

OF SORROW AND HONOR

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"Pete, the funeral arrangements have been made. Judy would like you to be one of the pallbearers," Lieutenant Val Moore was saying to me.

"No, Val, I can't. I can't do it," I said dully. "Tell her to ask someone else."

"She wants you to do it," Sergeant Bill MacDonald said. "You were his partner and his friend."

I studied my hands. "I don't know. I just don't feel right doing it." I took a sip of the amber liquid in my glass. "After all, I was the one who is responsible for Howie Parker's death."

Val sighed. "Pete, you are not responsible for Parker's death. Not at all. If you were, you'd have been dismissed from the department. You need to put that out of your mind."

"But, Val..."

"No arguments, Pete. There was nothing you could've done to have stopped the outcome."

"I was the one who decided to drive down that alleyway."

"Pete, it was a freak incident," Mac said.

I took another sip. "Maybe."

"Malloy, look. We're all saddened by Parker's death. It was unexpected and tragic, yes, but Parker died doing his job. It's a risk we take, we ALL take, whenever we put on the uniform," Val said.

"Pete, think of it like this," Mac said. "You're honoring Howie Parker's memory one last time. It's a show of respect, not only to him, but to his family and the police department."

"Alright, alright, I'll be a damned pallbearer," I snapped. "Anything to get you two off of my back."

They stared at me in surprise. I had never spoken sharply to either Val or Mac in the years that they had known me. Val cleared his throat. "Well," he said, taking a folded envelope from his uniform pocket. He laid it on top of my coffee table. "There's the mourning band. You'll need to wear it on your badge at all times, whenever you're in uniform."

"I know that." I shot Val a glare. "I've done funerals before, Val."

He exchanged a look with Mac. "Parker's visitation is tomorrow from 4-8 p.m. at the First United Methodist Church on Van Arden. Do you know where it is?"

I rolled my eyes, taking a sip of the liquid again. "Yes, Val, I know where it is. It IS in our patrol district." I set the glass down and it sloshed a bit on my coffee table. I didn't care.

Val's eyes narrowed as he regarded me. "It would be NICE if you could make an appearance, express your condolences to Judy and the rest of Parker's family, especially since you haven't seen Judy since

the night of the shooting," Val's tone was clipped, indicating his increasing irritation with my attitude. "The funeral is set for 10 a.m., Thursday, at the church. You are to be at the station by 9 a.m. to go over the final details and be transported to the church. I don't need to tell you it's full dress blues." He fixed me with a stony look. "And, I might add, you can leave the attitude here at your apartment, Malloy."

"I think I'm allowed to have an attitude, Val," I said testily. "I was the one who saw his partner die."

Mac jumped in, trying to defuse the situation. "Pete, I've got you scheduled to work Friday. Do you think you'll be able to handle it, or do you need more time off?"

"I can handle it," I said, wishing they'd hurry up and leave. "Hell, I could even come back tomorrow night if you needed me to."

"No, Pete, we've got it covered," Mac said hastily. "Besides, you're still on paid leave until Friday."

"Yeah," I said. "I don't know WHY...I'm fine to come back to work."

"It's policy, Pete," Val said, standing up. He and Mac headed to the door. "Oh, and Malloy?" Val asked.

"Yeah?"

"I'd better not smell any whiskey on your breath," he said sternly, pointing to the bottle and glass on my table. "And you'd damned well better be stone-cold sober tomorrow and Thursday. Otherwise you'll have BOTH of us to answer to."

"Yes, Father," I said snidely.

Val shook his head as he and Mac left.

I downed what was left in the shot glass in one gulp. I poured myself another shot. The whiskey burned a warm, comforting fire in my stomach. I didn't normally drink, not hard liquor, and not by myself. But, I mused, gazing at the amber liquid in my glass, what better reason to drink than to toast the passing of a good friend and partner?

"Here's to you, Parker," I said, lifting the glass in salute. "May the rain never bother you now, and may you never be stuck with a stupid partner like me." I downed the shot.

A familiar buzzing sensation in my skull told me the whiskey was definitely kicking in. I clumsily screwed the cap back on the bottle and left the shot glass sitting on the coffee table. I stumbled into my bedroom, falling into bed. Maybe, just maybe, I could sleep tonight. I closed my eyes.

The rain sheeting down...think we'll take a run down the alley, then we'll call it a night...we surprise the guy trying to break into the warehouse...he takes off running, Parker in pursuit...the blast of a shotgun...Parker drops...lying there in the rain, his chest crimson...his eyes dead and staring...I put my hand over the wound...his cold hand suddenly clamps over my wrist...I try to jerk away...his other hand

grabs me by the throat, choking me...No! I rasp...it should be you, Malloy, not me...I can't escape...a flash of lightning and it's not Parker lying there, dead...it's me...

Gasping, I woke up in a cold sweat. Rubbing my face with a shaky hand, I glance at my alarm clock. 3 a.m. I thought about another shot of whiskey, but my stomach rolled in response. I got up and padded into the bathroom to splash cold water on my face. I rummaged in the medicine cabinet for a bottle of aspirin. Finding it, I popped the cap off and shook two out. I cupped my hand to catch some water and downed them. I shut the cabinet door, catching sight of my reflection in the mirror. My eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, my face deathly pale.

"You look like hell, Malloy," I told myself. I pressed the palms of my hands to my temples, trying to still the pounding in my head. It didn't work. I turned the light off and went back to the bedroom.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I picked up the pack of cigarettes on my nightstand, shaking one out and lighting it. I drew the smoke deep into my lungs. I sat there, staring at my dress uniform hanging in my closet. The one I would wear to bury my friend. I dreaded the next two days. I lay back down, but didn't close my eyes.

I knew that sleep would come no more for me tonight.

I parked my car outside of the First United Methodist Church. One of the oldest churches in Los Angeles, it was a huge, stately structure that was serene instead of imposing. I didn't get out, I just sat there in my car, staring at the church. My knuckles were white on the steering wheel. I didn't want to go in, I didn't want to be there at all. I was doing a good job of keeping all of my emotions in icy numbness, but going inside that church would unthaw some of them, I feared. Cold horror bounced around in my gut.

Someone tapped on the driver's side glass. I looked up to see Bob Brinkman and his wife standing there. I rolled the window down.

"You comin' in, Pete?" he asked me.

"Yeah, Brink, in a minute," I told him.

"Do you want to walk in with us?"

"No, you two go on ahead."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm SURE!" I snapped.

Brinkman stared at me for a second, then shrugged, taking his wife by the arm. As they walked up to the church, I heard her ask, "Is he the one who got Howie Parker shot?"

