me this morning and wanted to double-check the time of the review. He was afraid you might've purposely given him the wrong time, just to discourage him from coming down here. When I found out that's what he was planning to do, I decided to come along too." He gestures to Jim. "It seemed silly for us each to drive over here separately, so I picked him up and drove us over. The least you could do is be grateful."

"Believe me, I am. I'm extremely grateful. I appreciate the show of support more than anything right now. But is it wise for Jim to sit out here for an undetermined amount of time, waiting in that hard chair?" I ask. "With your injuries, won't it be uncomfortable?" I say, looking at Jim.

He shrugs. "Eh, personal discomfort is a small price to pay for moral support," he says. "I can stand it."

"But you don't know how long this review is going to take," I say. "You could be out here for two or three hours."

"So? You'd do the same for me, Pete. I know you would," Jim tells me.

"Yes, but..."

Jim shakes his head firmly. "No 'yes, but,' Pete. I'm sitting out here until the review is over with. And that's final." He folds his arms across his chest and fixes me with a steely-eyed glare.

I sigh wearily. "Well, there's no use arguing with you when you get that determined look on your face, is there?"

"Nope."

I give him a small smile, having one card up my sleeve that I haven't yet played. "And what did dear Jean think of you coming down here and sitting for so long?" I ask innocently. "What, with your injuries and all. Won't she be worried?"

"She's fine with this, Pete. Now quit pestering me. I'm not budging, and neither is Mac," Jim says with finality. "Save your righteous indignation for the review."

"Yeah, about that..." Mac says with a cough. "Watch your attitude in there, Pete. You know that Friday's going to be sitting in on this."

I nod. "I know it. He has that privilege to do so, as the investigating detective."

"Yes, well, don't let his presence get to you, that's all I'm saying," Mac warns. "And for God's sake, *keep your temper in check*. Don't blow up or get snarky with any of the questions, Pete. You'll sink yourself for sure."

"I'll keep my cool, don't worry about that," I tell Mac sharply.

"Like you've kept it all along?" he asks. "It doesn't seem to me like you're doing a good job of reining it in, Malloy. Your anger is running fairly close to the surface and it doesn't exactly take very much to set you off."

Val clears his throat. "I'll keep an eye on him, Mac, don't worry. If things get too heated, I'll ask for a small recess to regroup." Val looks at me pointedly. "But that shouldn't be necessary, should it, Pete? You're going before that board and play it as cool as a cucumber, right?"

I glare at Val. "What is this? Gang up on Pete Malloy day or something?" I snap. "Quit reminding me about my temper. I'll be fine." I shoot a glare at both Reed and Mac, too, just for good measure. "Just fine," I say.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Mac mutters.

A sour-faced secretary with cats-eye glasses sticks her head out of the door marked 5B. "Captain Moore, Officer Malloy, you may enter now. The board is ready for you."

Val looks at me. "This is it, Pete. You ready to face the big guns?"

I take in a deep breath. "I've gotta be ready, Val. My career is on the line here."

Mac stands up, shaking my hand. "Good luck in there, Pete. Give 'em hell."

Reed shakes my hand too. "Tell it just like it happened, partner, and you won't have any trouble." He grins. "Good luck."

"Thanks," I say. "If you start getting tired, Jim, have Mac take you home, okay?"

He winks at me with that damned one good eye of his, since the other one is still puffed shut a little bit. "We'll see," he says.

Val is waiting for me at the door. He looks at me, his hand on the knob. "Don't let anything they ask get to you, remember that. Keep your answers short and to the point. Don't elaborate unless they ask you to."

I nod crisply. "I won't." I follow Val into the dark wood-paneled room, ready to face my fate, whatever it may be.

A police shooting review board is always an internal affair, convened strictly within the department itself. It is comprised of three ranking officers not affiliated with the division, the case, or the officer involved. It is always impartial, and no civilians are ever allowed to sit on the board. The only civilian allowed to sit in on the proceedings is the secretary, whose job it is to take notes. It is the duty of the board to decide whether an officer-involved shooting is justified or not. In cases where questions remain, or the circumstances are still unclear, the review board can then opt to bring in the District Attorney's office for further inquiry. The D.A.'s office decides after hearing the facts and testimony of those involved whether or not to impanel a grand jury to determine if there is any wrongdoing in the case. The grand jury can then recommend if criminal charges should be filed against those involved, or if the case should be closed and investigated no further. If an officer-involved shooting gets to that point, it's a pretty sure bet that the officer is screwed. Even if the grand jury deems the case closed, the fact that the case went that far will follow that officer around for the rest of his career. I seriously hope that it doesn't come to that in my case.

As we step into the dark wood-paneled room with its deep red carpeting, I am greeted by a large diagram of the Walters' basement laid out on white paper and propped against an easel. The diagram is a little more detailed than the one Jerry Miller scribbled out in his notebook. It has been painstakingly prepared by the S.I.D. team, and they certainly have left no stone unturned, that's for sure. I glance to my left and see another layout on an easel, this one of color shots of the headless body of Stuart Walters. The shots are taken from several different angles and miss absolutely nothing in detail. Not only will I be facing the review board, but I will also be facing pictures of the dead man himself. My stomach quails a little at the graphic photos, but I swallow my nerves in order to face the three men who will ultimately decide my fate.

"Officer Malloy, Captain Moore, if you'll both have a seat, we'll get these proceedings under way," says a thin, bespectacled man with grey hair I recognize as Captain Dan Martin, currently working here at Parker Center. He's seated at the middle of a long table. The other two men sitting on either side of him are Lieutenant Joe Wambaugh, a tall man with dark hair and a serious face from Foothills Division, and Sergeant Mike Collins, a James Cagney lookalike from Venice Division. I'm not acquainted with any of them, I know them only by name and photos when they've been mentioned in the police

departmental newsletter, *The LAPD Beat*. Sergeant Joe Friday sits in a chair alongside the wall, Bill Gannon seated next to him.

Val and I sit down at a table across from the three men. I flash Friday a small triumphant smile, just to let him know his presence doesn't bother me in the least. He narrows his eyes slightly and frowns.

Captain Martin clears his throat. "Are you gentlemen ready to proceed?" he asks.

Val nods. "We are, Captain."

Martin turns to the sour-faced secretary, making sure her pen is poised to transcribe the review. "This shooting review board, convened to investigate the on-duty shooting and killing of one Stuart T. Walters on the early morning hours of Monday, October 18th, 1973, by Officer Peter J. Malloy of Central Division, is now in session on this day's date, Wednesday, October 20th, 1973, at 10:00 a.m. Sitting present on the board are Captain Daniel Martin, P.A.B., Lieutenant Joe Wambaugh from Foothills Division, and Sergeant Mike Collins from Venice Division. Show also present are Officer Peter J. Malloy, subject of this inquiry, and his advisor, Captain Valman Moore, of Wilshire Division. The investigating detectives, Sergeant Joe Friday and Officer Bill Gannon, both of P.A.B., are also present in this proceeding." Martin looks at me over the tops of his glasses. "Officer Malloy, will you please stand?" When I do, he continues. "Do you swear, upon oath, that the testimony and any statements that you make before this board this morning are the complete and honest truth, so help you God?" he asks sternly.

I nod. "I do."

"And do you also swear, that the testimony and any statements that you make before this board this morning have not been coerced or forced upon you for purposes of cover-up, misconduct, or criminal wrongdoing?" he asks.

"I do."

"You come before this board this morning with full and complete cooperation and compliance, in order to determine the outcome of this case involving you as primary party?" he asks.

"I do."

"You are here willingly, free from any bonds or constraints from a secondary party?"

"I am."

"Have a seat, Officer Malloy," he says. When I'm seated again, he begins speaking once more. "Please state your full name, your serial number, and your years on the force."

"Malloy, Peter Joseph. Serial 10743. It'll be twelve years on November 15th."

"Which division have most of those years been served in?" Martin asks.

"All of them have been served in Central Division, sir," I tell him.

"You have been promoted to the rank of Police Officer III, Senior Lead Officer, am I correct?" he asks.

"Yes, that's right. I've held that rank for a little over a year now."

"You were a training officer prior to that, correct?" he asks.

"Yes, from 1968 to 1969. I moved out of that capacity when the rookie I was training reached the end of his probationary year and became my regular partner."

"And the man who is your partner, he has been that for the last five years, correct?"

"Yes, Officer James A. Reed has been my partner for the last five years, sir."

"He was your partner on the date of this incident?"

"He was."

Martin studies a set of papers in front of him. "Officer Malloy, have you been involved in any shooting incidents in the past, that have required your presence before a board?"

"Yes, I have."

"Could you please list them for this board, to the best of your knowledge?"

I nod. "Yes, I can. In 1961, my rookie year, I was involved in a shootout with some bank robbers. One man was killed, the other man wounded. In 1965, I was involved in a shooting incident in which a mentally unstable man held his wife hostage, holding a gun to her head. During attempts to negotiate with him, he became agitated and began firing upon us. He killed his wife in front of us, and we were forced to open fire upon him. I was the one who fired the shot and killed him. In 1968, I was involved in a shootout with several warehouse burglary suspects. Two of them were killed. In 1970, I was involved in the shooting of an armed draft dodger and burglar. He was killed."

"Have there been other shooting incidents in which you have not gone before a board, but before your commanding officers?" he asks.

"There have been, yes. Nothing that was very serious, though. The incidents I just related to you were the most serious ones I can recall," I tell him. "To the best of my knowledge," I add.

"You are a Distinguished Expert on the shooting range?" asks Lieutenant Wambaugh.

"I am. I was trained as a sharpshooter while in the Army, and I carried that talent over into my police career."

"You maintain a near-perfect degree of proficiency every time you qualify on the range?" asks Martin.

"I do. It's pretty rare that I don't shoot 100 percent."

"So you generally get what you're aiming at?" Martin asks me with a small smile.

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Have you ever been brought before a disciplinary board in the past, in regards to your attitude, your conduct, or your handling of any specific incident?"

"No, I have not."

"Have you ever received any type of punishment, such as suspension or administrative leave, in direct accordance of your superior officers in regards to your attitude, your conduct, or your handling of any specific incident?"

"No, sir, I have not."

"Have you ever received any type of reprimand, either written or verbal, from your superior officers in regards to your attitude, your conduct, or your handling of any specific incident?"

"No sir, I have not."

Martin leans back in his chair and regards me for a moment. "Officer Malloy, I understand that you nearly resigned from the force about five years ago, is that correct?"

"Yes, I did."

"Would you mind explaining why?" he asks.

I hesitate, looking down at my hands clasped on the table in front of me. "My partner prior to Officer Reed had been killed during a warehouse burglary. I watched him die. I didn't feel that I could be an effective police officer after that tragedy had occurred. I had my doubts about my own ability to continue working within the force. With that in mind, I felt that the wisest course of action would be for me to tender my resignation. I feared that I would no longer be a good police officer for the city of Los Angeles. I decided to quit."

"What changed your mind?" asks Lieutenant Wambaugh.

I hesitate again. "The night that was supposed to be my final night on the force, I was given a rookie as my ride-along. I could see that the kid needed a strong, guiding influence in order to shape his career. He had the makings of a fine police officer, given the proper teacher. Against my better judgment, I decided to stay on and train him."

Martin frowns a little. "Why do you say 'against your better judgment,' Officer Malloy? Did you still have your doubts?"

"Not about myself any longer, no." I allow myself a small smile. "He, on the other hand, was another matter."

"How so?"

"He was pretty headstrong and stubborn. His patrol techniques lacked finesse, and at times, I was afraid to turn him loose without a leash," and at that, Val coughs slightly, giving me a small grin as he remembers the blistering tirade I gave Reed the night he went into that park after those armed teenage thugs. "A very *strong* leash," I add.

"I see," Martin says with a slight smile. "And you decided to stay on the force and train him?"

"I did. And I'm certainly not sorry I did, either. Quitting the force would've been one of the most foolish and rash decisions of my life."

"How so?" asks Sergeant Collins.

"Being a police officer is the only job I've ever really held. I got into the job nearly immediately after my discharge from the Army." I stop a moment, gathering my thoughts. "It's what I enjoy doing. I'm quite happy in this career. I'm proud of my achievements throughout my twelve years on the force. I cannot imagine myself doing anything else."

Martin nods. "Alright. Have you ever had any type of conflict, such as personality conflicts or disagreements in the way a certain situation should be or has been handled, with any of your partners, either current or in the past?"

"No, there's been none."

"That you're aware of, correct?"

"That I'm aware of, yes."

"Have you ever been called in by your superior officers to discuss any conflicts with your partners, as a form of mediation?"

"No, I have not."

"Have you yourself gone to your superiors to discuss any types of conflict you have had with your partners, either current or past?"

"No, I have not."

"How would you describe your current partnership with Officer Jim Reed? Is it cordial, respectful?" asks Lieutenant Wambaugh.

"Yes, Officer Reed and I have grown close over the years of our partnership. We have become rather good friends. I am the godfather to his little boy, Jimmy Jr."

"Do you respect Officer Reed's ideas and opinions, do you encourage him to be open with his thoughts regarding aspects of your patrol duties?"

"Yes, I do. It's an equal partnership in One-Adam-12."

Martin looks at a paper in front of him. "I understand you are not married? Your parents live in Seattle?"

I nod. "Yes, I'm unmarried. My folks still live in Seattle."

"So you have no close family around here, correct?"

"I consider Officer Reed's family as if they were blood relation to me. He and his wife and young son are the closest thing I have to family around here. I think very highly of them, and am proud to consider them as my own."

"And Officer Reed holds you in the same high esteem?"

"He does. If he didn't, he wouldn't have asked me to take on the role of godfather to his young son."

"Have you ever sought any type of therapy or counseling after any type of traumatic incident in your life?" asks Sergeant Collins.

Val clears his throat. "Gentlemen, that question bears no relevance to this case. Furthermore, Officer Malloy is under no obligation to answer such a personal question."

I shake my head. "I don't mind, Val. I'll answer it." I look at Sergeant Collins. "No, I have not sought therapy or counseling in the past."

"Have you ever been placed on medical leave pending the outcome of a psychiatric evaluation?" asks Martin.

"No, I have not."

"How would you describe your attitude towards your job?" asks Lieutenant Wambaugh.

"As I stated earlier, I enjoy what I do. I believe I'm fair and impartial in the day to day proceedings my duty as a patrol officer entails."

"Would you say you possess an even temperament in regards to this job?" asks Martin.

"Captain, one *must* possess an even temperament in this job, not to mention the patience of a saint and the wisdom of God. There are many things that may test one's faith on a daily basis, and you have to be strong enough to overcome that and go on."

Martin frowns. "I didn't ask you that, Officer Malloy. I asked if you *yourself* possessed an even temperament in regards to this job."

"I do."

Sergeant Friday speaks from the side of the room. "If I may, Officer Malloy was certainly not in possession of an even temperament the morning of my interview with him. He was quite angry at times, even downright antagonistic towards me over some of the questions I asked him."

Val whips his head around to glare at Friday. "Sergeant Friday, it was made *clear* during the interview with Officer Malloy that you yourself were being deliberately provocative towards him, attempting several times to goad him into answering your questions in outright anger. Under those circumstances, any officer would react the same way."

Martin shoots Friday a look. "Sergeant Friday, bear in mind you are sitting in on these proceedings primarily as the investigating officer, not as a member of the review board. Should myself or the other two members of this board require your opinion in regards to Officer Malloy, we will certainly be sure and ask you for it. For now, please refrain from interrupting the proceedings. If you persist, I will order your removal from this room and take your written interview as the primary evidence into this proceeding. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Captain," Friday says, but none too contritely.

Martin turns back to me. "Have you ever found yourself getting angry at a citizen or a situation that you've encountered in your duties, possibly to the point of losing control of your anger and lashing out, either verbally or physically?"

"No, I have not. I refuse to allow my emotions to color my job performance."

Martin shuffles some papers around in front of him. "Enter into record Officer Malloy's service record with the Los Angeles Police Department, documents 1-744-10743, MPJ," he says to the secretary. He looks back at me. "Describe for the board the events of the late night hours of Sunday, October 17th, 1973, to the early morning hours of Monday, October 18th, 1973, starting with what time you and Officer Reed began your shift."

"We began our watch at 4 p.m. We were on the four-to-midnight shift that week. We still are," I add.

"How was your mood?"

I hesitate. "My mood, sir?"

"Yes. Were you happy, sad, angry, what?"

"I was in a generally good mood. The weather was pretty bad outside, but it didn't bother me. The radio stayed quiet most of our shift."

"How would you say Officer Reed's mood was?" he asks.

"He was quiet."

"Quiet, how? Like something was bothering him, or he was upset over something such as a personal problem or anything?"

I shrug. "Officer Reed sometimes is quiet during our shifts. It's nothing unusual, if that's what you're implying. I didn't get the impression that he was worried or upset over anything. He was just quiet. After a while, he began to engage me in a discussion. We were carrying on the discussion when we received the welfare check call from dispatch."

"What was the discussion about?" asks Sergeant Collins.

"Again, that question is irrelevant to these proceedings, gentlemen," Val says. "It has no bearing on this case whatsoever. A discussion between two partners is assumed to be private and a privileged matter not meant for other parties."

Martin nods. "Noted." He looks at me. "So neither one of you was upset or angry over anything that night, prior to getting the welfare check call?"

The memory of Jim Reed's damned stupid worry about developing dark sides and job burnout flashes through my mind. Then, his harsh accusation of me being jaded and bitter rings in my ears. I close my eyes for a brief second at the brief stab of anger I still feel, then I open them, careful to keep my emotions out of my eyes. "No, neither of us was upset or angry at anything prior to the welfare check call," I tell him coolly.

Martin looks at another set of papers in front of him. "Can you take me through your watch that evening, leading up to the welfare check call?"

"We began our watch at 16:00 hours. We took a neighbor disturbance in the vicinity of 1400 Van Arden. After we cleared from there, we drove through the area of Washington Elementary to check for vandalism. There'd been a rash of it over the last couple of days and we were hoping to catch whoever was doing it. We continued routine patrol until our supper break at 20:00 hours. We assisted an elderly couple whose car had stalled on them near Hollywood Boulevard. We waited with them until a tow truck arrived to help. We were sent on another disturbance call in the area of 4500 Wilshire. We were unable to locate anything, and the PR declined to leave a contact number, so we resumed regular patrol. We gave out two speeding tickets, plus a failure to yield citation between 21:00 and 22:00 hours. We were also sent to a minor TA, directing traffic until wreckers could be called to tow the two cars. After that, the radio stayed pretty silent. We started getting some pretty heavy weather around the time we cleared from the TA, so I think that probably contributed to the low traffic on the radio. Dispatch gave us the welfare check call at 23:40. The times are, of course, approximate," I say.

"Enter into record a copy of the logbook from Central Division vehicle unit One-Adam-12, dated October 17th, 1973, to October 18th, 1973, from times 16:00 to 23:40 hours." Martin tells the secretary. He turns back to me. "When dispatch gave you the welfare check call, how long did it take for you to arrive on the scene?"

"No more than five minutes, sir. We were fairly close in the area to begin with."

Lieutenant Wambaugh looks down at some notes. "You responded code two, is that correct?"

"Yes, dispatch informed us to handle the call code two."

"What was the address that dispatch sent you to?" asks Wambaugh.

"We were sent to a neighbor lady's address, 2500 Briarcliff Road. She was the original PR on this call. Her name is Dorothy Timmons."

"And you and Officer Reed made contact with her?" asks Sergeant Collins.

"Yes, we did."

"What did she tell you about this call? Why was she concerned about her neighbors' welfare?" asks Captain Martin.

"She told us that about three hours prior to calling the police department, she'd heard a loud disturbance coming from the house at 2510 Briarcliff Road. She said that she'd heard lots of yelling and screaming, and the sounds of stuff being broken. She decided not to call police at that point, though, and it was only after seeing the soon-to-be ex-husband leave the residence that she went ahead and called us."

"Did she say why his presence at the house concerned her?" asks Martin.

"According to her, the female resident at the house, Melissa Walters, had filed for divorce two months prior. She also had a valid order of protection against her husband, Stuart Walters. Mrs. Timmons related to us that Stuart Walters used to beat his wife and children rather frequently. When she saw him leave the house that night, she became worried, especially since she didn't see the front porch light on for Melissa's little girl, Natalie. After noticing those two things, she became concerned for Melissa and her three small children, Natalie, Andrew, and Matthew. "

Martin frowns. "And not having the porch light on, that's important, how?" he asks.

"Natalie was afraid of thunderstorms, according to Mrs. Timmons. Her mother always turned the porch light on to soothe her fears. It wasn't on at that time, and a rather vicious thunderstorm was occurring that night."

"Did she attempt to make contact with Melissa Walters on her own?" asks Lieutenant Wambaugh.

"No, she did not."

"When Mrs. Timmons informed you of the order of protection against Stuart Walters, did you or Officer Reed contact dispatch to find out if that was, indeed, true?" asks Martin.

"No, we didn't."

"It's standard protocol, Officer Malloy. If you believe that there is a valid order of protection on file in the county, you are supposed to contact your dispatch and find out if that is true," Martin chides.

"I am aware of that, sir, but we didn't. We took the neighbor lady at her word."

"Was there a reason *why* you didn't contact your dispatch?" he asks.

I shake my head. "No, no reason. We just assumed that Mrs. Timmons was telling us the truth."

Martin sighs. "Enter into record Los Angeles County Order Of Protection, number 855-743-LACOP, signed by Judge August Halloran on July 20th, 1973. Protected parties listed are Melissa Walters, Natalie Walters, Andrew Walters, and Matthew Walters. Defendant listed is Stuart Walters. This order of protection was good for 120 days, with the option of being renewed at the expiration of 120 days." He takes a moment to scribble something down on a legal pad in front of him. "That's one count of failure to follow set protocol against you, Officer Malloy," he says. "You *always* double-check with your dispatch for confirmation of a valid order of protection when you've been informed that one possibly exists."

"Yes, sir. And normally we do," I tell him.

"After you took the information from Mrs. Timmons, what did you and Officer Reed proceed to do next?" asks Sergeant Collins.

"We went over to 2510 Briarcliff to attempt to make contact with Melissa Walters."

"Did you contact dispatch at any time and ask if there was any type of call history at that residence?" asks Collins, glancing down at the notes in front of him. "Either prior to your arrival at the scene, or after hearing of the neighbor lady's concern?"

"No, we didn't."

"Any reason why? Especially after Mrs. Timmons informed you that it was a possible domestic disturbance that she'd heard?" asks Collins.

"I guess we didn't think to do that," I tell him lamely. "Neither of us recalled being dispatched to that residence in the past. We had no reason to believe that there was a prior call history of domestic disturbances at that address."

"Again, it's standard protocol, Officer Malloy," chides Martin.

"I'm aware of that, Captain," I tell him a bit testily.

"Enter into record Records and Information call history at 2510 Briarcliff Road, document number 1145-CH." Martin looks down at the piece of paper. "In fact, had you *called* dispatch and requested a history check, you would have discovered that the parties residing at the residence had a background of domestic disturbances in the past. Two of them were handled by you and Officer Reed." Martin frowns. "As senior man in the car, you certainly weren't on the ball that night, were you?"

Val clears his throat. "That's a matter of opinion, Captain. I'm sure we've all had cases in the past that we've not handled per standard protocol."

Martin looks over the tops of his glasses at Val. "Agreed, Captain Moore. But in this case, not following standard protocol has ended in the death of a civilian." He glances at me. "Was it, perhaps, the weather that made you not follow protocol?" he asks. "You were in a hurry to get the call handled so you could return to the warmth of your car?"

"No, that's not it at all," I say. "I've handled worse calls in worse weather. My personal comfort ranks far below that of citizen who has called upon me for help. And I resent that inference, too," I add sharply. "I'm not one of these cops that finds a cozy little spot and coops during their shifts, avoiding calls as best they can. I do my job, the one that I'm paid to do, and I do it damned good."

"Pete," Val warns.

Martin scribbles down something once more on his legal pad. "And that's another count of failure to follow set protocol against you, Officer Malloy."

"I thought this was a shooting review board, not a disciplinary board," I say, glancing at Val.

Martin stares at me for a moment. "Officer Malloy, this board is fully capable of handling not only the review for the shooting incident, but also any protocol infractions that you have committed in this case. We are here not only to decide the final outcome of the shooting review, but to also sanction any disciplinary actions against you. Do you understand?"

I nod. "Yes sir, I do. But I was under the impression that any disciplinary measures that might be taken against me would be handled by my superiors at my own division, not here."

Sergeant Collins smiles a little bit as he interrupts Captain Martin with his own answer. "Sadly, Officer Malloy, you are quite mistaken," he says, a small malicious tone to his voice. There is something pugnacious about his attitude and I'm reminded of Sergeant Friday. He folds his hands in front of him and fixes me with a vulture-eyed look.

"So, after NOT contacting dispatch for a check on either a valid order of protection against Stuart Walters, or a call history at the residence, what did you and Officer Reed do next?" asks Martin.

"We tried to make contact with Melissa Walters."

"How so?" asks Wambaugh.

"We rang the doorbell first, but got no response. I suggested we check the windows of the residence, to see if we could see inside. Officer Reed took the rear of the house while I took the front. I attempted to look in what was the bedroom windows but they had shades pulled down over them. The only room I could see into was the living room, and that was from the large picture window."

"What did you see?" asks Martin.

"I could visualize a lot of damage inside. The house looked like a disaster area. Officer Reed returned from his survey of the rear of the house, and reported that the only window he'd been able to look into was the kitchen window. He said the kitchen sustained a lot of damage, also. Based on what we could

see, we decided to try and make contact once more, this time opening the front screen door and knocking on the interior door, just in case no one had heard the doorbell."

"Did either of you announce your presence?" asks Martin.

"I did. I called out that we were police officers, and we needed to speak with her. We got no response."

"So you knocked on the interior door?" he asks.

"Yes, and when I did, it swung open on me. It wasn't latched or locked. Officer Reed noticed what appeared to be a spot of blood on the doorframe, as if someone with blood on their hands touched the door on their way out."

"Why, at this point, didn't you get on the radio and request back-up to your call?" asks Collins. "Again, it's standard..."

"Protocol, I know," I interrupt. "We didn't."

"It certainly would have been prudent, Officer Malloy," says Martin sharply.

Val nudges me. "Pete, stop it."

"According to Officer Reed's statement to Sergeant Friday, he wanted to request back-up before you made entry into the house. He suggested it to you, and you didn't agree. Why?" asks Wambaugh.

"I felt that time might be wasted waiting for our back-up to arrive...time that was possibly precious to a seriously injured person lying in that house, waiting for help. I wasn't going to take that chance and have an innocent person die." I meet Martin's eyes. "I realize that I didn't follow protocol as far as that was concerned, and I'm prepared to face any disciplinary actions that might be taken against me for that. But due to the fact that the interior of the house had sustained quite a bit of damage, plus the fact that the door wasn't locked made me decide to go against protocol and enter the residence. And there was that spot of blood on the doorframe that worried me, too."

Martin shakes his head. "And yet a *third* count of failure to follow set protocol against you in this case, Officer Malloy," he says wearily, taking notes once more. He gazes at me. "How many more counts are there, Officer Malloy?" he asks.

"Depends on how hard you decide to throw the little blue book at me," I say snarkily. I catch Val's warning glare and back down a bit. "Sir," I add, loading my voice with fake contriteness.

"What did you say to Officer Reed about entering the house?" asks Wambaugh.

"I told him I was going on in, and that he could remain outside if he wanted to. At no time did I force him to go along with me. He went on his own accord." I glance down at my hands folded on the table in front of me. "Officer Reed was understandably nervous about violating protocol, but he went along with me."

"So you overruled him, correct?" asks Collins.

"No, I didn't overrule him," I say. "I made the decision on my OWN to enter that house, by myself if necessary. I was not going to waste precious time waiting for our back-up to arrive, and I informed Reed of that then. I didn't want the possibility of a seriously injured victim dying in the time we waited for our back-up to be on my conscience. Neither did Officer Reed. He entered the residence with me willingly."

"Would you still make that decision now, Officer Malloy, if confronted with a similar situation in the future?" asks Sergeant Collins.

I hesitate, thinking for a moment, then I speak. "Yes, I most likely would. Of course, in this case, hindsight is a blinding 20/20, and had I known what was going to happen, I would have kept us out of there. But one of the most important things of being an effective police officer is learning to trust your gut instinct. My gut instinct told me that there was something very wrong inside that house, and that I needed to make sure that the occupants were alright."

"Weren't you concerned that Stuart Walters might be lying in wait inside that house, prepared to blow you or your partner's head off with a shotgun?" asks Martin.

"The neighbor stated she'd seen him leave. We took her at her word. While Officer Reed and I were peering in the windows, neither of us noticed anyone skulking around inside the house. I felt we were pretty safe."

"But you admitted to Sergeant Friday in your interview that you couldn't see well throughout the rest of the house, only through the kitchen and living rooms, right?"

"Right, but I had the feeling that Walters had departed the residence."

"Foolhardy," mutters Sergeant Friday from the side, just loud enough for everyone to hear.

Martin peers over his glasses at Friday. "I'm sorry, Sergeant, did you have something to say?"

"They were foolhardy," Friday says. "They could've gotten themselves killed."

"Yes, but the fact that Officer Malloy is sitting right here in front of us proves that they didn't," Martin says. "It's a matter of opinion, Sergeant. And I'll thank you to keep yours to yourself."

"Did you announce your presence once more after you entered the residence?" asks Wambaugh.

"I did."

"But you received no response, is that correct?" he asks.

"Yes, there was no response from anyone within the house at all."