I put my head down on the steering wheel. I couldn't go in there, face all those people. I just couldn't. I didn't want them whispering, "He's the one who got his partner shot," condemning me with their harsh words and disgusted looks. I didn't want to face Judy, especially Judy, Howie's pretty little wife who was now a young widow, tragedy and stupidity on my part whisking her husband away from her. They would never grow old together, never see their baby girl, Jenny, grow up into a beautiful young woman, never get to enjoy the bright life they had planned out for themselves. All Judy would have now is a cold, unfeeling headstone in a lonely cemetery...because of me. If I hadn't of decided to take that drive down the alley; if I had used my head as senior officer and chased after the suspect instead of Howie...it would be MY funeral, not his. Waves of guilt and remorse washed over me.

I looked back up at the church. I could leave, say that something came up. I'd never have to go inside and see Howie's casket, his widow and baby girl, his grieving parents. Yes, I could leave. Make some excuse. The line was too long, I didn't want to wait. I didn't think anyone would notice that I hadn't made an appearance. Brinkman might say something, but I could come up with a little white lie. What did it matter?

"You aren't thinking of leaving, are you, Pete?" asked Mac, startling me. He was standing at the window, a stern look on his face. His wife, Mary, stood next to him.

"Uh, yeah, actually I was," I mumbled. "What difference does it make anyway, whether I'm there or not?"

"It'll make a lot of difference, Malloy," Val said, coming up behind Mac. "Especially to Judy."

Sighing, I grudgingly got out of the car. I straightened my suit jacket and tie. I nodded a curt greeting to Mary and Elizabeth, Val's wife. Mac and Val flanked me as we walked up to the church. Trying to keep me from escaping, I thought sourly.

Val caught my sleeve before we went up the steps. "You did leave the attitude at home, didn't you, Pete?"

I nodded. "Give me credit, Val. I'm not going to act like a jerk in front of Judy."

He raised an eyebrow. "You certainly acted like a jerk last night to MacDonald and I," he said.

I didn't answer.

The church vestibule was cool inside. There wasn't too long of a line to stand in, but I felt fidgety just the same. Mac and Mary were ahead of me, Val and Elizabeth behind me. Mac kept glancing back at me. Finally I scowled at him, and he exchanged another one of those looks with Val. The line moved slowly up to the front of the church, where Howie's family received condolences, and his casket lay.

I glanced once at his casket, morbid horror forcing me to look. It was closed, I noted, and I was glad of that. I didn't want to see the face of Howie Parker...I had seen it once in death, and the thought of his eyes staring emptily into the rain made me shiver. I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose.

"You okay, Pete?" Elizabeth asked me in a concerned tone.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I shrugged. "Just a bit of a headache."

My brain dragged my eyes back to the casket. It had the American flag draped over it, and it stood, a splash of red, white and blue sorrow amid the muted sunlights of the church's stained glass windows. Howie's official departmental photograph stood on a wooden easel nearby, black cloth covering the top part of the frame. Flowers and wreaths adorned the steps leading up to the bier. Their perfume ran together overwhelmingly, and I swallowed back a wave of nausea. I ducked my head down, shifting nervously on my feet.

Mac looked back at me. "Easy, Pete," he said as Val put a hand on my shoulder.

I shook Val's hand off. "I'm fine," I said irritably. I fiddled with the cuff button on my jacket. Sweat ran down my back and I looked up at the ceiling of the church. I would've prayed for some Divine Intervention, but I had coldly turned my back on God the night of Parker's death. I would pray to Him for nothing, now. I looked down at the marble floor, wondering if maybe it would open up and let me be swallowed by the bowels of Hell.

Judy sat in the front pew, her face white and drawn with fatigue. A small black hat with a tiny veil attached sat perched on her head, and it bobbed gently, the veil fluttering a little, as she sadly greeted people expressing their condolences. Her voice was heavy with tears. Jenny, their little girl, sat quietly on Judy's lap, her gaze solemnly studying each person as they clasped Judy's hand. She was only six months old, so she would have no memory at all of her father.

Panic began to swell inside of me as I noticed that Mac and Mary were up next in line. I glanced back at Val, wishing I could bolt for the door. Instead, he nudged me forward.

Judy looked up at me. "Oh, Pete," she said, fresh tears starting to roll down her face. "I'm so glad you could come. Howard always looked up to you, said you were the perfect police officer."

"Er, uh, thank you, Judy," I stammered, taking her hand gently. I quickly bent and gave her a peck on the cheek. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you, Pete," she said sadly.

I quickly mumbled my condolences to Howie's parents and brother, unable to look them in the eyes. I felt sure they knew I was the one who let their son and brother get killed. The panic I was feeling gripped at my heart with icy claws, and every breath I took brought in the sickening stench of the flowers. I knew I had to get out of there, fast. I pushed past Mac, quickly threading my way through the crowd of people in the vestibule. I heard him call my name, but I ignored him, jamming my hands into my pockets and hurrying down the steps. Head down, I fled to my car. I quickly started it up and pulled out, the tires throwing up gravel in my haste to escape. I headed for the freeway, nudging the car up to 70 miles per hour. I loosened my tie and drank in the evening air in great heaving gulps, until I felt the panic loosen its grip and the queasiness leave me. I drove, not really sure where I was headed. I just

wanted to get away from the city, away from the sorrow. If I wasn't there tomorrow, they'd have to find another pallbearer.

But my sense of duty kicked in. I'd agreed to carry out that final honor for Howie, and I was damned if I'd shirk it. I had to see it through, no matter what. I turned the car around and headed back to Los Angeles. I dreaded going home.

Suddenly an idea formed in my mind. I'd go to the police academy training grounds and go for a jog on their track. While exercise didn't appeal to me too much, I knew it always left me exhausted. Maybe that would help me sleep. I knew I had a pair of sneakers & a track suit in my gym bag in the trunk, so I nosed the car in the direction of the academy.

I pulled into the academy parking lot and parked, getting my bag out of the trunk. I showed my identification at the desk and rented a locker to hang my suit in. I quickly changed, grabbed up a towel from a stack by the door, and headed out to the track.

I was happy to see that there weren't too many people out on the track. A small handful of academy recruits trotted around the track under the critical gaze of their instructor. I remember my own recruit days all too well, I thought to myself as I tossed the towel onto a bench. I stretched, warming up. I waited for the recruits to leave the track before I started off on my solitary jog. A single recruit sat in the stands, taking advantage of the nice evening to study. He glanced up as I jogged past, but returned to his book.

I paced myself on the track, clearing my head of all thoughts except just running. It felt good not to think. I jogged for at least ten minutes, until my legs began to feel heavy. I glanced at my watch and decided to take the last lap in a sprint. I put all of my speed into it. I came to a stop at the track entrance, my lungs burning and sweat rolling down my face. I did some cool-down stretches and sat down on the bench, grabbing up the towel and wiping my face. I tried to catch my breath.