Wambaugh frowns. "So *why*, at that time, did you and Officer Reed decide to continue through the house if you got no response?"

"I was concerned that someone might be inside and unable to call for help," I tell him. "I made the split-second decision to continue through the residence and check for victims."

"Without a search warrant?" asks Sergeant Collins. "You were treading a fine line in regards to stomping on guaranteed Constitutional rights, Officer Malloy."

"I understand that, but at that point, the situation was still a routine welfare check, not a crime. We had not entered the house to arrest anyone or check for any criminal wrongdoing. We were there primarily to check on the occupants of the house and that's it."

Wambaugh looks down at papers in front of him. "It states in your interview with Sergeant Friday that you were under the impression that everyone in the house was deceased." Wambaugh leans forward, fixing his eyes firmly upon me. "Why is that, Officer Malloy? What made you feel that the occupants were dead?"

I hesitate, remembering the spooky, silent atmosphere of the house. A shiver rolls down my spine. "It was the atmosphere of the house. There were no signs of life stirring at all. And the damage inside was incredible. I couldn't see how anyone could sleep through wreckage like that and not be awakened, especially if the lady next door heard it."

"Did your partner share the same assumption?" he asks.

"Officer Reed thought at first maybe they'd all been kidnapped by Stuart Walters, but I pointed out that had that been the case, Mrs. Timmons would've likely seen them leaving with him in his car. She didn't, so it was a safe guess that they were all still within the house, either seriously injured or dead."

"But you stated you felt they were dead. Why didn't you leave the house *then*, Officer Malloy, if you were under the impression that they were all dead?" Wambaugh asks.

"I wanted to make sure we didn't overlook a live victim, Lieutenant."

"Enter into record the interview dated Monday, October 18th, 1973, conducted in the early morning hours at Central Division by Sergeant Joe Friday, transcribed by Officer Bill Gannon. Subject interviewed is Officer Peter J. Malloy, and present during that interview was his commanding officer, Sergeant William MacDonald," says Captain Martin to the secretary. Martin then looks back at me. "Officer Malloy, you and Officer Reed have now entered a private dwelling without benefit of a sworn search warrant, merely to check on the well-being of the occupants inside, correct?"

"Yes."

He sighs heavily. "While it's a fine line between following protocol and not following protocol in this case, that you decided to continue to search through that residence, I'm going to take the high road and let this one slip by me," he says. "Understood?"

"Yes sir. Thank you," I say.

"How did you proceed, once you entered, announced your presence, and got no response?" he asks.

"We shone our flashlights over the area of the living room. As I stated before, it was in dire disarray. The tv set had a shattered screen, a curio cabinet had the doors ripped off and smashed, and the knickknacks inside of it had been crushed underfoot. Pictures that had hung on the walls were yanked down and thrown about, potted plants had been overturned and dumped upon the carpeting. In short, it was a disaster area. Officer Reed and I made our way through the living room, trying to sidestep as much of the destruction as we possibly could. We came to the kitchen. It was in the same state as the living room. Dishes and glasses had been broken, the kitchen table had been upended, the matching chairs scattered and busted up. Food items and canned goods spilled out onto the floor, the refrigerator door had been left open and the items inside of it had been knocked over onto the floor also."

"In surveying such wanton destruction, why did neither of you decide to leave the residence?" asks Collins.

"Again, concern for overlooking a live victim," I remind him.

"Why didn't the two of you split up to search the premises?" asks Wambaugh. "It's standard protocol."

"I'm aware of what standard protocol is, Lieutenant," I say somewhat sharply. Val gives me a warning glance, but I continue. "Officer Reed and I didn't feel quite comfortable splitting up and checking the residence individually."

"Oh? Why not?" asks Martin.

I cough, clear my throat a bit nervously. "Well, we felt there was a bit of safety in numbers. And, I think we also felt that whatever hellish scenes we might see inside that house, we'd see them together, and not alone."

Martin glances down at the transcript of my interview with Friday. "I believe the word you used was 'folie á duex,' am I correct?"

"Yes."

"Would you care to enlighten us as to what it means, Officer Malloy?" he asks.

I stare at the table in front of me, suddenly feeling foolish for using such a high-falutin' term. "It uh, means a madness shared by two, in basic terms."

Martin frowns. "I'm curious, Officer Malloy, and I hope you'll satisfy my curiosity for me. How did you learn a term like that?"

"I've taken college courses, Captain," I say. "In order to better myself both as a person and as a police officer. One of the classes I took was Abnormal Psychology. It dealt with such cases and terms, and in order for me to pass the class with flying colors, I memorized the terms and their meanings."

Martin allows himself a small smile. "And did you?"

"Did I what, sir?"

"Pass the class with flying colors."

I give him a small grin back. "Yes. I had the highest final grade out of all the other students in my class, sir."

He shakes his head. "Unfortunately, not splitting up is a fourth violation of protocol against you, Officer Malloy, despite the rather interesting term you gave for your reason."

"I understand."

Collins clears his throat. "Are you and Officer Reed in the habit of not following the blue book when it comes to handling your calls?" he asks.

I narrow my eyes, glaring at him. "Sergeant, we follow protocol on all of our calls 99.9 percent of the time. I have always made sure to impress upon my junior partner the importance of following rules and directives to the letter."

He glares back at me. "So what was the exception in this case?" he asks.

"This was a non-standard case," I say. "A small .01 percent of the calls that we DON'T handle per protocol."

Collins smiles a little bit. "How many welfare check calls do you and Officer Reed handle in any given week?" he asks.

"Anywhere from four or five, to a dozen," I say.

"Do you always handle each call this way?" he asks. "In such an intrusive and haphazard fashion?"

My mouth tightens into a thin line. "I resent that, Sergeant Collins. Each welfare check is different and unique, with its own set of circumstances. We handle each call as we see fit."

"Sergeant Collins, you're stepping rather closely upon character assassination in regards to Officer Malloy," Val warns. "I suggest you stop."

Collins stares at Val icily. "Very well," he says coolly. "Officer Malloy, what did you and Officer Reed do next as far as this call was concerned?"

"We started down the hallway that led to the bedrooms. We came to the master bedroom first. The door wasn't quite shut, so I pushed it open with my flashlight and that's when we found Melissa Walters dead on the bed, strangled to death." I pause, remembering her ravaged body with the black nylons knotted cruelly around her delicate throat. "I entered long enough to check for signs of life. I found none, so I exited the room."

"Did Officer Reed enter the room with you?" asks Wambaugh.

"He entered about a couple of feet or so."

"Did you determine that she was dead, just by the manner in which she was found?" asks Wambaugh.

"If you mean did I assume she was dead, yes, I did. She had pantyhose knotted around her neck, and she was tied to the headboard of the bed. Her eyes were open and staring at the ceiling." I shake my head. "Even though just by the sight of her, I knew she was dead, I went ahead and checked."

"Why? Why not just leave her where she lay?" asks Collins.

"I *did* leave her where she lay, Sergeant. I did not touch her body nor did I move it. I merely put my fingers to her carotid artery in her neck to check for a pulse. When I found none, I left the body and the room exactly as I found it, with the exception of the door being opened by me. That was the only contact I created within that room," I tell him.

"How many homicide scenes have you worked in your career, Officer Malloy?" asks Collins.

"Enough to know not to touch anything, Sergeant," I reply testily. "I'm no idiot, nor am I inexperienced in handling homicide scenes, if that's what you're implying."

"I'm not implying that at all, Officer Malloy," Collins retorts. "You're reading too much into my question. I merely asked about your previous handlings of homicide cases that you've worked, in order to gain an idea of your experience."

"That's not what it sounded like to me," I say sharply.

Martin raps a gavel that he has alongside him on the table. "Officer Malloy, Sergeant Collins, please. This is a fact-finding proceeding, not a witch hunt." He slides a piece of paper out from the pile in front of him. "Enter into record Los Angeles Medical Examiner's Report on Walters, Melissa R., dated October 18, 1973, number 301-H-WMR. Cause of death listed: asphyxiation by strangulation. Classification of death: homicide."

Collins grins snarkily. "So now you and Officer Reed have discovered the body of a murdered woman. Why didn't you leave the residence at that point, and contact the homicide team?"

"We had three other victims to check for, Sergeant," I tell him. "Melissa's three small children. Officer Reed and I continued our search of the residence just for that reason. While the mother may have been dead, there was a slight chance that the children might have been spared and were hiding from us." I clear my throat. "After we exited the master bedroom, we checked in the bathroom across the hall. There was evidence that someone had, at some point, tried to clean blood off of their hands. There was a red ring around the sink, and bloody towels on the floor. We gave the bathroom a cursory glance and then continued down the hall. We came to the nursery next, where the two little boys were at, Andrew and Matthew." *Please don't make me go in there...I don't think I can handle what I know we're going to find* whispers Reed's voice in my ear. I close my eyes for a moment, recalling the gruesome sight that lay just beyond that nursery door. I cannot repress the shudder that runs through me suddenly.

"Officer Malloy, is everything alright?" asks Captain Martin.

"What?" I ask, opening my eyes. "Oh, yeah, everything's fine, sir. I just had a...a...a momentary flashback to the scene, if you will," I say by way of shaky explanation. "It's imprinted on my mind, you know what I mean?" I ask.

Martin is quiet for a moment. "Indeed, I do, Officer Malloy. We've all been witness to horrific scenes like that. You never get rid of the images," he says softly. He looks down at the notes. "You entered the nursery to check on the two littlest ones, correct?"

"Yes. We noticed what appeared to be a partial bloody palm print on the door, made as if someone touched the door on their way out. Again, the door was not pulled shut. I nudged it open with the flashlight once more and entered the room."

"It's my understanding that Officer Reed was quite hesitant to enter that room, Officer Malloy," says Collins. "Is that true?"

"Yes, it is. He didn't want to go in, so I told him to stay outside in the hallway, I'd go in and check."

"Why was he reluctant to enter?" Collins asks, cocking his head.

I pause for a moment. "Officer Reed has a young son of his own, sir. I can understand where he might be loath to discover a murdered child inside that nursery, for fear of thinking of his own son lying there dead."

"But you forced him to enter anyway?" Collins asks.

I narrow my eyes at him, glaring once more. "Evidently you did not hear my statement just a few moments ago, Sergeant. Officer Reed voiced his reluctance to enter that room, and I told him to stay outside in the hallway, that I would enter the room myself to check on the two children." I narrow my eyes even more. "Furthermore, Sergeant, I did NOT force Officer Reed to participate in any of these discoveries. He had the option to leave the house at any time, under his own free will. And had he chosen to do so, I certainly would not have held it against him at all."

"But he entered anyway, right?" Collins asks.

"Yes, despite the fact that I'd told him I'd do it myself. He entered right behind me, and that's when we found..." Bile rises in my throat suddenly and I choke it back. I swallow hard a few times, not trusting myself not to gag when I speak.

Val senses my distress and grabs a cup that is sitting on the table in front of us. He pours a small amount of water into the cup from a nearby carafe and hands it to me. "Here, drink this, Pete," he urges softly.

Shakily, I take the cup and down the cool water. I wait to see if it's going to stay down, and it's apparent it will. Drawing in a deep breath, I continue. "We entered the nursery and found the toddler, Andrew, dead on his bed, a butcher knife rammed through his chest. The baby, Matthew, was beaten unrecognizable by a hammer that lay in the crib next to him."

"Jesus," says Wambaugh quietly, turning slightly pale. "Did you check them for vital signs?"

"I did on Andrew. There was none. The baby was...he was...he was a mass of gore and tissue. There was not any point in me checking him for vitals. He was obviously dead," I say softly.

"Enter into record Los Angeles Medical Examiner's Report on Walters, Andrew R., dated October 18, 1973., number 302-H-WAR. Cause of death listed, stab wounds to the chest. Classification of death: homicide. Also enter into record, Los Angeles Medical Examiner's Report on Walters, Matthew M., dated October 18, 1973, number 303-H-WMM. Cause of death listed, blunt force trauma to head. Classification of death: homicide." Captain Martin slips those two sheets of paper on top of the small stack he has started to his right, then he gazes at me. "I understand that your partner was so visibly distressed by what he witnessed in that nursery, he had to leave the house in order to vomit, am I correct?" he asks.

"Yes, Officer Reed left the house at that time," I say.

"Why didn't you leave with him?" asks Collins.

"Officer Reed is a big boy and can handle being sick on his own," I say to Collins. His manner is much like Sergeant Friday's and I heartily dislike him for it. "He didn't need me to hold his hand for him, Sergeant. Besides, we had one more child to search for, little Natalie."

"You continued through the house on your own, correct?" Collins asks.

"Yes, I did. I checked in Natalie's bedroom at the end of the hall, but she wasn't there. That left only one other place we hadn't checked inside the house, and that was the basement."

"So you left your sick partner outside to fend for himself, while you checked the basement for the final child?" asks Collins.

I glare at him. "Sergeant, as I stated just a moment ago, Officer Reed is fully capable of handling himself. He did not need my assistance."

"Why? In dragging him into that residence, you forced him to witness a sight that made him sick to his stomach..." begins Sergeant Collins.

"Sergeant Collins, I object to that line of inference!" Val exclaims. "Officer Malloy has repeatedly denied forcing Officer Reed into that residence. If you REVIEW Officer Reed's testimony, you'll see that he went willingly into that house. If you persist in denigrating Officer Malloy's character in this fashion, I will have to request that you no longer be allowed to ask any questions of Officer Malloy on this board." He pins Sergeant Collins down with a nasty glare of his own.

Captain Martin clears his throat. "Sergeant, please keep your questions in reference to the incident only and not Officer Malloy's character."

I sneak a glance out of the corner of my eye at Sergeant Friday sitting off to the side. He sits there, a dour expression on his face. I turn back to the board. "I realized that there was only one place we hadn't searched yet for little Natalie and that was the basement. While Officer Reed was indisposed outside, I took it upon myself to enter the basement to see if I could locate her. Sadly, I did. She was hanging from an overhead pipe, the noose around her neck." I bite my lip, recalling the sight of the limp child dangling there in front of me. "I thought I saw her move slightly, but it was just my imagination. She was obviously dead."

"Enter into record Los Angeles Medical Examiner's Report on Walters, Natalie A., dated October 18th, 1973, number H-304-WNA. Cause of death: asphyxiation by strangulation, compounded by stab wound to the throat. Classification of death: homicide," Martin tells the secretary. "Now that all four family members have been located in various areas of the house, all of them clearly deceased, did you decide to leave the residence at that time, Officer Malloy?" he asks me.

"I did," I tell him. "I was going to go call for a homicide team. But before I could even leave the basement, Officer Reed returned to the inside of the house to inform me that he'd already gone ahead and made the request for homicide. He asked me if I'd found the last child, and I told him that I had. I instructed him to not come down into the basement, I did not want him seeing the little girl hanging there like a slab of beef." I narrow my eyes slightly at Collins, who frowns. "And I did that in regards to his feelings, should you wonder why," I tell them. "He'd already seen enough hell in that house as it was, I didn't want to subject him to any more."

Collins fidgets and sighs, but keeps his peace. Lieutenant Wambaugh looks down at the notes. "Officer Reed stayed upstairs, then?" he asks.

"Yes, I ordered him to remain upstairs."

"He then heard something, am I correct?" he asks.

"Yes, he thought he heard a car pull into the driveway. Thinking it was homicide already there, he went to investigate."

"And you were...where?" asks Sergeant Collins.

"I was still in the basement yet," I tell him. "I had not made my way upstairs."

Wambaugh frowns. "It says in the interview that you felt you needed to gather your thoughts. Why is that, Officer Malloy?"

I hesitate, unwilling to reveal why I stayed in that basement a moment longer. "I was understandably upset and sickened by the shocking discovery in that house," I tell him. "It was enough to turn anyone's stomach. I needed to strengthen my resolve to be able to face going back through that house with the homicide team, that's all."

"When you say you were upset, how do you mean, Officer Malloy?" asks Sergeant Collins a little bit maliciously. "Were you sad, angry, what?"

"Sickened and saddened, yes," I tell him tightly.

"Were you angry, though, at whomever had perpetrated these evil acts upon an innocent family?" he asks.

"Pete, it's a valid question," Val whispers to me. "You have to answer it."

I pause. "I was more horrified than anything," I say, rubbing my forehead. "At that point, there wasn't anyone there for me to get mad at. No perpetrator had entered the picture just yet. As far as I knew, as we knew, Stuart Walters had long since split the scene."

Collins leans back in his chair, a slightly contented smile on his face. "How certain were you that Stuart Walters was, in fact, your perpetrator, and not someone else?"

"He was seen leaving the premises," I tell him. "By a reliable witness. She identified him right down to the car he was driving. Any reasonable assumption could have been made that he was the killer of his family. We saw no sign of forced entry into the house that would've indicated a stranger breaking in, nor did the four murders point to anyone other than a close family member to have been the killer. No one but Stuart Walters committed those crimes."

"How SURE were you, though," he presses. "It could've been a spurned lover of Melissa Walters, an angry co-worker, a burglary gone bad."

"True, but it was NOT any of those, Sergeant. Had you witnessed the level of destruction within that house, you would have realized that it was all done on a personal level, with anger and hatred directed at Mrs. Walters and her small children. The viciousness and brutality inflicted upon their bodies indicated someone well-known to the family. Had it been a stranger, or even a spurned lover, I would've thought that one of the kids might have attempted to escape or at least hide. None did. And who would a child trust more than their own parent?" I ask. "Any amateur Sherlock Holmes could've figured that one out, Sergeant. The anger was personally directed. And, as it turns out, Stuart Walters had a reason for wanting his family dead. Several reasons, in fact. Perhaps he didn't like the idea of a divorce from his wife, whom he apparently controlled. Plus, there was the sexual abuse angle, too. Perhaps Melissa had turned him in to the authorities for abusing their daughter."

"That's not been fully confirmed as the motive, Officer Malloy," Captain Martin says. "We're still investigating it."

Wambaugh coughs. "We've gotten a bit off-track, gentlemen. The question put to you, Officer Malloy, was were you angry at the perpetrator?"

"I certainly wasn't going to shower him with hugs and kisses, if that's what you mean," I say.

"There's no need to be flippant about this, Officer Malloy," warns Captain Martin. "Were you or were you not angry at that time?"

I hesitate, then I take in a deep breath, blowing it out with a puff of my cheeks. "Yes, I was. Any normal sane person would've been, sir." I catch the triumphant little sneer Sergeant Collins gives me.

"Were you angry enough to kill?" asks Wambaugh.

"No, I was just angry," I say. "Anyone would've have been."

"But let me remind you, Officer Malloy, that not anyone is sitting before this board right now, under investigation for the shooting of a citizen," Wambaugh says pointedly. "However, you *are*."

"I'm fully aware of that salient fact, Lieutenant," I say, using a pointed voice of my own.

Val kicks my foot underneath the table quite hard. "Pete," he whispers. "Can it."

"Officer Reed's assumption that it was the homicide team arriving on the scene was wrong, wasn't it?" asks Captain Martin.

"Yes, sir. It was, in fact, Stuart Walters returning to the residence, evidently with the intention of setting fire to the place to cover up his crime," I say. "Walters had no sooner set foot inside the residence when he attacked my partner."

Martin frowns. "Was he not aware that police officers had been called to the house?" he asks.

The question catches me off-guard. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't quite understand what you mean," I say.

"He obviously had to see your squad car sitting outside the house, correct?" he asks. "A reasonable assumption on his part would mean that police had been called to the prior disturbance. Didn't he know that the two of you were inside that house?"

I shake my head. "No, apparently not. If he did, perhaps he thought that only one officer was present at the house instead of two. Maybe that's why he attacked Officer Reed instead of attempting to flee. He felt that if he neutralized Officer Reed, he could continue with his plan." I shrug. "I honestly don't know otherwise, sir. You're asking me to guess about a madman's thoughts, and that is something I cannot answer."

"Did you hear the initial struggle?" asks Wambaugh. "Did your partner call out to you that he needed help?"

"Yes, I heard the struggle break out at about the same time Officer Reed hollered for my help. I rushed up the stairs to assist, but Stuart Walters broke free long enough to kick me in the stomach and send me falling back down the steps." I pause, as the memory of hearing the shot being fired into Reed washes over me in a sharp-edged wave of guilt. "I was a little bit disoriented after the fall down the steps, it took me a few moments to get my feet back under me. By that time, Stuart Walters had already hit Officer Reed over the head with a statue and shot him in the side with his own service revolver."

"Enter into record the interview with Officer James A. Reed, dated Monday, October 18th, 1973, conducted at Central Receiving Hospital, in the early evening hours. Interview was conducted by Sergeant Joe Friday, transcribed by Officer Bill Gannon," Martin says to the secretary.

"Did you black out from the fall, Officer Malloy?" asks Wambaugh.

"No, I just had the wind kind of knocked out of me."

"Were you injured seriously enough to seek medical treatment?" he asks.

"No. I was uh, checked over by a paramedic at the scene after I called for help for Officer Reed. All I received as far as injuries were some bruises, that's all."

"Were you able to visualize your partner struggling with Stuart Walters?" asks Sergeant Collins.

"I could see him struggling with a male subject. I wasn't sure it was Stuart Walters at the time, not having gotten a very good look at him," I say.

"So you weren't SURE that it was Stuart Walters that Officer Reed was struggling with, correct?" he asks.

"That is correct, yes."

"Because you weren't upstairs with your partner, like you should've been, correct?" he asks again.

"I tried to come to Officer Reed's aid as soon as possible," I say sharply.

"It's funny," Collins muses airily. "You state that you and Officer Reed were nervous about splitting up to search the house, even going so far as to attempt to explain it away with a hundred-dollar word, but yet you showed no compunction about leaving your partner alone in the upstairs to fend off a brutal killer on his own." He leans forward, steepling his fingers in front of him. "Why is that, Officer Malloy? It seems to me it was downright cavalier on your part, in regards to your partner's safety. Because of it, he ended up getting seriously injured."

I notice Sergeant Friday gives a small triumphant smile and it angers me greatly. I take a sip of water in order to calm myself. I set the cup back on the table in front of me, fixing my gaze firmly on Sergeant Collins. "I made a mistake, Sergeant. A mistake that nearly cost my partner his life. A mistake for which I am profoundly sorry. If I could take it back, I most certainly would. But I cannot. And I will have to live with what I've done for the rest of my life."

Captain Martin takes off his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose. "I understand, Captain Moore, that Officer Reed was not that seriously injured as first thought?" he asks.

"That's correct. He sustained a concussion and a minor bullet wound to his side. He has since been released from the hospital and sent home to recuperate." Val shakes his head. "Which, of course, he is not doing right now."

Lieutenant Wambaugh looks at Val. "Oh?" he asks. "What is Officer Reed doing?"

"He's sitting outside this room, along with his commanding officer, Sergeant MacDonald, in order to give moral support for Officer Malloy," Val tells him.

"I take it Officer Reed holds none of what has happened against you?" Wambaugh asks me.

"No, sir, evidently not," I reply, a sharp ping of guilt hitting me once more as I realize that by all rights, Reed should blame me completely for his injuries.

Martin shakes his head. "Well, it's not an OBVIOUS breach of protocol," he says wearily. "Leaving your partner alone upstairs. By your own account, you went on down into the basement on your own to find the last child, and, upon the discovery of her body, you had intended to return to the upstairs in order to call for the homicide team. In fact, you stated that you ordered Officer Reed to remain in the upper level, for you didn't wish to expose him to further horrors. However, your momentary hesitation downstairs is a serious lapse in judgment, Officer Malloy, and I feel I must admonish you for it. The next time you might not be so lucky, Officer Reed might end up dead."

"There won't be a next time, trust me," I say. "I intend to make sure we follow all protocol ascribed by the little blue book, right down to the periods at the ends of each sentence."

Collins frowns. "Wait a second. I'd say write him up, Captain. His hesitation down in the basement nearly cost his partner his life. Woolgathering like that should be punished," he says.

"It would be a hard point to make that Officer Malloy intentionally remained downstairs," Martin says. He shrugs. "Who knows? Perhaps Officer Malloy's presence in the upstairs might not have made a difference in the outcome."

"Still, it's an infraction, Captain," Collins protests.

"But not a CLEAR infraction, Sergeant," Martin says irritably. "Officer Malloy did not *intend* to stay downstairs and get his partner injured by Stuart Walters. It was, as I stated, a serious lapse in judgment, but a mistake that any one of us could have easily made. I will not write him up for that." He plops his glasses back on his nose. "Do I make myself clear, Sergeant?"

Collins stares at the table. "Yes, sir. *Perfectly* clear." He raises his eyes to meet mine in an icy gaze. "Officer Malloy, after realizing that your partner was injured by Stuart Walters, what was your reaction?"

"I knew that Walters was going to come down to that basement in search of me, so I turned off the downstairs light and hid under the wooden stairwell," I say.

"I take it the light was already on downstairs?" asks Lieutenant Wambaugh.

"Yes, it was. Walters had evidently left it on himself, presumably after he killed the little girl."

"How did you turn it off?" asks Collins. "Did you race up the steps and turn it off at the switch?"

"No, there was a string attached to the light fixture," I tell him coldly. "I merely pulled on the string and *walla!* the light magically turned off."

"Pete, don't be flip about it," Val warns.

"You say you hid under the stairwell?" asks Captain Martin. "How could you even see to navigate the basement in the dark?"

"My eyes adjusted pretty fast," I say. "It was also lightning outside, so that helped. I had a fairly good memory of how the basement was laid out, just from my short time down there."

"I see," says Martin. "Did you wait for Stuart Walters to come looking for you?"

I nod. "I had no choice. I wasn't about to climb those steps and walk into his line of fire. I felt the safer advantage would be for me to allow him to come to me. I stood a better chance at taking him alive."

"Did you have your revolver unholstered?" asks Wambaugh.

"I did. I knew he most likely had Officer Reed's weapon in his possession, so I wasn't about to give him that edge over me."

"Did you have a clear visual on him as he descended the steps?" asks Martin.

"I did."

"How was your mood at that time, Officer Malloy?" asks Collins.

I pause. "I was understandably upset, Sergeant. For all I knew, my partner lay dead in the house upstairs, killed by the man now coming after me. I was upset and fearful for my life."

"Were you angry?" he asks.

"I wasn't overjoyed, if that's what you mean," I tell him sharply.

He narrows his eyes at me. "But were you *angry*, Officer Malloy?"

"Pete, you have to answer it," Val says.

"Yes, I was," I say. "I despised the man, if you want to know the truth. But I did not let my emotions get in the way of the trigger. I had every intention of taking him alive. And I tried to do just that."

"Did he call out to you, say anything to you as he was coming down the steps?" asks Martin.

"He kept saying 'come out, come out, wherever you are,'" I tell him. "I ignored it and kept my attention focused upon him."

"Why didn't you shoot him as he came down the steps?" asks Collins. "You could've wounded him with a shot to the leg."

"And he would've hollered police brutality the minute I did that," I snap.

"You say you had a good visual on him as he was descending," Collins says. "So how certain were you that he had possession of Officer Reed's weapon?"

"He was holding it in his hand as he came down the steps."

"But I'm assuming he had his back to you, correct?" Collins asks. "So how did you see through his back...or do you have extraordinary powers of x-ray vision, Officer Malloy?" he snarks cattily.

I look at Val. "And you warned ME about being flip," I say dryly. I look back at Collins. "When he reached the bottom of the steps, he moved forward to turn on the light. As he did, he turned slightly towards me. I could see the glint of the gun in his hand."

"What did you do when he hit the bottom of the steps?" asks Martin.

"I had already started to move out of my spot underneath the stairwell. By the time he grabbed onto the string to turn on the light, I was already behind him, my revolver aimed at the base of his skull. I ordered him to drop the weapon. He refused to comply, trying to goad me into a reaction by stating that he'd already shot and killed my partner upstairs. He failed to get the desired response, though, and surrendered his weapon after a second order and warning from me."

"Were you still angry, Officer Malloy?" asks Collins.

"Yes, I was. But anger aside, I knew my first duty was to place him in handcuffs and arrest him."

"So...you weren't in the least little bit vindictive?" he asks innocently.

I glare at him. "No, Sergeant, I was not."

"You didn't threaten to kill him if he didn't comply with your demand, anything like that?" Collins continues.

"No, I didn't. I ordered him to drop his weapon and that was it." *Like hell it was, Pete. You offered to blow his brains out for him six ways to Sunday,* the little voice whispers in my head.

Collins rubs his chin thoughtfully. "Why didn't you just shoot him right then and there, Officer Malloy? It would still be technically considered self-defense," he says.

I stare at him in shock. "I'm not that kind of officer, Sergeant. I would not have gunned him down in front of me just like that, and then claim self-defense," I reply heatedly. "Despite what you might think, I do not operate that way. But perhaps *you* do, Sergeant," I say with a sneer.

Martin raps on the table with the gavel. "Officer Malloy, Sergeant Collins, need I remind you to keep the proceedings civil?" he admonishes.

Val clears his throat loudly. "Captain Martin, if I may, Sergeant Collins is obviously engaging once more in character assassination in regards to Officer Malloy..."

"And what about HIM?" exclaims Collins, pointing at me. "He just as much labeled me a dirty cop!"

"I did NOT!" I snap. "I merely suggested that you must operate on a different system of moral values than I do! Especially if you would even CONSIDER the possibility of shooting a man without giving him the chance to surrender, and then claim it to be self-defense!"

Martin raps the gavel harder. "Sergeant Collins, you WILL refrain from making such uncalled for remarks in regards to Officer Malloy's character. Should you continue in this vein, I will silence you myself!" He points to me. "And you, Officer Malloy, will refrain from outbursts such as this! Your *character* is not in question here, but your *actions* are!"