The lone recruit who'd been sitting in the stands closed his book and stood up. He came down the cement steps, approaching me. "Excuse me, sir?" he asked.

I looked up at him. He was tall and lanky, with brown hair and steady blue eyes. "Yeah, kid, what do you want?" I asked, really not wanting company.

"Are you a police officer for Los Angeles, sir?" he asked, standing in front of me.

"Yeah, why?"

"What division are you in, sir?"

"Central Division." I said.

"Oh, the one where that police officer got shot the other day," he said. "Did you know him, sir?"

"Yeah, I did," I said. "He was a friend of mine." I offered no more. "Aren't you a little young to be a police officer?" I asked, squinting at him with a critical eye.

He shook his head. "No, sir. I'm twenty-three. I graduate next week." He gave me a big smile. "I'm really hoping I get assigned to Central. I hear it's a good division to get."

"Yeah, I guess." I shrugged.

"Have you been a police officer for very long, sir?"

"Seven years," I told him.

"You must like it then," he mused. "I can't wait for my first day on the job." He stuck his hand out for me to shake. "I'm Jim Reed, by the way."

I shook his hand. "Pete Malloy."

"Well," he said, "I should head home. My wife's expecting me." He gave me another huge grin. "It was nice meeting you, Officer Malloy, sir. Maybe if I get Central, I'll see you around." He chuckled. "Or maybe you'll even be my training officer, who knows?"

"Maybe, kid," I said. "But I doubt you'd want me as your training officer."

He shrugged. "You never know. It's funny how life turns out sometimes." He turned and headed off to the track entrance.

I sat on the bench for a while longer, enjoying the solitude of the field. Finally I'd had enough solitude and got up, grabbing the towel. I headed to the locker room, changed, and left the academy, weary from my run. Once home, I took a shower and dropped into bed. Maybe, just maybe, I could catch some sleep tonight. I closed my eyes, willing sleep to come.

The blast of a shotgun...a figure lying on the ground in the rain...I approach warily...Howie? I ask, kneeling down...the eyes stare into the rain...Howie?...I put my hand on his chest...his icy hand grips mine and I try to jerk away...lightning flashes...it's not Howie lying there, it's that Reed kid from the academy...Don't let me die, he whispers...save me...I can't...it's funny how life turns out sometimes...

I woke up with a start. I flicked on the light on my nightstand. I repeated my ritual of last night, cold water and two aspirin, followed by a cigarette. I went out to the kitchen, grabbing the whiskey bottle and the shot glass. I poured myself some. One drink wouldn't hurt me, I thought to myself as I gulped it down. Maybe it'll help. Surely Val wouldn't begrudge me one drink. So I poured another and downed it. I put the cap back on the bottle and padded back to bed.

As I lay there, staring into the unrelenting darkness, I wondered just how long I could keep this up before I either dropped from sheer exhaustion or went completely insane.

The morning of Howie Parker's funeral was clear, the sun already shining bright. I showered and shaved, not meeting my eyes in the mirror. I dressed with dread, buttoning the long-sleeved dark blue uniform shirt with shaky fingers, tucking it into my uniform pants. The starch crackled and the creases were razor-sharp. I knotted the tie perfectly, placing the silver tie clasp on to hold it in place. I took the heavy woolen dress coat off of its hanger; the Los Angeles Police Department shoulder patches and my five-year hash mark on the sleeve bright splashes of color against the dark blue. I fumbled with the gold buttons, finally getting them done up, tightening the coat belt around my waist. My Sam Browne belt lay across a chair, its black leather gleaming. I picked it up gingerly, not wanting to leave fingerprints. Running the strap through my right shoulder epaulet, I hooked it onto my gunbelt, my fingers brushing the symbolically empty holster. How ironic, I mused, no guns at a police officer's funeral, as if to make us forget that Baker died by gun. We live by the weapon, we may die by the weapon, but heaven forbid, we should show up at a funeral wearing a weapon...not even our nightsticks. I snapped the holster guard into place, missing the familiar heft of the revolver at my side.

The last two items to go on my uniform lay on my dresser. I picked up my shooting medal and pinned it onto the coat. I picked up the envelope marked "Malloy, 1968" that Val had given me the night before. I removed the black elastic mourning band, holding it in my palm for a second. I picked up my badge, shined to an inch of its life, and, holding the badge by the pin, I slid the black band over it, careful not to cover up my badge number or leave a smudge. I pinned the badge on and solemnly studied myself in the mirror. I picked up my white gloves and hat from the dresser. Outwardly, I was prepared to bury my partner and my friend today.

Inwardly, I wasn't so sure.

I met up with the other pallbearers at the station. Bob Brinkman, Ed Wells, Jerry Walters, Dave Russo, Jerry Woods, and myself stood in the assembly room, awaiting last-minute instructions from Sergeant MacDonald and Lieutenant Moore.

"I must say, we cut quite dashing figures," Ed Wells joked in a phony British accent. "We should attend funerals more often."

"Shut up, Ed," I said, from the back of the room.

"Well, well, the great Peter Malloy speaks," he jibed. "I thought maybe you had taken a vow of silence."

"Ed, maybe YOU should take a vow of silence," I snapped. "Do us all a favor."

"Now, Pete, don't get your Irish up," he said. "After all, you're our enigma for today."

I shook my head. "I'll bet you don't even know what enigma means, Wells."

"Are you insulting my intelligence, Malloy?" he asked.

"Ed, a ROCK has more intelligence than you," I said with a mean smirk.

"Well, Malloy, at least I'm smart enough to know that it should've been the senior man in the car that gave chase to that suspect, not Baker," he sniffed haughtily.

"THAT DOES IT!" I roared, starting towards Wells with my fists clenched. "I'M GONNA KICK YOUR ASS!"

"Try it, Malloy!" he taunted.

Brinkman darted in front of me, waving his hands. "Pete, just cool it."

"Outta my way, Brink, or I'll deck you, too," I threatened.

"Hold it, hold it!" Mac shouted from the doorway as he and Val hurried in. "No one is going to deck anyone!"

Val fixed Wells and I with an icy glare. "I suggest you two gentlemen settle down. I'll not have the pallbearers fighting amongst themselves like street thugs. Need I remind you two that this is a FUNERAL, and a certain amount of decorum is expected, especially from the men who will be escorting the casket and folding the flag?"

I dropped my eyes, woefully ashamed of myself. Wells did the same. Silence set in.

Val shook his head. "Now that we've calmed down, I'll go over the final details. Malloy and Walters, as senior men on the watch, you will be the two lead pallbearers. At the church, when we enter, Sergeant MacDonald and I will split you into two formations of three. You will march down the aisle SLOWLY," (at this he glanced at Wells and I) "And take your seats in the front pew on the left. When the final prayer is said, you will move to the casket."

"What about the flag?" Brinkman asked. "Will it be fastened down already?"

Val nodded. "Yes, it will be. The funeral home should have done that prior to the service. Malloy and Walters, you will be at the head of the casket, right and left side. Brinkman and Wells, the middle right and left, Russo and Woods, the bottom right and left. The minister will give you a signal when the final prayer is through, to begin removing the casket from the church. Everyone has to be in perfect synchronicity. You will carry the casket down the steps to the hearse. Once at the cemetery, you will do the same thing. The funeral director will remove the strap holding the flag in place prior to you taking the casket out. Once you get the casket to the gravesite, you will move it into place, then move off to the right. The minister will say a few words and a prayer, then you are to move back to the casket to fold the flag. Once again, it must be perfect. Malloy will hand the flag to the Chief of Police, who will present it to Judy Baker. There will be the 21-gun salute, Taps, and that is it." He coughed. "I don't need to remind you gentlemen that this is a very solemn affair, and I expect each of you to act accordingly. That means no gawking at the attendees, eyes front at all times, and remember, it's right foot first."

Brinkman looked confused. "When do we give the salute?"

"At the gravesite, prior to folding the flag. Any other questions?" He looked around at us. "If any of you is unsure of the proceedings, ask now, as there won't be a chance once we get to the church. Take your cues from Malloy and Walters if something confuses you."

MacDonald handed out the funeral programs, a white lily adorning the cover and the Lord's Prayer inside. "I picked these up at the church this morning," he said. "I thought it might give you guys an idea of the pacing of the funeral."

I glanced at mine and then folded it, tucking it inside my coat.

"Alright, gentlemen, I believe it's time we head for the church," Val said. "Sergeant, you take Malloy, Brinkman and Russo in your car. Walters, Wells and Woods, you're with me." He turned back to us just before we left the building. "Oh, and a bit of advice...don't put your gloves on until we get to the church. We don't want them to get dirty."

I climbed into the passenger seat next to Mac. The antenna on the car bore a black ribbon around it. The breeze fluttered the ends of it. The flag outside the station flew at half-staff, as did the other flags we passed. I leaned back in the seat and closed my eyes.

"You doing okay, Pete?" Mac asked worriedly.

"I'm fine," I said. "Really. The sunlight was just kind of bothering me." Icy fingers of dread fluttered in my stomach like the black ribbon fluttered on the antenna. If I kept my eyes closed, I didn't have to see the sorrow expressed by the citizens of Los Angeles. My own sorrow weighed heavily on my shoulders.

The church was packed when we arrived, in fact people had lined up outside that couldn't find a seat inside. Every division in Los Angeles had sent a contingent of officers to Parker's funeral. I spotted the khaki uniforms of the Highway Patrol, the grey of the State Police officers, the black of the Sheriff's office. Officers from all over the state had come to pay their respects to Howie. Obviously not everyone could fit inside the church. Two large speakers set up on platforms would pipe the service outside. News media and curious bystanders were kept back from the funeral-goers by barricades. Uniformed police officers from other divisions had stepped in to provide traffic and crowd control for the funeral, the procession, and the burial. Mac had told us that some of the recruits from the academy would also be providing assistance. Briefly I wondered if the kid I'd met last night would be among them.

"Jesus," Brinkman said as we got out of the car. "Look at the size of that crowd."

I smoothed my uniform down, flexing my fingers in the white gloves. The others did the same. We glittered and gleamed in the sunlight, from our hats to our shoes.

"Yeah," Mac said. "There's always something about a police or a firefighter funeral that draws the curious." He glanced around at the crowd. "At least there's not any protestors. I can't stand it when they show up and disrupt a sad time for the family."

The eight of us walked up the church steps. Inside the vestibule, Val greeted the funeral director. He nodded to us. "The pallbearers can go ahead and take their seats." He gave a signal to someone inside.

Mac gripped my shoulder and whispered, "Hang in there, Pete." He lined up Brinkman and Russo behind me, as Val did the same with Walters' bunch. He and Mac took spots at the rear, and I knew that they would be seated in pews behind us.

I glanced at Walters out of the corner of my eye and he gave me a curt nod. We began the precise march down the aisle, the only sound heard was the clicking of our shoes on the marble. We reached the pew, Walters and his two going in first; me and my two last. Once seated, we removed our hats, placing them in our laps.

Judy Parker came up the aisle, carrying baby Jenny. She was followed by Howie's parents and brother. Brinkman turned around to look. I tugged on his coat sleeve, hissing, "Brink, eyes FRONT!" out of the side of my mouth.

"Sorry, Pete," he whispered.

The minister, dressed in black robes, took the pulpit. "Please rise," he intoned. There was a shuffling as everyone got to their feet. "Let us pray," he said, launching into the Lord's Prayer.

I bowed my head and closed my eyes, but I refused to pray. I denied that homage to God.

The minister instructed us to be seated and once we were, he began a praise-filled tribute to Howie. I ignored it, my eyes fixed on Howie's casket, but my mind remembering Howie Parker as I knew him.

Guess what, Pete, I'm gonna be a daddy!...I don't care if it's a boy or a girl...I can play catch with a little boy, and have tea parties with a little girl...tea parties, Howie? Right, I can really see you doing that...Pete, kids are fun, you should get married and find out for yourself...Nah, I'd rather leave the old married stuff to you and Judy and have fun being a bachelor...we painted the nursery this weekend and I put the crib together...Judy's having a blast picking out baby stuff, little tiny sleeper outfits and little tiny socks...geez, Howie, you're making me sick with all your talk about babies, the kid hasn't even been born yet...Judy figures she's due to deliver around our fifth wedding anniversary, wouldn't that be quite a present if she delivered on that day?...have a cigar, Pete, I'm the proud father of one sweet little girl, named Jennifer Louise Parker!...here, would you like to hold her?...I'm afraid I'll drop her, Howie...no you won't Malloy, she's got to get to know her Uncle Pete...Uncle Pete?...yeah, Judy and I decided to make you an honorary uncle...uh, Howie, this doesn't mean I actually have to do anything, other than spoil her, right?

The minister ended his tribute and turned the pulpit over to the Chief of Police, Thomas Reddin. I pretty much knew his speech, since it was practically the same speech he gave at previous police funerals, with just the names changed. I let my mind wander again.