"Fine!" I snap. "Then tell Sergeant Collins to quit asking me such inane questions!"

Lieutenant Wambaugh holds up his hands. "Okay, gentlemen, we're not here to engage in a pissing match." He looks at me sternly. "Officer Malloy, you claimed you ordered Stuart Walters to drop Officer Reed's weapon, correct?"

"Yes, I commanded him to drop it twice. I informed him the second warning would be my last. If he didn't comply, I would've taken physical measures against him."

"Such as?" asks Martin.

"Such as physically taking him down to the ground, like we are taught to do at the academy," I tell him, hoping they don't realize I'm lying.

"You didn't tell him you'd shoot him if he didn't drop the gun?" asks Martin.

"No sir, I did not." My voice is cool and collected.

"And on the second command, he complied, dropping the weapon?" asks Wambaugh.

"Yes, he did. He laid it down on the cement and I kicked it out of his reach."

"Why didn't you pick it up?" asks Collins. "Seems prudent to me."

"I didn't want to expose myself to a possible assault by Walters. I didn't trust his attitude, there was something hinky about it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it seemed to me that he'd given up too easily. He went from taunting me to complete complacency in a matter of moments. I felt there was a chance that he might try to make a break for it, just by his body language."

"What did you do after kicking the weapon out of his reach?" asks Martin.

"I ordered him over to a tool bench."

"Weren't you afraid that he might grab something up off of the tool bench and use it against you?" asks Collins.

"I think my revolver pressed to the back of his skull stopped any idea like that," I say. "When he got to the bench, I ordered him to put his hands behind his head. At that time, I reholstered my weapon and prepared to cuff him."

"Did you read him his Miranda rights?" asks Collins.

"I was going to read them after I placed him in handcuffs. I didn't trust him, so I wanted to lessen any threat he might have posed to my own safety before I Miranda-ized him."

Collins frowns. "Suspects are always read their Miranda rights before being placed in handcuffs, Officer Malloy. It's standard protocol, plus it's guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution."

"Not necessarily is it always standard protocol," Martin says. "If the suspect posed a physical threat, I can understand placing him in cuffs before reading him his rights. It's only prudent to think of one's own safety first, Sergeant."

"So you're not going to write him up for it?" Collins asks with dismay. "I would."

Martin leans forward to peer down the table at Collins. "And can you honestly say that every suspect you've ever arrested has been properly read their rights before you've placed them in handcuffs, Sergeant?" he asks sharply.

Collins sighs. "No, I haven't followed protocol in that area all the time," he admits grudgingly.

"Then we cannot hold Officer Malloy accountable for taking steps to ensure his own safety," chides Martin.

"But if the case came before a court, it would most likely be thrown out, simply on that technicality," Collins says.

"It *hasn't* come before a court, and nor will it," Martin says. "If I had been in Officer Malloy's shoes, I would have likely done the same thing. I am not going to write him up for being concerned for his own welfare first, and the suspect's Constitutional rights second."

"But..." Collins protests.

"Moving ON, Sergeant Collins," Martin tells him sharply. He gazes at me. "You attempted to place Stuart Walters in handcuffs, Officer Malloy?" he asks.

"Yes, I did. I had one cuff snapped around his left wrist and was just getting ready to snap the cuff onto the other wrist when he made his move, lunging away from me and swinging the cuff up to meet me." I point to the scratch on my cheek. "That's how I ended up with this. The open edge of the cuff sliced my cheek open."

"Did you require medical treatment for it?" asks Wambaugh.

"No, it looks worse than it really is," I tell him. "I tried to regain control over Stuart Walters but physically, I was no match for him. He outweighed me, and I knew that I would likely be overpowered by him."

"Why didn't you use your nightstick?" asks Collins. "That's what it's there for, you know," he says snidely.

"I'm aware of what my nightstick is for, Sergeant," I tell him tightly. "Any defensive move on my part would've been like a fly attacking a bull. I knew that I had only one hope of regaining the upper hand on him, and that was by turning the light back off and hiding once more under the steps, intending to use the element of surprise to retake him. And that is what I did. I grabbed the string attached to the light fixture and turned it off. The string came off in my hands and I dropped it to the floor. I then went and hid under the steps once more, hoping for a chance to take Stuart Walters down alive."

"Really," says Collins. "Don't you mean, 'a chance to shoot him down in cold blood', Officer Malloy?"

"No, I don't. I waited for an opportunity for me to regain control of the situation, but sadly, that opportunity never presented itself," I tell him sharply.

Captain Martin coughs. "I understand from your interview with Sergeant Friday that Stuart Walters searched for Officer Reed's weapon, is that correct?"

"Yes, it is. He had a lighter and was using it to see his way around the basement."

"And I'm assuming that your eyes had adjusted to the darkness once more, and you had a clear visual on him at all times?" Martin asks.

"Yes. It was still lightning outside from the storm, and every time he flicked the lighter on, he illuminated himself quite well. He found Officer Reed's weapon and began searching for me in the basement again."

"Why didn't you shoot him before he got the gun?" asks Collins.

"Again, he likely would've cried out police brutality," I tell him. "It was only a minute or so anyway before he found the weapon where I'd kicked it."

"Did he call out to you?" asks Wambaugh.

"Yes, the same thing he'd called out prior, 'come out, come out, wherever you are'. He was also calling me 'pig', trying to get a rise out of me, so he could get a fix on my location."

"Did his use of the term 'pig' bother you?" asks Martin.

"No sir. I've been called a lot worse in my career," I tell him.

"Why didn't you shoot to wound him, if you had a clear visual on him?" asks Collins.

"He could've gotten the drop on my location and returned fire. I was not about to make that standoff in the basement any worse than it already was."

"How did you manage to stay hidden so well?" asks Collins. "Did he not know you were hiding under the steps from the first time you approached him?"

"He didn't know where I came from the first time I approached him. My approach was quiet. And fear for my life is what kept me so well hidden, Sergeant. I wasn't about to die at the hands of a madman, if I could help it."

"Perhaps the same could be said of him," muses Collins. "How long were you in the basement with Stuart Walters, Officer Malloy?" he asks.

"From start to finish, it was about ten minutes. From the time he got away from me and started hunting me again, it was about four minutes."

Martin gestures to the diagram. "Enter into record diagram made by S.I.D. concerning the Walters case. Could you please stand up and show us where you were at in the basement, Officer Malloy?"

I stand, going over to the diagram of the Walters' basement. I point to my hiding spot. "I was standing right here the whole time, watching him search for me."

"Was it a large basement?" asks Wambaugh. "Was there a lot of area to cover?"

"No, it was a normal basement, the size of an ordinary ranch house."

"What was your emotional state at this time?" asks Collins.

"I was afraid for my life, Sergeant. He'd killed his family upstairs, and by all accounts had done the same to my partner, so I knew he would not spare me. Why else would he be coming after me with a gun? To play tiddlywinks?"

"Officer Malloy," says Martin. "Your attitude is glib once more."

"I'm sorry," I say wearily. "I've just gone over this scene so many times, I know it by heart. And the ending never changes, either. I shot and killed Stuart Walters in self-defense, and self-defense only."

"Do you think that Walters was aware you were under the steps?" asks Collins.

"I cannot answer that," I tell him. "For me to do so, would mean for me to presume to know his inner thoughts, and I was not privy to that at all."

"But do you think he realized it?" he asks. "He approached the steps in search of you, instead of heading around the water heater or the furnace. It seems to me he had an inkling at least, that that's where you were at."

"Perhaps so, Sergeant," I tell him.

"You had your weapon unholstered and ready to fire?" asks Wambaugh.

"Yes, from the moment I went back into hiding. I wanted to be ready for him," I say.

Martin frowns. "Ready for him, how?"

"Ready to attempt to take him alive, sir. As I stated before, I was waiting for the opportunity to present itself. It just never did."

"How was he holding the weapon in regards to you?" asks Wambaugh. "Did he have it out in front of him, by his side, what?"

"He had it out in front of him, but down by his waist. Like this," I say, demonstrating with my hands how Stuart Walters held Reed's weapon.

"And you could see him approaching, correct?" asks Martin.

"Yes."

"Where was he standing when you fired upon him?" asks Wambaugh. "Show us on the diagram, please."

I point to where Walters was standing at approximately. "Here. Give or take a few inches or so."

"Enter into record the transcripts of the homicide investigation conducted by Sergeant Jerry Miller on October 18th, 1973, at 2510 Briarcliff Road," Martin says. "Also enter into record Los Angeles Medical Examiner's report on Walters, Stuart T., dated October 18th, 1973, number H-305-WST. Cause of death: single gunshot to the head. Classification of death: homicide by police officer." He looks at me. "From here on out, walk us through the situation, moment by moment, as best you can, Officer Malloy," he tells me.

I pause, gathering my thoughts. "Stuart Walters kept lighting himself up every time he flicked the lighter on. He held it out in front of him to see his way around. I kept my eyes trained on him the whole time, I shut out all the other distractions. I never moved from where I was hidden at, for fear that he'd get a fix on me and shoot. By that time, I think I had realized that there was no hope of me taking him alive." I glance over at the graphic pictures of the deceased Stuart Walters, his head gone in a spray of grey, white, and red. I close my eyes, looking away. "It's not an easy decision to make, sir. To decide to pull the trigger on a man and end his life, just like that. But there was no other way, believe me." I open my eyes, gazing at the carpet below my feet, red carpet, like blood.

"Did you pray?" asks Collins.

I stare at him, the very nature of the question startling me. "Excuse me?" I ask.

"I said, 'did you pray'?" He smiles coldly. "To God, you know. For guidance in this matter?"

"I don't see where that has any relevance to this case," Val says. "Prayer is between the man and his Lord, not the man and his review board."

Collins cocks his head. "Officer Malloy, are you a religious man, by any means?"

"I'm not obligated to answer that, Sergeant," I tell him. "My religious beliefs are my own business."

Collins thinks for a moment. "Alright, then, let me ask you this. Do you believe in the Afterlife?" he asks.

"You're fishing, Sergeant," Val warns. "Into private and personal matters."

I meet Collins' gaze with a chilly glare of my own. "No, the man is curious, Val. I'll answer it, just to satisfy his curiosity." I put my hand to my chest. "Yes, Sergeant Collins, I have been brought up with religious training, that of the Catholic Church. I have not followed those religious teachings since I reached adulthood, though, for reasons of my own. But despite that, I do harbor sincere beliefs that there exists an Afterlife, that of Heaven and that of Hell."

"What about your teachings of Purgatory?" asks Collins. "Your church believes in Purgatory, does it not?"

"Yes, the church does. I don't. I feel that Purgatory is simply an escalator for the undecided," I remark, getting a small smile out of Captain Martin and Lieutenant Wambaugh. "If you are asking me if I believe in God, yes, I do. And if you're asking me if I believe in Satan, then yes, I do believe in that, too." I jab a thumb at the gruesome pictures of Stuart Walters. "But which do you think HE believed in, Sergeant?" I ask. "It certainly wasn't God, that's for damned sure." I frown a little. "Does that answer your question satisfactorily, Sergeant, or should I bring in a priest for further explanation?"

"Are you not concerned how your church perceives the act of killing another man?" asks Collins.

"I'm sure that the church would make an exception in this case, Sergeant. The loss of my life would be far greater than that of Stuart Walters," I tell him. The memory of holding my gun to my head and nearly pulling the trigger this morning hits me all of a sudden and I feel myself sway slightly. I shake my head to clear it. "I have been reliably informed that I will be forgiven for what I've done to Stuart Walters," I tell Collins. "Thus ensuring my soul's safe passage into heaven," I lie. I am not sure of that, despite what I've been told. I turn my gaze back to Captain Martin. "As Stuart Walters approached my spot under the steps, I became aware of a sound from the upstairs. It was my injured partner, Officer Reed, coming to the top of the steps. I never took my eyes off of Walters. He was about seven feet away from me when Officer Reed turned on the basement light from the upstairs switch. I used that diversion to fire. My single shot caught him in the head, bringing him down."

"Were you aware that Officer Reed had only been injured, and not killed?" asks Collins.

"No, I was under the impression that Walters had killed him. It was only when he came to the top of the steps, looking for me, that I realized he was still alive."

"Did you call out to him prior to shooting Walters?" asks Collins.

"No, I didn't want to reveal my location. Walters was fairly close to me by that time, and he was quite ready to shoot."

"What was your frame of mind at that point?" asks Wambaugh.

"I was scared, frightened for my life, as any normal person would have been."

"Were you angry?" he asks.

I cast a glance at Val, who is frowning. "Yes, I was angry. But that emotion didn't play into my pulling the trigger, I assure you."

"He was seven feet away from you. Why didn't you lunge at him and take him down?" asks Collins.

"And risk getting myself shot in such close quarters?" I ask. "No, that would not have been wise of me to do that, Sergeant."

"You had your weapon up, ready to fire?" asks Wambaugh. He looks down at the notes. "In the usual firing stance?"

"Yes."

"At that close of range, did you have spatter on you?" asks Martin.

"Some, yes, on my coat."

"According to the testimony from your partner, you admitted that you didn't regret killing him," says Collins almost gleefully. "Is that true, Officer Malloy?"

Shock washes over me in a hot and cold wave. *Jim Reed blabbed something that should have been kept private!* I stare at him. "I...I...I spoke that in the heat of the moment, Sergeant, and nothing else," I stammer.

Collins stands up and comes over to me. He grabs the graphic pictures of the dead Stuart Walters off of the easel, shoving them under my nose. I close my eyes tightly, turning my head away as bile churns in my gut. "Officer Malloy, open your eyes and look at these pictures," he commands, poking me in the chest with the posterboard the pictures are mounted on.

I hear Val Moore come to his feet, knocking his chair over in the process. I still don't open my eyes, but I'm aware of Val approaching us, his footsteps thudding softly across the thick carpet. "Sergeant Collins, I demand that you stop that immediately!" he snaps. "You are badgering Officer Malloy!"

Collins ignores him, poking me once more with the posterboard. "I said *LOOK AT THEM*, Officer Malloy!" he barks.

Rage hits me hard and, opening my eyes, I grab the posterboard, yanking it out of his hands. With a savage swiftness, I rip the piece of stock in half, then into fourths. I throw them onto the ground at Collins' feet. "I came here to go before a review board," I growl angrily. "Not get assaulted and harangued!"

"*Pick those up!*" Collins hisses in a deadly tone. "I order you to pick those up!"

I fold my arms across my chest and glare at him defiantly. "Like hell I will," I snarl.

"See what I mean?" calls Sergeant Friday from the side of the room. He has previously been silent since his last admonition from Captain Martin, but now he becomes critically vocal once more. "Officer Malloy has a temper! He is defiant! We do NOT need a man like that on the force!"

Martin pounds the gavel. "Sergeant Friday, zip it! Sergeant Collins, Officer Malloy, Captain Moore, please return to your seats immediately!" he demands.

Collins ignores him, picking up one of the pictures from the floor. He shoves it under my nose once more. "That is what is left of Stuart Walters' head," he snaps. "After YOU shot him in cold blood, with your own weapon. And you have professed to have no remorse at all, even stating to your partner that you would do it again if you had to."

I yank the picture from his grasp again and tear it in half, throwing the pieces in his face. "Go to hell," I hiss through clenched teeth. I turn and start to walk back towards the table, but he grabs me by the shoulder, his fingers digging tightly into my flesh. Without even thinking and acting purely on instinct, I quickly whip around, my fist drawn back in order to strike him. White-hot anger pounds furiously in my brain and sings soaringly in my blood.

Luckily Val catches my hand just in time, jerking me back before I can strike Collins. "PETE!" he gasps in horror. "Stand down!" He grabs me by the nape of my neck and shakes me, hard. "Come to your senses, damn it!" he orders.

The roaring in my ears begins to dim and I am aware of the open-mouthed and wide-eyed looks of shock and disbelief on the faces of everyone. I very nearly struck a superior officer. One doesn't do that, even if the superior officer has it so richly coming to him. I drop my hands to my sides and hang my head in embarrassment, a deep red flush staining my face. "I'm sorry," I mumble, staring at my feet. "I don't know what came over me."

"Officer Malloy, take your seat, NOW!" Martin orders sharply.

I feel their stares upon me as I allow Val to lead me back to my chair. As he picks his up from where it fell over on the floor, I slide into my seat, putting my head into my hands. A faint buzzing sensation vibrates at the base of my skull and I feel woozy all of a sudden. The overhead lights seem to dim a bit and I rub my eyes. I reach out a shaky hand to grab the cup of water, but I manage to knock it over instead, the water splashing silently onto the carpet, turning the rich red a deep maroon...like dried blood. Nausea sails through my stomach and I lay my head down on the table, seeking the cool polished wood out against my feverish forehead.

Val puts a hand on my back. "Pete, are you okay?" he asks softly.

I turn my head just enough to look at him. "I need to go home," I say thickly. "I'm not feeling too well, Val."

"Do you want me to call an ambulance?" he asks worriedly.

"No," I whisper. "Just ask for a recess, a reschedule, whatever it takes to get me out of here," I say. I slip my arms under my head and close my eyes. Vaguely I am aware of the voices of the other men in the room, their tones rushing across my ears like a disharmonious orchestra.

"Captain Martin, I'd like to address the board if I may," calls Sergeant Friday.

Martin sighs heavily. "Very well, Sergeant Friday. Keep it short, please."

"Officer Malloy is obviously an angry man and what he nearly just did only proves it. I believe he shot Stuart Walters in anger for what he did upstairs, and that the police department is no place for a man like that. I feel his actions make him a cold-blooded killer. He just as much admitted that to his partner the night he shot Stuart Walters."

"Is that all, Sergeant?" Martin asks.

"He attacked me while I was interviewing him," Friday says. "I noted that in my interview."

I raise my head to see Martin glance down at the paperwork in front of him. "I also have in my possession two statements, one from your partner, Bill Gannon, the other from Sergeant MacDonald. Both state that you were deliberately provocative and tried to anger Officer Malloy on numerous occasions during the interview." He shakes his head. "I would say it was fifty-fifty, Sergeant. You each baited the other." He gestures to me. "And furthermore, you have to see it from Officer Malloy's point of view. He had just been through one of the worst experiences of his life, and here you were, ranting at him for committing an action he was trained to do. I would hardly call that fair, Sergeant Friday."

Officer Malloy's nerves were understandably frayed and he snapped after continued goading by you. I would have reacted much the same way, had I been in his shoes."

"Captain Martin, if I may, Officer Malloy is feeling a little bit indisposed right now," Val says. "I was wondering if it would be possible to end this review for now and pick it up tomorrow, perhaps?"

Martin shakes his head. "No, Captain Moore, it is not possible. To do so would mean to reseat a whole new board. We've already heard most of the testimony we need. I feel that if Officer Malloy can hang in there for a few moments longer, he will be allowed to leave. Fair enough?"

Val looks at me. "How about it, Pete? Can you hold out just a little longer?"

I nod wearily. "Yeah, let's get this damned thing over with." I rub my forehead tiredly. "Go ahead, Captain Martin," I tell him. "I'll continue with it."

"Officer Malloy, could there have been any other outcome in this situation, besides the one that occurred?" asks Martin.

"No sir."

"You exhausted all other possibilities in your mind in the time you were being hunted in the basement?" he asks.

"Yes sir."

"And Stuart Walters' actions left you no other reasonable opportunity to take him alive, correct?"

"No sir, no other opportunities presented themselves."

"And the death of Stuart Walters at your hands is truly self-defense?" he asks.

"Yes, it is."

"You did not shoot him out of anger or vindictiveness or with malice aforethought?"

"No sir, I did not."

He studies the papers in front of him. "And your statement to your partner right after shooting Walters...it was made only in the heat of the moment?"

"Yes sir, it was."

"Are you remorseful now, for pulling the trigger on him?"

"Yes sir, I am," I easily lie.

Martin exchanges a glance with Wambaugh. "Very well," he says. "This board is now closed. We will let you know the results of our investigation within twenty-four hours, including any disciplinary measures that need to be taken against you for failure to follow protocol."

"I understand," I say, standing up. I give Martin and Wambaugh a curt nod. I don't bother looking at Collins. "Thank you, gentlemen," I tell them. "I will await your decision and abide by it."

"Good day, Officer Malloy," Martin says, dismissing me with a wave of his hand.

I follow Val out of the room with leaden legs. Mac and Jim both stand up as we exit. "Pete, how'd it go?" Jim asks. "We heard a bit of a disturbance in there. What was going on?"

I shake my head. "It was nothing, Jim. Just a minor shouting match."

Val snorts. "Shouting match my ass, Pete. You nearly slugged a superior officer in front of other superior officers."

Mac looks at me with surprise. "Is that true, Pete? You almost hauled off and hit someone?"

I look away, shrugging my shoulders. "I guess. He had it coming, Mac. He started it."

"Someone else always starts it, Pete, that's your favorite excuse," Mac says with a frown.

"No, Pete *was* pushed into defending himself, Mac," Val tells him. "Sergeant Collins got pretty rough with Pete, both verbally and physically. He tried to force Pete to look at the pictures of Stuart Walters' body. When Pete wouldn't, Collins put his hand on Pete's shoulder. I think Pete reacted mostly on instinct than anything else."

I keep my gaze on the floor. "You might as well save your breath, Val, trying to explain to Mac why I did what I did. He doesn't believe me, anyway," I say bitterly. I look up, letting my eyes slide quickly across those of my friends. I don't meet any of their gazes. "No one does, either, including myself."

Val puts his hand on my shoulder. "Are you going to be okay to drive home, Pete?" he asks.

"Why, what happened?" asks Jim with obvious concern. "Did you get sick in there?"

I ignore Reed's question. "I'm fine to drive, Val," I tell him, shaking his hand off irritably. "It's just been a strain on me these last few days."

"Go home then, get some sleep," Val tells me. "You look like you could use it."

"Yeah, sleep," I say sourly. "It's more like I need oblivion."

Jim touches my arm. "Pete, if you're sick, I can have Mac drive you home in your car while I follow in Mac's car."

I shake his touch off, too, like I'm shaking off a distasteful insect. "I'm fine, Jim," I snap. "I wish everyone would quit worrying about me."

"But we're your friends, Pete, and that's what friends do," Jim says gently. "They worry about one another, and help one another through the rough times."

Anger riles in me once more and I bring my gaze up to meet his; narrow, flashing green eyes meeting trusting, guileless blue ones. "You know what Reed?" I growl. "You're full of shit. I don't need help, I don't need friends, and I sure as hell don't need YOU!" A stab of guilt pierces my heart sharply as I see the hurt flood into his eyes, but I turn away from him. I point to all three of them, jabbing the air viciously with my index finger. "As far as I'm concerned, you can all just go to hell!" I snarl, turning on my heel and stalking off down the hallway alone. I don't bother looking back and no one runs to catch up to me. And that's just fine with me. I don't need them anyway.

I manage to make it back to my apartment okay, but when I get to the door, a heavy weariness hits me all of a sudden and I nearly stumble across the threshold after I get the door unlocked. I shut it behind me, locking it securely, and lean up against it, my back pressed firmly to the solid wood. I slide down, closing my eyes and resting my head against my knees. The feverishness I felt earlier has passed, but the nausea still roils within my stomach. I draw in great heaving breaths, trying to force some kind of normalcy into my body. Reaching a flailing hand up, I snag the cord for the living room drapes and yank on it, plunging the room into semi-darkness. Still leaning against the door, I haul myself to my feet and stagger out to the kitchen. I rummage in the cupboard, pulling forth the whiskey bottle with shaking fingers. I don't even bother with a glass; I carry the bottle back into the living room, setting it down on the coffee table in front of my couch. I study it for a moment, then I unscrew the cap and take a swig straight from the bottle and it goes down harshly, causing me to cough and sputter until tears come to my eyes.

I go back to the bedroom, tugging the uniform tie off over my head, the silver tie clasp falling to the floor with a whispered thud. I don't bother looking for it. I undo the shirt buttons clumsily, finally getting frustrated with my thick fingers trying to work the fine buttonholes, and I yank the shirt open with a vicious jerk, the buttons flying off the cloth with a pop. I toss the shirt onto a chair, not even bothering with removing my badge and brass. I kick off my shoes and socks, then I unbuckle my belt, skinning out of my pants, and tossing them atop the uniform shirt. I hear something, probably my wallet, drop out of the pants with a clunk, but I ignore it. Dressed only in my boxers and t-shirt, I reach over onto the nightstand and turn the phone off, then I pull the bedspread off of my bed and grab a pillow, returning to the living room, dragging the bedspread behind me like a train. I toss it onto the couch, then I go into the kitchen once more, turning the phone off in there. I have absolutely no desire to be bothered by anyone right now. When those tasks are done, I reward myself by sitting down on the couch and taking another swig of the whiskey, the amber liquid going down a little smoother this time. I swallow a couple of more, then I put the bottle back onto the table and lie down on the couch, stuffing the pillow underneath my head and pulling the bedspread up over me. I bid sleep to come to me...if it won't visit me in the bedroom, maybe I'll have better luck out here, especially with some booze under my belt. I close my eyes and try to empty my head of all nagging thoughts.

Behind the darkness of my eyelids, images soon appear, coming to me like technicolor movie images flickering before my eyes. Stuart Walters' head popping like a ghastly balloon; Natalie strung up like a side of beef; Andrew and Matthew gruesomely murdered in their own little beds, Melissa's ravaged body upon the bed, her thighs pushed open to the world. I rub my eyes, willing the images to go away. Instead, more images appear. Jim Reed lying injured in the Walters' living room, his lifeblood draining out between his hands; Sergeant Friday's angry face glaring at me as he ranted his way through the interview; Mac's look of combined pity and sorrow as he left my place that Monday afternoon; Jean Reed's wide-eyed shock as I tore into her outside of Jim's hospital room; the grotesquely avid look of interest on the face of the waitress at the diner after she asked me what it was like to kill a man; the kind expression on the face of Father John at the church I sought solace in...and then there are the eyes...always the eyes. Reed's meeting mine right after I killed Stuart Walters in the basement, the shock hitting him as I candidly confess to not regretting pulling the trigger; my own eyes meeting in the mirror over my bathroom sink, the toll ravaging me and leaving my eyes a ghostly green; Stuart Walters eyes meeting mine in a flash of recognition and triumph, just before I slammed that bullet into his brain. The last pair of eyes that flash through my mind are those of Jim Reed, after I told him he was full of shit at the Parker Center. With a grumble, I punch the pillow and turn over so I'm facing the back of the couch. I close my eyes once more, but then the voices start whispering in my addled brain, like sharp little darts of piranhas eating at my flesh, stripping me down to my very bones.

Please don't make me go in there, Pete, I don't think I can handle what I know we're gonna find. Come out, come out, wherever you are. Ooh, a tough cop, huh? Whaddaya gonna do, pig? Blow your brains six ways to Sunday, all over this basement. Looks like you caught him right in the head, Pete. Single shot? I sure as hell wasn't going to miss. Maybe the self-truths you are not willing to face are the hardest self-truths of all. Tell me, Officer Malloy, does vigilante justice sound good to you? You punished Stuart Walters with your own brand of justice, placing a bullet right between his eyes. Is that true, Pete? Did you lie in wait for him and shoot him down in cold blood? I wish I could believe you when you say that you try to protect Jim, but this time you didn't, Pete. Is it forgiveness you need, Pete? You've committed no sin, no transgression that I know of. Who are you going to call when the nightmares get too bad? So does taking a life like bother you, or is it just another notch on your gun? It's silly, then, to place yourself on a cross of your own self-making, just because you feel no remorse for killing a murderer in your own self-defense. Take the leap...it might not be as big as you think.

"SHUT UP!" I shriek, turning my face into the pillow. "I CAN'T TAKE THIS ANYMORE!"

But the voices continue. *I don't want to be jaded and bitter. I don't want to be like you, Pete. Is that what you think I am, jaded and bitter? You don't have to explain yourself to me, Pete. I know what thoughts are going through your mind right now. No cop likes to shoot and kill a man, but you did what you had to do. Oh, but that's not what I'm thinking at all, Jim. I shot the sonofabitch, and I'm glad that I did. I'm not sorry. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. Oh yeah, baby, everyone has a dark side...even me...*

"Go away!" I growl, shoving the pillow off of my face. Grabbing a fistful of my own hair, I yank on it hard, but not hard enough to pull it out. The pain shoots through my scalp. "Get out of my head," I snarl. "I don't need this right now!"

You can't get rid of us that easily, Pete...We're your conscience, the voice whispers. Your conscience...your conscience...your conscience echoes and chases around in my pounding skull.

I throw the bedspread off and slide off of the couch to kneel on the floor, my hands clasped on the coffee table in front of me. Desperate, I do what I have been taught to do in times of distress and need, I pray, something I haven't done in a very long time. The words won't come to me, and I pound the wooden table in frustration until my fist burns with the blows.

There is a way to end this torment, the voice whispers cajolingly. The gun, it's in your nightstand. Take it out and use it, Pete. It's so easy, believe me. Just one shot will do it. Then it will all be over.

"No," I groan. "I'm not doing this again." Claspng my hands in front of me once more, I turn my face towards my ceiling. "Dear God," I whisper hoarsely. "Please save me." I clench my hands together so tight the knuckles turn white. "If you're listening, please save me," I rasp again. "I don't like what I've become. But I don't know how to turn myself back, God, to the person I was before that awful night." Tears slide down my cheeks as I beg. "I don't want this to be me forever, God, I can't live with myself if I am. I will end up taking that gun and putting a bullet through my brain, I know." I drop my head onto my clasped hands, shaking with sobs. "Dear God, please save me," I plead chokingly. "Save me from myself." I repeat that over and over, the mantra ringing in my ears, rubbing my voice raw, the tears dampening my hands beneath my face. I stay like that for how long, I don't know. I lose all track of time as I sit there on my knees, humbled and pleading for the sanctity of my soul, shaking and crying before a being I'm not sure even exists right now. And I for damn sure don't even know if He heard me or not. If I don't believe in Him, what's to say He believes in me? Because right now, I sure as hell don't believe in myself...not one damned bit. And that thought scares me, right down to my very core. A deep bleak feeling settles over me.

Now I know how the truly soulless feel. For I've finally become one of them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sharp banging on my door startles me and I jerk my head up, glancing dazedly at the clock on my wall. Groggily, my mind fumbles around in my skull in fits and starts, and I try to remember how long I've been slumped here, sitting on the floor of my apartment, my legs tucked and cramped under me, my head resting on my forearms as I evidently snoozed rather ingloriously upon my coffee table. Late autumn sunshine peeks in around the edges of my drawn curtains. The pounding on the door starts up once more, matching the pounding in my head, and I try to disentangle myself from the uncomfortable position I've gotten myself locked into. My knees creak and groan as I haul myself slowly to my feet, trying vainly to work some circulation back into my legs which, mercifully, have not fallen asleep completely. My back is killing me and I have a crick in my neck that feels like a horse sat on me. I glance at the clock again and realize with a start that I've been asleep for at least five hours. That's something, I guess, in lieu of the last few nights of sleeplessness and nightmares I've endured. The sharp rapping starts again and with a heavy sigh, I holler, "Just a minute, I'm coming!" to whomever is on the other side of the door. I hobble over to it, limping on sore legs. Just as I reach the door to answer it, a key turns in the lock and the door opens, only to be stopped by the chain lock. The chain rattles sharply as it draws taut.

Jim Reed's face peers in at me through the little sliver the space between the door and the doorjamb allows. "Let me in, Pete," he says in a low tone.

"I'm not in the mood for company right now, Jim," I tell him, my voice sounding raw and hoarse. "Go away." I try to push the door shut but Reed sticks his big foot in the way, stopping me.

"No, I'm not going away. Let me in, Pete," he says, a little sharper this time.

I peer back at him with a dour frown. "And if I don't?" I ask belligerently.

"I'll kick it, so help me God," he says softly, but menacingly enough to let me know he's completely serious. "I mean it, Pete. Let me in." He leans against the door hard, keeping me from shutting it.

"Are you alone?" I ask sharply. "Or is Jean or Mac with you?"

He rattles the door angrily, grabbing it by the knob and shaking it vigorously. "I'm alone, damn it. Now let me in!" The chain lock clicks and jangles, the links striking the wood.

"Can I at least go throw on a pair of sweatpants before you bust in here?" I growl.

"Two minutes, Pete. You have two minutes to go get a pair of sweatpants on. If you're not back in that time, I swear to freakin' GOD I will kick this door in!"

"What, you're going to *time* me?" I snap.

"Two minutes," he hisses. "And you'd better make it a *fast* two minutes, because you don't want me making a scene with your neighbors, do you? Somebody might call the cops, and then you'd have a LOT of explaining to do. Especially if it's someone you and I *both* know that responds out here." He points to his watch. "Two minutes, Malloy. Get moving."

"Oh, for God's sake," I say disgustedly as I slam the door shut on him, not even bothering to see if he's pulled his nose back in time to avoid getting it pinched. I head into the bedroom, snagging a pair of sweatpants off of the chair beside my bed. Hopping about and irritated cussing Reed out under my breath, I manage to get one leg into the sweatpants, then the other, without falling on my ass. I return to the door, where Reed has pushed it open once more. He points to his watch with a narrow-eyed glower. I shove the door shut once more in order to undo the chain lock. Then I yank it open, jerking Reed rather unceremoniously into the apartment. "What in the hell do you want?" I snap. "I'm trying to get some sleep!"

He slams the door shut hard behind him and fixes me with the nastiest glare he can muster with one eye still slightly swelled shut. "Where in the *hell* do you get off, telling me I was full of shit this morning?" he snarls, his arms folded across his chest. "And then telling all of us to go to hell?"

I fold my own arms across my chest and glare back. "You came over here and bothered me just to ask me a stupid question like *that*?" I snap. Anger prickles along the back of my neck.

"No, I was worried about you, Pete. We ALL are," he tells me venomously. "The least you could do is show some gratitude."

"Gratitude?" I ask. "Gratitude?" My voice rises in pitch, along with my ire. "You want *gratitude*, partner? I'll give you gratitude! There's the door, I'd be grateful if you don't let it hit you on your ass on the way out!" I gesture to the door for emphasis.

Reed pokes me sharply in the chest with his finger, leaning towards me. Dark thunderclouds storm his face. "You know what, Pete? Sometimes you can be a real asshole, you dig?"

Taking umbrage at being assaulted and insulted in my own apartment, I grab his finger and shove it away from me, slamming his hand back up against his chest, knocking him back a step. "Stop poking me or I'll drop you on your ass faster than you can blink, you *dig*?"

He snorts derisively. "Oh yeah, like you could really do that, old man," he says.

"*Try me*," I threaten warningly. "I'm in NO mood to be putting up with any crap right now, *Reed*. State your piece and then get out!" I point at the door once more.

"What in the hell has come over you?" he demands. "You've been acting like a complete jackass ever since this whole Walters incident started. Now either you tell me what's bugging you, or I take it to Mac and let HIM deal with you."

"Why?" I ask. "What's in it for you?"

He frowns, caught off-guard. "What do you mean?"

"Are you looking to satisfy your Scout Badge requirement?" I ask snidely, my tone just dripping with syrupy condescension. "Or maybe you're feeling a little bit on the saintly side, and think you're some sort of saving angel of grace, swooping in to save my soul from eternal damnation? Is that it?"

"No, that's not it at all, Pete..." he begins.

"Save it, Reed," I snap, interrupting him. His questioning presence in my apartment irks me to no end, and I move in to intimidate him, crowding his space with my body, much like I would a rowdy criminal in order to get them to comply with me. "I don't need *saving* from anyone, let alone some pious little goody two shoes like YOU!" I'm pleased to see my words hit home, as pain mixes with dismay, washing over his face in a conflict of emotions. "So now just get the hell out, okay?"

He stares at me, not even slightly intimidated by me. A muscle twitches in his jaw. "No, it's NOT okay, Pete! It's not okay at all! Something's driven you *way* too close to the brink, and either you stop it right here and right now, or Mac will stop it FOR you, by firing you!"

"Maybe that's what I need," I hiss through clenched teeth, my voice loaded with deadly rattlesnake venom. "A new job. Something that gets me away from a sorry-assed Boy Scout like *you*!"

He steps back from me a little bit, away from my harsh, biting words. "If you've got a problem with me, Malloy, tell it to me now," he snarls, his eyes narrowed and shooting fire. "I'll be sure and ask Mac for a new partner when I'm cleared to go back to work."

"Yeah, well, why don't you just do that," I snap. "I'm sick of you, Reed! You always have the right answer to everything, don't you?"

"No, not always," he says heatedly. He casts a glance down and spies the open whiskey bottle sitting on my coffee table. "Have you been *drinking*?" he asks sharply, pointing to the bottle with an accusing finger. "Are you DRUNK?"

"No, I'm not drunk, Reed! And so what if I *have* been drinking?" I challenge. "I'm allowed to do that in the privacy of my own home! What I do in my own damned time is MY business, not anyone else's!"

He stares at me with shock on his face. "Mac and Val both said that you drank pretty heavily after Baker's death, but I didn't believe them," he says softly. "I didn't WANT to believe them. Pete Malloy, a lush? It didn't wash with the man I know." He looks back at the bottle, shaking his head sadly, then he fixes his gaze once more on me. "But maybe they were right." He regards me with a mix of pity and slight disdain.

"*Leave me alone!*" I bark, my voice harsh and raspy. I hate the look in his eyes, I cannot stand it. How *dare* he look at me that way, with sickening pity written all over his face. "I sure as hell didn't ask you here, Reed, and you have the option of walking out that door and not looking back!" I'm angry at him for pointing out the obvious flaw in my character, and even angrier at myself for allowing my flaw to be so easily exposed and exploited.

He glances at the door, then back at me, jutting his chin out. "No," he says. "I'm not leaving." He folds his arms across his chest again and maintains a firmly defiant stance, daring me to act.

"*Get out!*" I growl menacingly. "Before I throw you out!" I give him a hard shove for good measure, causing him to stumble back a bit. "You don't wanna screw with me, Jim, or I'll pound the shit right out of you!"

"I'll take my chances," he says, gritty determination ringing in his voice. "Right now, I don't think you could hurt a fly, Malloy, let alone *me*."

"I said GET OUT, GODDAMNIT!" I yell, as a sudden hot rage swiftly overtakes me, flooding my emotions and sending them into an insensible overload. I can think of nothing else right now, other than striking the man who stands before me, sinking my fist into his face with mad joy. It matters little to me that Reed has already been injured by Stuart Walters, and that any physical attack by me might make things worse for him. No, I don't care about that at all, I want to see his face bloodied by my blow. My own lifeblood pounds and throbs heavily in my brain and a veil of crimson swirls before my eyes as I lunge at Jim Reed, drawing my right fist back to punch my best friend and partner. I swing at him, my eyes wild with anger, my blood thirsting for the shedding of his.

Startled, he quickly parries my lunge and swing, sidestepping me in a swift move, bringing his forearm up to block the blow and knocking me away, causing me to stumble forward. "What the hell, Pete?" he shouts at me, grabbing me by the left arm and forcing it behind my back, much as he would if he were arresting me. He leans heavily into me, trying to force me to my knees so he can gain control of me.

I writhe madly in his grip, my muscles alive with electric anger. I manage to break free, whipping around to face him. My rage makes me strong. I refuse to be bowed or driven down by the likes of him. I grab two fistfuls of his shirt in my hands and shake him hard. "*I told you to get out of here*," I rasp, my face just inches from his. "*But you didn't listen, damn it!*" Using my weight, I force him backwards, trying to knock him off-balance.

"What in the hell has gotten INTO you, Pete?" he shouts, and I look for quivering fear in his eyes, but see none, much to my dismay. *He should be afraid of me*, I think to myself as I shake him hard again, snapping his head back and forth with the violence of the rattling. *I mean to pound the crap right out of him*. "Let go of me right now!" he says. He brings his hands up, grappling with me, finally grabbing my wrists and breaking my tight grip on the front of his shirt. He shoves me back once more, this time hard enough to send me crashing into the wall with a thud.

I bounce off the wall and with a lion's roar, I use the impetus to propel myself towards him, rage singing and soaring mightily in my veins. I want to see him bloodied, whipped, cowed before me, begging and pleading for mercy. I want him humbled and on his knees. Right now, I *hate* the very sight of him. "Why in the hell don't you ever listen?" I growl. "You damned stupid fool!"

Warily, he steps backwards away from me as I advance on him, his eyes darting around, trying to gauge what I'm going to do next. I start to make another lunge for him when he suddenly brings his left hand up, palm open, delivering a sharp, stinging slap to my right cheek, breaking the handcuff scrape on my cheek wide open. "Pete, stop it!" he demands, his voice sharp. "You're acting crazy!"

Shocked, I raise my hand to where he hit me, the warm blood trickling down my cheek. My fingers touch the wetness...*he struck me!*...and fury ignites in me like a match to gasoline. My eyes meet his in a sheer bloodlust. Insensibly, I know nothing right now, other than my thirst for blood and violence, as my anger stomps and rages inside of me, ricocheting crazily around in the recesses of my brain. "I'll give you crazy, you little rat bastard!" I shout, lunging wildly at him once more, intending to bring him down for good.

He sidesteps me deftly once more, using my forward motion to his advantage. Grabbing the back of my shirt, he slings me into the couch, where I crash headfirst among the cushions. Momentarily stunned and rattled, I shake myself free. *"How dare you!"* I rasp angrily. Coming to my feet, I advance on him once more, stalking him like he is my prey, the thrill of violence surging through me like molten lava. *"You don't EVER raise a hand to me in MY house!"* I snarl low, my fists balled up tightly, my eyes narrowed to mere slits. *"Do you HEAR ME? I oughta kill you, you little sonofabitch!"* My breath comes in heavy pants and sweat stings my eyes and the freshly-opened handcuff scrape on my cheek. The taste of victory is like ashes in my mouth.

Reed backs away from me, his eyes wide as he watches my moves, hypnotized by the hissing cobra I've become. *"Pete, please, listen to yourself! This isn't you! I don't know what's come over you, but this isn't you!"* he pleads, his hands up in a gesture of supplication. Not watching where he's walking, he catches his foot on the edge of my bookcase and stumbles, falling hard against the wall, instinctively throwing his arms out to steady himself.

I'm on him in a lightning flash, moving in for the kill, pinning him tightly to the wall with my forearm, just like he's an insect on display in a glass case. I use my weight to keep him there. This is all I need to finish him off now. *"How many times do I hafta do this in order to beat some respect into that goddamned thick skull of yours, you little snot-nosed punk?"* I growl, pressing hard into his throat with my arm. *"Do you like me to hit you? Do you enjoy it? Is that it? You push me and push me until I break, and then I hafta smack you in order to put you back in your place, you little bastard?"* My voice is harsh and grating in my ears, and some small part of my brain shrieks to me that these aren't my words that I'm saying, they're someone else's...someone from my past. But my white-hot rage drowns that sensible little part out in a firestorm of anger. Nothing can or will stop me now from inflicting pain on the man standing mute prisoner before me.

Reed stares at me in open-mouthed shock, his eyes wide in horror. He doesn't struggle against me or even try to fight, he just stands there, his hands dropped to his sides. *"Pete, listen to yourself! I don't know what in the hell you're doing, but this ISN'T YOU!"* he pleads. *"It's NOT you, Pete!"*

"SHUT UP!" I scream at him. *"JUST SHUT THE HELL UP!"* My eyes narrow to slits once more as I regard him, my lip curled in a thin sneer of disgust. *"You've always thought that you were better than me,"* I rasp hoarsely. It is someone else's voice growling those words right now, not mine. *"Well, you're not! You never WILL be, and I'm gonna pound the shit right out of you until you realize that, kid!"* With that, I draw my right fist back, preparing to deliver the striking blow I so desperately want to deal him.

"HIT ME!" he screams back at me then, the cords in his neck standing out sharply. He coughs slightly, from my arm pressing against his throat. *"If that's what you want, then HIT ME! If it'll make you feel better, then do it, damn it, just DO IT!"* His eyes meet mine in an angry, defiant glare, snapping fire at me. *"Go on, Pete, hit me!"* he snarls. *"Hit me as hard as you can, Malloy, if it'll make any goddamned sense to you!"*

Then I suddenly realize at the very last minute who I'm about to strike with my fist and I screech to a stop, as icy shock washes over me, bringing me fast to my senses. *Oh man, that was my father's voice saying those words just now, not mine!* Quickly loosening my grip on Jim Reed, I step back, completely and utterly horrified at myself. *"Oh my god,"* I whisper, putting a hand over my mouth as my eyes go

wide with shame and embarrassment. "Jim, I'm so sorry." I take another step back, catching myself on the edge of the recliner. I lean heavily against it, my legs weak and trembling. *I channeled my old man and nearly lost control...I DID lose control...and because of it, I almost struck my friend.* "I...I...I don't know what came over me," I stammer hoarsely, by way of uneasy explanation. I rub at the sweat on my forehead with my palm. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say."

Sidling carefully around me as if he's not sure whether or not I'm going to change my mind at the last minute and still hit him, he moves well out of my range. "What in the hell is wrong with you?" he asks, his voice low and shaky.

Closing my eyes, I shake my head. "I dunno, Jim. Something inside of me just snapped, I guess." Turning around, I fumble towards the recliner, sitting down in it with a hard thud. Automatically, I reach for the bottle of whiskey on the coffee table in front of me. Closing my fingers around it, I lift it to my mouth and take a swig. I take another swig, this one a little bit more sloppy than the first, and with a hiccup, I plunk the bottle back down on the table. I turn my eyes to Jim. "I'm truly sorry, Jim. I don't know what I was thinking." I hiccup again, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

He gapes at me in slack-jawed disbelief. "I know what you're thinking," he tells me sharply. "Or at least what you're thinking with." He gestures to the booze. "You're thinking with THAT, Pete. When the booze is in, the brains are out." With that, he grabs up the whiskey bottle in a single snatch and heads out to the kitchen.

I leap to my feet. "Give me that!" I shout at his retreating back. Dread shoots through me with chilly fingers as I realize what he's going to do. I race into the kitchen after him, chasing down my whiskey in order to save it from its horrible fate.

He's standing at the sink, the bottle tipped up over the drain, slowly pouring the whiskey out. He glances up at my entrance, then returns to dumping my precious liquor.

I knock his elbow up, stopping the flow of the booze down the drain. I grab for it. "Don't you *dare* dump that down the drain, Reed!" I hiss. "That's MINE! Not yours!" I make a desperate lunge for it as he holds it out of my reach like a taunting bully playing a cruel game of keep-away. "Damn it, give it back to me!" Desperation tinges my voice.

"Back off, Pete!" he warns sharply, using his elbows and arms to keep me away. He starts to tip the bottle upside down over the sink, preparing to dump the booze down the drain once more, right before my shocked eyes.

I make a final dart for it, only to be shoved back by him, hard, causing me to slam into the countertop. My hip and my side begin smarting from the sharp impact. "You don't understand," I whine, immediately hating the syrupy wheedling tone in my voice with a passion. *Look at me, I've been reduced to whining*, I think sickly to myself. *Pete Malloy, begging for his booze...and the thought of not having it scares me very much.* "I need that, Jim." I hold my hand out, wiggling my fingers. "Give it to me, please," I coax, forcing a tone of false nicety into my voice. Maybe if I ask for it pleasantly, he'll relent and turn it over to me.

He looks at me, kindness in his eyes. He holds the bottle before him, shaking the contents gently. "You don't need this, Pete, trust me. It'll only make things worse for you. What you do need is friends who care about you." He tilts the bottle up and the whiskey begins to glug merrily down the sink again. "And if you look, you'll find that you've got that already."

"I don't need *friends*," I hiss, horrified at witnessing my precious whiskey flow down the drain. "I need *that!*" The kindness in his eyes rather sickens me, and a pang of hatred for him pricks at me once more. *Maybe I should have hit him when I had the chance*, I think to myself. I don't like having people pity me, not one damned bit. Thoroughly disgusted with both him and myself, I turn away. "You don't know *how* much I need it," I mutter sourly. I rub at a worn spot on my linoleum with my big toe. "Especially now," I mumble, folding my arms across my chest and slouching forlornly against the kitchen countertop, projecting the very air of dejectedness. I sneak a peek out of the corner of my eye to see if Reed buys my sorrowful pose.

With a heavy sigh, he stops pouring the liquor down the drain, tilting the bottle back up and shoving it at me. Drops of whiskey slide down the side of the bottle. He looks at me with something resembling disgust. "Okay, fine. Here you go, Pete. Your bottle. Just like Jimmy when he was a baby and needed a bottle to soothe himself." He looks at me, his eyes narrowed. "Is that what you are? A baby in need of his bottle?" he asks derisively. He nods at the bottle. "Well, go ahead, Pete. Take a drink. I'm waiting."

"I need it to go to sleep on," I tell him sharply, clutching the bottle firmly in my fingers like it's the Hope Diamond. And to me, it is. "That's all! Nothing else!"

"And the next thing you know, you'll be needing it to get up in the morning, and then to get through the day, and then to put the demons to rest at night," he says. "It doesn't work that way, Pete. You begin to rely on it more and more. And I'm not going to stand by and watch you do that to yourself."

"No one's asking you to," I tell him angrily. "So leave." I jerk a thumb in the direction of the door.

"You just don't get it, do you?" he asks, cocking his head. "For someone as sharp as I thought you were, you certainly don't get it."

"What in the hell am I supposed to get?" I snap. "Let me know, because I must have missed the memo somewhere along the line."

He sighs heavily again, shaking his head. "Pete, if you don't know by now, I'm not sure there's hope for you." He stares at the floor for a moment, then he looks up at me, pinning me to the spot with a piercing gaze that I can't back away from. "This whole Stuart Walters incident has really rattled you, I know it. For the last two days, you've been talking utter nonsense about your soul going to hell, and how you're an ice-cold killer because you don't regret killing the bastard. And that's where you're wrong, Pete. About everything. You're not going to hell, you're not a cold-blooded killer."

"How the hell do you know what I've been going through?" I ask.

"Because I'm going through the same damned thing," he snaps back at me.

I narrow my eyes, glaring at him. "Then try to help yourself, Jim, and give up on me. It's not worth it. I'm not worth it." I gesture to the living room. "Get out while you can." Then, unbidden and seemingly with a mind of its own, the whiskey bottle finds its way up to my mouth and I defiantly take a swig, still glaring at him, gauging his reaction.

He stares at me, a thin sneer of distaste on his face. "You disgust me," he mutters. "You're no better than the lousy putrid drunks we haul in on a nightly basis. I never thought I'd see the day when Pete Malloy was brought down by his own damned demons." He shakes his head again, folding his arms across his chest. "It's sad. Seeing you lower yourself like this. I thought you had more dignity and class than that, Pete. But I guess appearances can be deceiving, huh?" Abruptly, he shoves past me in order to leave the kitchen. "I came over here thinking I could talk some sense into you, help you, and instead I find a drunken fool. You're right, Pete. You don't need friends. You don't deserve us, anyway. Let your booze be your pal from now on, Pete. It'll tell you exactly what you want to hear, all the sweet lies, all the pretty dreams, all the false fantasies. Live in the lure of the amber liquid, I'm sure it's a helluva lot easier than living in real life...like the rest of us have to do." He heads into the living room, moving towards the door in order to leave.

"Oh, look who's talking!" I snarl, following him out of the kitchen, the bottle still in my hand. The disappointment and disillusionment in his words makes me dislike him for voicing it. And I hate myself even more for what he just said being the god-awful truth. Stung and smarting, I lash out. "You've got the perfect life, pal! The pretty little wife who faithfully waits up for you until you come home, the adorable little boy that hero-worships you and who'll probably grow up to be just like you, the loving friends and family who'll come rushing to your aid whenever you need them," I tell him, the words spitting out of my mouth like a very bad taste.

"I don't understand what that's got to do with anything," he says defensively, turning around to look at me. "I've worked hard for what I've got, Pete, and you'd have the same things in life if you only asked for it."

"Oh, *worked*, that's really rich, " I say with sharp derision, shaking my head. "You don't know what it IS to work, Reed! You've had it easy all your life, your parents supported you in whatever you did. They gave you everything you ever wanted. They still do. You got to go to college on their dime, and then went into the police academy without any trouble at all. You didn't have to *work* for that, Reed, not like I did," I tell him, venom dripping from my voice. "You've got the charmed golden life, kid, while I have the tin one that tarnishes at the first whisper of rain." The words fall from my lips like the hiss of a snake.

"Oh, so now it's a pity party you're wanting?" he asks, that muscle twitching in his jaw again. "Well, sorry, pal, but you don't broke any sympathy from me. You've made your life exactly what it is, Pete, no one else has done it for you. You've made all the decisions for yourself. No one's held a damned gun to your head and told you that you shouldn't get married and have a family, you decided to do that yourself."

"I didn't decide to watch Howie Parker die," I tell him in a low growl. "I didn't decide to force that run-in with Steve Deal and Norm Landon. I didn't decide to roll the squad in Griffith Park that night."

"Those aren't decisions, Pete, those are twists of fate!" he snaps. "Tragedies, yes, but you get over them and MOVE ON, damn it! You don't spend your life diddling around and whining about what sad little fates life has served up to you! There are thousands of other people who have it a helluva lot WORSE than you do, Pete, and they don't soak up the booze and whine like you're doing right now! They get up, dust themselves off, and jump right back into life with both feet!" He takes a step towards me, his index finger jabbing the air. "So *what* if you killed Stuart Walters? Do you honestly think a lowlife scumbag like him is going to be MISSED? Not by society, I can tell you that much! And who gives a rat's ass if you don't regret it? Truth be known, I probably wouldn't either, if I'd been the one to pull the trigger on the asshole instead of you!" He advances another step, his blue eyes snapping and blazing with fury. "What in the hell has HAPPENED to you, Pete? The man I knew as Pete Malloy would SURE as hell not be holed up in his apartment, licking his wounds like some damned little sob sister, pissing and moaning about what sorry fates life has dealt him! The Pete Malloy I know would stand UP for himself, and not allow himself to get bogged down by booze and self-pity!"

I glare back at him, my own eyes blazing with fury. "Yeah, well, *newsflash* for ya, kid. I'm not the man you thought I was."

He sneers that thin-lipped sneer of disgust once more. "Obviously," he says quite acidly. "I came here looking for a hero and all I found was a joke."

The sudden sharp bitterness of his words wound me deeply and I blink. Reed's never spoken to me that way before, not even once in the five years I've known him. I draw myself up to my full height, mustering up what dignity I have left. "I'm sorry to have disappointed you," I tell him tightly. "Truly sorry."

"You know, it's not myself so much that I'm concerned about being disappointed," he says quietly, sorrowfully. "It's your godson, Jimmy. How the hell do you think he'd feel, knowing that his uncle Pete was a complete and utter sham, a fake? That the man he looks up to is nothing more than a worthless bum, a gutless coward afraid to face his own problems, so he turns to booze to help him through it. It sickens me and it saddens me, to see this of you." He meets me in the eyes. "I don't want you around Jimmy any more, Pete. Not at all. I don't want my son hurt by you. He's too young to understand why you're doing what you're doing to yourself. And I'm not about to explain it to him, when I can't even explain it to myself." He shakes his head, turning around to start towards the door once more.

I stare at him, completely stunned. *Not able to see little Jimmy anymore? The little boy who is as dear to me as if he were my own son? NO!* "You would really do that to me?" I ask in a hoarse whisper. "You would really ban me from seeing Jimmy for good?"

He stops, turning around to look at me, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jacket. "What do you think, Pete? That I'm going to allow some lousy boozehound near what's most precious to me, my wife and my son? I'm just sorry now that we even asked you to be Jimmy's godfather. Looks like we made a bad choice. We bet on the wrong horse."

I take a step towards him, fear and desperation ringing stridently in my voice. "Jim, no! You didn't bet on the wrong horse. You didn't make the wrong choice, I swear! I love that kid like he were my own, and you KNOW I would never do anything to harm him, not at all! Please don't do this to me, please don't ban me from seeing him! I'll do whatever it takes to show you that I'm not lying!" I hold up the bottle of whiskey. "If you want me to go dump it right now, I'll do that! Whatever you want, whatever you need for me to do to show you that I'm sincere, tell me, and I'll do it, I promise!" My voice is frantic with pleading. "You would take away someone I care very deeply about, Jim. Don't do that to me, please, I beg you!"

"Why?" he asks tiredly. "You've already taken away someone I care deeply about, Pete...you. You've allowed this...this *stranger* to step into Pete Malloy's shoes, a stranger that I find I despise and loathe the very sight of. You obviously aren't willing to try and help yourself out of this, Pete, and I'm not going to work myself to death trying to help you myself. I thought there was an outside chance, a glimmer of hope in the darkness, but I was wrong. Dead wrong. That glimmer of hope was nothing more than a trick of the light cast out by the joke of the man that you have become. I'm sorry, Pete, but I've got my own troubles to worry about, without taking on yours, too." He looks away from me then, casting his gaze down at the floor. "I'm going to ask Mac for a new partner and a switch to a different shift when I get off medical leave, Pete," he tells me softly. "I don't want to be your partner any more, nor do I want to be on the same shift as you. And I think I'll put in for a transfer out of the division as soon as I can get one. I may land in a division quite a-ways away from my home, but I don't care, if it means I'll no longer be forced to work in the same division as you." He rubs his forehead. "I'm going to personally suggest to Mac that he have you removed from duty pending a psychiatric evaluation. I think Mac was thinking along those lines himself, anyway, and a suggestion from me might make him decide to go that route."

"No psych evaluation!" I snap. "I'm not crazy, Jim! I don't need a shrink!"

"No, I honestly don't know *what* you need, Pete, and I don't think you know yourself, either. Maybe some counseling will help you sort it out, since I sure as hell can't. And you certainly can't go on like this, drinking yourself out of your misery all the time." He looks up at me then, his eyes filled with sorrow. "We were *friends*, Pete, and friends help each other out when times get tough. I seriously thought I could help you, but I can't. So I'm getting out of it. I wash my hands of this whole sordid mess you've created. You're on your own, Pete, from now on."

"But we're still friends!" I cry out. Jim Reed hesitates, a frown on his face, and stark fear shoots through me; icy, chilly fear. "Jim, we're still friends!" I remember having a conversation like this of my own, with a man named Tony Johnson, who ended up betraying the bonds of friendship between us in the most dastardly way. Shaking, I stare at Jim Reed. "We're still friends...aren't we?" I hoarse out.

He shakes his head wearily. "No, Pete, you burned those bridges just a bit ago, when you chose the whiskey over our friendship. You burned them good, down to mere ashes at the waterline. Now there's nothing left, nothing at all. Just the memory of what once was. I used to respect and admire you, Pete, but now...now all I feel is sorrow. You took a good friendship and drowned it in booze. You shredded the ties of friendship like they were nothing more than confetti to you. And I find that I cannot forgive you that, just like you can never forgive Johnson for what he did to you. It's too damned hard, and it's just not worth it, not now, anyway." He nods at the bottle still in my hand. "Good night, Pete, have fun with your bottle. It'll have to keep you company, since it's your friend from now on."

"But what am I supposed to do?" I ask, fear running fast through my veins.