Jenny's got colic, she kept us up most of the night with her fussing...I'm so tired I could sleep in the squad...I don't think the Sergeant would approve of that, Howie...aw, Pete, come on, just a few winks...that's why I'm in no hurry to get married and have kids, you lose your freedom and your sleep,

too...it's not so bad, Malloy, especially when Jenny smiles at me...I think that's just gas, Howie...Peter Malloy, the eternal realist...I think I'm going to take the Sergeant's exam next month, Pete...oh yeah? Good for you, you should pass it easily...why don't you take it, Malloy?...I like the street work, not the paperwork...yeah, you wouldn't like being chained to a desk all shift...in a way, I hate to take it and break up our partnership in Adam-12, but Judy wants me to advance in my career...don't worry about the partnership, Howie, we'll still be friends...ah, but who'd look after you, Malloy? Someone's gotta keep you from gun-wielding thugs and crazy psychos, not to mention the little old ladies who think you're just darling...worry about yourself, Parker, you might sustain a serious papercut from all that paperwork you'll have to do...guess what, Pete! I made sergeant!...congratulations, Howie!...I'll be promoted in the next round of, well, promotions...that's great!...the only thing is, I may not be in Central Division after I get it...just as long as you don't get shootin' Newton, you'll be fine, I have complete faith...thanks, Pete.

The Chief of Police finished and the Captain of our division got up to speak. I sighed. This was why I hated funerals, all the pontificating and the speeches about how wonderful the deceased was, even if he or she was really hell on wheels in real life.

I hate rain, it's making me catch a cold...hey, you're dripping water on the floor, Howie...yeah, I'm thinking of turning Adam-12 into an ark...I just wish they'd put decent heaters into some of these older cars, ain't even taking the moisture away enough to see...be happy we even have windshield wipers...Sunday's sermon: What You Leave Behind...sounds pretty dull to me...ashes to ashes, dust to dust...how wise, Pete, the great sage of Adam-12...for that, maybe I oughta turn around and leave you behind at that church, let you get a little bit of preaching...nah, I'd just give the poor folks a cold...god, I hate colds, and the rain, and this stupid car with the worthless heater, and a partner who isn't feeling sorry for me...poor old Howie, I feel even sorrier for your wife...why?...she has to take care of you when you get sick, not me...think we'll take a run down the alley, then we'll call it a night...Dispatch, this is Adam-12, we have a 459 suspect in the alleyway behind Pollet's Warehouse at 4500 Clearwater Drive, request a back-up unit...okay, pal, hands where we can see them...

Howie's father was the final one to speak. He got up, clearing his throat several times, and began the family eulogy to Howie. I stared down at my gloves, willing myself not to listen. I didn't want to hear, especially from Howie's family, what a great guy he was. I already knew that for myself, from the two years that he was my partner. Brinkman shifted in his seat, fidgeting. He glanced at me to see if I was going to correct him, but I didn't. I closed my eyes and stifled a yawn.

Dispatch, this is Adam-12, we have a 459 suspect on foot in the alley behind Pollet's Warehouse, we need back-up immediately...the blast of a shotgun, Parker falling heavily to the ground...Dispatch, this is Adam-12, we are under fire, officer down!...officer down!...oh my god, Howie...the water dripping off of my coat as I kneel down next to him...bright red blossoming viciously on his rain coat, running in rivulets onto the wet pavement...I put my hand to his chest, horrified at the sticky crimson that covers my palm...lightning flashes, thunder rumbles overhead as Howie Parker leaves his life behind; the cold, harsh rain washing his blood away...Pete, Pete, is Parker okay?...Malloy, is Parker?...oh my god...get the Sergeant and Lieutenant out here on the double...Pete, we got the suspect, he's DOA...did you hear me, Pete?...I think he's in shock...Pete, we're gonna need you to come with us...could someone put a blanket over Howie? He hates the rain...Pete, he's dead...that should be me lying there, Howie's got a family to take care of...it should be me...Pete, things happen, you couldn't have stopped it...we never

should've taken that run down the alley...I should've waited for our back-up but we figured the guy was unarmed, I didn't even shoot back at him...look, Pete, every shift is different, you roll the dice and take a chance...yeah, only this time we rolled the dice and my partner is dead...he's dead...and still the rain came down...

The minister got back up to say a final prayer for Howie Parker's soul. At the final "Amen", he gave the funeral-goers a moment to collect their thoughts, then he nodded to us. The organist began a mournful dirge, and the six of us stood up in unison, putting on our hats. We mounted the steps to the bier, Walters and I taking our places at the head of Howie's casket, the others taking theirs at the sides and the foot. We gripped the handles, and Walters whispered to us, "Ready", and we lifted the casket from the bier. We held it at an even height, making it seem as if the casket were gliding off of the bier effortlessly. The steps inside and outside the church would be the hardest to maneuver with the casket, but we had to make sure we didn't falter or bump the casket. As we walked onto the marble aisle, the funeral-goers stood, and as we passed the pews slowly, those that were in uniform gave a final salute to Howie. Judy and Howie's family followed us slowly. Once outside, a bagpiper began playing "Amazing Grace" as we carried the casket down the stairs. Two lines of uniformed officers, from our division and from other divisions, stood at attention on the steps, raising their hands in salute. I felt a lump thickening in my throat, but I choked it back. The black hearse stood waiting, the back door open, and we gently slid the casket into the vehicle, a funeral home assistant helping to keep the casket steady. Once it was in place, Walters and I shut the door. The whole time, from when we left the church, until now, the crowd outside was silent. Judy and Jenny, and Howie's parents and brother got into the black family limousine. The six of us went with Mac and Val to the two police cars. A contingent of motorcycle officers was parked at the entrance to the church parking lot, ready to escort us to the cemetery.

"Well done, gentlemen," Mac congratulated us, once we were in the car. "You did our division proud."

"I didn't realize that casket was going to be so heavy," Brinkman said. "And I thought my butt was going to fall asleep during the speeches, and then I wouldn't be able to stand up when it came our time."

"You did fine, Brink," I told him. "Just remember not to turn around and look at the family when they enter."

"Yeah, I wasn't thinking."

"Poor Judy, she sat there so stoically," Mac said. "And Jenny didn't fuss at all during the service. I was surprised. Most little ones won't sit still for that long."

"I thought that the minister was never gonna shut up, then the police chief had to give his speech, then the captain, then Howie's dad," Russo said. "If I never hear another speech this year, I'll be happy."

Mac looked at me. "You're awful quiet, Pete. You okay?"

"I'm fine."

The procession was ready to begin. Mac flipped on the headlights and the top lights. The motorcycle cops kept the speed to a sedate crawl. Val's car fell in behind us, then the hearse and the family car.

Once we put a bit of distance between us, Mac looked in the rearview mirror and said, "Turn around and look, boys, there's something you don't see very often."

We turned and looked. As far as the eye could see were police cars, lights flashing, following the family car. There must have been at least two miles of police cars.

"My god," Russo breathed.

As we crept down the road, every car we passed pulled off to the side, ordinary citizens honoring the funeral procession of a fallen police officer. Some got out of their cars, hands over their hearts. Some saluted.

"And just when you think the city doesn't care about us, they go and prove that they do," Brinkman said reverently.

"It's honor and respect, Brink," I said softly.

Mac coughed. I shot him a glance and saw that he was swallowing hard. "It's something to see," he said sadly. "It's too bad they don't treat us with respect all the time. It takes the murder of a good police officer to make them realize we are not Gestapo pigs in uniform, but we're human, too, just like them."

"We mourn just like them," Brinkman's voice wavered.

The cemetery appeared, its limestone wall and black wrought-iron gates looming up in the distance. Another crowd of people, much smaller than the one at the church, thronged about, held back by the recruits from the police academy.

"Where's Parker's gravesite?" Russo asked.

"Not too far inside the cemetery," Mac told him. "We'll park outside the gates."

The car ahead of us, carrying the minister and the solitary bagpiper stopped first. We came to a halt behind it, getting out of the car and once again smoothing down our uniforms. We met up with Val's group and approached the hearse, once again forming into our lines. The family was getting out of the limousine, Judy crying into a handkerchief. Walters opened the rear door of the hearse. The flag, as Val had said, had been freed from its restraint around the casket. Walters and I waited for the nod from the funeral director to begin the solemn removal of the casket from the hearse. We gripped the handles at the foot first, sliding it toward Brinkman and Wells, who caught it up, sliding it to Russo and Woods. Once the casket was out, we waited a beat, then turned and began the somber walk through the cemetery gates to Howie's final resting place. The bagpiper played "Going Home" as we carried the casket along, our steps and movements in precise, graceful unison. The family fell in behind us, followed by the rest of the mourners. Our feet crunched on the gravel drive of the silent cemetery. Once at Howie's gravesite, we carefully placed the casket on the winch that would lower it into the ground. We moved away quietly, going to stand with Lieutenant Moore and Sergeant MacDonald. The minister took his place at the head of the casket, his Bible in his hand. He waited a moment for the crowd to settle in, and he recited the 23 Psalm, blessing the ground in which Howie Parker's body would rest.

I kept my head down, hands clasped in front of me. I didn't pray, studying the bright green grass at my feet instead.

"And so we commit to this sacred ground, the body of Howard Stephen Parker, to rest in eternal peace. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," he intoned. "Keep the peace, Howie Parker."

At that, we moved back to our places beside the casket and, as one, gave Howie's casket the final, slow fade salute, our gloves flashing white in the sunlight. Sweat trickled down my back. The Chief of Police came to stand at the head of the casket, awaiting the folded flag. We took the flag into our hands, holding it taut by the edges. A breeze lifted it gently, the stars and stripes ribboning gracefully, as if also giving a quiet, final salute to the young man whose casket it had adorned. Carefully, precisely, the flag passed from my hands to Jerry Walters, to Bob Brinkman, to Ed Wells, to Dave Russo, to Jerry Woods, until it was a tight triangle with only the blue canton showing. It was then passed to me, and, one hand on the top of the flag, the other on the bottom, I handed the flag to the Chief of Police. He walked carefully to Judy Parker, kneeling down to present it to her with quiet thanks. We moved to stand next to Val and Mac, as the rifles fired their 21-gun salute. A lone bugler played "Taps", the mournful notes echoing across the quiet cemetery like silver teardrops. I glanced at those around me, seeing tears on their faces, even the faces of Val Moore and Bill MacDonald. My fellow pallbearers sniffled.

But me, I couldn't cry.

The station was subdued when I reported for my first shift back since the shooting. I suppose that's normal when an officer is killed in the line of duty, but it was a dramatic change from the usual noise and banter of the locker room prior to roll call. And it fell dead silent when I walked in. Ignoring it, I went to my locker and began to change into my uniform.

Bob Brinkman approached me. "You missed a nice luncheon yesterday afternoon at the academy cafeteria," he said.

"Yeah," I said, not looking up. I'd asked Mac to drop me at my car in the station parking lot after the gravesite service. I'd told him I had a raging headache, which wasn't too far from the truth. I'd wanted to go home and try to sleep, thinking maybe it would come easier to me in the daytime. Unfortunately, it didn't. I'd caught only 4 hours at the most, and kept waking up with the same nightmare.

"You know, Pete, if you ever want to talk..." Brinkman said hesitantly.

"I'm fine, Brink," I said, my voice tight. I kept my eyes on my locker.

"Really, Pete, I mean it."

"I know, Brink, but really, I'm fine." An edge of irritability crept into my tone.

"Pete, maybe you should..."

"Maybe you should shut the hell up, Brinkman!" I snapped, turning on him.

Hurt flashed in his eyes and he held his hands up in defeat. "Geez, Malloy, I was only trying to help," he muttered.

That did it for me. My anger flared hotly in my veins and I whirled on my co-workers in unbridled fury. "Help?" I snarled, my voice harsh. "I don't need help any more than I need your damned sympathy! Why don't you all just leave me alone? I'm fine! Get it? Peter Malloy is JUST FINE!" I spun back to my locker, slamming my fist into the metal door.

"MALLOY!" I heard MacDonald yell. His shoes clicked on the cement floor as he quickly approached me.

I kept my back to him, gritting my teeth. He put a hand on my shoulder and I whipped around, hand clenched into a fist, ready to punch him.

Surprised, Mac threw his arm up in a parry, then quickly stepped back, catching me by the wrist, stopping me. I started to fight him, blind with anger. I flailed out with my other fist, dealing him a glancing blow on the jaw. He yanked on my arm, knocking me off balance for a moment, but a moment was all it took. He looped an arm around my neck, pinning me in a chokehold. Brinkman grabbed my other arm.

"LET ME GO!" I yelled. I tried to break the chokehold, twisting my shoulders away from Mac. "LET ME GO, DAMNIT!" I howled.

"Get Val!" Mac ordered to Ed Wells, who along with the rest of my shift-mates, was watching the fight with wide-eyed horror. Wells ran for Val.

I flailed and thrashed, trying to break free. I spat and cussed at Mac and Brinkman, raining dire threats on them.

"Malloy, if you don't settle down, I'm gonna put you in cuffs!" Mac said.

"Try it!" I snapped.

Mac looked at Jerry Walters. "Jerry, cuff him!" he ordered, tightening the chokehold around my neck until I coughed. Still, I continued to struggle.