He studies me for a moment, then a mirthless and cold smile quirks across his lips. "To paraphrase Rhet Butler, 'frankly, Pete, I don't give a damn'." He turns away from me then, starting toward the door once more in order to leave me for the final time.

And at the thought of him turning his back on me forever, denying me not only the gift of our friendship, but also the love and joy of my little godson, something...*something* seizes up around my heart, squeezing it so tightly I gasp out loud from the sheer bright pain of it. *How could I have let this happen...how could I have let it get this bad, this out of hand?* my brain asks numbly. My fingers let the whiskey bottle slip from them, where it lands on the carpet with a muffled thunk. White-hot anguish sears my soul like a welder's torch and I moan, swaying on my feet, dropping my head into my trembling hands. "Oh my god," I whisper, nearly to myself. "I almost killed myself this morning. Now I wish I had." The words flee out into the open between us like startled deer, and a twinge of anxiety hits me, as I look up to see what Jim's reaction will be to my shocking announcement.

Reed's spine stiffens, his hand on the doorknob, and he stops. He doesn't turn around to look at me, but says, "What did you just say?" in a low tone.

"You heard me. I almost killed myself this morning," I tell him quietly, my voice shaking. "I put my off-duty weapon to my temple and nearly pulled the trigger. Maybe I shoulda, then that would've ended it all right there. "

His shoulders sag heavily, and he lets out a deep sigh. He still won't turn around, but his hand drops away from the knob, falling lifelessly by his side. "And what do you want me to do, Pete? Shout for joy that you didn't?" he asks dully, tonelessly. "Be glad that you somehow managed *not* to pull the trigger on yourself? Should I be grateful you decided at the last minute to *not* commit suicide, is that it?"

I stare at his back, rather disturbed by his lack of emotions. Such an announcement should bring out *something*...rage, sorrow, shock...anything other than this cold, stony pose of his. "I...I...I just thought I'd let you know," I stammer, suddenly rather embarrassed that I admitted such a dark dirty secret to him. Secrets like that aren't meant to be blurted out, they're meant to be kept behind locked doors chained shut with padlocks.

He rests his head against the door, his back still to me. He shrugs listlessly. "Why?" he asks softly. "So I can have *that* happy little thought dancing among my *other* happy little thoughts tonight when I go to bed?" He puts his palms against the door, leaning his weight heavily against it. "Why tell me that, Pete? Do you want to add to my suffering already? Isn't what you've put me through tonight enough?"

Sudden anger lashes through me sharply at that comment, like a spray of sand across a sunburn. "Well, hell no. I'll relieve you of your suffering, Reed. You won't have to worry about me anymore, I can promise you that," I snap.

"GODDAMNIT!" he yells, sharply hitting my door with his fist, startling me, making me jump. The door rattles in the frame and he hits it again, as hard as he can. "GODDAMNIT, PETE, THIS ISN'T RIGHT!" He whips around and advances on me quickly with a swift-footed fury I've never seen in him before, a fury that makes me cringe back from him a bit. "How DARE you dump this onto me now! I came over here trying to help you, and all I hear is your whining and complaining...and now this! This is just great, you know that? My best friend is MORE willing to take the coward's way out of his misery, rather than try to solve it!"

"Yeah, well it takes a helluva lot more than pretty words and friendship to solve my misery!" I shout back.

"How the hell would you know?" he yells, poking me in the chest once more. "You've never even tried to open up to me, or anyone else, for that matter! All you'd rather do is mewslop around, feeling sorry for yourself and pounding down the booze! Well, it doesn't work that way, Pete! Either you get it together and go on with your life, or you stay miserable and pathetic until you die!"

"Maybe my death will be sooner than you think!" I yell at him.

"You wanna kill yourself, Pete?" he asks with a hiss, his face inches from mine. That muscle in his jaw begins twitching again. "You *really* wanna kill yourself and get it all over with? You think that's gonna solve your problems?"

"Yeah, maybe!" I snap.

"Fine!" He reaches to the holster at his side that holds his off-duty weapon, sliding the gun out. He thrusts it at me with a vengeance. "Here," he snarls. "Take it!"

I stare at him in shocked horror, surprised that he would even do such a thing as offer me his own gun to kill myself with. "I don't want it," I say, as ice water floods my veins, drowning out the anger I just felt a moment ago.

He shoves it at me again, his eyes narrowed to slits. "Take it, you lousy coward!" he rasps, sweat streaming down his face. "Man up and stick the barrel to your temple or in your mouth and pull the damned trigger! Take the easy way out! Show the world just what kind of man Pete Malloy is!"

I step away from him, shoving my hands at him. "I said I don't want it," I tell him sharply. " Now stop it!"

"Why not?" he asks heatedly. "You were ready to do it this morning, so what's the damned difference? Or do you want an audience to your death, is that it? You need to have someone witness your dying by your own hand for some obscene reason, Pete?"

"It's not like that at all!" I snarl.

"Then what IS it like, Pete, tell me! Because I sure as hell don't get it, not at all!" he snarls back. "*You make me sick!*" he growls. "*Sick at heart, sick at mind, sick at my goddamned soul!*" He grabs my hand, trying to force me into taking the gun into my fingers. He fails.

I move away from him once more, clenching my fists by my side. "Will you STOP IT!" I tell him. "I don't want the gun! I'm not going to take it, Jim!"

He ignores me. "Here, you want me to take the safety off for you?" he asks, slipping the safety off. He thrusts it at me again, fairly shaking with anger. "I said *take the goddamned gun*, Pete. Kill yourself, little man. Then you WILL be no better than Stuart Walters, you WILL be a cold-blooded killer. And the two of you can visit each other in hell!"

"STOP IT, JIM!" I yell. "JUST STOP IT! I'm not going to take the goddamned gun!"

He sneers at me again, that awful sneer of disgust, and I find myself being forced to look away from him in shame. "You know what?" he asks in a low tone. He doesn't wait for me to answer, instead, he continues, his voice vibrating with anger. "I'm just really damned glad Jimmy is young enough to hopefully forget you, Pete, to forget that you even existed in his life. I don't want my kid growing up with the tainted knowledge that his uncle couldn't face up to his problems and took the coward's way out. I can't bear to force that upon him, Pete." He holds the gun out to me, butt-first, the barrel gripped between his fingers and aimed down at the floor. "But go ahead, Pete. Be my guest. Take the gun and finish yourself off. I won't stop you, but I also won't watch you, either. I don't want that to be my last memory of you. So please, do me a favor and wait until I leave your apartment, okay? I'll go down and sit in the car until I hear the gunshot, then I'll come back up and call for the cops." He shakes his head. "And I'm not coming to your funeral, Pete. I can't grant you that one last favor, even out of respect for what used to be our friendship. I just won't do it. I refuse to. I won't honor a coward, not at all." He thrusts the gun at me one more time. "Take it, Pete," he says, looking away. "Just take it from me and get it all over with, okay? If that's what you really and truly want, to end your own life, then just do it."

"No!" I whisper. "I won't!" And suddenly my knees give way without warning underneath me and I crumple with a hard thud to the floor in a rather untidy heap of Pete Malloy. An uncontrollable trembling seizes me then, and I lay there on the carpet, violently shaking and jittering like a junkie desperately in need of a fix. My head pounds out a kettle drum beat and my stomach rolls acidly. Blackness swirls and skitters in front of my eyes, and I feel like I'm going to pass out, just like I did earlier during the review board. Drawing my breath in through my nose and swallowing hard, I will myself not to vomit or faint in front of Jim Reed. I keep my eyes fixed firmly on the carpet in front of me. I do not wish to look up and see his face, for fear of what I might see there...disgust and dislike, mixed with obvious pity. All of the fierce anger and hatred I've felt over the past couple of days leaves me in a flooding rush, like muddied water pouring over a dam. And I am finally humbled at last, lying there on the floor at the feet of my partner and best friend, my abject humility and dire shame washing through me in waves of tortuous pain.

"Pete, get up," Jim says quietly. He slips the safety back on, then slides the gun back into his holster.

I shake my head mutely. "No. Please, Jim, just leave," I whisper miserably. My teeth begin to chatter as an icy chill races through me, cutting through my very core.

"Pete, get up," he says again, his voice still soft.

I close my eyes tightly, turning my face away. "P-p-please, j-j-just l-l-leave me b-b-be," I chatter frantically, teeth clicking like skeleton bones tap-dancing across a floor.

"Do you want me to call Mac...or maybe Val?" he asks.

I shake my head. "No," I groan. "Not Mac or Val. I don't want you to call them. I'd be stripped of my badge for sure if they saw me like this right now."

He kneels down next to me, his hand on my shoulder. "Pete, get up, please," he says, his voice gentle.

"Why?" I moan, my eyes still closed. "I'm already in the gutter. I'm as low as I can sink. I deserve to stay on the floor. It's the best place for a lowlife like me." The chill hits me again and I shudder and shake violently once more.

"You're not in the gutter, Pete," Jim tells me, his hand still on my shoulder. "You're not some kind of lowlife, if that's what you're thinking."

"I don't know what I'm thinking anymore," I whisper. "I honestly don't know, Jim. And that scares me. It truly scares me."

"I know it does, Pete. It scares me too," he says. "If I try and help you up, do you think you can make it over to the recliner?" he asks.

"I'll try," I say. "But don't reinjure yourself helping me. I couldn't bear it if that happened, I just couldn't."

"C'mon," he says, standing up and tugging gently on my arms. "I won't reinjure myself, I promise. I didn't get hurt by our scrap just a bit ago, so I'll be fine, trust me."

Shakily, and with Reed's help, I manage to get to my feet and wobble weakly over to the recliner. I feel as if I've been run through a super-wringer and hung up to dry in a soggy, humid wind. I sit down in the recliner with a plop, and Jim pulls off his jacket, tossing it onto the couch. He sits down on the coffee table across from me, his hand still on my shoulder in a gesture of comfort.

"So, talk to me," he says.

Mutely, I shake my head, as a myriad of thoughts whirl through my brain. My trembling begins to lessen as I draw in a few deep breaths to calm myself. "I...I don't know where to begin," I say, finally finding my voice.

"Start wherever you'd like. Wherever is easiest for you, Pete," he tells me, giving my shoulder a slight squeeze of reassurance.

I close my eyes. "Could you please not touch me right now?" I ask, sheer misery edging my voice. "I can't bear to be touched. I don't deserve it."

Reed lets his hand drop away. "Okay, I can understand that."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Do me a favor, willya?" I ask. "Go into the bathroom and in my medicine cabinet is a bottle of aspirin. Get me a couple, okay? Then in my bedroom, on the nightstand, is a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Grab them for me, would you please?"

He frowns. "You started smoking again?" he asks with dismay.

I look at him with pleading eyes. "Just get them, okay? I really need one right now, not to mention the aspirin."

"Boy, you're pulling in all the vices here, aren't you, Pete?" he asks, but his tone is laced with humor. "What's next? Dancing girls in your living room?" He gets up and goes into the bedroom, stopping momentarily on his way to pick up the fallen bottle of whiskey and setting it back on the coffee table.

"I doubt I'd be great company for even a dancing girl right now," I say, my usual customary humor failing to find me right now.

After a few moments, he returns with the pack of cigarettes and the gold Zippo lighter, the ashtray from the nightstand in his hand, along with a dampened washcloth. He sets the cigarettes, the lighter, and the ashtray on the table in front of me. He hands me the two aspirin and the washcloth. "I'll go get you a glass of water to wash those down with," he tells me. "While I'm doing that, you might want to wash the blood off of your face, Pete." He bites his lip. "I'm sorry I had to slap you like that, but I didn't know what else to do. I was hoping I'd bring you to your senses." He leaves then, and I hear him rummaging in the kitchen for a moment, banging both cupboard doors and the refrigerator door, then he returns, a tumbler of pale liquid in his hands, along with a package of saltines. "Here," he says, handing me the glass. "It's ginger ale. I found some in your fridge." He opens the package of crackers. "Eat these before you take the aspirin, you don't want to upset your stomach."

I eye the crackers warily, rubbing at the handcuff scrape on my face gently with the warm washcloth. "I'm not hungry, Jim. I don't know if my stomach can handle food right now." The cloth feels soothing to my aching cheek, and I rest my head against my palm, cradling that side of my face gingerly. "Thanks, though," I say. "Maybe I'll try eating some later. But not right now."

"Pete, you have to eat something," he says. "Just try a couple, see if they stay down. It always helps Jimmy when he's got an upset stomach, so I'm sure it'll help you."

Grudgingly, I take a cracker and nibble on it, realizing that if I don't, Jim Reed will stand over me like a hawk until I do. It stays down, so I take one more and eat it, swallowing the aspirin with a gulp of the ginger ale. "Is that good enough?" I ask, looking up at Jim, who is still towering over me.

He sighs, shaking his head. "No, but try and keep eating them, okay, Pete? I don't imagine you've had a lot in your stomach over the last few days. You don't want to crash and have to be hospitalized because you're malnourished and dehydrated, do you?"

"No," I tell him, grabbing up another cracker quickly. The idea of being stuck in a hospital does NOT appeal to me in the least.

Reed sits down on the couch. "You said you DIDN'T want dancing girls, Pete?" he asks a bit wryly. "What are you, sick? I never knew Pete Malloy to turn down dancing girls, even if he were on his deathbed."

I shake my head. "Let's not mention death right now, okay?" I ask him. "Especially mine." Laying the package of crackers and the glass of ginger ale on the coffee table, I grab up the smokes. I tap a cigarette out of the pack and light it, my thumb trembling across the wheel of the lighter. It takes me a couple of tries to get the cigarette lit. Finally, I do, and I blow a stream of smoke up towards the ceiling. "Thanks, Jim, for grabbing these for me," I tell him, keeping my eyes from meeting his. "I appreciate it." I lay the cigarettes and the lighter back on the coffee table.

He picks up the lighter and studies it. "Pretty engraving," he says, examining my name written in the script. He runs his finger over the letters spelling out my name, then he puts it back on the table. "Was it a gift?"

I nod. "Yep. A Christmas present."

"From who?"

I shrug. "A girl. Someone I once knew a long time ago, back in Seattle."

He grins. "She musta thought a lot of you, Pete, to give you such an expensive present like that."

"Yeah, you'd think," I tell him, tapping ash into the ashtray. "Unfortunately, it turned out not to be the case." I glance at him. "Are you sure I didn't injure you when I went after you?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No, Pete, I promise. You didn't hurt me."

"Good," I say, taking a drag on the cigarette. "I'd hate myself if I hurt you, Jim." I cast my gaze up at the ceiling.

"You mean physically or emotionally?" he asks softly. "The words sting harsher than the blows, you know."

"I know." I shake my head, closing my eyes for a moment. "Believe me, I know." I shoot him another glance. "I can't apologize enough to you for what I said and how I acted. I had no right, no right at all, to lash out at you like that, both physically and verbally." I rub at my cheek once more with the washcloth, then I lay it on the floor.

Reed shrugs. "Forget it, Pete. I've already forgiven you and have moved on."

"That fast?" I ask, surprised.

He nods. "That fast. Because I know it wasn't *you* talking like that, it was someone else. A stranger. Not Pete Malloy." He leans back on the couch. "So you were going to talk to me...weren't you?"

I keep my eyes on the coffee table in front of me. "I'm trying to figure out where to start and how to start," I tell him, watching the smoke from my cigarette drift past my face.

"Why not start with the truth?" he asks. "That's the easiest place to begin, I would think."

I snort. "Yeah, the truth." I take final drag on the cigarette and then stub it out in the ashtray, blowing the smoke up towards the ceiling once more. Leaning forward, I set the ashtray on the coffee table. "The truth is, I haven't been honest with you...with anyone, for that matter." I rub my forehead. "But most of all, I haven't been honest with myself. And that's what really galls me."

"What, are you going to tell me you're a secret axe murderer or something?" he asks with a small chuckle.

"No, worse," I tell him softly. "The man you see before you is a fake, a sham, a façade," I say, bitterness edging my voice. "Made up of brick and cast-iron walls mortared together with cellophane and chewing gum."

"Seems to me the man I see before me is my friend. And he's in trouble right now, and I'd like to help him if I can," Jim says gently. "So that he can get back to being Pete Malloy again."

"I don't know if that's even possible anymore, Jim," I tell him. "I think that the Pete Malloy that existed just a few days ago is dead and buried. Someone else has taken his place. Someone I hate viciously with a deep, deep loathing."

"Pete, I don't think that the events of the last few days have changed you all that much," Jim says. "I have a feeling you're magnifying the things that have happened, blowing them WAY out of proportion. And if you try and put them behind you, you'll return to the same person you were before any of this took place. I have my faith in that, Pete, I have my faith in YOU."

"Do you?" I ask, my voice still bitter. "Trust me, Jim, you shouldn't. Not at all. And when you hear what I'm going to tell you, you'll change your mind about me, damned fast. You'll hate me as much as I hate myself, Jim."

He studies me with a small frown. "Pete, I don't think I could hate you, not at all. Hatred is a strong emotion earned over time by untold anger and unshed sorrow. You've done nothing at all to make me even slightly dislike you, let alone hate you."

"You were ready to hate me just a bit ago," I remind him.

"No, that wasn't hate, Pete. It was profound disappointment and sorrow over what you are doing to yourself right now. And even if I'd walked out that door, without ever looking back, I still wouldn't hate you. I'd probably not LIKE you, no, but I wouldn't hate you. I couldn't do that to you, Pete. We've had too many good times together for me to just give over to hate that easily. Too much water under the bridge, you know? Too many shared experiences in the past five years we've been friends and partners."

"Maybe," I tell him warily. "When you hear what I have to say, you'll probably be changing your tune and fast. And not that I blame you, either." I bite my lip, as thoughts shimmy and swirl rapidly through my mind.

"I think you're reading false lines into the future, Pete," he says. "Tell me what it is that's bothering you so much right now. Maybe I can help in some way, even if it's just to listen. I promise I won't judge you or condemn you, or spit in your face with whatever you say to me. And I can assure you that I won't hate you, I swear. Confession is good for the soul, you know."

Drawing in a deep, uneven breath, I scrub my face wearily with my hands. "How well do you know me, Jim?" I ask, still not looking at him. I'm not ready to do that just yet.

"Pretty well, I guess," he says with a nonchalant shrug.

I shake my head mutely. "No, how WELL do you know me, Jim?" I ask, desperation creeping into my voice. "How well do you know what's in my heart, my mind...my soul?"

"I know that you're a good man, Pete," he says. "If that's what you're asking me. You're one of the most intelligent and thoughtful men I know, not to mention kind and considerate. You've got a lot of integrity. You're honest and trustworthy, you stand up for what you believe in, for what you believe is right. You've got the courage and bravery of a lion. You're one of the finest cops I know."

"You don't understand," I rasp. "How well do you know what's in my *soul*?"

He hesitates. "Your soul is your own lookout, Pete, not mine," he says gently. "But it doesn't take a genius to see that something is deeply troubling you right now, and I'd like to help you if I can."

I study my hands in front of me. I heave a heavy sigh. "What I'm about to tell you does *not* leave this room, do you understand me?" I ask. "*You tell no one*. Not Mac, not Val, not anyone else at work. And *especially* not Jean, am I clear? NO ONE is to know what I'm going to tell you, got it?"

"Sure, Pete, but I don't understand what this is..." he begins.

"Promise me!" I bark at him.

"I promise," he says solemnly. "Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye. I swear on my mother's grave that I will not tell anyone." He grins a little at me. "That cover all the bases, or do I need to also give you the Scout's honor?"

I give him a mirthless smile. "That's covered it," I tell him. My gaze settles on the whiskey bottle in front of me, and I pick it up. I catch Jim's dismayed expression. "Don't worry, I'm not going to drink any more of it," I say, grabbing the cap up and twisting it back onto the bottle. "Much as I'd like to." I start to pick at the paper label glued onto the clear glass as I begin my story to Jim Reed. "I was only a kid when my dad went to war overseas, in Germany," I tell him. "He was always a very happy-go-lucky sort of fellow, deeply in love with my mother. They used to go dancing every Friday night. He'd take me to the movies on Saturdays when he didn't have to work, and we'd go to church every Sunday, the three of us, the happy little Malloy family together. He taught me about baseball, football, and fishing, and when he wasn't too tired from his job, we'd play catch in the backyard. He was the kind of guy a kid would be proud to call his dad. I loved him very much, and I knew that he loved me. It made us feel safe, secure, my mom and I. I pretty much hero-worshipped him, you know?"

"Yeah, I think every kid hero-worships his dad, Pete," Jim says. "I did mine."

"When he came back from the war, he'd changed. His unit had seen a lot of heavy action over there, sustained a lot of casualties. They were also one of the units that liberated Buchenwald. What he saw over there, what he experienced...well, it did something to him, to his mind. He'd left us a very carefree and gentle soul, and came back a bitter, angry man, lashing out viciously at whatever he could find." I peel a bit of the paper off and drop it into the ashtray. I'm quiet as I study the whiskey in the bottle. "He took to drinking, something he had not done very much of prior to the war. Oh sure, he'd have beer or mixed drinks once in a while, but nothing too hard and never to the point of drunkenness. When he came back, he couldn't get enough of the stuff, hitting the sauce pretty heavy. And when he drank, he got mean. Really mean. He developed a hair-trigger temper and my mom and I soon found out that anything could set him off...a look, a wrong word, an implied tone of voice. We tried to stay the hell out of his way, but it didn't matter. He'd find us, one or the other, and..." I pause, gathering my emotions and keeping them tightly in check. It won't do for me to show any kind of weakness in front of Jim Reed, he might despise me for it. I run a shaking hand through my hair.

"Go on, Pete, I'm listening," Jim says gently.

I take in a deep breath and let it out with a puff of my cheeks. "This is hard to tell you, you know?" I ask. "It's really difficult to admit to MYSELF what my childhood was like, let alone to someone else."

"I'm not going to judge you, Pete, if that's what you're afraid of. I already told you that."

"No, it's not that...well, maybe it is a little bit," I say somewhat hesitantly. "I've just kept it locked away inside of me for so long, I don't know how to let it out in the open." I'm quiet for a while, pondering exactly how I wish to reveal to Jim Reed what used to happen to me as a kid, on a near-daily basis. I don't wish to seem like I'm asking for his pity or his sorrow for me, I merely want him to know what it was like for me. Reflexively, I rub the scar under my chin with my thumb, deciding to just let the words go where they may. "He used to beat the crap out of us, Jim," I tell him dully. "He used to call us horrendous names. He seemed to delight in his meanness, enjoying every slap, every punch, every stinging, bitter word. He hit my mom so hard one night that he knocked her unconscious. He left her lying there on the kitchen floor while he went to soak up more booze at the tavern. I was there when it happened. I was frantic, not knowing what to do. I got some ice out of the freezer and put it to her head until she finally came to. I helped her up to the bedroom. I wanted to call the police, but she

wouldn't let me. She said it was family business, and it had to stay in the family. I was *never* to tell anyone what my father did to us. She made me promise." I cough, clear my throat, gathering my thoughts as the memory of that horrible night washes over me like a tidal wave. I repress a shudder and venture on. "I swore that night I was going to confront him, make him stop hitting my mom and I. He was never going to hit us again, I thought, with all my twelve-year-old heart and bravado. I waited up for him, waiting in the dark until he came staggering home from the tavern, whiskey on his breath, his eyes bleary and bloodshot, looking all the world like something a cat puked up." I laugh bitterly. "I made my stand quite valiantly, confronting him on our enclosed porch so that I wouldn't disturb my mother. He stood there laughing at me, as I rained hell and verbal daggers on him. He thought it was pretty funny, a twelve-year-old snot-nosed kid standing up to the likes of him, Timothy Malloy. Until my words hit home, that is." I close my eyes, the shudder I tried to repress running through me with a shaking violence. "I called him a lousy, worthless, stinking drunk who didn't deserve my mother or I, and I wished that he'd die. I told him that, to his laughing face. I wished that he would die. And truly I did. Something snapped in his emotions then, and he hit me, hard, with the flat of his palm, sending me crashing into the deep freezer we had on the porch. I caught my chin on the sharp edge and sliced it open. He kicked me when I landed on the floor."

I stop, shaking my head, biting my lip, my eyes still closed. My voice drops to a mere whisper and Jim is forced to lean forward in order to hear me. "Then he *spit* on me, Jim. My own father *spit* on me. Called me nothing but a bastard, an evil little sonofabitch. Said he wished I'd never been born in the first place, that I was the reason he drank. If I was any kind of son he could be proud of, that he could consider his pride and joy, a chip off the old block, he wouldn't be forced to drink. But since I wasn't, since I wasn't what he'd thought a son should be, he hit the booze to ease the pain I caused him. Then he left me there, lying out on that porch. My mother had heard the commotion and came down. She saw what had happened and called the doctor to come out and stitch up my chin. It took ten stitches to close it. My mom explained to the doctor that I'd been playing out on the porch and had lost my balance, falling into the deep freeze by accident. The doctor bought it, and after he left, my mom asked me why I didn't cry while he was stitching me up. I told her I couldn't. While I was lying in a bloodied heap out on that porch, I'd made myself a solemn vow: my dad was never EVER going to make me cry again, no matter what he did to me. He could hit me, he could kick me, he could whip me with his belt. He could call me the vilest names he could think of, he could spit on me, but I was *not* going to ever let him make me cry again. And I kept my word. He didn't." I tilt my head back, pointing to my chin. "I still have the scar he left me."

Reed is staring at me in wide-eyed shock. "Jesus, Pete, why didn't your mother leave him and take you with her?" he asks softly.

"She was always faithful to her wedding vows, no matter how much he hurt her. She was a staunch Catholic, so she was afraid of eternal damnation if she filed for divorce." I snort, shaking my head with derision. "It's funny, you know. She kept praying and praying to all the damned saints that he'd change, that he'd quit drinking and return to the man he once was. She never gave up that hope. And a fat lot of good the power of prayer did her. He never changed." I look at Jim then, meeting him in the eye. I look for pity there, and see none, which makes me grateful. "And me? Well, I used to go and pray to all the damned saints that he'd die. That some horrific accident would take his life and then we'd be free from him, from his brutal abuse. And not a single one of my prayers was ever answered, either. The

bastard is still alive, still married to my mom. How awful is that? That a kid would wish and pray for his own father's death."

"I don't think that it's awful, Pete," Jim says. "I can understand it. I'm sure God does, too."

I frown. "Does He, Jim? The Ten Commandments exhort us to honor thy mother and father. What kind of filial piety is that, praying that your old man would croak?"

"I don't think God is going to hold that against you, Pete, if that's what you're worried about," he says. "Didn't your mom try to turn to someone in the church for help? Someone besides the saints?"

"If she did, I never knew about it. Besides, I'm sure that even if she DID tell the good Father Louviere what was going on in our family, he'd have told her it was our fault that we angered my father, and that we must take whatever punishment he'd mete out. It was the husband's prerogative, you know, to discipline his wife and child as he saw fit." I hesitate. "You know, my dad never went to church all that much after he returned home from the war. Said it was stupid to worship and believe in a higher being, one that stood by and let the Holocaust happen. The only time he *would* go was on Christmas Eve, to the midnight mass. He'd manage to stay sober long enough to make it through that night, just to make a good impression on everyone. He was always all about making good impressions, you know." I cock my head. "No one ever knew that hiding behind that hail-fellow-well-met exterior was a mean and abusive alcoholic. It's funny just how *much* can hide behind a bright fake smile and a hearty handshake. Around his friends, my dad was the life of the party. Of course, it helps if you're the one buying the rounds on the house, too. Free booze can do wonders for your popularity." I roll the smooth glass whiskey bottle between my palms, the liquid inside sloshing gently about.

"Didn't your mom have a job? Did she ever try to turn to anyone there?" Jim asks. "Ask them for help in getting out?"

I nod. "Yeah, she was a teacher, but it didn't pay much. We certainly wouldn't have gotten by on her salary, that's for sure. Plus, I think she was afraid of trying to make it on her own without him. I don't think she wanted to really be alone, the thought of it frightened her. A man by your side is a solace of comfort, even if he is a sonofabitch."

"Didn't anyone notice the marks on you or her?"

"Sure they did. But in those days, no one asked, no one got involved in another family's business. What went on behind closed doors stayed behind closed doors. It was shameful to let crap like that out in the open."

"Didn't anyone in your family step in, like aunts or uncles, or your grandparents?" he asks.

"Everyone had their own problems, Reed. They weren't about to take on someone else's," I tell him. "No one wanted to intervene. It was taken as a paternal privilege to beat your wife and child."

Is that why you stole his car when you were a teenager?" he asks. "To get back at him?"

"No," I say, with a shake of my head. "That was just sheer stupidity on my part. I wanted to impress the wrong crowd. And believe me, I paid dearly for it. Even though by that time, I had gotten too big for him to smack around, he still did it, or at least tried to," I tell him. "But I managed to get the upper hand." I'm silent as I remember my dad chasing me around the kitchen, raining hard blows of his fists upon me as I tried to escape him, cursing me soundly while my mother begged and pleaded with him to let me go, I'd learned my lesson. Then he'd turned on her with such a viciousness, that something inside of me just snapped and I reacted in the only way I knew how.

"Pete," Jim says softly. "You look like you're a million miles away right now. What happened? How'd you manage to get the upper hand over your father?"