Walters hurried forward with his handcuffs, snapping them first onto the wrist Mac had ahold of, then the wrist Brinkman had. Mac deftly spun me around, pinning me against the row of lockers. I tried to twist back around, the fight not out of me yet, but Mac kicked my feet apart and grabbed me by the collar, slamming me face-first into the lockers.

"You wanna act like a punk, Malloy, you'll get treated like a punk," he snarled at me.

"You bastard!" I rasped, pressed against the metal. "You lousy bastard!"

Mac slammed me again against the locker. Blood trickled from my nose and I saw stars. "Malloy," he barked. "Do you want to keep breathing or keep up with the name-calling?"

I turned my head and sneered at him. "Screw you!" I spat.

"You men get to roll call!" Val ordered as he hurried into the locker room. "Walters, do a quick roll call and car assignment. They're on the table in the assembly room."

"But I need my handcuffs back!" Walters protested. Val quickly took his cuffs from the case on his belt and tossed them to Jerry. "There," he said. "Now go!"

The rest of the shift exited the locker room hastily, not wanting to bear witness to the punishment I would receive at the hands of my superior officers.

"What in the hell is going on in here?" Val demanded. "Wells told me Pete attacked you!"

Mac shook me by my collar. "He did, but he didn't inflict any damage."

"Pete, what has gotten into to you?" Val asked.

I didn't answer.

"Pete, answer me!"

Mutely, I shook my head. "Dunno," I rasped, panting with the exertion of fighting with MacDonald. Sweat rolled down my face. My uniform shirt was soaked.

"Do you still want to fight, Malloy, or have you settled down now?" Mac asked me.

"I'm done," I panted, all the fight in me gone.

Mac released me and I stumbled backwards. He and Val caught me by my arms and sat me down on the bench.

"The cuffs," I said, a sudden unexplainable panic gripping me. "Get the cuffs off of me, Mac, get the cuffs off of me, GET THE CUFFS OFF OF ME, NOW!" I hollered, hysteria shrilling my voice. Wild-eyed, I twisted my wrists in the metal bracelets, the chain taut in my struggle.

"Pete, QUIT!" Val commanded, grabbing my arm as Mac released me from the metal restraints.

I rubbed at my wrists while Mac grabbed a towel, handing it to me to wipe the blood from my nose. "Could I please have some water?" I stammered hoarsely. A cup of cool water was pressed into my hand. I kept my eyes down, not wanting to meet either man in the eye.

"Pete, do you want to talk?" Val asked, sitting down on the bench next to me.

Ashamed, I shook my head no.

Mac sat down on my other side. "Pete, if you're not handling things well right now, maybe you should take a few more days off. Get yourself together," he said gently.

"We know you're hurting, Pete, but the world didn't stop just because Parker got killed," Val told me.

"I know," I said. "I thought maybe coming back to work would be the best thing for me...maybe it was too soon." I didn't want to say that I had come back to work to do the job I loved, but now my heart was no longer in it. "Truth is, I'm not sure HOW to handle this whole mess."

"What do you mean, Pete?" Mac asked.

"I don't know. I just feel, well, numb. Like everything inside of me is a wall of ice."

"When was the last time you got any real sleep?"

I hesitated. "The night Parker died, when they gave me that shot to calm me down." I didn't dare tell them I was having nightmares, I didn't think they'd understand.

Val touched my shoulder, gently. "Pete, I think this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to put you back on paid leave for another week. I want you to go home, sleep, watch tv, do something not related to the job."

"Take a trip up to those fishing cabins up north," Mac suggested. "Get in some nice relaxing fishing. Take your mind off of here."

"But can you spare me the time off?"

"Yes, Pete, we can spare you some extra time off." Val's voice was gentle. "I think maybe you've just been too caught up in this incident. You need to start moving forward now."

I stared at my hands. "I guess," I said dully.

"Well, then, it's settled. As of now, you're on leave." Val patted my back. "Go home, Pete." He and Mac stood up, leaving me alone in the locker room.

Wearily, I changed back into my street clothes and went home. Once there, I called Mike Simmons, the owner of the fishing cabins Mac had suggested to me. I rented a cabin for a week. Then I tossed some

clothes into my suitcase, put my fishing gear in the trunk, and headed up north. Before I left, I dumped the remainder of the whiskey down the kitchen sink. I'd planned to let the fresh air clear my mind.

And somehow, I had the feeling it was going to help.

I spent five peaceful days fishing in relatively mind-numbing solace. The sixth day, it rained, and I stayed indoors, listening to the radio and watching a staticky tv. I had been doing a lot of thinking since my arrival at the cabins, and I had come to a decision. When I left the cabin on the afternoon of the final day, I felt I was making the right decision in the long run.

Once in Los Angeles, I stopped at the cemetery to see Howie Parker's grave. The headstone had already been put into place, a shiny black granite slab, with Parker's name, birth date, and date of death chisled into it. Nothing more. Dying flowers from the funeral lay around the stone. Kneeling, I placed my hand on the cool granite slab.

"I have something to say, Howie, something that's been on my mind since this happened," I said, the words coming out in a rush. I felt silly talking to a grave, but I hoped it would help ease my mind. "I am sorry, very sorry, that this happened to you. I never ever wanted this tragedy to befall a co-worker, especially one who was my partner and my friend. I keep seeing Judy and Jenny in my mind, and I hate like hell that Judy will never celebrate another birthday or anniversary with you, or feel your arms around her when you two danced, or spend the evening staring at the stars with you. And Jenny, well, she'll never get to play tea party with her daddy, or spend summer nights catching fireflies with you, or hear her daddy's wonderful laugh as she did something silly for him. I shot that all to pieces for you, Howie, and I can never say I'm sorry enough. I ruined a happy life for you and your family. They'll never share another moment with you. All they'll have is this cold granite rock and sad memories to comfort them."

I took a breath, continuing. "You were a hell of a cop, Howie, and a damn good partner. You would have made an excellent sergeant. You had great compassion for the people we came in contact with in our daily job, and you never shirked a responsibility or duty. I never worried who had my back in hairy situations, I knew you were there. You never let me down." I plucked at a blade of grass. "But I let you down, Howie. I should be the one who's six feet under, not you. I was the senior man in the car and I should have given chase. I wish like hell it was me who caught the shotgun blast, instead of you. I don't know if you can ever forgive me, I know I can't forgive myself. I've tried to quit thinking about it, but my mind goes back to it, time and time again. I live the horror and the shock of it all every waking moment, every single time I close my eyes to sleep. I've done a lot of thinking since this happened, and I've come to a decision. It's a tough decision, but I had to make it, for my own sanity." I closed my eyes, my voice a whisper. "I'm leaving the force, Howie, for good. I just don't think I can do it anymore, my heart isn't in it." I opened my eyes, studying the gravestone. I got to my feet, laying a palm on top of the stone. "You were a good friend, Howie, and I'll miss you," I rasped around the lump in my throat. "I never got to tell you that." I patted the gravestone gently. "Keep the peace, Howie Parker."

My emotions finally thawed and I cried, sobbing like a child. All of the sadness, all of the guilt, all of the deep, black sorrow I'd been keeping hidden inside me for the last two weeks, poured out. I went to

my knees and I wept until I could weep no longer and my sides ached from the wracking sobs. I sat there quietly for awhile, the sun slowly setting over the cemetery, picking out the glints of stone in Howie's grave marker. A gentle breeze danced around me, playfully lifting up the petals of the dying flowers and sending them swirling merrily. A sense of profound peace settled over me. I left the cemetery, one more stop for me to make before I headed home.

And in the breeze, I swear I heard Howie's laughter.

I knocked on the glass door to the Watch Commander's office. Val Moore motioned for me to enter.

"Hey, Pete, how was vacation?" he asked. "Did you catch any fish?"

"Yeah, some. It was nice to get away, gave me some space to think," I said.

Mac walked by in the hallway and saw me in Val's office. He popped his head in. "Hey, Malloy, you're looking rested! You ready to get back in the saddle again?"

"Well, uh, actually, that was something I wanted to talk to you two about," I said.

Mac came on into Val's office, shutting the door. "What's up, Pete, you need some more time?"

"Uh, no, not really..."

"Well, great! What do you want to do, switch shifts or something? I'm sure I could work it out on the schedule. It might be a bit tight, but I can swing it, I think," he said.

"I'm quitting the job," I said.

Stunned, they stared at me in open-mouthed surprise. Val recovered first. "What do you MEAN you're quitting the job? You've got seven years on the force!"

"I know it, but I just don't think the job is a good fit for me anymore."

"A good fit? Malloy, did you get into some loco-weed up north?" Mac asked. "I can't imagine you leaving the force! You said you'd always wanted to be a cop!"

"Well, things have changed." I shrugged. "I've been doing a lot of thinking. I just don't feel I can be an effective police officer any more. I lost a little piece of my soul the night Parker died, and I don't ever want to go through that horror again." I sighed. "I had to face it, my heart is no longer in the job."

"But, Pete, what are you going to do?" Mac asked me.

"Dunno. Maybe go out East. Get a job on one of the fishing boats." I laughed. "Hell, who knows, I might even become a writer. Pen my memoirs."

"I just don't believe it," Val said, shaking his head. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"No joke, Val. I'm really turning in my badge and gun."

"When are you leaving?" Mac said.

"Well, I hate to spring this on you guys so suddenly, but tomorrow will be my last shift."

"That doesn't leave us much time for a farewell party," Mac said.

"No parties, Mac. In fact, I'd really appreciate it if you two didn't say anything to anyone about me leaving. Just let me go quietly."

"There's nothing we can say to talk you out of it?" Val asked hopefully. "I hate to see one of my police officers make a decision he may regret later on. Take some more days, think about it."

"I've thought about it, Val. It's what I really want to do. My mind's made up."

"You realize there's no going back?" he asked.

"I do."

He exchanged a long look with Mac. "Well, if your mind is well and truly made up, then I guess we have no choice other than to accept your decision."

"I'll have my letter of resignation on the Captain's desk by tomorrow night."

Val stood up. "In case I don't get a chance to say this tomorrow, it's been great working with you, Pete." He grabbed my hand in a firm handshake. "I wish you the best of luck."

Mac shook my hand, too. "Yeah, Malloy, it's been a good seven years. Good luck to you."

Smiling, I accepted their well-wishes. "Thanks, Val, Mac. I'll miss you guys." I strode out of the office, finally heading home. For the first time since Parker died, I slept peacefully, no nightmares.

And completely unaware that Lieutenant Val Moore and Sergeant William MacDonald had hatched a desperate plan between them to keep me from making the biggest mistake of my life.

Tomorrow's when we get those two new rookies, isn't it, Val?...yeah, it is...what's their names?...William Stenzler and James Reed...who's the best of the two?...Reed is, he finished up in the top ten of his class and he's a sharpshooter...Mac, you got something up your sleeve I should know about?...I think Peter Malloy is going to be a training officer for tomorrow night...for which one?...Reed, give him Reed...if that doesn't change Pete's mind, well, I guess he's gone...I hate to see him throw seven years of a good career down the drain, he's too good of an officer to lose...that's why he's getting a rookie tomorrow...well, I guess we'll soon see if it works...let's hope it does...let's hope it does...

"So you won't talk it over, eh?" Val asked me in the locker room as we were getting dressed for our shift.

"It all got said last night," I told him.

"I think you're making a big mistake, Pete," he continued, knotting his tie. "Seven years on the job, senior man on the watch."

"Maybe."

"You've been assigned a new man tonight, name's Reed. Jim Reed. He's 23 years old, a probationer," Val smiled a little.

I looked around him to see the lanky recruit from the academy track. I grimaced, rolling my eyes. "You'd never guess it, would you?" I told Val sarcastically.

"He finished up in the top ten of his class. He's shooting four-dollar money. Looks good on paper."

"They all do," I said dryly.

Val put on his hat and fixed me with an unreadable gaze. "It's too bad he won't have someone to hold his hand," he said.

I put my own hat on. "I did that once, remember?" I grabbed my nightstick, slapping it firmly in my palm.

Rookie or no rookie, tonight was my last night. I was certain of it.

My resignation letter lay on the top shelf of my locker. I took it down, staring at it. I tapped it against my thumbnail, thinking of tonight, Reed's first shift and my last one. I sat down on the bench, my chin cupped in my hand, lost in a whirl of thoughts.

"You're not supposed to think yet, Junior!" I'd snapped at Reed after the damned kid had gone charging in like Sergeant York to take down, single-handedly, a group of armed teenage thugs. "It's when you start thinking, before you're supposed to think, that you think yourself dead!"

He had a lot of potential, I'd give him that. He looked to be an excellent police officer, provided he learned to obey orders. He was eager to learn, quick to catch on, and enthusiastic about the job...and he reminded me all too much of myself when I was a rookie. Still, though, kept on a tight leash, he could be trained, given the right teacher. The right teacher? I mused, chuckling to myself. Sly old Val Moore and Bill MacDonald.

Shaking my head, I stood up and shut my locker door, the resignation letter in my hand. I walked to the locker room door, stopping in front of the trash can. I opened the resignation letter up and read it.

Taking a breath, I clasped the letter in my hand. I closed my eyes, just for a second. Then I ripped the letter into tiny pieces, letting them drift like confetti into the trash can. Whistling, I left the locker room.

Isn't it funny how life turns out sometimes?