I sigh, leaning my head back, rubbing my forehead wearily. "He'd went after me that night, waiting until we got back home from the police station, his rage building inside of him the whole time. He started in on me, ranting and raving about how shameful it was that a son of Tim Malloy's had gotten stopped by the cops, driving HIS car, without HIS permission, and HE had to go to the police station and retrieve not only ME, but get his stupid car towed out also, from the irrigation ditch I'd rolled it into. I was an embarrassment, a disgrace, a shame to the name Malloy. I yelled back at him that it wasn't ME that was the disgrace to the family name, it was HIM. That only served to fuel his anger and he went nearly berserk, chasing me around our kitchen, hitting me whenever I unfortunately managed to get within striking range of his fists. I did a pretty good job of dodging him for a few minutes, at least, until I tripped and fell up against the refrigerator. He cornered me then, punching me in the head, in the face, splitting my lip and bloodying my nose. He hit me hard enough to crack three ribs and bruise my stomach. I wouldn't cry, I wouldn't beg for his mercy, and that only infuriated him more. He wanted me to weep, plead for him to stop, to fall on my knees and ask for his forgiveness. I couldn't do that, Jim. I just couldn't. The years of abuse had strengthened my resolve, and I wasn't about to let the lousy sonofabitch see me humbled before him. I'd be damned if I would give him that satisfaction." I fall silent for a moment, remembering that night oh so well. Reed sits in non-judgmental silence, studying me carefully.

I rub at my eyes with my palms, drawing in a deep breath. "You know, even after all these years it doesn't dim. The memory never fades. Even now, talking about it brings it right back to me, just like it was yesterday." I heave a sigh. "Anyway, I think he aimed to kill me that night, I honestly do. Even after I'd slid down to the floor, trying to protect myself as best I could from his harsh blows, he never relented. He took to kicking me then, along with hitting me. Kicking me in the legs, in my sides, until I finally curled up into a fetal ball. Finally, my mother grabbed ahold of him, somehow pulling him off of me, begging him to stop hitting me before he killed me. He turned on her then, striking her with vicious slaps and punches, giving her a bloody lip just like he'd given me, blackening her eye for her. And she wept as he hit her, deep choking sobs that sounded like her very soul was trying to escape from the torment she was going through. It only made him madder, hearing her cry like that. He kept screaming at her to just shut the hell up. He put his hands around her throat then, nearly lifting her off her feet as he tried to squeeze the very life from her."

"Jesus Christ," Reed whispers, his eyes wide with horror. "How awful, Pete!"

I take in another deep breath, holding up my hand. "That's not the worst of it, Jim. It's not the worst of it by far." I set the whiskey bottle back on the table, then I stare at my left palm, rubbing a thumb across the creases and lines etched into my skin by time. "I'd gotten to my feet, somehow, just before he started trying to strangle my mother, undeniable joy and rage in his eyes. When I saw with horror what was happening, I knew I had to act. I did the only thing I knew how to do." I fall silent once more, biting my lip until I taste the copper of my own blood.

"Take your time, Pete," Reed says softly. "Take all the time you need."

I shake my head. "It's not time I need, Jim, it's figuring out how to tell you what I did next." I close my eyes, leaning my head back once more. "I know you have said that you're not going to judge me by what I tell you, but I've judged myself, all these years, for what I did that night. And that's the worst thing, my own self-condemnation. I did the unthinkable, the inexcusable, and I'm afraid you're going to despise me when I tell you about it."

"I'm not going to judge you, Pete, and I'm not going to despise you, I promise," Jim tells me gently.

My eyes still closed, I begin again, my voice halting and hushed. "I knew he was going to kill my mom, from the minute he wrapped those huge hands of his around her fragile neck and started to squeeze. I couldn't stand by and let that happen to her, not my mother. It was...it was like a final injustice, you know?" I ask, not waiting for an answer. "He'd started off pissed at me, and here he was taking the rest of his anger out on her, when she'd only tried to save me from him. It didn't seem right. So I fled the kitchen, running as fast as I could to my parents' bedroom, where my dad kept the gun he'd brought home from the war in the nightstand beside his bed. He always kept it loaded, for personal protection, he'd always tell us. I knew how to use it, he'd at least seen fit to teach me that, how to use a gun. I raced back down to the kitchen, where he still had my mother in his vise-like grip, her eyes nearly popping out of her head, her hands clawing desperately at his wrists as he slowly throttled her." I fall quiet once more, the image of my poor mother dangling from his grasp still burned like acid into my mind. "Something inside of me just snapped then, Jim, it just gave way," I tell him softly. I open my eyes and study my trembling hands. My voice shakes as I continue. "I...I...I took my father's gun and pointed it at his head. I told him that if he didn't let go of my mom right that instant, I'd kill him, I'd drop him where he stood. He let go of my mom then, and he sneered at me, told me I didn't have the goddamned guts to kill him. I cocked the hammer, told him to just try me, just try me. There was something that he must have seen in my eyes at that moment, and he realized I was dead serious, so he backed down. With the gun still in my hands, still pointed at him, I told him that if he EVER laid another hand on my mom or I, that I'd kill him without any hesitation at all. We were through being his punching bags, and this night was the last night he'd ever raise a hand to either one of us, so help me God."

I hesitate, rubbing the scar under my chin again, I continue. "I saw fear in his eyes then, Jim. Pure fear. He knew that I meant what I said, and I would keep my word. I'd murder him if he hit either one of us again. And instead of feeling powerful over my father, that I had finally made him truly afraid of me, I felt...I felt nothing. Just a huge black abyss where my emotions should be. I should have felt *something*, I know, but I didn't. I was as cold and calculating with that gun in my hand as if I were a hired killer facing down his quarry instead of a sixteen-year-old kid facing down his dad. Not even my hands shook. I stared him down without even *blinking* over that barrel of his OWN gun. I didn't flinch or waver, I held

my ground. He finally left the kitchen, shambling off to bed, probably thinking that we'd all forget it in the morning. But we didn't. My mom didn't, I didn't, and he sure as hell didn't. I took that gun, hiding it in my bedroom in a place where I knew he wouldn't look. He knew I had it, he never demanded it back from me. And from that night onward, he never lifted a hand to either of us. He'd continue his verbal abuse of us, but the physical abuse stopped that night." I look at Jim then, my eyes meeting his. I see his anger and horror at what I went through reflected back to me. I look away. "I was *sixteen*, Jim... just a kid! I had no right to do that to my dad, no right at all! I shouldn't have threatened him like that!"

"But look at what he nearly did to your mom," Reed points out. "Pete, if you hadn't of done what you did that night, he would have strangled her to death, and then likely killed you. Did you think of that? That yes, you threatened to kill him, but you were well within your rights to do so. You were only protecting your mom, trying to save her the only way you knew how."

I shake my head. "It wasn't right, Jim, I shouldn't have done it. No matter what he did to us, no matter how bad he smacked us around, I had no right to pull his own gun on him and threaten to kill him. And that has weighed heavily on me all these years since, that I nearly killed my own father."

Jim is quiet for a moment, then he speaks. "I see it this way, Pete. You didn't have a choice, you acted purely on self-survival instincts. Anyone else put into that SAME position would have done the same thing, I'm sure of it. And some of them might have gone ahead and pulled the trigger on the bastard, finished him off. It sounds like he certainly deserved it." He leans forward, his hands clasped in front of him. "Pete, you need to let that burden go now. Quit letting it weigh on you. If it's forgiveness that you need, well, I'd say that you should have forgiven yourself a long time before now. Nothing of what happened to you back then was your fault at all. You weren't to blame for your father's anger, his war scars were. And he's full of shit if he thinks you're unworthy of the Malloy name. I'd be mighty damned proud to have someone like you in my blood family. Hell, I'm proud enough as it is, that you're Jimmy's godfather."

"You shouldn't be," I tell him dully. "You should despise me."

"Pete, let it go, quit despising yourself," Jim says gently. "It's not your fault what happened, and you only did what you could to finally stop it. For your own sake, you need to quit damning yourself, condemning yourself for what you did. It's not right. I'm not going to despise you for something like that."

"Maybe," I say.

"No maybes, Pete. You shouldn't even FEEL like you need to forgive yourself for that, there's absolutely nothing to forgive yourself for. And God knows that," he tells me.

I grimace. "I wouldn't be so sure about that, Jim."

"I am," he says. "I'm sure of it. God wouldn't consider that a transgression, a violation of the Ten Commandments. In fact, I'd nearly wager you a small bet that God had a hand in you doing what you did. He made you save your mother and yourself."

"It's a matter of opinion," I tell him, my tone noncommittal. "I doubt that God would look kindly on, or even endorse any form of patricide."

"But you *didn't* kill him, Pete, and that's what matters in the end. So please, stop thinking that way about yourself. You're not a horrible, evil person for what you did. You're not that at all. You did what you had to do, and that's it. It's your father that should be worried about God instead of you. He's the one who's been so damned nasty to you and your mom all those years ago. He's the one who'll have to face up to what he's done when it's Judgment Day."

"Yeah, all those years ago," I murmur. "So far in the past, it should be forgotten. But it isn't. It ties me to the present right now. Essentially, what Stuart Walters did to his family, my father did to mine."

"Not quite, Pete," Jim says. "Walters massacred everyone in his family. Your dad didn't do that. You didn't give him that chance. You stopped him that night." He is quiet for a moment. "Does he still hit your mom, now that you're no longer there?"

I shrug. "I don't know. She's never said anything to me that makes me think he's still doing it, and the few times that I have been back, he's never made any move at her like he's going to strike her. He still gets verbal with her, I am aware of that. And I've offered to get her out of there countless times, paying for her to get a divorce from him and move down here closer to me. But she always refuses. Says it's her duty to stay with him, until one of them dies. She's sworn to honor her wedding vows, made in her church."

He shakes his head sadly. "How utterly *horrible* it must have been for you, Pete, to have gone through all that. Now I know why you empathize so much with abused women and children. You were an abused child yourself."

"It's not horrible when you have hate as your shield," I say bitterly. "I hated him, truly *hated* him, with every fiber of my being. I counted the days until I turned eighteen and could leave the house for good. I graduated from high school one weekend and moved out on my own the next. I didn't want to leave my mother alone with him, for fear that he'd start hitting her again, but if she wasn't willing to save herself, there was little I could do for her. I could only rescue myself. To this day, I hate visits home, and that's why I don't go very often. It's the past that's hard to forgive in the present, you know? I can't forget what he did to us, not ever. I can't stand to be in the same damned city as him, let alone the same room. He loathes me just as much as I loathe him." I pause, clearing my throat. "Those words I spoke to you earlier, when I had you pinned against the wall...those weren't my words, they were my father's, do you understand me?"

"I knew it wasn't you talking like that to me, Pete. I knew it all along," Reed says. "So yes, I understand."

"That's twice now in my life that I've nearly become my old man," I tell him.

Reed studies me. "What do you mean by that?"

I frown at him. "Are you sure you want to hear this, Jim? I'm sure Jean is expecting you home by now. If you want to leave, I'll understand. I think the worst has passed for me for now."

"Nope, I'm not leaving, Pete, until I'M sure that the worst has passed for you," he tells me. "Jean knows I'm here, and she knows I'll stay here until I am ready to leave you on your own. So don't worry about that." He gives me an encouraging nod. "Go ahead with your story, Pete, I'm listening."

I study my hands, flexing my fingers. "I'd met a lovely girl while I was in high school and we dated steadily during our senior year. She was a pretty little thing, with dark, wild curls of hair, deep blue eyes, and a smile that just lit up the room. She was really special to me and I knew she was the one for me after we'd dated for only about three months. Her name was Evelyn. I called her Evie, my Evie." I smile a bit, despite myself and the memory of what happened to us in the end.

"Did Evie know about your dad abusing you and your mom?" Jim asks.

I nod. "She had an idea, at least. She never came right out and asked me, of course, and I never told her, since by the time we started dating, I'd forced him to quit beating us. I never brought her around much while he was home. I'd bring her over to my house mostly when it was just my mom there. The few times he was around her, he came off as a gentleman, but that was his ego trying to make a good impression on her. I think she knew something was wrong between my dad and I, especially after he'd made a comment to her one time, telling her that she could do better than dating some sorry excuse of a man like me. She asked me what he meant by that, and I told her just to ignore it, it was his way of making a bad joke. Anyway, after we'd graduated from high school, I'd scrimped and saved money from my job at the Boeing plant and managed to buy her an engagement ring. I asked her to marry me and she said yes, making me the happiest guy on earth that day."

"Didn't you tell me once that your dad worked at the Boeing factory, too?" Reed asks.

"Yeah. He and I worked separate shifts, I always made sure of that. Our paths very rarely crossed." Leaning over the arm of the recliner, I flick on the lamp on my end table. It casts a warm glow into the living room. Settling back into the chair, I bite my lip, rubbing the ring finger of my left hand absently between the thumb and forefinger of my right, trying to decide how to drop my next bombshell on Jim Reed. "I was married, Jim. Married and divorced," I finally blurt out. Inwardly I cringe at the awkwardness of my sudden pronouncement, and I feel a faint blush of embarrassment creeping across my face.

"What happened?" he asks. "If you don't want to tell me, I can understand," he adds quickly. "If it's too hard."

I shake my head. "I've told you this much so far, so I might as well finish," I say. "I don't know what happened to Evie and I. I really and truly don't know. I thought she loved me, and maybe she did at first, but it wasn't enough, at least not for her. She evidently needed more than I could give her, and that included all of my love for her." I rub my hands together. "We'd had our quarrels, like all young married couples do. She wanted to start having kids right away, I wanted to wait until we had some money saved ahead, at least enough to buy a house. She also wanted me to make peace with my dad, in the name of family harmony. She didn't want her children growing up with tension between their father and paternal grandfather. She couldn't understand why I didn't WANT to make peace with him, that I was more than comfortable with the relationship of cold indifference my dad and I had."

"Did you ever try to explain to her what had happened to you with your dad?" he asks.

"Yeah, as best I could, without making the old man seem like a complete ogre. I left out a lot of the physical abuse, and quite a bit of the verbal abuse, too. I didn't want her to think that it was my fault somehow, that I'd failed to live up to my father's expectations."

"But it *wasn't* your fault, Pete, and I'm sure that she would have understood that," Reed says. He catches the rather dour look I toss him. "Maybe?" he adds.

"No, I don't think so, Jim. Evie was raised in a loving household, where her parents rarely argued or even raised their voices to one another. She pretty much led a sheltered childhood." I'm quiet for a moment as I think. "Evie wanted kids right away, like I said, and I wanted to wait until we could afford a house of our own. So she went behind my back and asked her parents for the money so we could put a down payment on a house. I got pretty upset with her over it, that was actually one of our biggest fights. I wanted kids, sure, but I wanted to make certain that they'd have the things in life I didn't have, a good home with two parents who loved them very much. I refused to accept the money from my in-laws. What kind of man would I have been, going around to his father-in-law begging for money? I wanted to work for what I had, earning every penny the hard way, by the sweat of my own brow. Evie wanted me to swallow my pride and take the money, but I wouldn't. A man has to have something to cling to, some measure of dignity and self-respect, after all. I think that was the beginning of the death knell of our marriage," I tell him. "After that, Evie became distant, standoffish. She'd quit her job at the local Woolworth's store and was spending a lot of time hanging around her friends...her SINGLE friends." I fall silent once more, then I speak. "I guess I should have questioned it, her sudden moodiness and distant attitude, but I chalked it up to marriage blues. We weren't even married a year yet, and I assumed she might have been missing the single life. I thought maybe a baby would cheer her up, so we began trying, despite the fact that we still didn't have a house of our own. I figured that would come later, after the baby was born. All that mattered to me was that my Evie was happy. And, for a little while at least, she was. Or so it seemed." I give Jim a small grim smile. "And you know, I honestly thought that it would work out for us, I truly did. And what a fool I was, such a *damned* fool. The hopes and dreams of the young are often gauzy fantasies made out of spun sugar. Then the rain of reality sets in and melts them all to hell."

"Why? What happened, Pete?" Jim asks quietly.

I laugh bitterly. "The husband is always the last to know," I say acidly. I pick up the gold lighter, sliding it around in my fingers. "It was our first Christmas together as a married couple," I tell him softly. "At Boeing, their policy was that if you came in and worked the first four hours of your shift on Christmas Eve, you could clock out and go home early. I'd already planned to do that, without telling Evie, because I wanted to go home and surprise her. I'd tried to make our first Christmas a special one, buying her presents I really couldn't afford, just to see her smile when she opened them. She had such a pretty smile, and smiling was something she hadn't been doing a lot of recently." I flick the lid of the lighter open, lighting the little flame with a rub of my thumb across the flywheel. I click the lid shut, extinguishing the bright tongue of flame. "I got a call at the factory from a local jewelry shop, saying that the package for Malloy was ready for pick-up. I was confused, since I hadn't ordered anything from the jewelry shop for Christmas. Then it dawned on me that they must have tried to get ahold of Evie and had failed, so they tried my work number. Evie had told me she was going to do some last-minute shopping and that's why they couldn't reach her. I figured that was the case, anyhow, and that the gift was meant for me. I asked my boss if I could clock out early and go pick up a package. Since we weren't

busy, he let me, and I drove to the jewelry store, picking up the neatly boxed and wrapped little gift. I told the jewelry store clerk that if my wife came in to pick it up later on, to tell her that I'd already gotten it and was waiting for her at home. I wanted to surprise her, you know?"

Reed nods. "I do."

I sigh heavily. "When I got to our little rental house, Evie's car was still in the driveway. I got a little worried, then, that maybe something was wrong, that she had maybe fallen ill or gotten hurt somehow and wasn't able to call for help. She hadn't been feeling all that well over the last couple of months or so, with stomach troubles and fatigue, and I was afraid maybe she'd gotten worse. I ran into that house, frightened of what I might find. I think in the short time it took me to go from the car to the house, I had painted out every worst imaginable nightmare that could've have befallen her. Was she lying injured from a fall? Was she horribly sick and too weak to call out for help? Had someone broken into the house and killed her? I was nearly frantic, you know?"

Jim grins a little. "Yeah, I do, Pete. Jean's scared the crap out of me a few times like that, too. And I run through every nightmare scenario myself until I get ahold of her, and then it turns out to be something silly or mundane, like she was over at a neighbor's house, or she forgot something at the grocery store and went back to pick it up."

"Yeah, only this nightmare proved not to be something like that," I tell him. "It was worse, much worse." I hesitate, rubbing my chin. "I heard noises coming from the bedroom, OUR bedroom. I opened the door, expecting to find her sick and in bed." My mouth quirks up in a bitter smile. "She was in bed alright. She was in bed with my best friend, Joey Donnelly. He'd been my best man at our wedding. I caught them *in flagrante delicto*. Of course, my sudden and unexpected appearance put a stop to them right there. They were embarrassed at getting caught in the act of screwing around, while I immediately saw red. Something inside of me just snapped at what I'd just seen and I jerked Joey Donnelly out of the bed and proceeded to pound the shit right out of him. He ended up fleeing the house with a badly broken nose, a busted lip, some missing teeth, and nothing on but his socks."

Jim snorts a bit with laughter. "Seriously, Pete? You made him leave the house with nothing on but his SOCKS?"

I grin a little, a rather rueful smile. "Yeah. Oh, he had his clothes wadded up in his hands, so it wasn't like I sent him out into the icy Seattle afternoon without them...but yeah, I chased him out of my home with just his socks on his feet. Tore out of there like a turpented cat."

"Heartless bastard," Jim chuckles. "You could've at least let him put on his tighy-whiteys, you know."

"He's lucky I let him get out of there with his life, Jim," I tell him solemnly. "I think that if Evie hadn't of pulled me off of him, I'd have killed him for sure. At least that was my intent." I'm quiet for a second. "After he'd left the house in bloodied disgrace, I turned my rage on Evie. I stormed around, throwing my stuff into suitcases, while she followed me, begging and pleading for me to stay, not leave her. She swore uphill and down that it would never happen again, that it was a mistake, and why couldn't I just forgive her for it?" I shake my head. "I'm not the forgiving sort, Jim. The harsh lessons of my childhood taught me that. I packed up what I needed and started to leave. She stopped me then, one final time, right in front of our fireplace, the same one that we'd shared so many cozy nights together. She was

hysterical, in tears, and she kept tugging on my arm. I couldn't stand to look at her, the sight of her made me physically sick to my stomach. My gaze landed on our wedding picture that sat on the mantelpiece. I picked it up for just a second, and she took that opportunity to beg and plead even harder. I looked down at her, and at that moment, I hated her, just absolutely hated her. Without even thinking, I drew my fist back to strike her, to hurt her, like she'd just hurt me. One good hard punch, I thought to myself. One good hard smack to make her realize what horrible transgression she'd committed against me. Just then, I caught sight of myself in the mirror over the fireplace, my eyes meeting my own. And in that instant, I saw not myself, but my father, the very man I loathed and despised. I had sworn to myself that I would never become him, but yet here I was, ready to strike my wife, just like he used to hit my mom for her supposed transgressions."

I fall quiet, leaning my head back and closing my eyes. My voice drops to a whisper once more. "At that moment, I *hated* myself for what I almost became. I dropped my fist and heaved the picture instead, at the mirror, shattering it into a million little pieces. I left the house then, going to a motel and checking in for the night. I stayed there until the day after Christmas, then I flew to Reno to get a divorce. I never went back to that house. My mom was the one who went over and packed up the rest of my belongings. Evie wasn't there when she did it, either. She'd already fled into Joey Donnelly's arms. I'd forgotten about the little package from the jewelry store. It was still in my coat pocket that night I'd left. I found it on Christmas Day and opened it. It was this." I hold the lighter up, the smooth gold metal flashing in the light cast by the lamp. "If I hadn't of gotten the message from the jewelry store, I never would've left work early that day and stopped by the store and picked it up. And then I wouldn't have gone home and found my wife in bed screwing my best friend. For that little twist of fate, I'm eternally grateful. I'd be locked into a loveless marriage, playing the cuckold to my wife, a role that I would thoroughly despise." I lay the lighter back onto the table. "It's my good luck charm, you know? My talisman against evil, I guess you could say."

"Didn't she contest the divorce?" Jim asks.

I snort. "Why the hell should she? She was already pregnant with Joey Donnelly's kid when I discovered them. After the six weeks in Reno was up and our divorce was finalized, she married him in a quickie ceremony. I went into the Army. When I got out, I came to L.A. and never looked back. A neighbor of mine encouraged me to go apply for the police force and I did. End of story."

"Are you sure it was HIS kid she was carrying?" Jim asks. "It could've been yours, you know. You just said that you two were trying for a baby."

I shake my head. "No, I'm pretty sure it was Joey Donnelly's kid," I tell him.

"What'd she have, a boy or a girl?" he asks.

I study my hands silently, ignoring his question. It's something that I've asked myself numerous times before, but it's also something that I don't exactly wish to find the answer to.

"Pete, what did she have, a boy or a..." he begins again.

"What difference does it make?" I ask him tiredly. "It's not like I can go to my ex-wife after all these years and ask her if the son that she had was mine or Joey Donnelly's."

"So she had a little boy?" he asks.

"Reed, drop it," I tell him warningly. "It's not important anyway. The kid was raised with Donnelly's name, not mine."

"If he *was* your son, though, wouldn't you want him to know his real father, Pete?"

I stare at him. "No, Jim, I wouldn't. I'm not about to go busting into some poor kid's world and shatter it, claiming that I'm his real father, instead of the one he's known for all the years of his life. That wouldn't be right of me to do that to an innocent child. It's best to let sleeping dogs lie in this case, trust me."

"I would want to know," he says quietly. "If I had any doubt in my mind whether Evie's son was mine or Donnelly's, I'd be finding out, damned fast. They can run a blood test, you know, to determine who the real father is."

I angrily slam my fist into the arm of the recliner, making Reed jump a bit. "Damn it, can't you just let it drop?" I ask, my voice as sharp as a razor. "For once, respect my decision, Jim. I'm not about to wreck the life of some kid, just because he may or may not be my son." I narrow my eyes at him. "What if I am, Jim? What if I am his dad? What kind of cruel trick is that to play on him, if I suddenly appear in his life after all these years and lay claim to him like he's some...some piece of land or something? I won't do that to him. I refuse to." I drop my gaze away, the corner of my mouth smirking up into a bitter grin. "And what kind of father would I be?" I ask. "Not a very good one, I'm afraid."

"Why not?" he asks. "You're good with Jimmy."

"But I'm not with him all the time," I say. "I wouldn't make a good dad, Jim. I know I wouldn't."

He peers at me rather intently. "Are you afraid that you'd be like your own dad?" he asks softly. "Is that it?"

His words hit home, giving voice to my inner thoughts. "Yeah," I say quietly, after a moment. "I wouldn't want to find out, anyway, if I *am* like my dad. That's not a chance I'm willing to take. I couldn't bear it, inflicting a hellish childhood like mine on a kid of my own."

"I don't think you're like your dad, Pete," Jim says softly. "Not at all. You're too kind and gentle. You don't have a mean bone in your body."

I look at him. "Are you *kidding* me?" I ask with surprise. "The night I found Evie and Joey together, I almost hit her in my blind rage, just like my dad always did my mom and I. And I went after you just a bit ago out of pure anger. I was channeling my dad, right down to the exact phrases he used to scream at me." I point to the whiskey bottle. "Plus, I've started drinking. If that's not being just like my old man, I don't know what is." I clasp my hands together. "Like I told you just a bit ago, that's TWICE now in my lifetime that I've almost become my father. And you know what they say, the third time's the charm. I'd rather not have a third time, if you know what I mean."

"Pete, you're going through a rough patch right now. It's caused you to go temporarily insane for a bit. You've hit the bottle, yes, but you know that it can pose a problem for you if you continue." He studies me. "You certainly don't intend to keep drinking, do you?"

"No."

He shrugs. "Then I don't think that's being your old man. You're a far better man than he could ever hope to be, Pete. Trust me."

"How do you know that, though?" I ask. "How can you be so certain of that?"

He sighs a little with exasperation. "Pete, I just KNOW, okay? I've known you for five years now, and I think I have a pretty good idea of your personality."

"You didn't know any of this about me, though," I point out.

"Only because you didn't tell me before now," he says. "And it's taken something as horrible as this Walters case to bring it out. Maybe if you'd told me before now, I could have done something to help you."

I frown at him. "I don't believe in hauling out the chained ghosts of my past for public viewing, Jim, and I've hated telling you what I HAVE told you about my life back then." My voice is a little bit sharp again. "They should remain where they belong. They're not of the present. They're not of the Pete Malloy now."

"But it's not like it's something you can exactly push away, and say 'out of sight, out of mind.' It's not that simple, Pete. What you went through THEN has made you what you are today," Jim says.

"Why pick at the scars of my past?" I ask. "What I went through wounded me so deeply that for the longest time, I was afraid my soul would never see the light. Now that I've got a new life here in L.A., why revisit my own Dante's Inferno? Wasn't going through it once bad enough?"

"Yes, and I'm all for you leaving the ghosts where they belong, Pete," Jim says. "But that's the thing; they haven't remained where they belong. This Walters incident has set them loose on you once more. And if you don't face it now, and put them to rest, once and for all, you'll never be able to get past this, do you understand?"

I rub my face wearily. "Since when did you become a psychologist?" I ask dryly.

He grins a little. "Since I put the badge on for the very first time," he says.

I shoot him a small glare. "I suppose now, after hearing what I've told you, you're going to feel sorry for me. And that's one emotion I cannot stand. Pity. Not from you, not from anyone else."

"I honestly don't feel all that sorry for you, Pete," he says. "Sure, I hate like hell that you had such a crappy early life, that all that bad shit happened to you. But I wouldn't exactly call it pity."

"Oh?"

"Actually, I kind of admire you. You came out of a horrible beginning and you've done just fine for yourself. I'd say that's a pretty noble and brave thing to do."

I point at him with my index finger. "Don't go casting aspersions about me, Jim," I warn. "I'm far from noble and brave. You said it yourself: you came here looking for a hero and all you found was a joke."

"You're not reading me, Pete. Look at you. You came out of the ashes of a horrific childhood and a ruined marriage, and you've remade yourself into what you are today. A good, decent human being."

"And that's a big deal, how?" I ask. "Lotsa people have it a helluva lot worse, Reed, and they manage to make it out somehow. They deserve the credit for pulling themselves up out of the ashes more than I do, that's for damned sure."

"Pete, you rescued yourself," he explains patiently. "You didn't let it bog you down, pull you down into the muck. You plowed ahead, with grit and determination, without looking back. You were the pioneer of your future, not the pilgrim of your past. I'd say that's a mighty damned fine accomplishment."

"What am I, Laura Ingalls Wilder?" I ask, slightly amused.

He smiles a bit. "Nah, I can't picture you in a prairie skirt, Pete." He stands up. "I believe I spotted a frozen pizza in your freezer when I was in the kitchen earlier," he says, stretching. "I'm getting a little bit hungry, so would you care if I put it in the oven?"

"Jim, just go home, okay?" I tell him. "I'm fine, I promise. Go home to Jean and have her feed you supper, alright? Frozen pizza ain't the best, you know."

He shakes his head. "I'd have frozen pizza at home anyway," he tells me. "Jean was going to take Jimmy over to her sister's this evening so they could work on his Halloween costume." He shrugs. "Besides, she fed me before she left. I'm just hungry again, that's all."

I mock-glare at him. "So you come over here to mooch food off of me?" I ask, pretending to be irritated. "I swear, you have a tapeworm."

He goes into the kitchen, turning on the light. "I'll share it with you," he says, over his shoulder.

"The pizza or the tapeworm?" I ask wryly.

He sticks his head around the corner. "What did you say? I didn't hear you over the demands of my tapeworm."

"Never mind," I tell him, my humor fading a bit. "What's Jimmy going as for Halloween?" I call.

"A puppy," he calls back. I can hear him rooting around in the cupboards. He returns to the doorway. "Where's your pizza tin at, Pete?" he asks. "I forgot."

"Bottom cupboard, lower left-hand side." I hear a loud crash and I wince. "Do I want to know what that was?" I ask warily.

"Sorry!" he calls. "I kinda dropped the pizza on the floor!"

I get up out of the recliner. "Oh, for the love of God," I mutter as I stalk into the kitchen. Sometimes Jim Reed can be a one-man walking disaster, and I'd rather not have him inflicting any of his accidents upon any of my stuff.

He is cutting the plastic wrap off of the pizza with my kitchen shears. He looks up as I enter. "It's under control, I promise," he tells me, a bit sheepishly. "It just slipped out of my hands when I took it out of the freezer. Good thing it had plastic wrap on it, huh?" he asks, sliding the pizza out of the wrap and onto the metal pie pan. "Of course, even if it HAD fallen on the floor, without the wrap, it'd still be edible, according to the five-second rule. And as neat and tidy as you are, Pete, I doubt there'd be any germs on the floor anyway. And cooking it in the oven would have killed off any germs that did get on it."

"Your logic, as supremely and confusingly twisted as it may be, cannot be argued with," I remark, watching as Reed scans the cooking instructions on the wrap. "What's the matter?" I ask, leaning against the doorway. "Can't you remember how to cook a pizza?"

He glances at me. "I don't do this very often," he says by way of explanation. "Jean usually does it."

I rub my face with a sigh. "Oh brother. It's a wonder you can even function on your own, Reed."

"I manage," he tells me. "That's why God created cooking instructions." He slides the pan into the oven, setting the temperature to 375°.

"You probably should have started the oven warming first," I tell him. "Otherwise, it'll take longer to cook."

He frowns, then sets it to 400°. "Will that make it cook faster?" he asks.

"Only if you want it to burn on the bottom," I tell him, reaching over and turning the oven temperature back down. "I don't know about you, but I don't like my pizza to have to be extinguished by the fire department before I eat it."

"Who said I was going to share it with you?" he asks, giving me a grin.

"It's my pizza, so I'll eat it if I want to," I tell him. "Go home and eat your own damned pizza, if you're not gonna share."

"I can't," he says ruefully. "On account of I'm kinda banned from the kitchen right now."

I shake my head. "What culinary disaster did you wreak upon poor Jean now?" I ask.

He slides past me and returns to the living room, as I follow behind. "I tried to make oatmeal," he says, sitting back down on the couch. "Instead, I made cement. It took Jean FOREVER to get that crud out of her pan."

I plop down in the recliner. My stomach gives a small growl and I realize that I'm a little bit hungry myself, so I reach for a cracker. "That's grounds for divorce," I tell him, taking a bite of the cracker. "Abuse of kitchen utensils."

He grabs a cracker up too, and pops it in his mouth. "You should know, Pete," he says, grinning. "Having been divorced yourself."

My mood immediately darkens with that comment and I glare at him. "If I'd known that you were gonna throw that up to me, I'd have never told you," I snap.

His eyes widen in horror as he realizes what he's done. "Oh my God, Pete, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way, honestly."

I grimace. "Forget it," I say, with a wave of my hand. The two of us are quiet for awhile, the muted ticking of the wall clock the only sound. I stare unseeingly at the bottle of whiskey on the table, Reed's eyes cautiously watchful upon me. "What am I gonna do?" I ask softly, more to myself than anything, my thoughts turning inward once more. "I feel like I'm going crazy here. It's like...it's like I've hit a brick wall, you know? And I don't know how to knock it down order to save myself."

"Pete, listen to me. You're under a LOT of stress right now, way more than you have been under for a long time. Your nerves are shot and frayed, and that's only understandable, given what we've went through the last couple of days. That's enough to make ANYONE feel like they're going crazy, including me." He rubs his chin. "What happened in that house was the stuff true nightmares are made of," he says. "Only this was one we couldn't wake up from, not at all."

"I keep feeling, though, that this whole mess is somehow my fault," I tell him.

"Why? It was a welfare check call that went bad, that's all. You nor I either one could've foreseen what was going to happen. It was just a bad twist of fate, nothing more than that."

I shoot him a glance. "Twist of fate, my ass," I say. "I made the decision to enter the house, Jim. I willingly violated protocol, and you even warned me about it before I went in. But I ignored you." I study my hands. "I guess I figured myself some sorta hero, charging into that house to save someone. Only there wasn't anyone left alive to save. Because of my stupidity and rash actions, I ended up getting you injured, and I ended up killing a man. Some kind of hero I turned out to be, huh?" I ask acidly.

"I could've stayed outside," he says. "You certainly didn't force me to enter along with you. I could've gone over to the squad car and radioed for backup, even if you went ahead entered the house alone. But I didn't. I went in there just as willing as you were. So if you're playing the blame game here, I'd say I share it equally."

I shake my head. "I made you go through that house with me, Jim. I should have ordered you back outside after we found Melissa Walters' body. Then you wouldn't have seen the other horrific sights."

"Pete, I stayed in that house because I wanted to. I wasn't about to let you wander through that place by yourself, not knowing what was in there. Partners don't do that, at least not GOOD partners."

I sigh with exasperation. "But don't you see?" I ask. "Because of my decision to enter that place and search it, I made you see things you shouldn't have seen. I got you injured, Jim. Stuart Walters nearly killed you...all because of my stupidity! How can you ever forgive me for that?"

"Because there was never anything to even forgive you for, Pete. What happened was a tragedy, not an error on your part. You need to stop blaming yourself for it, and stop it right now."

I lean back in the recliner with a groan. "But I can't forgive *myself*, Jim. I wasn't there in the upstairs of the house when Walters returned, like I should have been. I was still down in the damned basement, gathering my thoughts. If I hadn't of been screwing around doing THAT, I might have been able to come to your aid. The two of us probably could've brought him down. And if we'd done that, then I wouldn't have ended up shooting the bastard in the basement."

Jim is quiet for a moment. "What thoughts did you need to gather, Pete?" he asks softly.

I massage my temples with my fingers. "Oh hell, I don't know." I look at him. "Promise you won't laugh?"

"Promise."

"I made the sign of the cross over myself," I tell him, feeling myself blush. "It's stupid and silly, and a bunch of superstitious mumbo jumbo, but for some reason, I felt the need to do it...especially in the face of such untold evil in that house." I gesture to him. "Okay, go ahead. Laugh at me. Call me an idiot."

"I don't think it's silly at all," he says. "In fact, when I was outside, after I'd gotten sick, I whispered a few prayers of my own."

I stare at him in surprise. "You're not just saying that to make me feel better, are you?"

"Nope," he says, shaking his head. "I felt so bad for what had happened to what appeared to be a lovely young woman and her three innocent children, that I whispered a prayer of my own. I asked God to watch out for their souls in Heaven. And I prayed that they didn't suffer, at least not too much, when the killing wounds were inflicted. I hoped that God saw fit to take them quickly, instead of leaving any of them in agony here on earth."

"But you know as well as I do that it didn't happen that way, Jim," I say softly. "They suffered before they died. They suffered for years at the hands of him, not just that night."

"I know it," he says quietly. "And it doesn't make it any easier, either. I keep seeing them in my dreams...in my nightmares, actually."

"Yeah, me too," I tell him, the words out of my mouth before I can stop them.

He looks at me, his head cocked questioningly. "I thought you said you weren't having any nightmares, Pete."

I run a hand through my hair as I clear my throat. "Yeah, well, I lied. And yet another reason for me to be so disgusted with myself. I lied to you about having nightmares, when I should have told you the truth, that I was having them, too."

"I wouldn't be disgusted with myself for that, Pete," Jim says. "Not a lot of people would want to admit that something like that bothered them, least of all cops, like you and I. We're supposed to take crap like that in stride, you know? Not get personally involved, keep the emotions under wraps, all that happy bullshit." He twists his wedding band nervously around on his finger. "They're...they're really bad, Pete. Horrific. I've never had nightmares this awful, not even after Steve Deal and Norm Landon."

"Yeah, I know," I tell him after a moment. "I never had them this bad before, either. Even after Howie Parker died."

He twists his wedding band even harder. He keeps his gaze on the coffee table in front of us, not meeting my eyes. And that's fine with me. "The thing of it is, Pete, I don't know how to handle them, you know?" he asks, his voice hushed. Without letting me answer, he continues on, his words rushing out in a torrent. "At first I thought it was the medication they gave me in the hospital, the stuff for the nausea and whatever they gave me to keep me from having more seizures. But even after I've gotten home, I still have them. Every time I try to take a nap...hell, every time I close my eyes, I see them. The images, the dreams. I'm nearly afraid to go to sleep, not knowing what kind of hellish nightmare I'm going to have next." He shakes his head. "I don't dare tell Jean about them, she'd worry to no end, and I don't want to subject her to that kind of horror anyway. I'd rather not expose my wife to that kind of shocking awfulness, you know?"

I nod. "Yeah, I do."

He picks up the gold Zippo lighter and fiddles with it, opening and shutting the lid with rapid little clicks. "The first one I had after I got home was the worst," he says, flicking the lighter wheel with his thumb and watching the little flame dance obediently in front of him. "It was...it was..." he begins, then he coughs, clears his throat. He still keeps his eyes from meeting mine, and I don't blame him. I don't want him looking into my eyes right now, either. "The worst one involved the basement, I mean, what happened down there, you know?" he asks, but his tone indicated he doesn't expect a response from me. I sit back in the recliner and fold my hands over my stomach, listening to him, for it's the best thing I can do right now. He draws in a deep breath and lets it out with a sigh. "I dreamed that I went into that house looking for you. I couldn't find you anywhere. I searched through the whole damned house, going from bedroom to bedroom, calling you. The place was empty, deserted. Or so I thought. Then I heard voices, muted voices, coming from the basement. I went to the top of the steps and called out to you, but you didn't answer. I could hear your voice, though, talking to another man. You sounded angry at him, calling him a murderer. I started down the steps to find out what was going on. I got about halfway down when I heard a gunshot. By the time I reached the bottom, I found Stuart Walters standing over your body, your service revolver in his hands. He'd somehow gotten it away from you and shot you with it, right in the head. He turned around to face me. By that time, I'd drawn my own

weapon, so it was kind of a Mexican standoff down there. He just stood there, grinning evilly at me, saying that you didn't even fight him, you gave your weapon up without a struggle. He called you a coward, someone who wouldn't even fight for his own life. I knew that wasn't true, so I got angry with him." He is quiet, studying the lighter in his hands. "I shot him, Pete. I shot him without him ever firing a shot back at me. I was angry enough to murder him, for what he'd done to you. When I woke up, I was shaking. I woke Jean up by accident, I was shaking so hard. I lied and told her I was just cold." He looks up at me then, his eyes somewhat fearful. "What do I do, Pete? I can't go on like this. I'm not sleeping well at all. What do I do? How do I get them to go away?"

I shake my head. "I dunno, Jim, I just don't know. I wish I really did. I wish I could give you some advice, but I can't."

"Are they that bad for you?" he asks.

I'm quiet for a moment, then I speak. "They're actually worse, I think." He studies me, trying to read my expression, and I know that he expects me to reveal one of my nightmares to him. I debate it over in my brain.

Reed speaks, settling the debate for me. "Look, Pete, if you don't want to tell me about any of yours, I can understand. But you've opened up and told me about your past, so what's a horrible nightmare or two to share on top of that?" he asks.

I grimace. "How about four nightmares?" I ask.

"Jesus, FOUR?" he asks in amazement. "No wonder you look like hell, Pete. You haven't gotten any sleep at all."

"Gee, thanks, partner," I tell him dryly. "And I wouldn't say I haven't gotten ANY sleep. I've gotten some, just not a whole lot over the last couple of nights."

"With the help of that?" he asks, pointing to the bottle of whiskey.

I stare at it dispassionately. "Yeah, some," I admit. "It helped some. But not enough, unfortunately. I still had nightmares even after I drank." I pick the bottle up, sloshing the whiskey around inside. "As much as I had hoped it would help, I think it only made things worse."

"I can assure you it most certainly did, Pete," he says rather archly. "Drinking to forget your troubles never helps at all. You should know that. Not only from the drunks we haul in on a regular basis, but from your own personal experience."

"I know it," I tell him. I pick up the pack of cigarettes and tap another one out. I hold my hand out for my lighter, which Jim Reed still has in his palm.

He hands it over with a heavy sigh. "You know, I hope that you aren't planning on continuing this nasty habit of smoking," he says with dismay. "I don't like it at all."

I shoot him a sharp-eyed glare. "What are you, my mother?" I snap, lighting the cigarette. I toss the pack down on the table, but keep my fingers around the lighter. "I'm only doing it to soothe myself, okay? It's only temporary, I promise." I slip the lighter between my fingers, the smooth metal warm in my hands. The action calms me a bit. The memories of the four nightmares roll around in my brain; the woman in the bedroom, the children in the nursery, the little girl down in the basement, the trial that ended in my death. A shudder runs through me unbidden.

"If this is too hard for you, Pete, I can understand," he says, reading my mind. "But look at it this way. If you don't let it out in the open to someone, it'll just stay inside of you and fester. And I don't think you want that."

I heave a sigh, realizing he's right. And I've allowed too much to fester inside of me now as it is. "I'll tell you the worst one, okay? But that's the only one. I'm not revealing the details of the other ones to you, other than to say that they're horrible." When he nods, I draw in a deep breath. Reaching forward, I lay the lighter on the coffee table and pick up the glass ashtray instead. I lean back, resting the ashtray on my stomach. I rub my thumb over the smooth edge of the dark brown glass. "It involved the basement, too," I begin, with some hesitation in my voice. "The ones that I'd had before that one were pretty awful themselves. In the other two, I'd entered the house alone, while you stayed out in the car. I came across the victims, first as they were alive, then after they were murdered. Each time, they all were able to speak to me even after the killing wounds had been inflicted upon them. They all accused me of allowing what had happened to them to occur, telling me to go to hell, before they collapsed dead from their injuries. Then, at the end of each nightmare, I'd die, by various methods. I was strangled in one dream, stabbed in another, shot in a third. That was actually one of the themes that ran through each dream, among others. I always died at the end."

I take a drag on the cigarette, tapping ash into the ashtray. "But the basement one...it was the worst, by far. I came into the house, alone, and ran across the little girl, Natalie. She hadn't been killed yet. She took me back to her bedroom and showed me her dollhouse. It was back there that she confided in me and told me her father abused her, both physically and sexually." I rub my forehead, taking another drag on the cigarette. I blow the smoke up towards the ceiling. "I tried to get her to leave the house with me, with the intention of taking her someplace safe. She got mad, said she wouldn't leave her mom, and ran off, hiding from me. I went looking for her and couldn't find her. She finally called out that she was in the basement. That's when I went down there and found her hanging there, noosed over a pipe. She was still alive and talking to me. I heard someone come into the house upstairs, and, thinking it was you, I called out, yelling that I needed help in the basement. Natalie whispered that it wasn't you, it was her father that had entered, and that he'd kill me if he found me down there. The light in the basement flicked off then, and I went and hid under the steps, my service revolver in my hands." I pause, tapping the glass ashtray with my fingernail. "It was her father, alright. He came down there, and then engaged her in a game of hunting me, like I was some sort of prey. She willingly played along with him like it was a big joke. Just as she revealed where I was hiding at, the light flicked back on and I fired, killing him. Only it wasn't Stuart Walters I'd killed, it was you. Like all the other victims in the house, Natalie blamed me for what had happened to her, and then she died. I couldn't live with myself, knowing that I'd killed you instead of Stuart Walters, so I put my gun to my head and pulled the trigger. That's when I woke up."

Reed lets out a low whistle. "Jesus, Pete, that's pretty bad. Was it that nightmare that almost made you kill yourself this morning?"

I take a final drag on the cigarette, then I stub it out. It leaves an acrid taste in my mouth. "No," I say, gazing at the brown glass ashtray as if it holds all the secrets to the world. "It was...it was a lot of things, Jim, that made me think of it." I lean forward, setting the ashtray back on the table. Sitting back, I rub a hand across my face. "I think I'm blaming myself for not realizing we'd been out to that house on previous domestics in the past, and that we didn't do anything THEN to help Melissa and her kids. Maybe if we had, they'd still be alive."

"I doubt it," he says. "After your board hearing this morning, I went over to R & I, just to see what the records showed about any of the previous calls that had been made out there. Sure, we answered a couple of them, but so did Wells and Brinkman, and so did Woods and Russo, and so did a few other cops on other shifts. Each time, none of the responding officers could find any physical evidence of abuse on her at all. And she declined each time to press charges against her bastard husband, so there wasn't a damned thing that anyone could do, least of all us." He shrugs. "Besides, dispatch kind of dropped the ball on that one, anyway. After so many calls out to a certain residence, they're supposed to flag the address, letting any officers responding to calls there in the future that there's a history at that residence, especially if it's a domestic disturbance history. Dispatch never informed us of that, even though it came up on their file when we were sent out. So part of the blame should lie with them, too."

"We still should have called in and checked, though," I tell him. "It was standard protocol, after all. Especially after the neighbor lady told us that there was an order of protection against Walters. The review board landed on my ass for that this morning."

"But it was merely a welfare check call," he reminds me. "Not a domestic. You know yourself that a lot of times, welfare check calls turn out to be either bogus or just someone that's gone on vacation and forgotten to notify anyone that they're leaving. It comes down to this fact, Pete. Melissa Walters had ample opportunity to let someone, *any* of us that responded out there in the past, know that her husband was abusing her and her kids. She didn't. And she ended up paying for it with her life and that of her kids."

I look at him. "But you can't blame her for what happened," I tell him sharply. "She'd filed for divorce. She'd gotten an order of protection against him. What more could she do? Go into hiding under an assumed name? Because I can guarantee you that an asshole like Stuart Walters would've tracked her and the kids down no matter what."

"No, now I'm not saying that at all," he says defensively. "No, she's not to blame for what happened in the end to her and her kids. But maybe if she'd taken action BEFORE then, she'd still be alive, or at least that's what I'd hope, anyway."

I study my hands. "And maybe, on the other hand, none of it would've made a damned bit of difference. The bastard would've ended up slaughtering her and her kids just the same."

"Pete," Reed says quietly. "I was at the station earlier today, filling out my medical leave forms. I ran into Jerry Miller while I was there. He told me something that I think you can probably guess at in regards to Stuart Walters."

"He was molesting his daughter," I reply. "Yeah, I figured that one out, Jim. The newspapers pretty much struck that idea home in their articles, even though they danced around the issue rather nicely without pointing fingers."

"That's true, but there's one fact that the papers didn't reveal," he tells me.

"What's that?"

"Natalie wasn't his child. She was only his stepchild. Melissa Walters had been married before and had Natalie by that man. He was killed over in Vietnam when Natalie was just a baby, and Melissa remarried rather quickly. The only two kids that were Walters' own were the two little boys, Andrew and Matthew."

"That would explain why he took out a lot of his hatred on her," I tell him. "She wasn't his blood child. He must have resented that."

"And not only that, but Miller also told me that Stuart Walters had been molesting Natalie since she was about two. He gotten caught at it while they were living up in Sacramento. One of the neighbors turned him in. After he went to jail and served his time, he was ordered to undergo therapy and to not have any contact with his wife or kids for a year. He must have been able to keep his perverted attitude clean long enough in order to complete the counseling. When the year was up, he moved them all down here to L.A. He went right back to abusing Natalie, picking up where he'd left off." Reed's voice sounds queasy.

"Who turned him in down here?" I ask.

"Melissa did. Finally, after all those years of letting him doing that to her little girl, she turned him in. Whether or not she believed him that he was innocent the first time around, she didn't believe him the second time. That's when she kicked his ass out and filed for divorce. Miller found all that out after interviewing her parents." He bites his lip. "But she let it go on for all those years without doing anything about it. She subjected her daughter to unspeakable acts by her own husband and just turned a blind eye to it all. What kind of mother is that, that you'd let your own child get harmed by your husband, just so you could keep a man around the house?"

"I dunno. Ask my mom that sometime, Jim," I tell him quietly. "Maybe she can answer that for you. She's the great expert at turning a blind eye to family problems."

He smiles, but there's no humor in it. "Yeah, what goes on behind closed doors is a family's greatest secret of all, huh?"

I nod. "Present a normal life to the smiling public with the aid of smoke and mirrors, and no one ever looks behind the curtain to see the awful truth unmasked."

"That's why I don't understand why you're so upset about not feeling any regret for killing Walters," Reed says bitterly. "If it were me that had pulled the trigger on the bastard, I'd have danced a jig."

I shake my head. "No, you wouldn't. You wouldn't have enjoyed his death at your hands. Not at all."

"Do you?" he asks, cocking his head. "Enjoy his death at your hands?"

"No, I'm NOT enjoying it, Reed," I snap. "Why the hell do you think I'm beating myself up over it?"

He spreads his hands out, palms up. "So? Then what's all this crap you keep rambling on about, not feeling guilty for killing him, thinking you've killed him in cold blood, and because of it, you're going to hell for it? Explain that to me, Pete, because I sure as hell don't seem to understand it."

A sudden, restless energy seizes hold of me and I leap to my feet. I feel like I have to be in motion right now, or else I will go crazy. I swipe a hand through my hair, pacing nervously back and forth across the living room. "I don't know," I tell him. "It's hard to explain."

"Try me," he says.

"I AM!" I snap again, my hotheaded temper running just below the surface once more. I don't look at Jim sitting on the couch as I speak. "I think I knew, from the minute he set foot on those stairs and started to come down into the basement after shooting you, that I wasn't going to let him leave alive."

"Yeah, so? He'd already shot me, so it wasn't like you had much choice, Pete."

"Yes, I did, Jim. I had a choice. I could've tried taking him alive. But instead, I wanted him to give me a reason, ANY reason at all, to just shoot him as he came down those steps. And I hid underneath those steps in that dark basement, just waiting for him to come to me."

"But you DID try to take him alive, after he got down there, didn't you?" he asks. "That's how you got the cut on your cheek. He got away from you when you tried to cuff him."

"You don't get it," I groan, clenching my hands into fists. "Yes, something prevailed over me, some vestige of common sense took ahold of me at the very last minute and made me realize what I was about to do. I was about to commit murder and it would've passed off as self-defense easily. I could claim to the review board that he came down the basement steps, with the gun in his hand, and I didn't want to take any chances on my own welfare, so I shot him, plain and simple."

"But you don't operate that way, Pete. You never have."

"I know it, and that's where the common sense kicked in. I couldn't live with myself if I'd done something as dastardly as that, so as he went to turn the light on down there, I sidled up to him and stuck my gun to the back of his head, surprising him. I figured I'd might as well try to take the bastard alive, even though he didn't really deserve it. But the whole time I was trying to convince him to drop the gun, I was secretly hoping he'd draw down on me, just so I could shoot him where he stood. When he dropped the gun and went over to the tool bench at my command, I was a bit disappointed, I'll admit that. Then when he made the move and got away from me, I was nearly glad, you know?" I ask.

"Because then it would give me an excuse to shoot him. I got the light turned back off and hid underneath those steps once more, just waiting for him to cross into my line of fire."

"But it wasn't like you had any *choice*, Pete," Reed repeats. "He was coming after you with the gun. Mac told me Walters had found it once more and was hunting for you. So the way I see it, you didn't have much choice in how it ultimately ended. It was either you kill him or he kill you. It's as simple as that." He frowns. "Will you sit down and stop pacing? You're making me edgy."

I continue to pace, nervously, frantically. "I waited for him, Jim. I waited for him to come to me. I WANTED to kill him, so help me God. And when I got that chance, I just jumped at it, like a tiger pouncing on fresh meat."

"Pete, if you didn't kill him when you had the chance, you'd be dead by now. He'd of killed you for certain. I know it. You just did what you had to do in order to protect yourself, that's all. It's nothing more sinister than that," Reed argues.

"I *waited* for him," I moan, wringing my hands. "I hid under those steps and waited for him."

"So damned what if you did?" Reed snaps. "I'd have done the same thing, Pete."

I swing my gaze around to meet his. "I was glad I pulled the trigger on him. I shouldn't be. I should regret the taking of a human life, even as one as miserable and scummy as his was. I played judge, jury, and executioner down in that basement, Reed. And just because I have a badge and a gun, it doesn't give me the right to cast myself in those roles. I'm not Dirty Harry."

"No one *said* you were!" he says, frustrated.

"Sergeant Friday did," I tell him. "He thinks I acted as a vigilante."

"Yeah, well, Friday's an ass," he remarks. "I got that impression from him when he interviewed me in the hospital."

I slap the back of my right hand into the open palm of my left. "But I let my emotions get in the way of the trigger!" I tell him. "Because of what I'd seen upstairs, I was glad to kill him!"

He snorts. "Do you *honestly* believe that to be true of yourself, Pete? Despite what you saw upstairs, you DID not let your emotions get in the way of the trigger, believe me."

"How do you know?" I ask sharply. "Did you know what was going through my mind at that time?"

"Pete, I'm not stupid. If you let your emotions get in the way of the trigger, why didn't you just shoot the bastard at the TOP of the stairs, instead of letting him get all the way down into the basement?" he asks. He comes to his feet, approaching me. "Look," he says, putting his hands on my shoulders and stopping my pacing. "You gave him the chance to surrender after he got down there. You tried to take him alive. But it didn't work out that way. It just didn't. You ended up killing him, simply out of your own self-defense." He turns me towards the recliner and gives me a small shove in that direction. "Now sit down before you drive me nuts."

Wearily, I plunk back down. "I STILL think I'm a cold-blooded killer," I tell him.

"Why? Because you don't regret what you did? And that somehow makes you a cold-blooded killer?" he asks, sitting back down on the couch. "Pete, a lot of people would think you're a hero for what you did. Just because you don't regret it, doesn't mean you're a murderer, or that you're going to go to hell. Trust me on that."

I pick up the lighter and begin to play with it again. I try to think of how best to explain my thoughts to Jim. "I looked into his eyes, Jim, right before I pulled the trigger on him," I tell him quietly. "He saw RIGHT into my soul. He knew that I didn't feel bad for killing him. He recognized that streak of maliciousness, of cruelty in me. It's the same streak that ran through him. It's the same streak that runs through my father," I say. "And I'm afraid now to meet my own eyes in the mirror every morning. I fear that I'm going to see HIS eyes staring back at me...or worse, those of my father's." A shudder runs through me again at that thought, shaking me violently.

"Whoa, now, hey," he says, putting his hands up in a stopping motion. "You need to stop thinking that right this instant, Pete. Stuart Walters was a madman, a psychopath. He could've looked into the eyes of Mary freakin' Poppins and saw a killer within. Men like him are that way. Don't go visiting his evil on yourself. It doesn't belong to you, it's not of you. It's of him. Let it remain with him. You're worth millions of Stuart Walters, Pete, and no matter what you think, you're nothing like him at all. The same with your dad. You're absolutely nothing like him in the least. I know that for a fact."

"Do you, Jim?" I ask. "Do you really know that for a fact?" I draw in a ragged shaky breath. "I don't know how much more of this I can take before I crack. Between the damned nightmares and my own conscience, I'm afraid that I WILL end up sticking a gun to my head and ending it all, just like John Randolph."

He frowns, puzzled. "Who's John Randolph?"

"He's a guy that was on the force, long before you ever came on," I tell him tiredly. "He was good friends with Val and Mac. He shot and killed himself during my rookie year."

"So? What's that got to do with you?" he asks.

"Randolph couldn't live with what he'd done a few years prior. He'd been involved in an accident. His squad car hit and killed a young boy. He was the driver. The board cleared him of any wrongdoing, but he couldn't clear himself of it in his mind. Eventually it got to be too much for him to handle, so he stuck a gun in his mouth and blew his head off. Val and I were the ones that took the call. It really shook both Val and Mac up, seeing their friend end up that way."

"And then you'd know how much it would shake ME up to find YOU that way," he says softly.

I shake my head. "You'd get over it," I tell him.

"Maybe you should ask Val or Mac if they got over Randolph's suicide," he tells me, anger lacing his voice. "Because I sure as hell know I wouldn't get over yours."

"But you don't understand," I snap. "If I've already hit THAT point, what hope is there for me at all?"

"Goddamnit, Pete!" he snarls, pounding the coffee table hard with his fist, making the stuff on top of it bounce. "This is what I'm trying to TELL you! There IS hope for you! All you have to do is just LOOK, damn it!"

I jab a finger at him angrily. "Where?" I growl. "Just where in the hell am I supposed to look, Reed? Is there a store around here that sells hope by the bushel? Let me know, 'cuz I'd sure as hell like to buy some!"

"It's in your friends, you damned stupid fool," he tells me. "If you'd put a little faith and trust in us, you'd find that out!"

"Yeah, well, faith and trust is something that I have in mighty short supply right now, Reed," I tell him. "And believe me, I've gone looking for them, too. I even went to church, in hopes of finding answers there. And you know what? I didn't. All I got was a bunch of crap about taking a leap of faith. And that's not something I'm plan to do any time soon, I can tell you that for DAMNED sure!"

He rubs his forehead, closing his eyes wearily. "I'm not giving up on you, Pete, I'm just not," he says, muttering to himself. He opens his eyes, looking at me angrily. "I'm not giving up. None of us are. All of us are behind you, Pete, if you're just willing to let us help. We're in your corner, believe me."

I snort derisively. "Yeah? Name 'em," I demand. "Name who's in my corner for me. Change my bitter and jaded mind. Show me the faith in humanity that I so sorely lack right now."

He holds his hands up. "There's Mac, there's Val," he says, ticking them off on his fingers. "There's Ed Wells, Bob Brinkman, Jerry Woods. There's a host of others at the station, too numerous for me to mention. There's Jean." He points to himself. "And then there's me, Pete. I've been here from the beginning for you, but you've been too damn pigheaded and stubborn to see it."

"But this is MY cross to bear," I say. "It's my albatross. No one else's. And I sure as hell don't plan on laying the burden on anyone, either, just because I can't hack it myself. I shoulder my load on my own. I always have."

He sighs, rolling his eyes. "It is NOT your cross to bear, Pete. There's no cross for you TO bear. You need to quit thinking that, pronto. This whole awful mess is just nothing more than a sad and horrible tragedy. You didn't commit murder, you're not going to hell because you don't regret what you did. You are NOT like Stuart Walters. You are NOT a cold-blooded killer. You are NOT going to hell. How many times to I have to tell you that before it sinks into that thick skull of yours?"

I scowl. "But maybe..."

"But maybe nothing," he says, interrupting me. "I'm going to say something to you, and I want you to listen very carefully, without interrupting me, without questioning me, without getting irritated with me. Do you understand?"

"But..."

Reed holds his hand up, cutting me off. "It's a simple yes or no question, Pete. Either you do intend to listen carefully, or you don't. Got it?"

"Do I have a choice?" I ask dryly.

"Not a single one," he says. He stops for a moment, thinking and gathering his thoughts before he finally speaks. When he does, his voice is quiet. "You've lost your way somehow, Pete, and I hope that what I tell you will guide you back to where you belong, back to the man you were before any of this crap ever happened." He runs his hand through his hair. "Do you know what it would mean for me to lose you to suicide, Pete?" he asks.

"Probably not much," I remark, forgetting his earlier warning for me to shut up and listen to him.

He slaps his palm sharply against the coffee table. "What did I just say about interrupting me?" he barks.

"Not to do it," I tell him. "Sorry, force of habit. Go ahead."

"Despite what vile and self-loathing opinion you have of yourself right now, you're a good man, Pete, you truly are. I tell you that from the bottom of my heart. I've looked up to you for guidance all through my career on the force. Because of what you've taught me, I've become the cop I am today. All the training, all the knowledge, all the harsh brutal truths you've forced down my throat over the years have made me what I am now. Do you understand me?" he asks, looking at me intently.

"I guess," I say, nodding. I catch his gaze for a moment, then I look away under his scrutiny. "Stop staring at me," I mutter. "It makes me uncomfortable."

"Good," he says, still staring at me with those intense blue eyes of his. "I intend it that way. What you've taught me, how you've trained me, has made me a good police officer. But I have a LONG ways to go before I can ever hope to fill your shoes, Pete. If I even become HALF of the officer you are now today, I will have at least accomplished something." He hesitates, biting his lip. "I can count on you, Pete. I always have. I've counted on you to show me the way, the RIGHT way, and my faith in you has never been shaken, not even once."

"Not even now?" I ask softly, keeping my eyes on the floor.

"Not even now." Reed gets up from the couch and shifts over to sitting on the coffee table in front of me, pushing the stuff on top of it aside. He puts a hand on my shoulder and I don't flinch away from him this time. I still keep my eyes on the floor, though. "Pete, please look at me," he says gently.

I shake my head miserably. "No. I can't. I can't look you in the eye right now, Jim. And don't ask me to do that. I don't want to see what I think I'm going to see."

"What do you think you're going to see?" he asks.

I shrug. "Pity. And if there's one thing I can't stand, it's pity."

"Look at me, Pete, please." He shakes me a little bit. "I promise, you won't see pity in my eyes."

Unwillingly, I drag my eyes up to meet his. And he's right; instead of seeing pity, I see a steely admiration and respect...and friendship.

"You're a good man, Pete. You're one of the best I've ever had the privilege to know," he says, holding my gaze. "You've come through sheer hell and survived it. What happened to you in your younger years has made you the strong person you are today. You haven't let yourself steep and wallow in self-pity, you've gathered the broken bonds of your past around you and moved on. And while, yes, the Walters tragedy has allowed those ghosts of your past resurface, I have every faith in you that you can put them behind you once more and move on, as time passes, and with the help of friends. You just have to be willing to believe in yourself, Pete. Take that leap of faith. It may not be as big as you think."

"That's the second time I've been told that in recent days," I mumble. I drop my gaze back down to my hands, as the sting of tears pricks my eyes. "I don't deserve this," I tell him softly. "I don't deserve friends like you, Jim."

"Why?" he asks gently. "Did you ever consider that maybe we don't deserve such a good friend like you?"

I shake my head, rubbing tears off of my face with my hands. "I can't seem to stop crying," I tell him. "I've never cried this much in the past, now it seems like I can't stop, you know?" I keep my eyes on the floor once more. "I don't know what to do. For the first time in my life, I honestly don't know what to do. And it scares me. A lot. I've always been able to handle whatever life throws my way, and this time, I can't. And I don't know why." I shrug. "I think that's why I considered killing myself this morning. I just don't know how to handle this at all. I thought that would be the easiest way out."

"But it's not, Pete. It's never the answer to ANY of life's little problems, and you should know that by now." He is quiet for a moment, his hand still on my shoulder. When he speaks again, his voice is choked with emotion. "I do know this much, Pete. You're my friend, one of the truest and best friends I've ever had the pleasure to have known. That's what I count on you for most of all...the gift of your friendship. You've always been there for me to lean on whenever I've needed someone. You lend a listening ear when I need to vent, and you give me advice even when I don't ask for it. I draw my strength from you just as much as I draw it from Jean and Jimmy. I'm honored, very honored, and awfully damned grateful that you're my friend, Pete. I want you to know that. And to have that friendship taken away from me, to have YOU taken away from me, just because you decided to kill yourself over some lowlife scumbag like Stuart Walters...well, it would devastate me."

"Why?" I ask. "It shouldn't."

"What stopped you from pulling the trigger on yourself this morning Pete?" he asks.

I am silent as I think. I look up then, not at him, but at the picture that hangs on my wall. It was taken on the day James Reed, Jr. had been christened. Jean and Jim flank Sarah, Jean's sister and Jimmy's godmother, and me, Jimmy's godfather. I'm holding him, looking down at him with fierce pride and love on my face. That kid had me wrapped around his finger from the moment I laid eyes on that tiny bundle in Jim's arms at the hospital on the day he was born. I bite my lip. "It was Jimmy," I say in a choked whisper. "The thought of Jimmy finding out that his Uncle Pete did that to himself, it felt like a disgrace. A shameful disgrace." I sigh heavily. "I didn't want to leave that kind of legacy for anyone, let alone my godson. I couldn't see doing that to Val and Mac, and you, especially you. It would be too much of a burden to place upon your souls. And I know I couldn't do that to Jimmy. I love him too much to put him through something like that." I scrub at the fresh tears that roll down my cheeks. "Maybe...maybe that makes me some kinda coward, that I couldn't pull the trigger on myself," I say miserably. "But I just couldn't do it, Jim. I just couldn't do it."

He grips my shoulder hard. "You're not a coward, Pete. You're far far from that. You're one of the bravest guys I've ever known. You've just been carrying a lot around on your mind and in your soul, and that's not good for you. It's driven you down to this. And so now it's time to let your own burden go, Pete. Let those that care about you step in and help carry it now." He shakes me by the shoulder once more. "Look, Pete, I don't have any ready answers for either of us right now," he says. "But I do know this much: we're friends, Pete, and friends get through the really crappy times together. We help each other out, through the good and the bad, no matter what. Got it?"

"What about your list?" I ask, blurting the words out before I can stop them.

He frowns. "My list? What list are you talking about?" he asks in confusion.

"The other morning, after I got back to the station from doing the walk-through with Jerry Miller, I put your briefcase and helmet bag back into your locker for you," I tell him. "While I was doing that, a piece of paper fell out and landed on the floor. I picked it up to put it back, not planning on reading it, but I couldn't help but NOT read it, you had it so clearly written out."

"Oh, yeah, THAT list," he says sheepishly. "Look, Pete, I can explain..."

"Please do," I tell him dryly. "Considering that not being paired with me was listed in both the pro AND the con column."

"Oh boy," he says, rubbing his forehead. "I'm sorry you found that, Pete." He fumbles in the pocket of his jeans, pulling out a folded piece of paper. Vivid blue ink is scrawled across it. He holds it up to me. "This list," he says. "Was made on one of the nights I was in a really crummy mood. Nothing had gone right for us that shift. We'd had three separate juvenile trouble calls, two burglaries in which the homeowners blamed *us* for not keeping a twenty-four hour guard on their homes, two car wrecks caused by drunks, four domestics, and FIVE loud party calls. I was grumpy, you were *extremely* grouchy, and it seemed like all we could do was snap at each other that night. We missed our seven, and I ended up going home to nothing but cold cuts and canned soup, since Jean got tired of waiting dinner on me and threw the meatloaf out. Mac landed on my ass because I filled out a report wrong, and Wells seemed to take SPECIAL delight that night to needle me to no end. In short, it was the shift from HELL, and I made that list up mostly out of frustration. It's awful damned hard to do this job day in and day out, without getting irritated once in a while. You should know, you've been a beat cop for

nearly twelve years now. You know how it gets, Pete, and you know in your heart that it will never get any better, it will only get worse. Some days it seems like the entire planet is screwed up royally, and no one gives a damn."

"That's quite a speech," I tell him a bit acidly. "Maybe you SHOULD consider taking the Investigator's exam. Sounds like you ARE getting burned out on this job. Take care that you don't develop much more to your dark side. You don't want to get like me. Jaded and bitter me."

Reed stares at me. "I told you before, Pete, I didn't mean anything by that," he says, obviously stung. "Just like I don't mean anything by this." He flicks the folded note with his index finger and thumb. Then he holds his hand out to me, wriggling his fingers. "Give me your lighter," he says.

I hand it to him wordlessly, my eyes watching his every move carefully.

Flicking the lid open, he rubs his thumb across the wheel, bringing the tiny tongue of flame to life. He holds it to the piece of paper, setting it on fire, the flames eagerly devouring the folded square like it's an all-you-can-eat buffet. He drops the paper into the ashtray, watching as the flames eat their fill, chewing the paper down to a small pile of mere grey and black ashes. He sets the lighter down on the table. "There. It's gone. I'm not taking the exam next month."

I stare at him. "Why not?" I ask in amazement. "You'd make a good investigator, Jim. A damned good one. Don't you want to advance in your career?"

He sighs, rubbing his forehead again. "Yes, I do, but not right now. It's Jean that's pushing me to take that further step in my career, not me." He shoots me a look. "What about you, Pete? Why don't you take the Sergeant's exam in January? Don't you want to advance in YOUR career?"

"I'm not ready to give up patrol work, Jim," I tell him. "Plus, I don't have a wife and child to worry about providing for. You do. You should take the exam."

He shakes his head. "I'm not ready to give up patrol work, either, despite the occasional misgiving. It gets in my blood, you know?"

"I do," I tell him. We fall silent again, lost in our thoughts. Then I nudge him with my foot. "Hey, would you mind moving your butt off of my coffee table?" I ask. "I would really rather not have my furniture destroyed by you and your friendly tapeworm sitting on something that's not MEANT to be sat upon."

He shoots me a grin. "Hey, my tapeworm and I are offended by that, Pete." He starts to shift back over to the couch when the oven timer dings, signaling that the pizza is done. "Good!" he says, rubbing his hands together in anticipation of the culinary feast that awaits us. "Pizza's done. I'm starved!" He gets up and goes into the kitchen.

I grab up the bottle of whiskey and follow him. I watch as he takes the metal pan out of the oven with oven mitts, setting it on top of the stove to cool while he looks for the pizza cutter. I catch his eye as he's rummaging in the utensil drawer. Wordlessly, I slosh the liquid around in the bottle for a second, then I unscrew the cap, dumping the rest of the whiskey down the drain. When it's gone, I toss the bottle into the trash. "There," I say, brushing my hands off. "That won't be a problem anymore."

He stares at me. "But what's to stop you from buying more?" he asks solemnly. "When things get bad again?"

"Let's just say it's a small step in that leap of faith," I tell him. "The larger leap is learning to rely on my friends when I need them."

He is quiet, biting his lip. Then he looks at me. "It's gonna be alright, isn't it?" he asks softly. "I mean, we're gonna get through this horrible nightmare together somehow, right?"

I study him for a moment. I see no condemnation, no disgust, no disappointment in his eyes. Instead, I just see good ol' Jim Reed. "Yeah, we'll be alright," I tell him. "We'll get through this together. A wise man once told me that that's what friends do."

Reed nods sagely. "Indeed they do," he says. He begins rummaging some more in the drawer, frowning. "Where in the world is your pizza cutter at?" he asks.

"Next drawer down," I tell him. "Hey, would you MIND not messing up my silverware?" I ask.

He shoves the drawer shut. "Well excuse me, I didn't know you had moved the cutters from that drawer," he remarks dryly. "Since when did you do that?"

"Since I moved IN here, Reed," I tell him. I reach into the cupboards overhead and pull down two plates and cups.

"Oh," he says. He begins carefully slicing the pizza into equal portions. I notice that he manages to cut some of the pieces a little bit bigger than the others, and I know that they are going to casually wander over onto his plate instead of mine.

I open the refrigerator. "What d'ya want to drink? I've got beer and soda."

"What kind of soda?" he asks, surreptitiously slipping some of the larger slices onto his plate, hoping that I won't notice him doing it.

"Pepsi," I tell him. "And you'd better plan on leaving me a couple of those larger slices, partner, or you and your tapeworm can go home hungry, while I eat the whole thing myself."

"Drat," he says. Sighing, he gives me two of the larger slices while he takes the other two. The third slices are cut evenly, so there's no quarrel there as he plops them onto the plates. He shoots me a look. "I shoulda known you'd be watching," he grumbles. "I'll take a Pepsi."

I take two bottles out of the fridge and set them on the counter. Opening up the freezer, I take the ice trays out, twisting them to break loose the ice cubes so I can drop them into our glasses.

Reed drops the pizza cutter into the sink, grabbing up a bottle of pop. Reaching in front of me, he plucks the magnetized bottle opener from my refrigerator, snapping the metal cap off of the bottle of pop with a smooth twist. Then he grabs up my bottle of pop and does the same, tossing the caps into the trash. He hands me my bottle, sticking the magnetized opener back onto the fridge with a thunk. He picks up his own pop and holds it up in front of him. "I propose a toast," he intones solemnly.

I raise my eyebrows. "With Pepsi?" I ask. "Don't you need champagne for a toast?"

He sighs heavily. "Pete, I'm trying to be serious here. Can't you play along?"

I hold my own pop up. "Okay, a toast. To what?"

He thinks for a moment. "Three things. To a new start..."

"A new start to what?" I ask, interrupting him. "Nothing new has been started that I'm aware of. Of course, I might have missed the memo on that, too."

"Pete..." he warns.

"Sorry, go ahead."

"To a new start for you, in hopes that you won't keep all that junk bottled up inside of you from now on, until a tragedy makes you face it."

"That's one," I say.

"Pete!" he tells me. "The second is to friendship. My mother always says that true friendships are like rare and precious gemstones. When you find one that special, you need to treasure it forever."

"Aww, you're gonna make me cry," I say, wiping a mock tear from my eye. "It sounds like you've been reading the Hallmark cards at the drugstore again."

"PETE!" he snaps, his eyes wide in frustration. "I'm trying to be serious and you're acting like one of the Three Stooges!"

"Woob woob woob," I say, in my best Curly voice.

Reed stares at me for a moment, then he busts into laughter. He shakes his head, snorting. "You know, I never woulda pegged you as Curly," he says. "You're more of a Moe Howard."

"Oh, wiseguy, eh?" I ask, still channeling Curly. "Before you collapse of hysterics, pal, what's the third thing we're toasting to?" I inquire. "I'd kinda like to eat my pizza sometime in this century yet."

He grins at me. "The third thing we're toasting to is taking that leap of faith, Pete."

I frown. "I'm not sure that I've taken it yet, Jim."

He cocks his head. "Yeah, you have. You took it when you opened up to me earlier and told me all that stuff about your past. You took it when you admitted that you were having nightmares, just like me. And you took it when you finally laid down that cross you've been carrying around for the last three days." He smiles again. "It wasn't such a big leap after all, was it, Pete?" he asks.

I grin back at him wryly. "Yeah, after you pushed me over the edge," I tell him. I clink my pop bottle against his. "To a new start, friendship, and taking the leap of faith," I say.

"Hear, hear," he says, taking a swig of pop. He burps loudly. "Excuse me," he says sheepishly. "It's my tapeworm speaking."

I roll my eyes in mock-disgust. "Didn't your mother teach you any manners?" I ask, grabbing up a plate of pizza slices. I snag a napkin from the counter, and go into the living room.

Reed follows, his own plate in his hands. "Yeah, but I gotta teach Jimmy sometime how to burp. Gotta make his old man proud, you know." He sits down on the couch, plate of pizza in his lap.

I take a bite of my own pizza, chewing it thoughtfully. "Hey...uh...thanks," I mumble after I swallow.

"For what?" he asks. He tries to catch a string of melted cheese that is rapidly sliding off of his slice of pizza in his mouth. His eyes widen. "Ooh, HOT!" he rasps, choking. He grabs the pop and takes a few healthy swigs. "I burned my tongue," he moans. "What are you thanking me for, Pete?" he asks, casting me a glance.

"For...for...everything, you know?" I say.

He nods. "No problem, Pete. You're very welcome."

I twirl a strand of melted cheese from my own slice of pizza onto my finger before I pop it into my mouth. "You know, I'd hug ya, but then I'd hafta kill ya."

Jim Reed flashes one of those patented huge white grins of his. "Yeah, likewise," he says.

I match his grin with one of my own, a genuine Pete Malloy smile. It feels good to smile again, but I don't have to tell him that. He already knows it. And in the late autumn evening, I feel my soul finally lighten, soar upward, as the burden of the last few days lifts on featherlight wings. Amidst it all, I send up a very thankful and heartfelt prayer to God for giving me such a good friend like Jim Reed. For while Jim doesn't know it, he saved me that night...he saved me from myself. Because of it, I'm truly truly grateful.

The next day I got the good news about my future as a police officer for the city of Los Angeles. The review board examined the evidence and the testimony presented before them concerning the Walters case that Wednesday morning, and came to the conclusion that my killing of Stuart Walters was wholly justified and I acted in my own self-defense. I was officially cleared of any wrongdoing as far as the shooting was concerned, but I drew two days' suspension for my failure to follow protocol in the way I handled the situation from the start. I took the punishment without any complaints, for the notion that it might have been far worse was quite clear in my mind. I very well could have been stripped of my badge and arrested for murder, something I shudder to even think about now.

I made a tenuous peace with Jean Reed, the two of us reaching an unspoken truce for the sake of the two Jims, big Jim and little Jim. The happiness and love I get from my little godson more than makes up for any slight dislike I might feel for Jean. However, since the Walters incident happened, I began to notice a changing shift in her attitude towards Jim's job; a change that showed up in her occasional catty remarks about Jim not advancing in his career as fast as she'd like. Jim always blew it off, but it eventually came to a head in 1975, when he was awarded the Medal Of Valor for saving my life in a shoot-out. Jean was not going to attend the award ceremony, despite knowing how much it meant to Jim, and her attitude very nearly drove them apart. However, their love for each other managed to pull them through that rough period of their lives, and I'm happy to say that they're still together.

I'd like to say that after that night of my numerous confessions to Jim, the nightmares left me for good. Unfortunately, they didn't. I still have them, once in a while, but they occur with less and less frequency, and I know now how to deal with them, without the help of booze. I know that my friends are there to guide me through them, and for that, I'm eternally grateful. I've gotten their unwavering support, especially Jim's, when the nights turn bad. I guess he's right, true friendship is like a rare and precious gemstone. And I treasure it every day...even on the days when it seems like all we can do is drive each other crazy.

Curiously, I did have one dream after my confessions; a few days after it, in fact. I dreamed that I was watching Melissa Walters and her three small children playing in a beautiful green park, bright smiles on all of their faces. They were all so happy together. I started to turn away from them, but someone called my name. I turned back to see little Natalie running towards me. She wrapped her arms around my legs as she looked up at me with those deep blue eyes and that gap-toothed grin across her tiny freckled face. I saw no anguish, or sorrow, or fear in those eyes, only pure happiness. She hugged me tightly for a moment, then she scampered off to rejoin her mother and her two little brothers. As I watched, they began to fade from my view, their images slowly dissolving in front of me like wisps of smoke. The last thing I saw of each of them was Melissa's beautiful smile, Andrew's shining mop of curls glowing like a halo, Matthew's plump little face breaking into a happy baby grin, and Natalie's tiny wave goodbye to me. I heard her small voice whisper past my ears for just a brief moment, saying "thank you, Peter;" then I woke up, tears rolling down my face. But they were not tears of sorrow, they were tears of joy. Melissa and her little ones had finally found their peace...and so have I.

And just today, while we were on our seven, Reed asked me something that had evidently been bouncing around in his brain for a while. "Hey, Pete," he says, chewing a bite of his hamburger thoughtfully. "I wanna know something."

I steal one of his French fries, my own having long been eaten. "Shoot," I tell him with a grin as I catch his dismay at his pilfered fry.

"Stop stealing my food," he says with a frown, covering his fries up and scooting them out of my reach.

"That's what you wanted to know?" I ask him sarcastically.

"No, that's not it," he says, taking a swig of his coffee. "That afternoon in the hospital, right after the Walters case, when I was still laid up, remember?"

I shrug. "Yeah, what about it?" I filch another fry from him.

He scowls. "Order another bag of fries, Pete, if you're that hungry. But stop eating mine!"

"Ah, but has no one ever taught you, young grasshopper, that the taste of stolen French fries are the sweetest of all?" I reply. "They're like manna from heaven."

"Yeah, well, get your own manna from heaven!" he says. He grabs my wrist and stops my hand from snaking toward another delectable fry. "I swear to God, if you snag one more fry, I'm gonna lick all of them!"

I grimace. "Eww, where'd you learn that from?" I ask with disgust.

He smirks. "Your godson, that's who."

"Bright kid."

"Takes after his old man," Jim says with a grin.

"In looks only. He gets his brains from his Uncle Pete. I'm teaching that kid all of what I know."

"That's what I'm afraid of," he remarks wryly. "It's bad enough having YOU around, I don't need a mini-Malloy at home." He takes another bite of his hamburger. "Anyway, I was wondering..."

"Who wrote the book of love?" I ask.

"Can't you be serious for once?" he asks.

"Aren't I always?"

He studies me for a moment. "I'm gonna hafta plead the fifth on that, Pete." He sighs. "That day in the hospital, when you and Mac came to see me, Mac said something to you. I've tried to figure it out, but for the life of me, I can't. So I'm asking you to explain it to me."

"I'll try. Mac says a lot of things, some of which I manage to conveniently forget the minute his back is turned." I lean forward, pretending like I'm interested in what Reed is going to say. In reality, I'm angling for another fry.

Drat, he reads my mind, grabbing the bag of fries up and setting them on the seat next to him. "Mac told you 'two years.' He was holding you to two years, he had it marked on his calendar. What in the hell did he mean by that, Pete?"

I smile at him, my best Pete Malloy grin guaranteed to win myself another fry. "Gimmie a fry and I'll tell you," I wheedle.

"Oh, here," he says with disgust, tossing the bag onto the table between us. "I can't bear the thought of you going starved the rest of the afternoon, for lack of French fry fulfillment. The guilt *alone* would be overwhelming."

I stare at the fries with abject disappointment. "Now they're not as interesting," I mumble. "Stolen fries are best, freely given ones aren't." Still, I snatch up a couple, popping them into my mouth.

"Are you going to tell me?" Jim demands.

"Tell you what?" I ask innocently.

"What the hell Mac meant that day! It's driving me nuts!"

"Ah, that," I muse, rubbing my chin thoughtfully. "Yes, I DO seem to recall that conversation."

"WELL?" Impatience flushes his face.

"Hmm, let me think..." I say, looking thoughtfully up to the ceiling as I pretend to try and remember the conversation, one that I actually recall quite well.

"Damn it, Pete, you're driving me insane!" he snaps. "Tell me what Mac meant, *please!*"

"Have you never learned the art of patience, young grasshopper?" I ask.

"Pete, I swear to GOD, if you don't tell me what Mac meant, I will whack you up alongside your thick skull with my nightstick!" he growls.

"My, my, threatening your superior officer with violence," I remark. "What is this world coming to, when a junior officer threatens his senior officer?" I shake my head sadly. "Such a sad state of affairs. Sounds like you're giving into your dark side, Reed."

"Hey, you only got that promotion because they were sick and tired of you being the oldest one on the watch without ever having advanced," he says. "At the rate you're going, old man, by the time you get ready to be promoted to Sergeant, you'll be hauling a walker and an oxygen tank around."

"Ooh, testy, aren't we?" I snark. "And I'm not that old, Reed. I'm only older than you by eight years."

"Is that in dog years or human years?" he quips. "By my standards, that makes you ancient." He grins. "Tell me, Pete. Did you have a yabba-dabba doo time back in the good old days? Didja hafta drive your car with your feet?"

"Speaking of cars, did you have any hope to drive Adam-12 sometime in the future?" I ask, grinning back. "Because I can tell you without a doubt, you just blew any chance you might have right now."

"I'll drive it when you retire," he says.

"Oh, but you'll be head of the detectives by that time," I tell him. "You'll have your own car to drive."

He finishes off the rest of his hamburger in a single bite. "You gonna tell me what Mac meant that day?" he asks around the mouthful of food.

I frown. "Didn't your mother ever teach you not to chew with your mouth open?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Nope. Now tell me. Or I'll go to Mac myself and ask him."

I smile. "Mac won't tell you either, Jim." I sigh, deciding to put him out of his misery...at least a little bit. "It's a promise for the future," I tell him.

"What?" he asks with dismay, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "What kind of answer is THAT?"

"The truth," I tell him, standing up and taking my lunch discards over to the trash.

Reed follows. "The truth? I don't get it, Pete."

I turn around and look at him. I shrug. "It's just what I said, Jim. The conversation between Mac and I that day in the hospital was a promise for the future. That's it."

He tosses his garbage into the trash barrel. "You know, sometimes I think talking to you is like talking to the Sphinx," he says, shaking his head. He snorts. "The truth...a promise for the future."

"Trust me, young grasshopper, eventually you will learn," I tell him in my wisest-elder voice as I head over to the black-and-white squad car.

He starts to climb in on the passenger side, sulking. Then he brightens. "Okay, can I at least have SOME idea of what this so-called 'promise for the future' is?"

I cock my head, pretending to consider it quite seriously. "Well, I WOULD tell you," I drawl. "But I don't want to spoil the surprise."

He studies me. "Somehow, I get the feeling that you're enjoying this rather immensely."

"You bet. Clear us."

He picks up the mike and clears us from our seven. "So what's the surprise?" he asks casually, obviously hoping that maybe I'll let it slip. "And don't tell me it's a promise for the future, either."

"Reed, if I tell you now, it won't be a surprise, will it?" I ask. "Besides, didn't anyone ever tell you that good things come to those that wait?"

"But I can't wait two whole years to find out what it is!" he groans. He looks at me with a frown. "You're not gonna tell me, are you?"

I shake my head, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "Nope."

"You know what, Pete? Keep your silly, stupid ol' secret," he grumbles, looking out the window as he sulks once more. "I probably don't really want to know what it is. It's probably something incredibly dull, like buying yourself a new car."

"I wouldn't exactly consider buying myself a new car all that dull, Reed. It's actually pretty exciting," I say, steering the car down Wilshire Boulevard. "And as far as trying to discover what my secret is, all I can say is, you're learning."

A faint smile appears on his face. "Yeah, from the best," he replies. Then he shrugs nonchalantly. "Eh, don't worry, I'll eventually figure it out, and then your big secret won't be a secret any longer."

"Maybe," is all I'll tell him as we settle back into our routine patrol. "It's taken all *this* time and you still haven't got a clue, so what makes you think you'll figure it out eventually?"

"I have two years to do it in, don't I?" he asks wryly.

"That you do, partner, that you do," I say. "And it's gonna be fun torturing you until you do."

"Gee, THANKS, Pete," he says sarcastically. "Can't I have at least ONE little hint?" he wheedles. "Just a *tiny* one?"

"Okay," I sigh. "Just one. That's it. No more. Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies. Got it?"

He nods eagerly. "Lay it on me, daddy-o."

I glance over at him. "Daddy-o?" I ask with a snort.

"An Elvis Presley movie was on last night and Jean and I watched it," he says. "So give me a hint," he says, rubbing his hands together in gleeful anticipation.

"The hint is..." I play it out as long as I can.

"Yeah, c'mon Pete. I don't want to die of old age before you reveal it," he says, impatience creeping into his voice.

"I'd probably die of old age first, thereby taking the secret to my grave with me," I tell him. "Anyway, the hint is..."

"Yeah, yeah, tell me already!" he says with avid curiosity. "I'll bet I can guess it with just the hint you give me."

"I seriously doubt it," I tell him. "The hint is...it's in the future."

"That's not a hint!" he cries. "No fair! You've already TOLD me THAT, Pete!"

I look over at him. "What can I say?" I ask with a shrug. "That's all I can tell you about it. The conversation between Mac and I is just a promise for the future. Nothing more than that." He starts to say something, but I hold my hand up, interrupting him. "And quit asking me now. I'm not telling you anymore."

He slouches in the seat, pouting one of his patented Jim Reed pouts. "You know, Pete, sometimes I really hate you," he mutters. Looking dejectedly out the window at the cityscape passing by, he shakes his head. "Promise for the future, right."

"You got it," I tell him, chuckling. "Daddy-o."

And, you know, it truly IS promise for the future, for both of us. But THAT, my friends, is a whole 'nother story...